

## A Qualitative Study of Women Leaders in Indian IT Sector

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### Abstract:

The Indian IT sector has developed into a global technology and innovation hub but women are underrepresented at senior levels. Progress in women representation among senior leaders is still lagging, even as number of women at entry-level and mid-level positions are increasing. The main aim of this study was to explore the dynamics of women's leadership in the Indian IT industry while bringing out for particular attention how ambition of individuals, culture within an organization, and social support are deciding women leaders' career advancement. The research is based on a qualitative exploratory design, which involved the use of semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 women leaders working at leading IT companies. Thematic analysis was used to extract key themes on leadership identity, gender challenges and bias, mentorship and sponsorship, work-life integration, and organizational support and culture. The findings indicated that women's leadership development was influenced by ambition, mentorship and sponsorship, organization support and culture, and social norms, while structural bias concerned career advancement. Organizations built stronger leadership pipelines through providing mentorship and sponsorship support, flexible working policies, and transparent systems with gender equity in all aspects for women leaders. The research developed a context-specific model of women's leadership development and added to the global gender equity research in providing practical guidelines for inclusive leadership in the Indian IT sector.

**Keywords:** Gender diversity, Indian IT sector, Leadership development, Mentorship, Women leadership.

### Introduction

The Indian Information Technology (IT) market has become one of the primary drivers of the national economic development and an international hub of innovations. (1) The IT industry with a forecastable and predictable manpower of 3.9 million professionals and a yearly income of over 200 billion has turned into a subsidiary in the digital transformation in a variety of industries, including healthcare, finance, telecommunications, and manufacturing. To place the country as a key player in the global technology landscape, the country has created over 1,700 Global Capability Centers (GCCs) in India. (2) This industry has successfully established the space in which government assistance, talent sourcing in different places, and frequent worldwide investment converge to encourage innovation in new technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), cloud computing (CC), cyber security, and block-chain technology, as the swiftest technological and economic development centers in the nation.

The present condition of the women's representation in this field is almost 34% of the total IT workforce in India, which has so far only 23% of top positions, and less than 1% is at the C-suite level. Specifically, women stand at approximately 51% of entry-level employees, and 46.8% of postgraduate students in IT and computing, indicating high primary involvement which fails to translate into senior-level jobs. (3)

Such a continuous disparity proves the "broken-rung" effect, (4) which may be explained as a kind of situation where women are comparable to their male colleagues in the entry levels but are hindered in the middle-level job categories and cannot achieve the top-level management in the company.

There are several obstacles to the advancement of women in leadership and work at different levels simultaneously. The visibility barriers, the absence of inclusion in the informal networks, and the absence of definite promotion criteria are systematically restricting access of the women to high-visibility IT projects and decision-making activities. (5–7) The other obstacle, namely gender stereotyping and the incessant demands of

technical ability and the incongruence of the women with the IT demand, is the psychological barriers that demotivate motivation and perseverance. (8)

The lack of mentorship and sponsorship networks exacerbates these problems since women lack equal access to the informal networks and relationships that are more likely to advance leadership careers.(7) Work-life integration pressures, exacerbated by organizational support practices that fail, and traditional gender role expectations, are experienced more by women, particularly with a significant life change, such as motherhood and caregiving.(9) Further, deeply rooted socio-cultural demands still label women as primarily household and caregiver, creating certain internal resistance between career and social adherence.(10)

Even though the activities of diversity and inclusion had already increased among the Indian IT companies, as per the empirical evidence, of course, by examining how women dominate the leadership paths in this shared cultural and corporate setting is restricted. The existing literature has been greatly familiar with the obstacles and inequalities, (11) but provided very little data concerning the active interaction between ambition at a personal level, organizational support systems, and socio-cultural backgrounds of women in their real lives under development in leadership. It may be observed that there is a discrepancy in the way Indian IT women establish leadership identities, mentorship, work-life balance, commitment to inclusion in an organization, and lastly, how they articulate ambition into practical career advancement.

### **Research purpose and Research objectives**

The importance of filling this research gap has various dimensions. According to the organizational effectiveness perspective, diverse leadership teams, especially gender-balanced ones, show improvements in innovation, financial achievement, and strategic decision-making that are measurable. Equity-wise, years of underrepresentation deprive women of decision-making power and equal economic progress according to their credentials. (12) Talent-wise, this loss of talent in the form of fully capable women due to the lack of promotion is a waste of human resources. Innovation-wise, a lack of diverse leadership will narrow the ability of this sector to create inclusive technological solutions. (13)

This study explores the dynamics of the leadership development of women in the Indian IT industry by combining the individual, organizational, and social viewpoints. The qualitative inquiry into the role of ambition in the development of leadership roles in organizations by exploring the ways in which women professionals enact and seek leadership identities is used to understand how ambition relates to organizational culture, access to mentorship, work-life pressures, and socio-cultural demands to form leadership career trajectories. The research premise is that the problem of women's development as leaders does not as much relate to inefficiency of individuals as it is to a consequence of complex systemic affairs that either support or compromise the ambition-action nexus of career advancement.

The qualitative, exploratory study, which follows the interviews of 15 women professionals in the large Indian IT companies, reveals that the development in leadership among women is the outcome of the dynamic balance between personal ambition and desire, the possibility to receive mentorship and sponsorship, the flexible working system, and the mediation of the socio-cultural demands. Part of the enablers of progression found in the research are progression-including mentorship relations, which give an opportunity to both instrumental mentorship and emotional confirmation, a clear promotion structure that allows subjectivity, flexible working policies that offer integration of work and family life, and a psychological safety organizational culture. On the contrary, the research records the presence of enduring obstacles, the old boy system, that never provides women with informal leadership development chances, the lack of female role models, the bias of the appraisal and promotion system, and the stigmatization of ambition to succeed in their working places. The conclusions indicate that it is necessary to introduce a multi-level intervention, which will involve individual agency, organizational designs, and narrative actions within the culture.

### **Researchers decided following research objectives for this study:**

1. To provide evidence-based insights for designing effective interventions such as mentorship programs,

transparent systems, and flexible workplace policies.

2. To understand women's leadership development in the Indian IT sector.
3. To generate evidence that supports diversity and inclusion initiatives at organizational level.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Women in Indian IT: Participation and leadership representation gap**

The Indian IT industry is an ironic situation when it comes to the involvement of women and their progress. Based on previous Industry reports by NASSCOM (14) (15) and other bodies, it has been indicated that women comprise around one-third of the IT workforce and make up large percentages in entry-level recruitment, but their numbers decline drastically in the top management and executive positions. This tendency has seen wide academic analysis of the intersection of structural conditions, organizational practices, and individual factors to create this disparity despite the perceived meritocracy and technological progress of the industry. (16)

Scholarly literature on women in IT in India has reported a phenomenon of "glass ceiling" or a "sticky floor" (17) where women are still concentrated in junior and middle management positions with little representation in top management positions. Observations of Indian software companies show that in spite of the high degree of education and technical skills, women are not accessing powerful networks and forward-looking projects, which are traditional sources of leadership pipelines.(18) The case studies of women leaders in the Indian IT sector also raise the similarity of the existence of opaque advancement criteria, an unstructured talent development process, and uneven organizational support towards the continuation of careers of women, especially in mid-career transitions.(19)

#### **Structural and systemic barriers to career advancement**

Studies on Indian IT and other corporate fields have reported several overlapping obstacles that restrict the career advancement of women. (20) Gender stereotyping, prejudiced evaluation procedures, lack of accessibility to informal networks, and limited opportunities to be present in high-visibility projects are all recurrent barriers. The organizational cultures that praise such work culture, which includes long working hours, constant availability, and "ideal worker" standards, indirectly harm women, with the majority of caregiving duties. (21)

Other than the workplace, cultural values and socio-cultural expectations in relation to marriage, motherhood, and family duties play a crucial role in determining the career choices and the rate of progression by women.(19) Qualitative studies show that numerous women in Indian business environments expect or have been pressured to curb career goals to conform to socially sanctioned occupations, and in this regard, tend to impose career constraints, pauses, or sideways advancements as opposed to advancing their careers. The demand in the IT sector, typified by international work-hours, active client contacts, and travelling necessities, places the local socio-cultural demands in special conflict with the dual role expectations of women. (22,23)

#### **Ambition, leadership identity, and career aspirations**

However, more recent studies have been less concerned with strictly structural explanations and more about how women perceive and respond to ambition and leadership identity in Indian corporate settings.(24,25) Career aspirations research on female career aspirations in the IT and ITES fields proves that most women have high leadership goals, which they balance against their expected organizational discrimination and the work-life issues.(26)(27) The studies that have been conducted based on the career development models have reported that self-efficacy, the presence of role models, and perceived organizational support are major factors that will determine whether women view leadership roles as achievable and desirable.

Qualitative narratives of Indian women leaders show that the construction of leadership identity is often a bargaining affair, and women must reconcile between career ambition and work and relational and family obligations, and cultural expectations of femininity and family first. According to these studies, women constantly consider the self- and social costs of striving to achieve leadership, such as fears of breaking gender rules and

being evaluated as too ambitious or lacking traditional roles. The literature, therefore, emphasizes that ambition cannot be understood as a purely individual trait; rather, it is formed and expressed within specific socio-cultural and organizational environments that either validate or constrain its expression.

### **Mentorship, sponsorship, and professional networks**

Mentorship and sponsorship emerge repeatedly in leadership literature as central mechanisms supporting women's advancement in technology and corporate sectors globally and within India specifically.<sup>(28)</sup> Qualitative studies of women leaders in India's IT sector demonstrate that access to senior mentors-both male and female-provides not only skill development and psychosocial support but also crucial exposure to strategic projects and decision-making spaces previously restricted to informal networks. Recent literature distinguishes critically between mentorship and sponsorship, emphasizing that while mentorship provides guidance and support, sponsorship, wherein influential leaders actively advocate for women's promotion and visibility, is particularly critical for bridging the transition from middle to senior management.

Global and India-focused analyses document that women are often "over-mentored and under-sponsored," receiving advice and encouragement but limited concrete advocacy for stretch assignments and leadership opportunities. Network analyses further reveal that women's relative exclusion from informal networks and "old boys' clubs" restricts their access to information, referrals, and informal leadership development that male colleagues routinely access. These findings highlight that the mere presence of mentorship programs, without complementary sponsorship and network inclusion, may be insufficient for facilitating substantial career advancement <sup>(29,30)</sup>.

### **Organizational culture, policies, and diversity practices**

Research on Indian IT and software organizations demonstrates that organizational culture and formal policies significantly influence women's leadership development trajectories. Studies indicate that inclusive cultures characterized by transparent promotion criteria, supportive supervisors, and explicit leadership commitment to gender diversity correlate with more positive career opportunity perceptions among women. Industry reports on women's leadership in corporate India similarly document that organizations with structured leadership development programs and gender-sensitive HR policies exhibit stronger women's representation in senior roles.

However, multiple studies caution that policies alone do not guarantee equitable outcomes. Empirical work demonstrates that diversity initiatives often remain symbolic if unsupported by everyday practices, accountability mechanisms, and shifts in managerial mindsets. Flexible work arrangements and remote work options, while promoted by organizations as enablers for mid-career women, may paradoxically carry stigma if women utilizing these options are perceived as less committed or less suitable for leadership consideration. These ambiguities highlight the necessity of understanding how women experience organizational cultures in practice, not merely through formal policy statements. <sup>(24,25)</sup>

### **Work-life integration and socio-cultural context**

The concept of work-life balance and integration is one of the recurring themes in studies conducted on women professionals in the Indian IT industry. Empirical research indicates that IT work conditions, such as long hours, rotating schedules, and client-imposed deadlines, make it even harder to balance professional responsibilities with household and caregiving responsibilities. Research on female employees in Indian IT organizations identifies inadequate childcare support, rigid scheduling, and unsympathetic managerial attitudes as contributors to stress, dissatisfaction, and, critically, attrition from leadership-track positions during mid-career stages.<sup>(23,31,32)</sup>

Broader literature on gender and work in India documents that patriarchal norms continue to position women as primary caregivers even among urban, educated professionals in technology sectors. These expectations influence women's availability for travel, late-night work, and high-visibility assignments traditionally viewed as prerequisites for leadership consideration. Consequently, the Indian IT context presents a distinctive milieu wherein globalized work practices intersect with local gender norms, making work-life integration a central

determinant of women's leadership development paths. (22,23,33)

### **Identified research gaps and study rationale**

Despite substantial scholarship addressing aspects of this issue, several significant gaps remain. First, existing research typically examines barriers, ambition, organizational policies, and work-life challenges in relative isolation rather than adopting integrated frameworks linking individual, organizational, and socio-cultural levels. Second, while industry reports provide valuable quantitative snapshots of representation and diversity initiatives, fewer empirical studies center on women's own narratives and meaning-making regarding their leadership pathways. Third, although mentorship and sponsorship are widely recommended, limited qualitative research explores how women in Indian IT actually experience, access, and leverage these developmental relationships over time and across career stages.

In response to these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design to examine how ambition, organizational culture, and socio-cultural structures interact in shaping women's leadership development within the Indian IT sector. By prioritizing women's narratives regarding leadership identity, mentorship experiences, work-life negotiation, and organizational support perceptions, this research aims to develop a nuanced, multi-level understanding of how women move from ambition to actionable career advancement.

### **Research Methodology**

The researchers undertook a small exploratory, qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. The researchers used QualCoder for qualitative analysis. The authors set out to critically assess and contextualize the observed findings to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors identified as hindering the advancement of women leaders in Indian IT companies.

### **Research approach**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore women's leadership development within the Indian IT industry. This research approach is perfect for gaining an in-depth, better understanding of complex, subjective experiences that quantitative methods cannot fully capture.

### **Research strategy**

The researcher divided this research design into two different phases, so it was quite simple to understand the methodology for data collection.

In the first phase, the researcher described about participant selection approach and detailed research procedures for data collection used in this study.

### **Phase 1: Participant Selection**

The purposive sampling was used to select participants who have direct, lived experience of the phenomena being studied, such as leadership identity, sponsorship and mentorship support, work-life integration, and organizational support.

Fifteen women leaders from major Indian IT companies and multi-national companies (MNCs) were selected, ensuring representation across different hierarchical levels and company types. The researchers used professional networks (via LinkedIn and other social networking platforms), and potentially snowball sampling to identify suitable participants.

### **Phase 2: Research Procedures**

Potential interviewees were approached by email or phone; all participants agreed to participate and were interviewed, with one dropout. All the women leaders were interviewed between June 2025 and December 2025.

**TABLE 1: Interview questionnaire for the study according to Core Themes**

| Core Theme                                | Interview questionnaire for the study (Open-Ended)                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Leadership Identity</b>                | <b>Q1:</b> How do you personally define leadership in your role/firm?<br><b>Q2:</b> Can you share a specific experience where you felt your leadership identity was challenged?                                                                                            |
| <b>Mentorship and sponsorship</b>         | <b>Q3:</b> What role has mentorship played in your career advancement, and what kind of support did you find most valuable?                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Gender Challenges and Bias</b>         | <b>Q4:</b> Have you observed any differences in mentorship opportunities available to men versus women in your organization?                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Work-life integration strategies</b>   | <b>Q5:</b> Describe your strategies for managing your professional and personal life.<br><b>Q6:</b> How has the company culture/policies supported or hindered this balance?<br><b>Q7:</b> What does 'success' look like to you in terms of combining work and life roles? |
| <b>Organizational support and culture</b> | <b>Q8:</b> What specific company policies or programs (e.g., parental leave, flexible hours) have been most impactful, and how could they be improved?<br><b>Q9:</b> How would you describe the overall environment for women aspiring to senior roles in your firm?       |

Interviewees were given a choice between a telephone interview or a face-to-face interview/Virtual interview on Zoom or Google Meet/Microsoft Meet platform, etc., with their office as the interview setting. In both cases, both the interviewee and the researcher confirmed that nobody else was present during the interview. Interviews were recorded only audio with the interviewee's consent, except for three interviewees who asked the researcher to take field notes by hand. Preceding to the interview, participants were informed orally on the telephone and in writing about the study objectives, methods, and data protection, and granted their consent, including signing an informed consent form. The first author carried out the semi-structured interviews; interviews lasted from 20 to 45 minutes. The interview questionnaire focused on the leadership identity, sponsorship and mentorship support, work-life integration, and organizational support, and was informed by the output of a previously conducted literature review relating to these aspects for women's leadership in IT sectors and by dedicated workshops and focus groups. Transcribe all fifteen interviews verbatim to ensure accuracy, which is the foundational step for the subsequent thematic analysis.

### Interview guide development

A semi-structured guide was created around the five core themes with nine questions as per given in TABLE 1, allowing for flexibility to probe deeper into unexpected yet relevant insights. The questions were open-ended to encourage rich, narrative responses from interviewees.

The analysis involved both deductive reasoning (coding supported by the available literature and theories) and inductive reasoning (identification of emerging patterns in data). The analysis sustains attention to intersectionality between ambition, organizational, and social contexts to define the women's leadership development patterns.

### **Research method**

The present study adapted a qualitative research design to investigate women's leadership development in the Indian IT sector. A qualitative design was selected to capture in-depth lived experiences and the numerous ways social, cultural, and organizational aspects intersect with leadership pathways.

### **Research setting**

The study was conducted in the Indian IT sector and respondents were employees of major IT organizations of different age groups, job designation, and year of experience, employer name, educational qualification, and marital/parental status as mentioned in **Annexure-1**.

Due to anonymity of data and confidentiality, the researcher used simulated names in place of real names. Every participant in this research study identified by unique participant ID such as WLP1, WLP2,..., WLP15, and employer name as ITCOMP1, ITCOMP2,..., ITCOMP15) respectively. This particular context presented the appropriate environment for understanding leadership development in a globally competitive industry, and one influenced by specific local cultural values.

### **Entrée and establishing researcher roles**

Participants were recruited using professional networks and referrals after the informed consent procedure. The researcher took a non-participative and reflexive position, locating herself as an independent academic investigator. Trust and credibility were established through transparency in relation to the research's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary participation throughout.

### **Research participants and sampling methods**

The study used purposive sampling to select women leaders working in leadership roles within the IT sector. The participants were selected to be representatives of different job roles as leaders, years of experience, organization context, and marital/parental status. Recruitment took place until no more new themes emerged from the interviews, i.e., when data saturation was achieved.

### **Data collection methods**

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, to enable the interviewer to probe on participant's attitudes towards leadership identity, organizational practices for mentorship and sponsorship, work-life integration approaches and career advancement. This method allowed for both consistency across interviews and getting more valuable information.

### **Data recording**

Interviews were recorded with the consent of participants to ensure accuracy. Field notes were taken by the researcher at the time of interviews and in their observation following each interview. The audio files were transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies (34) aligned with Lincoln and Guba's criteria (35):

**Credibility:** This has been attained through a long period of interaction with the participants, reflection of the emerging interpretations over time, and through careful questioning of how the researcher's positionality may affect the analysis.

**Transferability:** Improved with in-depth, dense descriptions of the nature of the participants, organizational settings, industry, and methods of research.

**Dependability:** Assured by the clear documentation of the research processes, which captured emerging insights and analytical decisions.

Conformability: Promoted through reflexive practice, ongoing interrogation of researcher assumptions, and maintenance of focus on ensuring themes derived from participant data rather than researcher imposition.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis of the data was conducted using a structured system that involved familiarization, coding, theme iteration, and variation. The analytical framework that guided the analysis was an intersectional perspective on gender, comparing how organizational and socio-cultural factors interacted with gender to shape leadership experiences.

### Reporting style

Findings were reported both as a narrative and thematic style, supported by verbatim quotes contributing to the authenticity.

## Results

Researchers organized the interview results around the nine questions modelled to the participants, which were given in Table 1, and five core themes were identified according to open-ended interview questions and responses shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Five core themes identified for the study

### Theme 1: Leadership identity in the IT sector

The first theme identified was “Leadership Identity in the IT sector”. Interviewees mentioned clearly that Leadership identity is based on several factors such as Leadership as Influence, transformational leadership approach, expertise-based leadership and emphasis on team success over individual recognition.

Interviewee WLP1 said:

*“For me as a Solutions Architect at my company, leadership is about steering the team through difficult technical challenges. I make sure everyone is on the same page, encourage people to think of new ways to solve problems, and create solutions that impress our clients. It's not about telling people what to do it's about earning their trust and making them feel responsible for the work.”* (WLP1).

Interviewee WLP4 focused on Leadership identity and said:

*“As a Senior Manager, leadership means connecting money with technology plans and taking care of the business profit. It's about helping people from different departments work together toward shared goals. It's using my power to influence and making sure people feel accountable, but with caring behind it.”* (WLP4).

Interviewee WLP5 said her leadership identity as Expertise-Based Leadership and shared an inspiring incident



and said:

*“As a Senior Architect at my company with 23 years here, leadership is building both solutions and teams. I guide people through major technology changes and help them grow in their careers. It's about creating something that will last, steady and reliable progress rather than quick, impressive changes.”* (WLP5).

Interviewee WLP10 was emphasis on team success over individual recognition said:

*“As a Global Program Director, leadership is bringing together different teams across the world. It's setting a clear vision, solving conflicts, and celebrating wins together. It's the connection that holds big projects together.”* (WLP10).

In addition to team success matter, Interviewee WLP11 also focused leadership as plan the strategy and strong team building on and said

*“As VP of Engineering, leadership is planning strategy carefully, building strong teams, moving technology forward, and protecting them from distractions. It's clear vision combined with real work, built over many years.”* (WLP11).

### **Theme 2: Gendered challenges and bias**

The second theme identified was gendered challenges and bias for women leaders in the Indian IT sector.

Many women leaders disappointed with gender stereotyping in company. Interviewee WLP3 said:

*“Last year during a busy project, a male colleague publicly disagreed with my work plan, saying it was too safe. I felt hurt and started to doubt myself. I gathered data to support my approach and talked to him privately, and eventually the team agreed with me. It was a moment where I learned something important about myself.”* (WLP3)

In addition, Interviewee WLP13 said:

*During a big global software project in 2020, the team in another country ignored my warnings, saying I was overthinking things as a woman without kids. I made a working model that proved my concerns, and it changed their minds. That shifted how people see me.* (WLP13)

Interviewee WLP12 upset with Motherhood Penalty and said:

*“When I came back from maternity leave and took on a big project, my team wasn't sure if I could fully commit. Deadlines were slipping, and it felt personal. I had one-on-one meetings with everyone, got we back on track, and we delivered early. It shook me up, but it proved how strong I could be.”* (WLP12)

Some Interviewees dissatisfied with doubt on credibility due to their age and said:

*“At a recent board meeting, senior people questioned my growth plan, suggesting they needed newer thinking. There was age bias in that. I showed the data, got my team behind me, and we executed perfectly. Proved my value.”* (WLP11)

*“In 2018, a younger male leader questioned my technology plan, calling it outdated. After so many years of work, that hurt. I built a working model that proved my thinking was right, and it changed how people saw the situation. That made me tougher.”* (WLP5)

Interviewee WLP15 intimated that how she managed Prove-it-again bias challenge in the company and said:

*“During a budget discussion, a senior male executive cancelled my financial risk plan as very cautious, and there was a hint that it was because I'm a mother. It really upset me. I reworked my analysis with better visuals and presented it again. I got the approval I needed. That challenge tested how confident I could be.”* (WLP15)

### **Theme 3: Mentorship and sponsorship**

Mentorship provided guidance, advice, and skill-building, while sponsorship involved senior leaders actively

using their influence to secure high-stakes promotions and visibility for women. Many of the women in the present study were identified as a Mentorship and sponsorship supported to their career advancement.

Interviewee WLP1 focused on formal mentorship to help in career journey and said:

*“Mentorship has been really helpful in my career. It helped me move from being a programmer to becoming an architect. The most useful thing was getting honest feedback about my weak areas, like negotiation skills. My mentor also pushed me to take on harder assignments, which built my confidence over time.”* (WLP1)

Many Participants mentioned about mentorship and sponsorship helped to career navigation support and said:

*“Mentors helped me reach my current role quickly. The best help was encouragement to take bigger risks and strategies to be more visible. One mentor coached me on negotiation, which led to better promotions.”* (WLP6).

*“Early on, mentorship made all the difference. A director helped me get promotions and taught me negotiation skills and how to be noticed. The best part was blunt guidance: “Aim higher.” That pushed me to be brave.”* (WLP8)

*“Mentors saved me through different career stages. The best support was thinking about the long term, like how to shift toward cloud technology. People also stayed interested in my career even when I took breaks for family, which kept me moving forward.”* (WLP5)

*“Mentors changed everything, speeding up my director promotion. The gold was coaching on being visible getting me in front of decision-makers.”* (WLP9)

#### **Theme 4: Work-life integration strategies**

Work-life integration is a modern approach that blends professional and personal responsibilities rather than keeping them separate, focusing on flexibility and harmony over rigid, traditional boundaries. It allows for increased productivity and reduced stress by enabling tasks like exercising during the day or handling family needs while working, leading to higher overall satisfaction.

Interviewee WLP7 said:

*“I schedule my calendar so there are no meetings after 6 PM most days. My weekends are just for me exercise and time with friends. As a single person, it's a bit easier, but I use apps to keep track of everything and set boundaries early. Getting enough sleep is something I never skip”.* (WLP7)

Interviewee WLP14 managed her work-life balance with support of husband and said:

*“I am a mother of five-year-old child, it's definitely juggling. I don't check work emails after 8 PM, and my husband shares all the home duties equally. At work, I delegate tasks to my team without feeling bad about it. We have family time together every week.”* (WLP14)

Interviewee WLP12 focused on Time Management and Planning and said:

*“I arrange my calendar carefully family time comes first, then work. We use apps to share duties. Weekly talks with my husband about workload. It's planned harmony.”* (WLP12)

Interviewee WLP11 spoken about how she redefines success in her life after divorce and said:

*“Two years ago my divorce made me rethink everything. I never mixing work and personal time. I travel alone that recharges me. Looking after myself isn't optional, it powers my ability to lead.”* (WLP11)

#### **Theme 5: Organizational support and culture**

The last theme was identified as organizational support and culture come under various aspects such as flexible work policies, parental leave support, wellness programs, policy-practice gap, and hybrid working policy and culture.

Interviewee WLP3 appreciated her flexible work policies in the company and said:

*“I took parental leave twice, and flexible hours helped me my whole career. Training programs for people returning to work were wonderful. They could improve by extending support to grandparents and making sure managers follow these policies.”* (WLP3)

Interviewee WLP10 supported how parental leave and flexible working hour and spoke

*“The parental leave was generous, and I used it fully. Flexible working and childcare cost help are lifesavers. To make it better, they could extend benefits to help with aging parents, and managers should be held responsible for making sure people can balance work and life.”* (WLP10)

Interviewee WLP6 was added on wellness programs provided by company and said:

*“I took full parental leave, and flexible hours are daily helpers. The program that helps with parenthood made coming back easier. Gradual returns and mental health support would make it even better.”*(WLP6)

Interviewee WLP13 Policy–Practice Gap and said:

*“Strong parental leave helped rebuild my career after my child. Daily flexibility is essential. Career pause options for mid-life changes would improve it.”* (WLP13)

Interviewee WLP15 respected Hybrid working policy culture and said:

*“Hybrid policy is perfect for school pickups. The culture supports family time through official family days. Pressure to work too much still remains sometimes.”* (WLP15)

### **Discussion**

#### **Ambition as dynamic rather than static**

The findings show that ambition is contextually negotiated and adjusted throughout the careers of women in contrast to the accounts according to which leadership development occurs as a result of personal will alone. Instead of ambition being an unchangeable character that forecasts performance, the participants characterized ambition as something that was in constant flux due to organizational feedback, family needs, peer experiences, and evolving self-understanding. The result is consistent with social cognitive career theory (36) as well as feminist career development theories (36,37) which note that aspirations are not so much individually defined but are coalesced and socially relative in nature. This study indicates that organizations and social contexts where female ambition is confirmed can lead to its maintenance and conversion into action, whereas contexts where female ambition (38) is stigmatized or incompatible with other more appreciated identities (mother, wife, team player) can be conducive to its repression or recalibration.

#### **Mentorship and sponsorship: quantity and quality distinctions**

The study confirms the imperative role of mentorship and sponsorship in women's leadership development (39) and indicates that not every mentoring relationship yields the same results. The difference between mentorship (essentially offering guidance and support) and sponsorship (advocating and offering opportunities) came out as a particularly relevant one. Women who had been actively sponsored, such as placement in high-profile projects, publicly sponsored by senior leaders, reported faster promotion than mentorship did not allow.

Such findings are in line with the existing literature on sponsorship that points out that mentorship, as handy as it is, may not be sufficient to overcome the systemic issues that do not enable women to move forward.(30,40) The fact that women could not at times secure sponsorship links, particularly with high-ranking men, is an organizational and cultural trend in which informal advocacy groups can be gendered, whereby this can disqualify women without their knowledge.

The issue that was raised by some participants about the mentoring relationship with opposite-gender senior leaders is worth considering. Organizations need to take proactive efforts to normalize and legitimize the cross-

gender mentoring using open structures, professional policies, and cultural values that encourage developmental relationships irrespective of the gender pairing.

### **Organizational culture as foundation**

The study shows that the culture of the organization, such as transparency about advancement standards, leadership devotion to diversity and inclusiveness, provides the platform that empowers or limits the progress of women. Companies whose diversity commitment was explicit and the systems clear were reported to be much more enabling environments.

Nevertheless, the result that formal policies are not adequate is consistent with the body of literature on policy-practice gaps (41). Organizations should also adopt policies and create cultures within the organization where such policies are always applied, appreciated, and encouraged by managers at every level of the organization. The stress participants reported on the formal flexible work policies (42) versus informal norms against their application explains how the superficial level of policy commitment can conceal the culture-level obstacles.

### **Work-life integration and gendered responsibilities**

The study points out that work-life integration issues are not evenly shared, but they are disproportionately experienced by women, especially those who have family responsibilities. (43) Although the IT industry requires long hours, travel, and international involvement, all the employees, the gender of household and caregiving duties require women to have a “second shift” (44), which is not always the case with their male colleagues.

The fact that a few of the women had actively redirected their career ambitions to suit family matters and were feeling very regretful raises important issues of equity and choice. The research indicates that although women have agency in making their own career choices that make sense to them, and depending on their values and circumstances, recalibrations can indicate constrained choice and not free choice as long as the organizational and household structure is rigid.

Organizations can support more equitable work-life integration through flexible scheduling, results-oriented evaluation (emphasizing outcomes over presence), parental leave policies (45) supporting both mothers and fathers, and cultural shifts valuing presence and availability less and outcomes and impact more.

### **Visibility, representation, and gender dynamics**

The absence of visible women leaders had trickle-down effects (46) on the possibility and aspiration of younger women. The lack of women in the executive positions formed a credibility or imagination gap-the fewer women who were not seen in these positions, the less strongly they believed that they could hold such positions.

The observation that visible women leaders felt the weight of responsibility to represent more than themselves, but also on behalf of all women, also conforms to the research on “only women” or token minority experiences. Companies ought to identify and strive to minimize this load by making deliberate attempts to bring in more women to the fore so that no female leaders are singularly burdened with the responsibility of representing their gender.

The reported experiences of gender stereotyping (47), interruption, stealing of ideas, and doubting competence, although they may be acceptable in light of gender equity literature, are alarming and would need direct organizational intervention in terms of training, accountability, and cultural change initiatives.

### **Theoretical contributions**

This study will add to the leadership development theory (48) by revealing the need to incorporate individual (ambition, identity), organizational (culture, systems, mentorship), and social-cultural (gender norms, family expectations) levels in the explanation of women's progress. The leadership development frameworks that are currently in place usually focus on either individual factors or organizational factors in relative isolation. This study indicates that progressions are not to be interpreted by a single lens but should be a combination of various levels.

In addition to this, the research may show the significance of the qualitative, narrative approaches to understanding the process of leadership development that captures the complexity, contradiction, and embeddedness in context that are not typically captured by quantitative approaches.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

This research, while contributing valuable insights, encompasses several limitations warranting acknowledgment:

The research involved 15 female professionals in the Indian IT companies. The research was conducted exclusively within Indian IT contexts. The qualitative research is usually founded on smaller, intentionally selected samples; the findings were not applicable to every woman in every IT situation and industry.

Although the participants in question worked in different IT organizations, the great variety in terms of organizational size, culture, and maturity might impact findings in some ways that were not completely investigated.

The research conducted was merely a cross-sectional taking of an image of the experiences of the women, instead of tracking career trajectories over a period of time. Longitudinal studies would provide more understanding of issues and provide factors that develop at various stages of a career.

Future research could productively extend this work through:

Analyzing career advancement trends of women over five to ten years to understand how the experience and outcomes vary and what predicts improvement versus lack of progress.

Comparative case study of the organizations that have varying commitment to the issue of women's leadership to understand how the factors in the organization can be converted into outcomes. Including men's experiences and perceptions of gender dynamics to understand how gender shapes all employees' experiences. Quantitative survey research with larger samples to test relationships identified qualitatively and to assess generalizability.

Research exploring whether findings from IT generalize to other technology sectors (GCC, engineering firms) or other high-growth sectors.

Rigorous evaluation of specific interventions (mentorship programs, flexible policies, bias training) to determine which produce meaningful impact on women's advancement.

### **Conclusion**

It was a qualitative and exploratory study which concentrated on the interaction effects of ambition, organizational culture, and social cultural structure to determine the development of women's leadership in the Indian IT industry. The research conducted on the basis of the interviews with 15 women professionals who work in the leading IT companies demonstrates that the transfer of ambition to action is not automatic and women-specific, as it is determined by the complexity of the organization, interpersonal, and social situations.

The five key themes identified through analysis-ambition negotiated and contextual, mentorship and sponsorship critical yet uneven, organizational culture and transparent systems enablers, work-life integration issues and gendered expectations, and visibility and gender dynamics-reflect a representative of the female as an agent of leadership development that is both multidimensional and requires the concomitant attention of both the individual agency and organizational structure and practices as well as the broader cultural contexts.

Even though the individual women demonstrate clearly that they can be ambitious and capable, the organization provides them with a high level of mentorship and sponsorship, a transparent advancement system, flexible policies, a culture of inclusiveness, and women leaders can be seen and represented. The absence or insufficiency of these organizational enablers restrains even ambitious, highly capable females.

The research has added to the theoretical and practical debate on this question by demonstrating that gender equity in leadership is never an individual or voluntary problem, but a structural and cultural challenge that should be changed. The organizations concerned must work simultaneously at multiple tiers to develop women leaders:

defining and establishing formal policies, changing informal patterns and cultures, implementing particular developmental programmes, and actively combating gender stereotypes and prejudices.

In the example of the Indian IT industry, the paper shows that the image of the industry as a meritocracy and innovation cannot be fully complete without similar innovation to provide women with equal and inclusive opportunities in leadership. This not only ensures the imperatives of morality and equity but also organizational benefits in terms of access to talent, in terms of greater innovativeness due to increased diversity in perception, and in terms of financial performance due to more inclusive leadership.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not represent any official position of the institutions affiliated with the authors.

### **Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance Process**

The authors confirm that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the creation of this manuscript. All content was conceived, analyzed and written by the authors and all sources have been properly cited. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the content.

### **Author Contributions**

Vaishali Chauhan conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, done interview process, and translate and analysis of the paper. Dr. M Vidyasagar was the main study leader and provided conceptualization guidelines and editorial inputs.

### **Ethics Approval**

Not applicable.

### **Data Availability**

The materials used in this study consist of semi-structured interviews with 15 women leaders working in the Indian IT sector. As the data contain participant information, they are not publicly available but may be shared by the corresponding author upon reasonable request. No separate dataset was generated for this study.

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**Annexture-1 Demographic profile of participants**

| P#    | Name<br>(Simulated) | Age<br>Group | Job Designation         | Years of<br>Exp | Employer | Educational<br>Degree | Marital/Parental Status |
|-------|---------------------|--------------|-------------------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| WLP1  | Madhu R             | 35-40        | Solutions Architect     | 14              | ITCOMP1  | B.Tech (CS)           | Single                  |
| WLP2  | Meera Reddy         | 40-45        | Director                | 19              | ITCOMP2  | MS (Software Eng.)    | Married, 1 child        |
| WLP3  | Indu Soni           | 35-40        | Tech Lead               | 12              | ITCOMP3  | B.Tech (ECE)          | Married                 |
| WLP4  | Yana T              | 35-40        | Senior Manager          | 15              | ITCOMP4  | MBA (Finance)         | Married, 1 child        |
| WLP5  | Preeti S            | 50+          | Senior Architect        | 23              | ITCOMP5  | B.E. (CS)             | Married, 2 children     |
| WLP6  | Rani F              | 45-50        | Head of QA              | 22              | ITCOMP6  | MCA                   | Married, 2 children     |
| WLP7  | Sneha Gupta         | 35-40        | Group Manager           | 14              | ITCOMP7  | MCA                   | Married, 1 child        |
| WLP8  | Deepika Nair        | 45-50        | Lead Architect          | 22              | ITCOMP8  | B.E. (IT)             | Single                  |
| WLP9  | Xena Y              | 40-45        | Group Architect         | 18              | ITCOMP9  | M.S. (AI)             | Married, 2 children     |
| WLP10 | Tara L              | 45-50        | Global Program Director | 21              | ITCOMP10 | B.Tech (CS)           | Married, 2 children     |
| WLP11 | Shreya Verma        | 50+          | VP of Engineering       | 25              | ITCOMP11 | M.Tech (EE)           | Divorced                |

|       |               |       |                    |    |              |                       |                        |
|-------|---------------|-------|--------------------|----|--------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| WLP12 | Anjali<br>Rao | 40-45 | Director           | 18 | ITCOMP1<br>2 | MBA                   | Married, 2<br>children |
| WLP13 | Oviya<br>N    | 40-45 | Delivery Head      | 18 | ITCOMP1<br>3 | MBA<br>(Operations)   | Married, 2<br>children |
| WLP14 | Vinita<br>N   | 35-40 | Delivery Head      | 13 | ITCOMP1<br>4 | M.Tech<br>(CS)        | Divorced               |
| WLP15 | Nalini<br>S   | 35-40 | Associate Director | 14 | ITCOMP1<br>5 | MBA<br>(Strategy<br>) | Married, 2<br>children |