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Beyond Gender-Inclusive Policies: Organizational Culture, Work–Life Balance, and Leadership Development as Conversion Mechanisms for Women's Career Advancement in Indian Multinational Corporations

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ABSTRACT
Gender-inclusive policies have been seen spreading in Multinationals Companies (MNCs) functioning in India and still the growth of women from entry and middle level in the companies to senior leadership is not uniform across the board. This conceptual review will provide an understanding of why formal policy adoption is not enough. The paper combines gendered-organization theory, role congruity theory, conservation of resources theory, social exchange theory, and the institutional-duality perspective on MNC subsidiaries to create a Policy–Culture–Resource–Advancement framework. An enacted inclusive culture is the mechanism that makes formal policies usable, credible, and enhance career, it argues. Culture creates two complementary pathways: one is a pathway of work–life, where flexibility is offered without penalty, preserving time, energy and career life; and one is a pathway of leadership-development, where development means having access to sponsorship, stretch assignments, and succession. These effects are mediated by managerial accountability, headquarters–subsidiary alignment, care infrastructure and intersecting identities. There are ten propositions which are open for empirical testing. It makes a contribution by differentiating between policy availability and enactment, flexibility access and penalty-free use, mentoring and sponsorship, and retention and advancement, and provides for outcome-oriented indicators for organizations and researchers.

Key words: organizational culture; work–life balance; sponsorship; women's career promotion; multinational companies.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-inclusive policies are now part and parcel of corporate diversity agendas. Companies post equal opportunity, anti-harassment, flexible work, parental policies, mentoring and leadership diversity statements. Nevertheless, formal equality does not ensure substantive equality in the case of formal adoption. Gendered advantage can be perpetuated in everyday practices of rating, seeing, assigning, promoting and selecting for succession even when formal rules are gender-neutral (Acker, 1990). There is a longstanding tradition in institutional theory that organizations can legitimize themselves by adopting formal structures but not change their working practices, and diversity intervention studies have demonstrated that diversity programmes that do not directly relate to the management of an organisation's business often have low impact on representation (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006).

The disconnect between the policy and outcome is extremely relevant in India. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for July 2023 – June 2024 shows that the labour-force participation rate (LFPR) of women aged 15 years and above stood at 41.7% which is still far lower than that of men (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2024). There is less of representation the higher up the corporate ladder. The survey by AIMA–KPMG 2024 suggests that in most organizations in India, women's representation in leadership is still low, with 56% of the organizations stating that they have 10-30% women in leadership roles, and 77% of the

organizations having less than 30% women in entry roles reach leadership levels. The 2026 edition shows modest improvement – 46% of organisations are still in the 10-30% band, 10% still have no women in leadership and 30% have made no progress or decline over five years (KPMG in India & AIMA, 2026). This kind of evidence moves the focus of recruitment to the organizational practices and processes that lead to retention, promotion and access to leadership building experiences.

India has legal requirements that set out key minimum requirements. The Companies Act, 2013 (Section 149) prescribes at least one women director in listed and specified public companies and the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 provides for extended paid maternity leave, crèche facilities for units that employ 50 or more people and temporary work-from-home arrangements for women as per mutual agreement. While important, none of these provisions can in themselves change informal networks, ideal-worker norms, assignment allocation, manager behaviour or promotion judgements.

MNCs in India are a theoretically valuable context, as they are a mixture of global corporate standards and local institutions. Gender-diversity practices can be standardized, adapted, diluted, or selectively enacted at the subsidiary level as they are under simultaneous pressure to integrate with the headquarters and host country responsiveness (Rosenzweig & Nohria, 1994; Kostova & Roth, 2002; Bader, Knappert, Lazarova, & Ng, 2025). Indian evidence shows that foreign subsidies are more likely to implement gender diversity management practices than Indian-owned firms (Chakraborty & Chatterjee, 2020), but this does not necessarily mean that employees are able to make use of those practices without penalty. A MNC may thus have a very advanced policy system and yet have local implementation shortcomings.

This paper deals with three questions. First, what is the role of organizational culture to move gender-inclusive policies to moving women's careers in Indian MNCs? Second, how do work–life balance and leadership development impact women's objective and subjective career outcomes? Thirdly, how are these relationships influenced by managerial accountability, headquarters–subsidiary alignment, social norms and intersecting identities? It has been argued that culture determines the accessibility, legitimacy, and consequences of potential resources generated by policies. Work-life balance is complementary to leadership development: while work-life balance acts as a tool for career continuity and preservation of personal resources, leadership development provides the competence, visibility, networking and advocacy for an upward trajectory.

There is a significant gap in the scholarships that currently exist. Previous research on women's careers in India has tended to investigate either the effects of individual-level predictors such as family responsibilities, mentoring, perceived support, or glass-ceiling barriers on women's careers in the same sector, and the international literature on gender-diversity management in MNCs has focussed on the transfer of practices from headquarters to subsidiaries (Bader et al., 2025). There are few explanations on how a transferred and adopted policy becomes or fails to become an opportunity that a woman in an Indian subsidiary can utilise. The present paper fills that gap.

The paper has three contributions. It recasts organizational culture as a means of conversion rather than an extra independent variable; it distinguishes between constructs commonly collapsed—availability and enactment of policies, flexibility and penalty-free use of policies, mentoring and sponsorship, retention and advancement; it brings together constructs typically studied separately—organizational-behaviour literature, work–family literature, leadership-development literature, international human resource management literature—and teases out ten testable propositions specific to Indian MNCs.

Review Approach:

An integrative conceptual-review design is used in the paper. Integrative reviews are suitable for situations where insights are found in various research streams, and the goal of the review is to synthesize them into a new explanatory model, not to estimate a pooled effect (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). The paper is a theory-synthesis article inspired by Jaakkola (2020), which combines elements from multiple theories to form a picture of a phenomenon of interest – the conversion of formal gender policy to career advancement. Five streams of literature were merged: Women's career advancement and gendered organizations, inclusive organizational culture and climate, and the work–family interface, leadership development, mentoring and sponsorship, and international HRM in MNC subsidiaries. Studies were given preference if they were peer-reviewed; they needed to be set in an Indian context (either corporate, IT or service sector); if not, then if they identify a mechanism which has the potential to be translated and applied in an Indian context, or if they offer a mature theory, they were included. Authoritative institutional sources, such as national labour statistics, legislation and large-scale employer/employee surveys, were selectively used to describe context, and are designated as such because they are often based on non-probability samples and on perceptions. The four steps of evidence synthesis were performed. Policy, culture, work–life, and development barriers and enablers were first identified and categorized as recurrent. These were then mapped to theoretical mechanisms. Third, synthesis identified the difference between what organizations provide and what employees can safely use. Finally, mechanisms were connected to advancement results and articulated as propositions, and only strong causal language was utilized for designs that could support it. The review is focused on rather than exhaustive, and should not be interpreted

as a systematic review: no PRISMA flow diagram, effect sizes or a fixed number of included studies are given. Studies were included if they related to women's employment, progression or career success within corporate settings and a design and sample was identified. Table 1 provides a summary of the India-specific peer-reviewed evidence that underpins the framework and the framework component that each study relates to. The table indicates a bias towards IT and service sector studies and cross-sectional or qualitative designs, affecting not only the trustworthiness of the propositions, but also the research agenda suggested in the conclusion.

Table 1. India-Specific Peer-Reviewed Evidence Informing the Framework

Study	Sample and design	Key finding	Framework link
Srinivasan, Murty, & Nakra (2013)	190 women software professionals; survey	Belief in gender disadvantage and an objective view of success distinguished women who persisted; authors recommend childcare and flexibility	Work–life pathway; career continuity
Sharma & Kaur (2019)	553 women managers in banking, IT, hospitality; survey	Organizational and societal barriers predicted career obstacles; personal barriers did not	Structural rather than individual explanation
Chakraborty & Chatterjee (2020)	IT/ITeS firms; survey	Subsidiaries of foreign MNCs adopted more gender-diversity practices than Indian-owned firms	Formal architecture; MNC context
Alok, Banerjee, & Singh (2021)	510 career-persistent women in IT; survey	Managerial support mediated the relationship between work–family conflict and professional self-efficacy	Work–life pathway; manager role
Paul, Krishnan, & Scullion (2021)	Two IT firms; case study	Talent policies viewed positively, but appraisal practices and culture acted as barriers	Policy–practice gap; enacted culture
Agrawal & Singh (2022)	363 women in IT-enabled services; survey	Perceived organizational support strengthened the effect of family support and proactive behaviour on career success	Social exchange; support
Chauhan, Mishra, & Bhakri (2022)	292 women in IT; SEM	Mentoring, organizational support, and family responsibilities predicted perceived career success	Development pathway; support
Das, Jha, & Datta (2024)	20 returning women professionals; interviews	Supervisory support, work–life practices, role models, and DEI hiring enabled re-entry after career breaks	Work–life pathway; re-entry

THE INDIAN MNC CONTEXT

Care and labour arrangements

The presence of women in the workforce in India is still very much connected with the gendered division of unpaid labour. Men and women are unequal in the amount of unpaid domestic and care work that they do, with women generating significant time poverty which limits their skill acquisition, mobility and capacity to take up challenging tasks. The organizational implication is that formally identical career systems can have different impacts if they are structured for uninterrupted availability, long hours, frequent travel and networking after hours. Safety is also a major consideration, with almost half of the women in India who responded to the survey citing personal safety at work or when traveling to attend a client as a top concern (Deloitte, 2024). Thus, the experiences of marriage, parenthood, eldercare, and household management are related to organizational expectations (Buddhapriya, 2009). Qualitative study in Indian IT companies revealed that family factors and social support had a significant impact on women managers' participation and advancement, and that while the policies were perceived as good, they were felt to be constraining in terms of their application when it came to performance evaluation and promotion (Paul, Krishnan, & Scullion, 2021). An analysis of 553 women managers working in banking, IT and hospitality revealed that organizational and societal barriers better predict women's career problems as compared to personal barriers, which would contradict the idea of women's advancement

being stalled because they lack ambition or capability (Sharma & Kaur, 2019).

The Corporate Pipeline

There is a progress as well as leakage in the Indian corporate pipeline. Although AIMA–KPMG found that women's opportunities for leadership had grown in the last five years, family and care responsibilities, bias, stereotyping and limited networks continue to be important constraints (KPMG in India & AIMA, 2024). The 2026 edition highlighted the focus on systemic effectiveness, revealing that 74% of organisations reported having fewer than 30% of long-tenured women progressing toward leadership, participation gaps in leadership-development programmes were ongoing, and concerns about fairness and transparency in evaluations and promotions were rising, while only 40% felt their organisation's culture strongly supported women leaders (KPMG in India & AIMA, 2026). The same holds true about peer-reviewed Indian studies. Mentoring, perceived organizational support, and family responsibilities were found to significantly predict perceived career success among female Indian IT professionals (Chauhan, Mishra & Bhakri, 2022), and perceived organizational support was found to be a significant moderator between family support and subjective career success among the women working in IT-enabled services (Agrawal & Singh, 2022). A study on women software professionals earlier identified that the perception that women are disadvantaged was a determinant to continue or leave and recommended childcare support and flexible working as levers to retain women (Srinivasan et al., 2013). The data from around the world underscores the need for the earliest transition: in North American companies, only 93 women were promoted to manager for every 100 men in 2025, and entry-level women were significantly less likely than men to have a sponsor (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.).Org, 2025). The evidence, as a whole, points to a not one, but many glass ceilings throughout career stages.

Duality in Institutions of MNC subsidiaries.

Transfer of stronger equality norms and HR practices to host environments by foreign subsidiaries is possible, but not automatic. The way how a subsidiary internalizes a parent practice, instead of simply mimicking it, is related to the institutional distance between home and host countries and to relational aspects, like trust and dependence upon HCs (Kostova & Roth, 2002). The transfer of gender-diversity management from the HQ to the subsidiary is the biggest avenue of research in the field in recent years and highlights the challenge of global standardization and localization (Bader et al., 2025). When there are differences between local norms and assumptions in the HQ, this is a high tension. If generic global flexibility doesn't take into account commute safety, the desire for extended family, childcare, and/or the career consequences of visible caregiving, it may not work. On the other hand, too much localization can give legitimacy to discriminatory norms. To be effective, the standards that must be adhered to, including the rights to equal opportunity, anti-harassment, pay equity, predictable schedules, and returnships, need to be supported by local responsiveness, including safe transportation, child care, and other locally responsive supports.

Theoretical Foundations

Gendered Organizations

The gendered-organization theory challenges the idea of neutrality of jobs and hierarchy. Acker (1990) claimed that the abstract worker of organizational design has no care responsibilities, thus marginalizing those who do not fit the pattern. The perspective suggests that policies alone are likely to have limited impact, because flexible working can coexist with the notion of constant visibility; the mentoring system can coexist with sponsor selection based on homophilous networks; and unbiased promotion rules can coexist with the notion that leadership potential can be deduced from masculine-coded behaviour. The issue is not with individual deficits but with organizational processes that are connected.

Role Congruity

Evaluative bias that occurs through the clash between stereotype of women and stereotypical expectations for leaders can be understood through role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women might be viewed as less qualified for leadership positions and agentic leadership behaviour less positively appraised when it comes from women. This incongruity can be exacerbated or lessened by culture. Organizations that only rely on think-manager–think-male judgements perpetuate such judgements, while organizations that also value collaborative, developmental, and adaptive leadership expand the leader prototype and mitigate the mismatch.

Conservation of Resources

Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory suggests that individuals try to secure, maintain, and defend valued resources, including time, energy, autonomy, support and status. For this paper, work–life balance is not about personal time management but rather about a state an organization can support in which work and non-work commitments are satisfied without the chronic loss of resources or the loss of a career. Flexibility, manageable workload, leave, safe transport, and family-supportive supervision keep resources, while overwork and work–family conflict start the resource loss spiral of exhaustion, reduced visibility, withdrawal from development, and exit.

Social exchange and organizational support

Why is it that treating people fairly and supporting them affects their career attitudes and behaviour? This is explained using the theories of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and organizational support theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Perceived organizational support is an employee's perception that the organization values his or her work and cares for his or her welfare. An imbalance occurs when women contribute competence and commitment but their recognition, access, sponsorship and/or promotion is less than it ought to be. When there is consistency in enactment, it means that contributions will be reciprocated, which fosters trust, aspiration, and commitment, and sometimes the reverse is true: a lack of consistency in enactment signals that contributions will not be reciprocated, which may result in silence, disengagement, or exit.

Institutional Duality

The institutional view provides an explanation at the MNC level. The subsidiary faces the challenge of dealing with the host country laws and gender norms, the expectations of the headquarters, the local labor market and the internal power relations (Kostova & Roth, 2002). So a global policy can therefore have various consequences at the subsidiary, city or function level. Headquarters consistency guarantees minimum standards and local translation guarantees practical accessibility; subsidiary leaders are translators who can stringently tie global commitments to local routines, or they can be ceremonial. Table 2 provides a summary of the contribution of each theory to the framework.

Table 2. Theoretical Foundations and Their Role in the Framework

Theory	Core explanatory mechanism	Role in the framework
Gendered organizations (Acker, 1990)	Ideal-worker norms embedded in jobs, evaluation, and hierarchy	Explains why formally neutral policies yield unequal outcomes
Role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002)	Mismatch between female and leader stereotypes biases evaluation	Explains evaluation bias; culture can broaden leader prototypes
Conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1989)	Protection and gain of time, energy, and support	Grounds the work–life resource pathway
Social exchange / organizational support (Blau, 1964; Eisenberger et al., 1986)	Reciprocity for perceived fairness and care	Explains effects of policy–practice consistency on aspiration and retention
Institutional duality (Kostova & Roth, 2002)	Competing headquarters and host-country pressures	Positions alignment and local translation as moderators

CORE CONSTRUCTS

Women's Career Advancement

Advancement in one's career can be multi-faceted. Objective promotions – promotion rate/velocity, hierarchical level, pay increase, decision making authority, budget or team ownership, strategic assignments, international assignments, etc. Subjective advancement comprises career satisfaction, perceived advancement, leadership identity, aspiration and employability. Both are required: otherwise, fixation on representation alone can lead to the misspellings of occupational segregation or symbolic appointments, and fixation on subjective success can lead to the misspellings of unequal access to power and pay. One-time representation is not desirable as it is incapable of showing the rate of promotion, interruption or lateral trap or of attrition, as shown by the longitudinal indicators.

Enacted Inclusive Culture

Organisational culture is a set of shared assumptions, values and behavioural expectations. Inclusion is not simply about diversity in numbers; it is about equitable access to resources, integration of diversity and inclusion in decision-making (Nishii, 2013; Shore et al., 2011). This paper outlines six dimensions of enacted inclusive culture that are important for women's advancement: (a) fairness – transparent, consistent criteria for evaluation, pay, promotion and succession; (b) voice and psychological safety – credible channels to raise bias, harassment and exclusion without retaliation (Edmondson, 1999); (c) belonging – respect for varied identities and leadership approaches; (d) care legitimacy – acceptance that care needs and flexibility are normal, not a sign of low commitment; (e) opportunity access – equitable access to visibility, networks, learning, mobility and sponsorship; and (f) accountability – measurable managerial responsibility for gender-equitable talent outcomes. The operative word is enacted: culture is seen in how these dimensions manifest themselves in everyday decisions, rather than in statements of values.

Work–Life Balance

Here, work–life balance is considered to be the ability to divide time, attention and energy between work and non-work roles in a sustainable way and to have equal access to career opportunities. These are three issues that are often confused and bundled together: availability (whether a provision, such as hybrid work, leave or childcare, exists); usability (whether a provision can be used in practice without obstacles or an adapted workload); and career neutrality (whether using a provision does not entail penalties in terms of ratings, assignments, promotion, pay, or perceived commitment). This distinction is one worth making since "flexibility stigma"—the devaluation of workers who use flexibility—is well-documented (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). A survey in India found that 96% of women respondents believed taking up or asking for flexible working would impact their career progression, 91% said they were not confident they would be able to discuss their work-life challenges with their managers and 94% did not think their workload would change if they were able to work flexibly (Deloitte, 2024).

Leadership Development

Leadership development is not just about formal training, it's about the experiences and relationships that foster leadership capability and credibility, such as: Coaching, stretch assignments, profit-and-loss exposure, international and cross-functional moves, visibility to top decision makers, and involvement in succession planning. Good programmes for women also consider issues of identity and the implicit second generation biases that influence the recognition of leadership (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). Mentoring and sponsorship are not equivalent. Mentors advise and support; sponsors use their influence to get opportunities, and take the reputational risk on behalf of the protégé (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). Women can be mentored lots, but not sponsored. Leadership development is only important if it alters the distribution of opportunities. A summary of the four differences on which the framework is based is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Four Distinctions Underpinning the Framework

Distinction	Commonly measured	What the framework requires
Policy adoption vs. enactment	Number of policies; disclosure	Consistency of managerial application; monitored outcomes
Flexibility access vs. penalty-free use	Availability and uptake	Workload adjustment; no rating, assignment, or promotion penalty
Mentoring vs. sponsorship	Programme participation; mentoring matches	Sponsor advocacy, stretch roles, succession nominations
Retention vs. advancement	Attrition rates; representation snapshots	Transition rates between levels; pay and scope growth

Conceptual Framework and Propositions

The proposed Policy–Culture–Resource–Advancement framework (Figure 1) contains four layers. Formal architecture establishes rights and potential resources but risks symbolic adoption. Enacted culture converts formal provisions into credible practice but risks policy–practice decoupling. Resource pathways—work–life and leadership development—protect continuity and build capital but risk flexibility stigma and development without opportunity. Career outcomes capture substantive advancement but risk representation without power. The framework is a mediated and moderated process: formal policies influence advancement primarily when culture translates them into consistent managerial behaviour; culture activates the two resource pathways; and managerial accountability, headquarters–subsidiary alignment, care demands, sector, career stage, and intersecting identities condition these links.

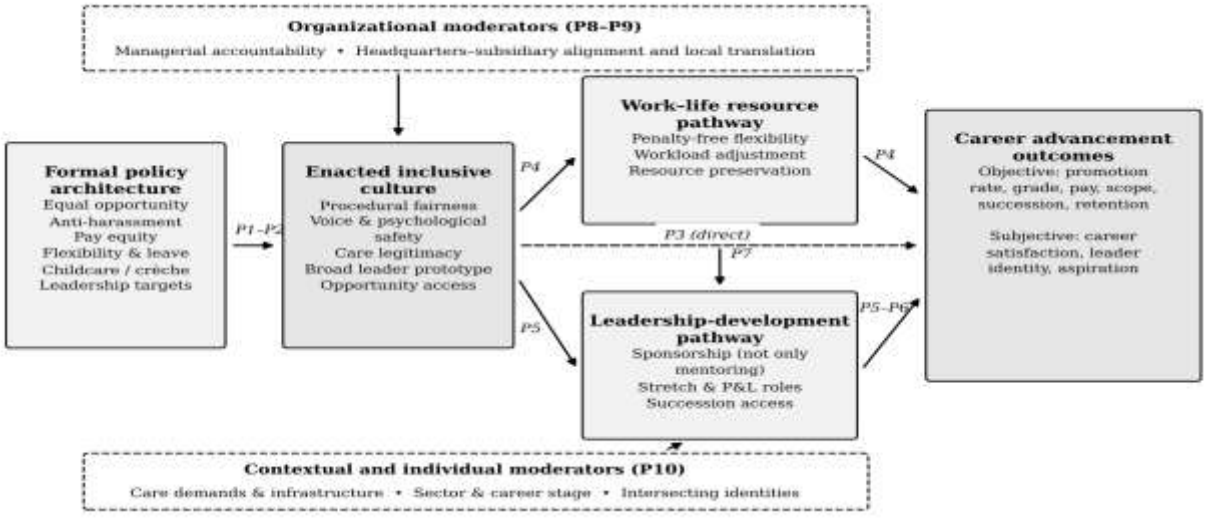


Figure 1. The Policy–Culture–Resource–Advancement Framework

Note. Arrows denote proposed conceptual relationships, not estimated causal paths. P = proposition.

From Policy to Enacted Culture

From Policy to Enacted Culture Formal policies state rights, distribute resources and establish standards to evaluate behaviour. However, an examination of IT/ITeS firms in India revealed that the impact of gender-diversity management on women's representation was weak, and the level of implementation of gender-diversity management was a mediator between the two (Chakraborty, n.d.). Furthermore, Kalev et al. (2006) demonstrated that corporate initiatives associated with managerial responsibility were more effective than those not associated with managerial responsibility. The theoretical change is from the question "Does the company have a policy?" to "How regularly is the policy put into practice by managers, and does the use help or hurt careers?"

P1: Formal gender-inclusive policies positively predict women's career advancement, and mediated by enacted inclusive organizational culture.

P2: Policy–practice consistency is positively related to women's perceived organizational support, their leadership aspirations, retention and advancement, while policy–practice decoupling is negatively related to them.

Culture and Advancement

Culture also directly influences advancement by affecting who is seen as leadership talent, who is seen to receive the information informally, and whose name is put forward for the talent review for promotion. A climate for inclusion lessens the relational conflict that may be associated with gender variety in work groups (Nishii, 2013), and broader leader prototypes decrease the penalties of role incongruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

P3: Enacted inclusive culture positively correlates with women's objective and subjective career advancement, as it is associated with higher procedural fairness, belonging, psychological safety, and access to career-relevant opportunities.

The Work–Life Pathway

Work–life supports ensure the conservation of time and energy, minimize conflict, and enable ongoing involvement. General support is less related to lower work–family conflict (WFC) than is family-specific supervisory and organizational support (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011). The Indian evidence suggests that it is the same mechanism: among 510 women in the sample who continued to work after childbirth, the relationship between work–family conflict and professional self-efficacy was mediated by managerial support (Alok, Banerjee, & Singh, 2021), and women who resumed their careers after a break identified supervisory support and work–life practices as central to re-entry success (Das, Jha, & Datta, 2024). The pathway from flexibility to promotion does not go directly through flexibility, but rather through resource preservation, well-being, and career continuity, and is fragile when caregivers' status itself leads to biased assessment (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). In the absence of workload changes, flexibility in after-hours visibility or flexibility in the absence of strategic assignments, work–life support can help keep workers on board without promoting.

P4: Penalty-free work–life support is positively associated to women's advancement, as driven by both less depletion of resources and greater continuity of jobs; this association is greater where enacted inclusive culture is likely to reduce the stigma of flexibility and is less when the job remains unchanged or when flexible workers are left out of strategic positions.

The Leadership-Development Pathway

It's not just about training; it's about access to experience, decision makers, networks and advocacy. Women's participation in leadership-development programmes is still reported to be low in Indian organizations (KPMG in India & AIMA, 2026), while globally, women are less likely than men to get sponsors during the early stages of their careers (McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.).Org, 2025). Development is only translated into mobility if the allocation of tasks and the promotion of women to leadership positions are also transparent; if promotion to leadership is based on gender, even if women are well developed, they may not be promoted.

P5: Leadership development is positively associated with women's progress: sponsorship and stretch assignments are more effective for objective advancement than mentoring or classroom training.

P6: Succession planning and promotion processes are transparent and calibrated, which enhances and gender-biased leadership evaluations hinders the transformation of leadership-development participation into promotion.

Complementarity of the Pathways

The two pathways are interdependent. Work–life resources, but lacking development; development, but lacking work–life resources may limit women's mobility to low-mobility jobs; development that does not consider work–life resources may only benefit those who can conform to the ideal–worker model. Adequate opportunity structures and resources are needed for women to stay in the pipeline. Both work–life support and leadership development matter

P7: work–life support facilitates access to development assignments, and women's progress is greatest when

both work–life support and career orientation are strong and career-neutral.

Moderators of Organization and Context

Workload, flexibility, feedback, visibility and opportunities are allocated by line managers, while the impact of diversity goals on budgets, talent reviews and rewards are determined by senior leaders. Increased managerial diversity has been linked to structures that assign responsibility for diversity, compared to awareness-raising initiatives (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Kalev et al., 2006). At the MNC level, it is either internalized or ceremonially adopted (Kostova & Roth, 2002) depending on the degree of alignment between the headquarters and the subsidiaries. Selective standardization (non-negotiable rights and fairness principles with locally adapted delivery) can be a means to balance integration and responsiveness. Lastly, there is no such thing as a generic "women. Interventions can improve average outcomes while leaving multiply marginalized women behind: Caste, class, religion, region, age, disability, marital and parental status, sexual identity and language are all determinants of access to elite education, networks, domestic support and organisational legitimacy (Crenshaw, 1989).

P8: Managerial accountability for gender-equitable talent outcomes reinforces the impact of enacted culture, work–life support and leadership development on women's advancement.

P9: HQ-subsidiary alignment enhances the link between formal gender policies and enacted culture, especially if delivery is flexible towards care, safety and mobility practices and conditions at the local level and does not undermine equality standards at the global level.

P10: Care demands, sector, career stage and intersecting identities shape access to work-life and leadership-development resources and their translation to advancement, resulting in heterogenous outcomes for women.

DISCUSSION

How to get from Policy Counts to Enactment

The framework will outline why counting policies is an insufficient measure of inclusion maturity. A company can allow for work from home, but still dock for interruptions, or give hybrid jobs but insist on physical attendance for promotions, or meet board requirements but still keep women out of the executive suite. These configurations are a form of inclusion but do not include substantive advancement. The core theoretical contribution is to see culture as a mechanism of conversion: culture works as a mechanism that connects policies with day to day allocations, and as such, explains why the same policy may lead to different results on different teams, and why direct policy–advancement relationships are often tenuous or inconsistent.

Retention Is Not Advancement

Although the concept of work–life support is often given in terms of lower turnover, remain is not progress. Workers may be given a lower-mobility job, not allowed to travel or be exposed to clients, or be placed on slower tracks. The right test is whether employees who use flexibility are rated, given developmental assignments, promoted at the same rate, paid at the same rate and included in succession plans as their peers. Work–life balance is therefore theorised as a necessary but insufficient pathway, in the sense that it maintains the capacity to engage in a career, but fails to provide influence or opportunity.

Development as Opportunity Allocation

Third is the re-imagining of leadership development as an opportunity system and not an individual-readiness intervention. Unless training hours and mentoring matches are complemented by programme changes in assignment quality, sponsor advocacy, mobility, and succession, training hours and mentoring matches are poor proxies. Finding a solution in “confidence,” or “executive presence” alone risks “fixing the women” and leaving evaluation systems unchanged (Ely et al., 2011). Sponsorship itself needs to be governed as it can simply perpetuate opaque favouritism if sponsors choose protégés from familiar networks.

The MNC Paradox

MNCs may act as the vehicles for progressive practices as well as be locations where practice is not consistent. Global systems can include transparent HR processes, anti-discrimination standards, and leadership targets, but institutional duality can enable local managers to reinterpret these systems and for local units to apply visible global programs while maintaining traditional opportunity networks. Gender-diversity transfer should therefore be examined as a multi-stage process (adoption, translation, enactment, employee usability, and career outcome); and variation within MNCs across subsidiaries may be as telling as the variation between foreign and domestic firms.

Managerial Implications

Indian MNCs need to think of gender inclusion as a talent-governance system, not benefits. The framework gives rise to four sets of actions.

- Governance and accountability. Boards and executive committees should consider promotion, pay, attrition, succession, development and flexibility outcomes by gender, level, function and location in addition to snapshots of representation, including the proportion of transitions between the levels. Successions governance and leadership scorecards can be used to integrate gender-equitable talent

outcomes.

- Career-neutral work–life architecture. Das et al., (2024) suggests the following to normalize flexibility across genders and seniority levels: train managers to manage outcomes not visibility; adjust workloads when schedules change; audit for flexibility penalties in ratings, promotions, pay, and assignments; offer childcare solutions, secure transportation, returnships, and structured re-entry where leave does not signify succession invisibility.
- Leadership systems that allocate opportunities. Set clear expectations around what mentoring isn't (sponsorship); require sponsors to talk up mentees at talent forums; seek evidence of stretch roles, profit and loss, client leadership, and international experience as testimony to sponsorship effectiveness; and have objective nomination criteria and calibrated talent reviews. The power should not be centralized on the top levels only and the inclusion of senior men as sponsors is required as power remains concentrated at that level and programmes should not be restricted to only the women that are already visible, which can result in class, caste, language or location privilege.
- Global–local design. Headquarters should establish non-negotiable equal opportunity, harassment prevention, pay equity, flexibility protection, promotion transparency, and non-retaliation standards and subsidiaries co-design delivery using employee listening and workforce analytics. Good local innovations can spread throughout the MNC network.

Table 4. Indicators for Evaluating Substantive Advancement

Framework layer	Weak (input) indicator	Stronger (outcome) indicator
Formal architecture	Number of policies disclosed	Policy awareness and usage by level and location
Enacted culture	Engagement-survey averages	Team-level fairness and voice-safety scores; grievance resolution
Work–life pathway	Flexibility uptake	Ratings, assignments, and promotion of flexible vs. non-flexible workers
Development pathway	Training hours; mentoring matches	Sponsor actions; stretch-role allocation; succession-slate inclusion
Career outcomes	Share of women in leadership	Promotion and transition rates; pay growth; decision authority

Research Agenda

Multilevel and Longitudinal Designs

Future research needs to be conducted within teams, business units, subsidiaries, and MNCs, and should correlate employee surveys with administrative employee performance, promotion, compensation, assignment, flexibility use, leave, and attrition data. A cross sectional design is problematic because it is not possible to determine if they support them to be more successful, or if successful women recall more support. In addition to event-history and fixed-effects models, panels that track employees through promotions, parents' transitions, and leadership programs would help make inferences. A staggered introduction of difference-in-differences (DiD) protections, sponsorship programmes, or manager scorecards across units provides opportunities for a difference-in-differences design, where parallel-trend assumptions should be investigated.

A Testable Model

The framework can be implemented as a moderated sequential-mediation model. The predictor is formal gender policies, which is also mediated by work–life support, but the first mediator is enacted inclusive culture, while the second mediator is penalty-free work–life support and third is access to leadership-development resources; in addition, work–life support is a predictor of development participation, and the outcome is objective advancement over 12–24 months in addition to subjective career success. Managérial accountability, headquarters – subsidiaries alignment, occupational context, care demands and intersecting identities are moderators. Common method bias would be reduced by a minimum three-wave design (policy and culture at Time 1, resource access at Time 2, and administrative outcomes at Time 3). The use of manager rated performance as a sole objective measure of control should be avoided because there is a possibility of gender bias in the rating itself.

Comparative, Measurement Work

Foreign owned vs. Indian owned MNCs, MNCs with subsidiaries in varying gender-institutional regimes, metro and non-metro regions, and industries like IT, finance sector, professional services, manufacturing and pharmaceuticals are useful comparisons. Comparative case studies in the same MNC can generate insights into

the tightness and looseness of coupling of the same global policies in different subsidiaries. Measurement development is also required: an Enacted Gender-Inclusion Culture scale across the six dimensions listed above, a Career-Neutral Flexibility scale that includes workload adjustment and expected penalties, and measures of behaviours, including the frequency of sponsor advocacy and participation in succession-slates.

Intersectional Research

Women who are part of disadvantaged caste and class, women with disabilities, LGBTQ+ employees, single mothers, elder caregivers, returners, and women in non-metropolitan areas are some of the groups that should be oversampled in research. It is not enough to control for the intersectionality of identities in studies; research should theorize the way intersectionality affects access to resources, stereotype content, network inclusion and/or the legitimacy of claims for support, and MNC global categories may require adaptation to the Indian social context.

Limitations

This is a conceptual synthesis and does not provide estimates of pooled effects. Comparisons are difficult because the evidence is spread across sectors, countries, constructs, and outcome measures. Corporate surveys offer timely large sample evidence but are often based on non-probability samples and self-reported perceptions and Indian peer-reviewed research continues to be focussed in IT and services. A number of mechanisms have been derived from studies in the United States and elsewhere, but have yet to be tested in India. The paper emphasizes organizational mechanisms and does not fully model labour demand, the public care infrastructure, occupational segregation, or household bargaining, which may limit what organizations can do. The framework should thus be interpreted as a way of organizing at the meso level, embedded in broader institutions and societies.

Conclusion

Policy adoption is not enough to achieve women's progress in Indian MNCs. Policies create formal opportunities; culture will dictate whether those opportunities can be used, are legitimate, and are rewarded. An enacted inclusive culture prevents biased evaluation, makes caregiving and leadership fit, expands leadership prototypes and holds decision-makers accountable. Work–life balance and leadership development serve two parallel but different roles: Penalty-free work–life support is essential to maintaining resources, continuity and retention; sponsorship, developmental assignments and succession access is key to converting continuity to mobility. Both pathways are incomplete.

The Policy–Culture–Resource–Advancement is a framework that shifts the focus from the number of policies and participants to how policies are enacted, opportunities allocated, and career outcomes over time. In order to achieve substantive progress, Indian MNCs need to integrate global equality standards with locally responsive implementation, clear and measurable managerial accountability, and an intersectional perspective of women's experiences. The credibility of the measure of corporate empowerment will be measured not so much by the number of programmes that are offered but by the nature of the opportunities and access routes that women can realistically pursue, the level of authority that they increasingly acquire and the absence of avoidable penalties for availed organisation support.

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