

NEGOTIATING 'RESPECTABLE FEMININITY': A STUDY OF WOMEN SOFTWARE PROFESSIONALS IN KOLKATA

Abstract

In neoliberal India, the state has strongly encouraged the flow of foreign investment into India. The Information Technology (IT) industry boom celebrates the educated workforce of 'knowledge professionals' who are said to be the beneficiaries of the new globalised economy. It is also one of the best prospects for the urban educated middle class Indian women due to its office based environment, higher income and intellectually stimulating work. It is a matter of enquiry how women are defining or negotiating femininity in this IT sector. In this paper, I have used a mixed methods approach to highlight whether women are upholding femininity while working in this 'trans-national space'. I have argued that while on one hand women are employed in high paying jobs and are financially strong, yet most of them are bound by traditional notions of respectable femininity in their everyday life. I have noted that this leads them always striving to strike a 'balance', that is gendered.

Keyword: Gender, Respectable Femininity, Work-Family Balance, IT, Software Professionals.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The economic liberalisation¹ in the 1990s fuelled India's development into a hub for outsourced Information Technology (IT) work, creating an upwardly mobile class of educated professionals in urban India whose numbers have been close to doubling every year. This IT industry boom celebrates the educated workforce of 'knowledge professionals'² who are said to be the beneficiaries of the new globalised economy. They are a part of 'new transnational capitalist class'³ (Radhakrishna, 2011) and constitute a socially significant segment of the 'new middle class'⁴ in India.

The 'newness' of this class is not in its composition. Entering the limelight of globalization⁵ it is characterised by conservative cultural or nationalist values, a hunger for global goods and a conscientious integration into the global political economy. People of this class have specific practices, attitudes and beliefs that foster and give rise to a socio-cultural formation that Radhakrishnan (2011) calls "new transnational" class. This class is full of ostensible contradictions. On one hand it embraces individuality, development and change and on the other hand while it encourages women to be "empowered", yet it places limitations on such empowerment⁶. Although it claims inclusivity by thinking of itself as "middle class" yet the boundaries in terms of who enters into its fold are remarkably limited. The conflict between cultural notions that situate women in the home and the economic realities that require her to enter job market became the foundation on which the constructions of womanhood emerged in the post liberalization and globalized period of 1990s and the new millennium. Thapan (2004) argues that the 'new' woman in the rapidly altering social and cultural imagery of the nation need not necessarily always be constructed in the context of a charged and transformed modernity as it were. Rather, the new Indian woman⁷ should be viewed in the fluid and marked nature of her identity as a woman which is shaped and redefined in the everyday experiences of women as they contest and submit to the images and constructs that impinge on their sense, their emotions and social conditions. Social class⁸, status⁹ and education are the significant markers in the construction of the embodied identity of the 'new Indian woman' (Fernandes, 2000).

In this paper, I intend to highlight that on one hand women are having access to independent income, are self-confident and engaging in consumerist attitudes but at the same time they have not been able to dissociate themselves from the dominant familial ideologies. I have argued that while they are employed and financially independent, yet they continue to uphold 'respectable femininity' in everyday life. Their employment has not led them to question the dominant ideologies of femininity, like: domesticity or being care-givers of family. I have analysed it theoretically with the help of Foucauldian idea of 'power' that controls women 'unconsciously' and confirm to ideals of womanhood.

II. METHODOLOGY

In the present study, I have used a mixed methods approach. The advantage of this approach lies in the fact that, as a set of interpretive activities, it does not privilege one single methodological perspective over another. Mixed methods enable researchers to simultaneously ask confirmatory and explanatory questions and thus verify and generate theory in the same study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In my study, I have used a partially mixed concurrent dominant status design, with major weightage given on qualitative data. I

have emphasized more on the qualitative aspects in order to provide a detailed description of the meanings that the respondents give and to gain a contextual understanding of their social experiences. I have also used some quantitative data like percentages to denote the responses of women.

The primary methods used in the study are face-to-face interviews and observation, in order to study women's experiences from their standpoint. I have also used narratives of women as they are also important strategies of data collection in qualitative studies and feminist research. It helped me to explore the subjective meanings and experiences of women that have not been documented before in the literature of women software engineers in IT. In doing so, the narratives allowed for new insights and awareness into social processes and gave women a voice to talk about their work experiences in the high-tech workplaces.

Women software engineers in the IT industries were the unit of analysis in the present study. Fifty women software engineers were interviewed working in three renowned IT companies of Kolkata, the names of which have been not been disclosed in order to maintain anonymity. I have referred to them as Company A, B and C respectively. All the women were computer science engineers from recognised institutes from either Kolkata or outside. The age composition of the sample varied between 24-45 years. Since IT companies are dominated by young men and women software engineers (who are in their early 20s), most of the female respondents belong in the age group of 21-30 years that is 58%. Only a small portion of women, that is, 10% belong to the age group of 41-50 years. The lowest age was 24 years and the highest age was 45 years because we see a dearth of senior women in IT companies. Not all senior women were willing to participate in the study, given the fact that IT companies maintain high level of confidentiality with information being shared to outsiders. Also, not many senior women are exclusively software engineer graduates.

III. RESPECTABLE FEMININITY

Following Skeggs (1997), I have used Bourdieu's (1992, 2008) model of class based on "capital"⁹ movements in social space, and conceptualized respectable femininity as a symbolic capital that brings afore the embeddedness of gender and class. The multidimensional approach of Bourdieu to class is based on economic, cultural, social and symbolic aspects. Following this line of thought, respectable femininity is a symbolic capital¹⁰ where women seek symbolic profit and class status. For Bourdieu, symbolic capital is the form that any other kind of capital (economic, cultural and social) can take once it is perceived as legitimate.

Respectable femininity is a gendered construct traceable to the 19th and early 20th centuries. (Fernando & Cohen, 2013). The discourse of "respectable femininity" validates a particular kind of femininity- one that is not submissive but rather confident and professional. However, her 'personal choices' ultimately uphold the sanctity of the Indian family. Respectable women dressed modestly, demonstrated sexual restraint or self-restraint, were sober and well-mannered, and confined themselves to mainly private spheres (Radhakrishnan, 2009). Domesticity is a central component of 'respectability' where women are constructed as prioritizing family and holding them responsible for preserving family's culture as 'good wives'/effective housekeepers and dutiful mothers and while pursuing their careers and being financially independent. The notion of 'respectability' plays out in women's

careers because factors like domesticity and self-restraint which confines women to private spheres are inconsistent with networking and impression management, seen as vital to developing a career in contemporary organizations. Through this essentializing discourse, the new Indian woman is someone who is economically independent and assertive while internalizing the socially prescribed gender roles as mother or wife or daughter-in-law.

A woman's body is an over-determined site for feminists to start an in-depth understanding of femininity, as it is the surface inscribed with culturally and historically specific cultural practices and subject to political and economic forces (Thapan, 1995). The notion of the body is central to the feminist analysis of the oppression of women because biological differences between the sexes are the foundation that has served to ground and legitimize gender inequality. Bordo (2008) noted that feminism first inverted the old metaphor of the 'body politic' to address the issue of the politics of the body. Feminists have identified how women have been subjugated primarily through their bodies and how gender ideologies arise from perceived biological differences between men and women which are supported by dualistic paradigms that have characterised Western thinking from the philosophers of ancient Greece to Enlightenment and beyond. The idea of men and women as opposing is supported by opposite categories like mind/body, culture/nature, spirit/matter which have been inflected with gender ideologies. Mind and reason are perceived as superior to emotions and senses and hence separate. A 'man' represents mind and culture, one who has rational thinking, while the 'woman' represents the body and nature, one who is the irrational and emotionally driven. Hence, the man with 'mind' and 'culture' must harness and control this potentially unruly 'body' of woman through the application of knowledge and willpower. Women's association with body/nature is strengthened by essentialist paradigms which defines a woman according to her reproductive physiology. Hence she is understood as 'passive', driven by emotions and instinct. In the process femininity is understood as a social organisation of relations among women and between men and women which is mediated by texts, i.e. by the materially fixed forms of printed writing and images (Thapan, 1995).

1. Upholding 'Respectable Femininity' in Family and Work: In our society, the 'good' or 'ideal' woman is considered to be a judicious blend of the qualities of domestic skills, knowledge of religious rituals and practices while having acquired education and employment opportunities. For most urban middle-class Indian women, this is a discourse that they are product of and simultaneously reproduce in turn (Thapan, 2004). Technically qualified and professional women trying to reproduce the notion of 'good woman' can be explained by feminists' perspective on Foucault's understanding of 'knowledge'/power and how it moulds the subjectivities of the individual. Women internalise the feminine notions (of family responsibilities or domesticity), in Foucauldian terms 'disciplinary practices', into their subjectivities in course of everyday lives. An evidence of this was seen in the fact that all women software professionals I interviewed, expressed their belief in the institution of marriage along with the 'responsibilities' which it entailed. It was interesting to note that while being independent and confident at their work, they drew upon resonant notions of family even as they reconciled those meanings with notions of individual achievements imbibed at workplace (Fuller & Narsimhan 2008, Radhakrishnan 2011). In fact, as the high status of women in the IT workplace has become established, the "time bind" between obligations at work and attending obligations to home has become an important factor in the lives of women software professionals. In contrast to public sector jobs, IT industry requires long working hours

and sometimes employees are required to work from home or even on the weekends. That is why the divide between work and home is blurred and that's when a woman's job becomes to impinge on her family life. In a society where this kind of time bind for middle class women is relatively new, the questions about priorities between professional and personal lives arise. In my study, a large number of women (44%) believed and recognised in the importance of family and their responsibilities that the role of women in upholding it. They are very much career oriented, but rarely at the expense of the family which is almost always privileged over the stimulation of work or even the high salary a woman may receive from her IT job. In fact, many of them viewed career as something 'supplemental' to a married life with family and children. The conversations women suggested they held family values of being the priority and spoke of adjusting their work life after marriage. Some of the narratives of women given below illustrate these discussions:

Gunja (30 yrs) is a software engineer in an IT company. It's been one year since her marriage. She is settled in Kolkata with her husband at her in-law's house. She spoke of how she adjusted to her new lifestyle after marriage. She says: "After marriage, a lot of change is there as I am staying with my in-laws. Although I have my own space and there is no interference from them, but you know working women have to balance both. I am mindful about getting up early so that I help her around little bit. At night, I am too exhausted to do anything. So, I try to make it up in the morning. I don't work on weekends now as I have other preoccupations."

Deepashree (34 yrs) is working little more than last 7 years. She is married and does not have a child. She reiterated the importance of 'adjusting' for women in IT between work and family. She says: "If I had a child today, I would have to consider many things. I don't know the situation but I may have taken some project or would have to say no to some due to time and travel considerations. You have to make adjustments with both. Not all women are able to prioritize work over family. Many women have this dilemma. Some make it clear while rest adjust in both."

The perspectives of Gunja and Deepashree in the above cases noted above, showed that their internalisation of gendered identities. They identify themselves with domesticity as a part of a women's 'nature', which is reflected in their unwavering in their support and orientation towards family while being employed. The primary location of women in the private sphere, irrespective of their employment and education may be explained by the 'power' of gendered ideology which women have internalised. The fact that they tend to prioritize their family needs imply that women internalise the power of dominant notions of womanhood, that they are 'naturally good' as care-givers and nurturers of family and hence assuming domestic responsibilities. Interestingly, it is family which plays an important role in indoctrinating women to accept the power of men in both private and public realms (Rainbow, 2010). They are constantly involved in adjusting between work and home after marriage by striking a 'balance', which is still unheard of in case of men. The way in which women strike this 'balance' along with its implications have been analysed further, in detail, in the following theme.

- 2. Family Comes First, then Job- A 'Gendered Balance':** In order to reproduce, reinvent and achieve the ideal of the 'good woman' and maintain their middle-class respectability,

while retaining their economic independence, women software professionals strike a much valued 'balance' and it is their constant engagement in striking this 'balance' that lies at the heart of the discussion of masculine domination as 'legitimate' and 'natural'. Both 'masculine domination', and its vital component - symbolic violence, are helpful to understand how women take part automatically, and are products of, in the patriarchal ideology of femininity and womanhood and thus maintain the continuity of this structure. The masculine-feminine opposition is 'naturalised' in a series of 'analogous oppositions' which includes the binaries involved in the sexual division of labour.

Masculine domination takes its power from the fact that women accept the domination as something that is 'legitimate' and 'natural'. This domination, as Bourdieu (1992) says, is established historically and is internalised, naturalised and essentialized. The symbolic use of violence to women, is not physical, but is carried out by the imposition of a particular image and personality. The conditions of femininity that are accepted include: domesticity, docility, adjusting or compromising, tolerant, subordinate and being dependent of men's expectations (Bartky, 1990). In this study, the responses suggested that women software professionals internalise the conditions of femininity, as mentioned above, which take the form of 'balance'. The new gendered 'balances' recreate older strategies of cultural preservation that seek to prevent the feminized private sphere from being 'degendered'. In this 'balance', most women professionals (although may not acknowledge) continued to prioritise family and its needs over their work and this took different forms. Women who have been in the industry for more than eight years and have stayed through marriage and children expressed their views on the dilemmas balancing the demands of home and work, going beyond the navigation of the gendered division of labour in the home and hinting at the more symbolic aspect of these 'balances'. Although they are successful in their career, yet use various strategies to uphold the ideals of Indian womanhood. Sometimes women make 'negotiations' between work and home by opting to keep housemaids (sometimes full time) to compensate their absence. It is also seen that women involve in taking families out to restaurants for dinner or cooking on a day for family members to make them 'happy' and compensate for their absence at it. In spite of these, their conversations often brought out feelings of 'inadequacy' behind the negotiations and not being able to the duties towards family and home as 'expected'. It did not refrain women from thinking that their status as a bearer of 'culture' in the family is to some extent compromised due to the work culture in IT like: erratic work schedules (long working hours), staying back till late evening although rarely, working at odd hours (sometimes even on weekends); not being able to give adequate time to family, especially children and family members like in-laws. Women like Pragya, Poonam and Ritu exemplified their way of asserting their navigation at work and home and their attempts at balancing:

Pragya is (39 yrs) a software developer project manager in one of the three IT companies. She has a six year old daughter to whom she has not been able to give much time. Her daughter is looked after by her parents and to compensate her presence at home she has kept a full time live-in domestic worker. Her husband has a business and both their earnings are important for the family's upper middle class lifestyle. She says: sometimes, my work gets under my skin you know. It's very strenuous. There are days I come back late at night and I see my daughter sleeping. Next morning we hardly meet for half an hour before she leaves for school. The girl who stays with her has become like

our family. We take her along with us on weekends. Although I am not like other mothers who are there for their kids all the time. Sometimes I know my family members talk behind my back. But no one in my family questions me on my face because they know me and how I love them. They will consult me first regarding my daughter's needs. I am always in charge of her always.

Poonam (35 yrs) is a software engineer in another IT company. She stays with her in-laws and they look after her five year old son and his studies. She also has a full time domestic help like Pragya and yet is at the helm of family affairs especially her son. She says: "Since I cannot be at home 24*7 and my in-laws are aged, I have kept a live-in domestic help. They supervise her and keep an eye on my son while the help does his work. I realise sometimes that I am unable to give him as much time as I should do and with my kind of job it is difficult to be that doting mother always with him. But, I know that am just a call away from them and they know it. Minu di (domestic help) reports to me if anything untoward happens at home."

Ritu (32 yrs) is also working in IT since last six to seven years. She acknowledges frequently with a sombre undertone about her 'inadequacy' of giving little time to family. She says: "working in IT gives very little time for family. For a woman it is more difficult given the responsibilities of childcare on her. When work pressure is more on a project, I can hardly have time at home. She understands that. My in-laws were initially not happy with my working style after I had my daughter because of my odd working hours. Sometimes I try to cover up my absence by taking them for dinner after my work. My husband discourages me to do it as it becomes strenuous for my health, but I know these are important to keep them happy. Sometimes even though I don't like, I cook on weekends and help my mother-in-law, by preparing a dish or two. It's not much you know but it makes her feel good and I feel content."

These experiences suggested that although women are confident, strongly tied to their work and value their financial independence, yet they are products of a gendered subjectivity. The dominant notions of femininity are powerful and it has been transferred into the subjectivities of the individual thus disempowering them. Thus, women are continuously striving to fulfil such ideologies by 'adjustments' (or what is referred to here as 'balancing') failing which makes them feel 'inadequate' or 'guilty'.

The importance of this 'balance' in the lives of women could be gauged from the fact that this term was a recurring theme in most narratives, which is still unheard of in case of men. It allows for the enactment of respectable femininity, a critical symbolic performance in which the women software professionals strive to participate (Radhakrishnan, 2009). Under masculine domination, women try to accomplish the ideas of motherhood and femininity. In IT industries, it was noted that the need to look after households, especially after childbirth, often leads to a tendency of self-selection of women in lower-end software domains like: quality assurance, testing or support (Upadhyya & Vasavi, 2006). These jobs are considered to be lower-end and are usually paid less and offer fewer channels for growth, yet women prefer them as they have regular working hours with little chance of being sent abroad or long hours of work in office. Such self-made 'choices' of women to prioritize family over work (to the extent of choosing to remain in particular jobs in IT) while interpreted as an entirely individualistic

decisions works in recreating or reaffirming the gendered notions of a 'woman' where the culture of the middle-class families lie at the importance (or construction) of women being the care-giver and nurturer of the family. In this study, women (38%) were found to make such voluntary 'choices' where they preferred to be in software tasks like: support or quality assurance or testing. Although these were lower-end software tasks, yet women did not complain as it gave the 'freedom' or ability to adjust between family time and demands of work. They shared diverse viewpoints on how they achieve that 'balance' in their own ways:

Sutapa (34 yrs) is a technical support lead with an experience of ten years in this field. She has a two year old daughter and shared her views about her family responsibilities which made her continue working in support team, even when she had the option of being a software developer. She says: When I had my daughter, I knew I would have to manage my work and family. I had good rating before I went for maternity leave because I took less leaves and did all the pending work and handed over my work charge on time. When my manager asked me for a designing project, I was not sure whether that would be appropriate at that time because my daughter was just six months old and I needed to be with her. In designing team, it would be very hectic to keep up with a small baby. I have been in testing since then and I am a team lead. I am able to balance home and family better than some of my friends who work as software architects.

Priyanka (27 yrs), who is unmarried but has plans to settle down soon, says: "It's not unusual to see some women opting to work in projects that enable them adequate work flexibility even though they provide slower rate of growth in companies. They take up such tasks or projects which do not need much travelling and have more or less regular work hours so that they can be with family. It's the choice that women make themselves to balance family and work-life."

Anwasha (33 yrs) with an experience of more than 10 years shared her experience of how she had let go of an otherwise lucrative opportunity for the sake of her son. She says: "I was called for a software development project couple of months back that had chances of frequent on-site visits. The client was high profile and I knew there would be tremendous pressure. My son only three years old and recently has not been keeping well lately and I have to be around. Although I have my family yet as a mother I need to give him time & care. I informed my manager about my inability to take up the project and I made my reasons clear. Yes, these do affect our career choices but sometimes for the sake of family your career can take a backseat for some-time. I am in a support team and I am content with what I do."

The fact that women do not question the normative roles in marriage, prioritize family and make 'necessary adjustments' at work imply that their 'choices' are not exercised freely but are a result of the gendered selves. Womanhood and femininity become a natural and self-evident status through its inscription in the objective structure of the social world which is then incorporated and further reproduced in the habitus of individuals. By prioritizing family, the women software engineers displayed strong notions of appropriate behaviours and actions that do not undermine the family and which sets up the terms of the delicate 'balance' that IT women continuously make. Thus, "balancing" the desires and motivations of the individual with the duties and obligations

of the family, the software professionals of the neo-liberal era hence reproduce the gendered ideals of femininity that draws upon the notions of a sacred, feminized domestic sphere while also engaging in the progress of economic and social development. They recognise the gulf between their goals and criteria, and those of their 'nature'- being committed to family and children. It also brings out the dilemma of balancing childrearing and work and the practical contradictions faced by individual mothers and it relates to the larger contradictions in society as a whole. This discussion is taken up in the succeeding section.

At the core of the discourse surrounding respectable femininity, lies the issue of women's sexuality (Phadke, 2007). In order to achieve 'respectability' in the service of family and work, the middle class women must respect a set of boundaries that delimit how they travel between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of work and leisure in everyday life (Radhakrishnan, 2009). In this study, I have attempted to explore what women felt about their leisure time after office hours. To this, it was noted that generally their leisure was limited to 'coffee-breaks' or 'pizza-breaks' on working days within the office hours so that there is not much delay in returning home after finishing work. Married women rarely went out for dinner with friends or colleagues because of their responsibilities at home. Given their long working hours, women preferred to give time to family, after work, rather than hanging out with friends. For unmarried women, although there was no such binding at home yet they felt the need to return home early after work before it gets too late. On rare occasions, (may be once in four or five months) they were found to visit near-by restaurants for a drink with their close friends or colleagues (who were also women). Such occasions were largely unknown to their guardians (parents or in-laws) at home, as they did not appreciate women drinking and hanging out with friends after office. In between conversations, women often acknowledged their family 'backgrounds'. The term 'background' not only refers to overt class markers but also to the gendered character of the domestic sphere which is implicitly linked to class standing (Radhakrishnan, 2011). 'Good family backgrounds' essentially consist of heterosexual families in which middle class women make 'appropriate' choices or decisions for their husbands and children- decisions that are enacted self-consciously and enthusiastically by most women interviewed. They noted that their employment gave them a 'respectable social standing', unlike in other professions, and that frequent going-out with friends could be misinterpreted by members of family and women did not want to transgress it. The fact that women believed in the norms of marriage and familial ideologies highlights that sexuality of women is channelized through marriage. Narratives of women like Anwita, Sresha and Priya illustrate this:

Anwita (34 yrs): It's not that we girls do not have our hang-outs. But it's not that frequent because I am married, I have a child and I have responsibilities. She waits for my return at home. If I go out for a drink or head to a party after work, how will that do. If we plan to have fun with friends, we do it within office hours and on weekdays. For weekends, I am with my family.

Sresha (27 yrs): I don't get much time to hang-out with friends after work. My parents worry about me till I reach home. And they don't like that girls staying out of house till late evening. If there is a plan to meet up with friends or colleagues, it's mostly

within office hours. If we go out for a lunch somewhere we share a drink or two but it's very rare and I don't disclose it to my parents.

Priya (44 yrs): My in-laws anyways don't like women going out alone with their group of friends at night and let alone for a drink. They think after work, you should go back home as you have responsibilities here. It shows the background and culture. I don't have a problem with that, it's their view. It's not that we go out often but there are some occasions where we want to go out and have a good time. We plan, we try to do it near our workplace according to a convenient time so that it's not very late in reaching home. I have my child at home to look into at the end of the day. But, I inform my husband before-hand that I am going out and he is ok with it. So, I have no problem.

Deepashree (34 yrs): Women generally return home after work. Office hours are as it is so long and there is no leisure time. Mostly we have our hang-outs within office hours where we go for 'pizza breaks' sometimes even a brunch with women colleagues at one of the restaurants inside the campus. Till now my mother keeps on messaging me when am I returning home after work. Our job gives has a good social standing in our families. Hanging out with friends frequently and going to parties does not give a good impressions at your in-laws house.

As understood from the narratives, women rarely took time to 'hang-out' with friends after office and even if they did it was only with their female friends. Thus women acknowledged and avoided, as Radhakrishnan (2011) calls "too much of exposure", and maintained their 'respectability' or sexual limitations. By refusing to take part in leisure time, like going out with friends', women uphold respectability within families. In fact, in Foucauldian terms, women are guided by the patriarchal construct of a 'good woman' and they 'discipline' themselves by being self-consciously professional, competent and ready to go home to be with family on time. Their frequent references to 'good families' suggested the ways sexual limits are set, reinforced and enacted by women in IT. According to feminists, for most middle class Indian women, the boundaries for acceptability within families is to have sexual restraint. As Phadke (2007) says, public spaces are important locations for understanding the sexuality of middle class women. Here, public spaces imply IT workplaces and women reproduce respectability by maintaining a distance from opposite sex, avoiding participation with men (outside IT offices) and thus prevent any kind of violation of norms of sexuality. For most middle class women, their respectability is linked to their being able to demonstrate on a regular basis their conformity to familial norms of being a 'good' or 'responsible' woman and any transgression from this is considered 'disrespectful' in middle-class families. Thus, in case of the women software engineers, their reputation is linked with familial ideologies maintaining sexual restraint and 'honour' and 'respect' of the family.

However, it was interesting to note some alternatives as well. In my study, there were few women (3%) who resisted ideal of middle-class respectability or domesticity. Women were found to resist the ideal of motherhood where they opted for frequent travels (either with their children or without them), took up projects that would demand strenuous work. Although it did not bring full support from parents or in-laws (initially), women were not deterred from doing what they desired for. Interestingly, sometimes their actions made them appear 'less feminine' to their family, relatives and (few) colleagues.

In one case, it was noted that a woman walked out of her marriage due to lack of support from husband and mental trauma caused by family problems. She continues to work in the IT company and stays with her parents. Some of the narratives of women are illustrative of what they feel:

Roshni (38 yrs) is a software engineer in one of the three IT companies. She is divorced with a six-year old son. She says: after childbirth, my in-laws wanted me to quit my job and focus on my job. They were upset about my hectic schedule and used to tell what sort of mother was I to leave my child for long hours and go to work. Surprisingly, even my husband started quarrelling with me and there was lot of mental and emotional trauma for me at home. Now, I am a single mother and looking after my son alone and my husband visits him time to time.

Sanjana (35 yrs): After childbirth, I was very clear at home that my work won't take a backseat and I would fulfil all duties required of me in my office. I went to Chennai for three days when my daughter was seven months old. She was with my husband and in-laws. My in-laws were unhappy but I knew it was my duty.

Amrita (38 yrs): When my son was born, I kept a full-time maid at my house as I knew I would be joining work after six months. I travel for official purposes since he was very young, and there are times my family did not support this, but for me my work is important. There are disagreements with me and my husband till date regarding this.

The above narratives provide interesting perspective about women resisting dominant gender constructions. Lack of support from family suggest how the subjugation of women is rooted in family, as noted by radical feminism. The fact that they are perceived as 'less feminine' suggest the social constructions of women in terms of dominant familial ideologies. In a culture, where sociality is presumed to be a key aspect of being a 'woman' and where men and women are presumed to be different, not confirming the gendered ideals make women techies something 'unseen of'.

IV. CONCLUSION

The paper bring forth the negotiating spaces of women in upholding their 'femininity'. In my research, I have highlighted that although women software engineers are confident and have access to independent income, yet they do not challenge the dominant notions of womanhood in family and marriage. The narratives of women suggest that while women are economically independent yet their 'choices' are guided by ideas of 'respectable femininity' which involves primarily involves domesticity. They are continuously involved in a striking a 'balance' between work and home. For them, career is viewed as a supplement to family and have a tendency to prioritize the latter over former, thus confirming to the social construction of women in terms of domesticity and nurturance. This could be understood in different ways like: cutting down on travels after childbirth or self-selection in certain lower-end software tasks in IT companies or taking a gap of few years after child-birth. I have also attempted to show the dilemma of childcare as experienced by women. Here, I have also highlighted how women's experience leisure. Mostly, they preferred to leave for home after work and they rarely go out with friends after office hours. Their sexuality is channelized through marriage. Their respectability is linked to 'good families' and women take part in

demonstrating on a regular basis their conformity to familial norms. Any transgression from this is considered 'disrespectful' in middle-class families. The Foucauldian idea of power and Bourdieu's concept of masculine domination are helpful in understanding how women disempower themselves by reproducing the feminine ideals on an everyday basis. In this section, I have also highlighted that women software professionals internalised the essentialist notions of motherhood. They believed in the idea of 'intensive mothering' which posits women as the 'best' care-giver and nurturer of children. Thus, women aspired to be the 'good mother', a social construct in itself, failing which would lead to feelings of maternal guilt and anxiety. Such feelings or apprehensions were unseen or unheard of, in case of men. However, not all women confirm to this idea of femininity and are seen to resist familial expectations. In doing so, in some extreme cases they are even found to choose their own freedom from mental strain due to lack of support from husbands or in-laws.

This paper is an extract of my broader work on women software professionals in IT. Given the limitation of extent, more work can be undertaken in this area in order to understand how women are negotiating their femininities in everyday life at high-tech workplaces.

END NOTES

¹Economic Liberalisation - The term 'liberalisation' refers to the process or means of the elimination of the control of the state over economic activities. It gives greater autonomy to the business enterprises in decision-making and eliminates government interference. Economic liberalisation refers to a country "opening up" to the rest of the world with regards to trade, regulations, taxation, and other areas that generally affect business in the country (Mukherjee, 2008).

²'Knowledge Professionals' - They are the most sought after people in post-industrial society as they have knowledge in fields of Information technology such as programmers or web designers or system analysts or technical workers or researchers. They have high level of productivity and creativity (Upadhyaya & Vasavi 2006).

³New trans-national capitalist class: Radhakrishnan (2011) used this term in her book "Appropriately Indian". It refers to the Indian IT professionals within India and outside. They have specific practices, attitudes and beliefs that foster and give rise to a socio-cultural formation that she calls "new" transnational class. This class is full of ostensible contradictions. On one hand it embraces individuality, development and change and on the other hand while it encourages women to be "empowered" yet it places limitations on such empowerment. Although it claims inclusivity by thinking of itself as "middle class" yet the boundaries in terms of who enters into its fold are remarkably limited.

⁴New middle class: There is considerable debate around the identity of the 'new' Indian middle class. Generally, they are associated with economic liberalization and new consumption patterns. There are various layers of the middle class differentiated by caste, religion, income, social capital and cultural capital ranging from low-level and less skilled clerical workers to upper level managerial personnel but it is a small segment of these upwardly mobile workers who seem to be associated with the discursive construction of India's new middle class. For Lakha (1990), the new middle class consists of the rich farmers, small business entrepreneurs, overseas workers in the Gulf region and the salaried professionals from diverse backgrounds. According to Fernandes (2000), in the contemporary context of liberal India, the new middle class has become a sign of the promise of a new national model of development that will allow India to catch up with larger processes of economic globalization.

⁵Globalization - Globalisation refers to the integration of markets in the global economy, leading to the increased interconnectedness of national economies (Giddens & Sutton: 2017).

⁶Empowerment - The term "empowerment" has been used widely by the government, donor agencies, NGOs, women activists, and academics since the early 1980s. However, there are differences between development planners and the women's movement as to how the concept of empowerment is understood. Sharma summarises the concept of empowerment as follows: The term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations. For individuals and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognize the systemic forces that oppress them but act to change

existing power relations. Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. Hence, women's empowerment is essentially about changing power relations that subordinate women in the family and society. It is an enabling process that seeks to redistribute power between genders and involves resistance, conflict, and accommodation. Empowerment also involves disempowerment of some structures, systems, and institutions (Patel, 1998). In my study, I have not used the term 'empowerment' as it was noted that economic empowerment did not necessarily lead to women challenging dominant notions of femininity.

⁷New Indian Woman- The image of the 'New Woman' in India is primarily derived from the urban, educated, middle-class career woman (Rajan, 1993). According to Rajan, the New Woman is primarily constructed by the media and for commercial ends. It is new in the sense of "having evolved and arrived in response to the times, as well as being intrinsically 'modern' and 'liberated'" (Rajan, 1993, p. 130). The new Indian woman is one who must attend her national identity as well as her modernity; she is Indian as well as new (Rajan, 1993: 132). In my study, I have attempted to highlight the notion of 'new' Indian woman is gendered. Although women are economically independent and career oriented, yet they do not challenge the dominant notions of womanhood, like: being family oriented, the care-giver or nurturer of children.

⁸Social Class – A social class is made up of people of similar social status who regard one another as social equals. It is an aggregate of people who have same status or rank or common characteristics. It is a very difficult idea to define and sociologists differ greatly in their ideas on social class. Karl Marx argued that there were two social classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Max Weber argued that stratification and social class were more complicated than this. Weber begins his analysis by defining class situation as the relationship of a person or number of people to a particular market that has an important effect on the lives of these people. Max Weber has defined class in terms of life chances and noted that a class is a number of people sharing one or more causes of life chances'. By life chances he meant 'the typical chances for a supply of goods, external living conditions, and personal life experience (Ritzer, 2011).

⁹Status – Max Weber also introduced the ideas of power and status as making up a full picture of a person's position in society. He defined status as the likelihood that life chances are determined by social honour or prestige. The status groups, as Weber calls, are linked by a common style of life and the attendant social restrictions (Ritzer, 2011).

¹⁰Capital – 'Capital' is a term used to refer to a person or group's accumulated status within a stratified society. High amounts of capital indicate a person's elevated social status and power in society, while low accumulated capital can indicate a person's inability to achieve social mobility (Haralamboss: 2018).

¹¹Symbolic Capital - Symbolic capital is said to understood as the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge and recognition (Haralamboss: 2018).

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