India is a global trailblazer in terms of the proportions of women working in the IT sector but the numbers of women in the sector taking up international assignments remains low. India is not alone in this lack of gender diversity in the internationally mobile talent pool, with the global average for female international expatriates at around 15%.

This report draws on a two-year research project Gender, Skilled Migration and IT: a comparative study of India and the UK undertaken by the Open University (in partnership with NASSCOM). It sheds light on the patterns of international mobility of women in the IT sector, the barriers to and enablers of such mobility, the implications of this mobility on women’s career progression and lastly, potential solutions to support women IT expats to undertake international assignments.

Women in IT in India: the value of international expatriate work

The Women and IT Scorecard – India, 2018 shows that about 35% of the Indian IT sector workforce is female, significantly higher than 25% in the USA and 17% in the UK. India was able to achieve this critical mass by drawing on a nearly gender balanced talent pool of higher education STEM graduates, as well as the sector’s strategy of intense and targeted recruitment. However, the IT sector also requires internationally mobile talent as it is intensely globalised. Yet, although the talent pool is relatively well-balanced, the uptake of international assignments is heavily male dominated. It is important to address this as India’s highly-skilled IT workforce is a valuable export; the Reserve Bank of India figures for 2017–2018 show that highly-skilled Indian expats were worth INR 1107 billion, 13% of the total export revenue for India’s IT sector. It is also crucial for achieving gender balance in the leadership pipeline as international assignments are seen as an important indicator for leadership potential.

General characteristics of mobile sample

There is limited sector-wide information available on the characteristics of women expats and none on the IT sector. Here we provide a profile of women IT expats from India drawing on our survey.

Figure 1 – Age

The largest group (33%) of women working abroad were between 36–40 years of age.

Figure 2 – Education

Women are more highly educated than men (more women have masters than men)

Figure 3 – Relationship status

80% of women expats are married/in a relationship, where as 20% are single

Figure 4 – Children

80% of women expats have children 20% have none
Barriers

The barriers to women’s mobility for international assignments are located within national contexts but individual, social and firm-level factors can also be transnational.

Figure 5 – Barriers to women’s international mobility

An individual’s lack of confidence in their ability and aptitude to undertake international mobility can be an enormous barrier.

Another significant barrier is societal norms about domestic roles, with expectations that women take the primary responsibility for looking after the household, young children, and ageing parents. As Figure 7 suggests, a large proportion of expat men with families were able to rely on their partners to care for the family compared to a very small proportion of women expats.

Moreover, the vast majority of women taking up international assignments were 36–40 years (33%), reflecting the years they are more likely to be independent of caring responsibilities, whereas most men (33%) who travelled for work were between 26 and 30. When asked about working abroad one of our female interviewees remarked,

“My kids are still small, so probably [in] another couple of years I would be OK doing it. Right now I think I need to be with them… then [in a couple of years] I would start looking at my career more seriously than I’m doing now.”

This suggests that women adopt the strategy of ‘lying low’ i.e. leaving their career progression dormant until their children are older, a pattern that has also been noted among women engineers in Europevi.

Despite firm and sectoral diversity and inclusion policies and programmes, women in mid-career and senior leadership roles reported that women are given fewer opportunities to undertake international assignments than their male counterparts.

Similarly, nearly 78% of the international organisations surveyed by PwC agreed that their organisation’s global mobility and diversity strategies were not aligned, thus impeding women’s participation in international mobility. Only 10% of the organisations were actively trying to increase the number of women who undertake international assignmentsvii.

Enablers and support

Of the other key factors enabling women to take up international assignments, ‘strong personal determination’ is cited by our participants in mid-career and senior leadership roles. However, this personal determination also requires family, firm- and sectoral-level support.

However, there are some signs of shifting gender roles and responsibilities. We found examples of fathers who were taking over childcare responsibilities while mothers were abroad. Noticeably, IT work is beginning to be characterised by short-term mobility undertaken on the client site, which is enabling more women to gain global work experience and exposure without lengthy relocation.
Training offered by firms also enables women to undertake international assignments. A significantly higher percentage of women who had been internationally mobile had received managerial training, compared to those who had not worked abroad (61.5% vs. 40%).

These skills are crucial to navigating global, social and professional contexts. Scaling-up skills training to sectoral level will foster women’s career progression.

In India, NASSCOM has introduced the W2RT program to support and enable women’s career advancement into leadership roles, which encouraged firms across the IT sector to be proactive in enabling women’s progression.

**Implications: women’s leadership pipeline**

International experience is vital to progression into leadership roles in many sectors but especially in IT. The *Women and IT Scorecard – India, 2018* reveals that more women (21%) than men (16%) consider career progression to be a key benefit of international mobility.

However, women’s progression into leadership roles is delayed compared to men’s. As Figures 10 and 11 show, 30% of expat men reached top-level/C-Suite roles by age 26–35, but no women of the same age cohort did. Women only started progression after the age of 36 years.
Recommendations

To diversify global IT talent and bring about a step change in women’s participation in leadership roles requires sectoral- and firm-level actions.

**Sector-wide**
- recognise and reward international experience
- facilitate inter-firm co-relocation policies.

**Firm level**
- provide training and mentoring for those considering or taking up international assignments
- enable early career international mobility for women
- offer strong family policies that support women expatriates
- offer a fixed-term premium to enable and support such expatriate assignments
- develop a flexible approach to women’s progression pipeline
- address the idealised career pathways based on male experiences
- align global mobility policies and programmes and women in leadership programmes
- align diversity and inclusion policies with global mobility policies and programmes.

Methodology

This report draws on data collected on the Indian IT sector through:
- 180 surveys from current and former Indian IT expats.
- 27 questionnaires with men and women in C-Suite roles.
- 20 interviews with women in leadership roles.

For more details on the methodology, please see *Women and IT Scorecard – India, 2018*.

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**I think in India, [and] in the industry in general, if you’ve worked outside you do get a leg up. It is an advantage from a career perspective. And it also helps you navigate the field better. You know how to approach various people, you know where they’re coming from... I wanted to work for a European company to understand what the differences in culture are, and how they work differently.**

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**Credits panel**

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The team would like to acknowledge ESRC funding, project ES/N003993/1.

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