

ADDRESSING THE LEAKY PIPELINE: HOW WIPRO IS HELPING WOMEN EMPLOYEES THRIVE DURING AND AFTER MOTHERHOOD

About

Through our Women in India Inc. project, in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Center for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA), we are spotlighting organisations that have demonstrated excellence in gender representation. This series of case studies focuses on selected private-sector organisations that have recently emerged as positive outliers in their respective sectors. The goal is to document gender-inclusive practices in the workplace by unpacking their gender-inclusive hiring, retention, and advancement practices and policies, inspiring others to adopt similar systematic approaches to bridge the gender gap.

The Udaiti Foundation The Udaiti Foundation (TUF) is building data-backed evidence to accelerate Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) in India. Udaiti focuses on improving the availability and accessibility of quality work for women, addressing barriers to women's work and entrepreneurship, and strengthening enablers that can create impact. We aim for every Indian woman to achieve her full economic potential as it will be a critical lever to help India become a \$10 trillion economy in the next decade.

Centre for Economic Data and Analysis The Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA) has been set up by the Economics Department of Ashoka University with the primary objective of facilitating informed and data-driven discussion about key socio-economic developments in India. CEDA's in-house data portal hosts data from various administrative and official surveys covering fields including demography, employment, public finance, food prices and high frequency macroeconomic indicators. The data is supplemented with deep-dive analysis covering various dimensions of critical issues relating to the Indian economy. In addition to these, CEDA is currently working on an ambitious project to understand and find ways to overcome the demand-side barriers that are keeping women out of the workforce.

Women in India Inc. 'Women In India Inc.' (WIIn) is a collaboration between CEDA and TUF as a part of a larger CEDA project on women's economic empowerment. With the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, CEDA has embarked on a wide-ranging project to understand and find ways to overcome the demand-side barriers that keep women out of the workforce. To achieve this, we at CEDA are taking a three-pronged approach – Inform, Investigate, Intervene – in order to enable women's entry, retention and progression in India's workforce. Visit <https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/womens-economic-empowerment/> for more details.

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Introduction

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“There are three times when a woman decides to leave (her career), the most common of them being the childbearing years.”

- Arundhati Bhattacharya, Chairperson & CEO of Salesforce India and former Chairperson of the State Bank of India (SBI).

At the India Economic Summit of the World Economic Forum a few years ago, Arundhati Bhattacharya, one of India’s most respected business leaders, highlighted¹ three crucial junctures in a woman’s career when she has to decide between staying in the workforce and leaving: first, to have a child; second, to prepare the child for exams; and third, to take on caregiving duties for an elderly family member. According to research findings² from across countries, 24% of women leave the workforce within their first year of motherhood and 15% never return to work even a decade later.

Post maternity, which typically happens during the middle years of women’s careers, they struggle to return to work, given their extended responsibilities and a need for flexibility. This contributes to the ‘leaky bucket problem’ where, in spite of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, organisations continue to lose women employees to voluntary attrition.

With 34%³ women’s participation, the information technology (IT) sector in India justifiably has a positive reputation for gender diversity and inclusion. The sector has made significant progress in facilitating entry-level hiring of women and integrating them into the workforce; however, challenges related to retention, still persist. Women’s participation, which stands at 35% in entry-level roles in IT, drops to just 17% at senior leadership levels.⁴

Wipro, one of India’s leading technology services and consulting companies, has tackled this problem head-on through a program designed to support women employees during and after maternity. Launched in 2018, the goal of this program is to create an inclusive and supportive work culture for women employees during the crucial motherhood phase and increase the likelihood of them returning to work after having a child.

¹ The three make-or-break moments in a woman’s career.

² The Impact of Motherhood on Women’s Career Progression: A Scoping Review of Evidence-Based Interventions

³ Close the Gender Gap 2023, The Udaiti Foundation

⁴ Economic Times: India’s give big IT firms see net exit of 25000 women in FY’24

The program includes pre-maternity interventions to help women employees navigate this new phase of life, learning modules to prepare managers and employees for conversations around maternity, internal support networks for women, flexible working hours, and role security post maternity. These initiatives have delivered positive outcomes, with 99% of employees returning to work after maternity leave from FY2021 to FY2024 and a 40% increase in redeployment of returning mothers.

In this case study, we will take a closer look at how Wipro is addressing the leaky bucket problem through various policies and interventions that fall under the aegis of this program. We will also examine the current outcomes, the challenges they face, and the organisation's plans for the future.

Methodology

This report was prepared by The Udaiti Foundation (TUF), using a mix of primary and secondary research methods over a six-month period from May to October 2024. It was developed as part of a larger project led by the Centre for Economic Data & Analysis (CEDA), Ashoka University, on 'Partnering with the private sector to increase women's economic empowerment'.

The TUF team employed a combination of primary and secondary research methods to prepare this case study. Primary methods include interviews with relevant stakeholders at Wipro, while secondary methods include analysis of sector reports, company annual reports, DEI reports, news articles and press releases.

1

Stakeholder Interviews The TUF team engaged in discussions with HR personnel, program owners, and women employees at Wipro to gain deeper insights into the organisation's gender-inclusive initiatives and their impact, exploring aspects such as design, challenges, rationale, costs, and governance.

2

Document Analysis Additionally, the team reviewed publicly available material such as Wipro's annual reports, Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) disclosures, as well as articles and reports on the organisation's diversity

journey, and the IT sector overall. In developing this case study, TUF has also referred to data and research insights gathered as part of the Close the Gender Gap (CGG) project. 5

The Leaky Bucket Problem

With 647,000 women employed in NSE-listed IT firms alone, the Indian IT industry boasts a significantly larger female workforce compared to other sectors. According to CGG data,⁶ women make up 34% of the employees in NSE-listed IT firms, a figure that has remained relatively stable over the past three years. On the plus side, IT also demonstrates a strong return-to-work rate, with 93% of women returning after parental leave.

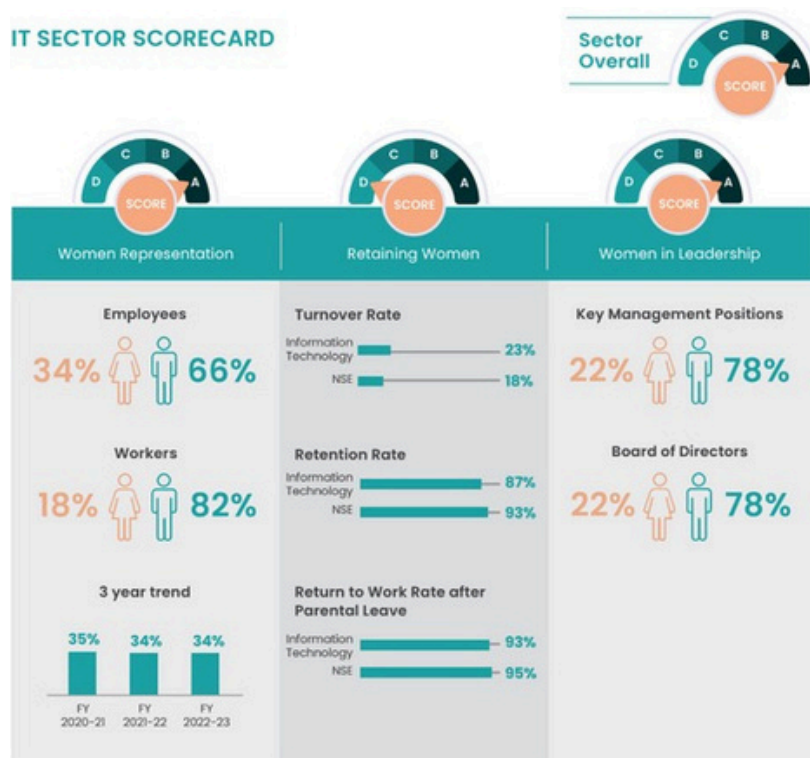


Figure 1: Women in the IT sector overview, Close the Gender Gap, 2023, The Udaiti Foundation. Note: This analysis focuses exclusively on NSE-listed IT firms.

5 Close the Gender Gap, 2023, The Udaiti Foundation

6 Close the Gender Gap 2023, The Udaiti Foundation

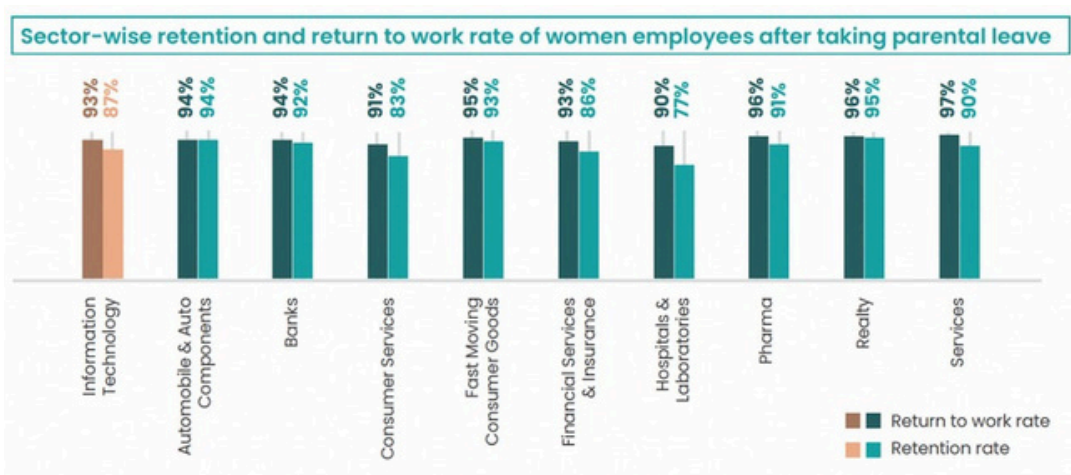


Figure 2: Sector-wise retention rate of women employees after maternity leave. Source: Close the Gender Gap (CGG) data.

However, there is still room for improvement. The turnover rate for women in IT stands at 23%, noticeably higher than the 18% turnover rate across other sectors. After parental leave, only 87% of women in IT return to work, compared to an average of 93% in other sectors. And perhaps most alarmingly, the participation of women in the IT workforce drops steadily, from 35% in entry-level roles to 17% at the senior level.⁷

Senior business leader Maya Hari, currently the CEO of climate-tech firm Terrascope and who has previously donned leadership roles at Twitter, Samsung and Microsoft, wrote⁸ about why women drop out of the workforce. “The first leak comes at the middle management stage when talented women on their way to being leaders come back from maternity leave. In my experience, they often deal with inordinate guilt, and self-doubt and struggle to cope with increased levels of multitasking & complexity becoming a parent generally creates. They are in their most vulnerable state and most likely to give up on their ambitions or leave the workforce at this stage, even if they want to stay. Leaders and management need to develop a keen radar to spot this immediately and perhaps even anticipate this.”

This is echoed in the findings of ‘Predicament of Returning Mothers’, a 2018 report by Asoka University’s Genpact Centre for Women’s Leadership (GCWL) that focused on working women from across sectors. The respondents were divided into three cohorts: pregnant women not planning to return to work/uncertain about the decision, women who have dropped out completely post their pregnancy, and women who have returned to work after their maternity leave but are facing challenges. The study found that a shocking 73% of working women leave their jobs after having a baby and 50% of women drop out of the workforce to take care of children by the age of 30. Even among those who manage to return, 48 per cent drop out within

⁷ Economic Times: India’s give big IT firms see net exit of 25000 women in FY’24.

⁸ The leaky bucket - Road to diverse leadership.

four months of rejoining the workforce.^{9, 10}

According to McKinsey & Co's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Lighthouses Report 2023,¹¹ the dollar spend on DEI initiatives is increasing year on year and is expected to touch \$15.4 billion annually by 2026. This is a clear indication that organisations are quite serious about their DEI efforts. Yet, from a gender perspective, merely hiring more women is not sufficient to achieve true gender balance, equity and inclusion at work. The only way to fix this leaky bucket is to design work policies and a culture that encourages women to stay in the workforce during and after a life-changing event such as motherhood.

Wipro's DEI Journey

Wipro is one of India's pioneering technology services and consulting companies, with 230,000+ employees across 65 countries. The company committed to gender equality efforts as early as 2008, long before DEI became a buzzword and has been recognised on the Bloomberg Gender Equality Index for four consecutive years. Wipro is a signatory of the United Nations Women Empowerment Principles (UNWEPS) and places a significant focus on improving the engagement and retention of women employees through context-specific interventions.

Wipro has 36.6% women in its workforce, which is higher than the IT sector average of 34% and the 23% average of the 2500+ companies listed on the National Stock Exchange (NSE) of India. In absolute terms, the number of women employed at Wipro increased by 20.25%, from 57,599 in FY21 to 69,269 in FY22. This was followed by a further increase of 6.3% in FY23. However, FY24 saw a decline of 9.34%, bringing the total down to 66,801. While the year-on-year growth in the absolute number of women employees has fluctuated, their representation as a percentage of the total workforce has remained consistent at around 36%, with a slight increase to 36.2% in FY24. Wipro's return-to-work after parental leave stood at 99% since FY23, and the attrition among women (12.8% in FY24) has been consistently lower than among men (14.5%).

Table 1: Total employee count at Wipro from FY 21-24

	FY24		FY23		FY22		FY21	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Number	117746	66801	131111	73680	124350	69269	102188	57599
Percentage	63.80%	36.20%	64.00%	36.00%	64.20%	35.80%	64.00%	36.00%

9 Predicament of Working Women | Ashoka University

10 50% of New Mothers Leave Their Jobs | The Quint

11 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Lighthouses Report 2023

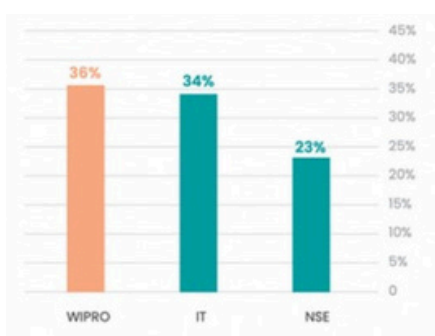
Table 2: Attrition data of Wipro employees from FY 21-24

	FY24		FY23		FY22		FY21	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Percentage	14.5%	12.8%	20%	17.6%	24.2%	22.5%	12.5%	10.3%

Wipro has made significant strides in increasing women's representation in decision-making roles and addressing the challenges of transitioning to management positions. By FY24, the percentage of women leaving the workforce during their progression from non-management to junior management roles decreased to 7.9%, down from 18% in FY21. Currently, women make up 22.2% of Wipro's Board of Directors, 20.0% of the Wipro Executive Board, and 22.6% of the Wipro Executive Committee. This progress demonstrates Wipro's commitment to gender equity, making it a strong candidate for this case study from both an intent and outcome perspective.

Table 3: Breakup of women's participation across levels at Wipro

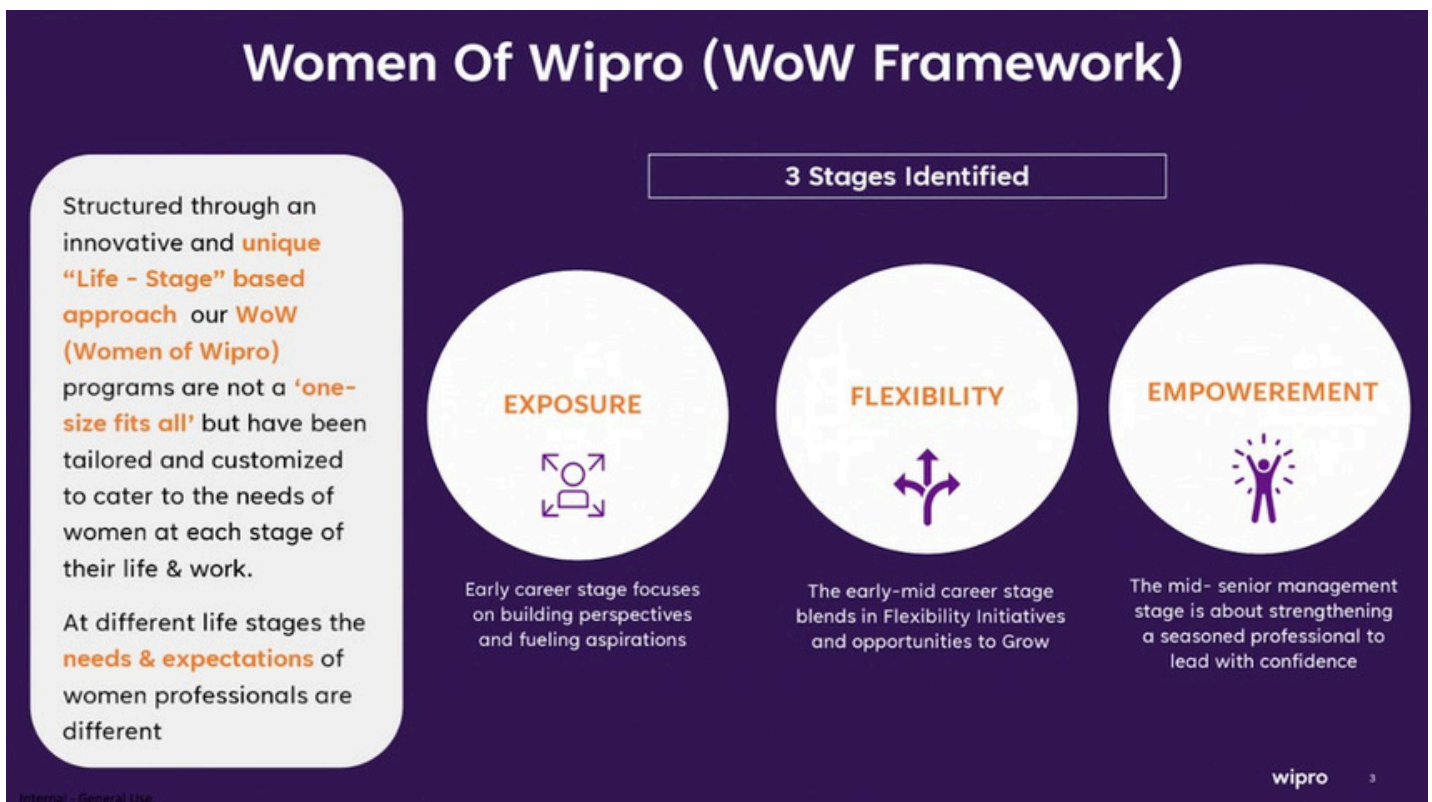
Women Representation	FY24	FY23	FY22
Senior Leadership	12.4%	17%	18.7%
Mid-Level	20.1%	22.8%	24%
Junior-Level	42%	41.7%	42%

**Figure 3:** Benchmarking representation of permanent women employees at Wipro with the IT sector and the companies listed on the National Stock Exchange

In the DEI Lighthouses report cited earlier, McKinsey has identified five success factors that make DEI programs most effective. These are (1) a nuanced understanding of the root causes of DEI gaps from the perspective of those affected (2) defining success criteria for the short and the long term (3) full commitment and backing of the CEO and senior leadership (4) designing context-specific solutions to address the root causes and (5) disciplined tracking of outcomes

and course correction as necessary.

Our study of Wipro's DEI efforts seems to check all these boxes. At the heart of it lies Women of Wipro (WoW), an umbrella framework the organisation established in 2008 to strategise, plan, and execute customised interventions for women employees based on their needs at different stages of their life and career. The framework structures Wipro's internal policies, processes, and initiatives to enable the inclusion and empowerment of women employees at every level, depending on their current context and aspirations.



Wipro has identified that in the early stages of their career, women employees want exposure to all aspects of work, build broader perspectives, and fuel their aspirations. As they progress to the mid stage, the need is a mix of career growth along with the flexibility to balance the demands of work and personal life. When they are poised for senior managerial or leadership roles, women employees focus on becoming seasoned professionals, advancing in their career, and leading with confidence.

Under WoW, Wipro has tailored programs and initiatives catering to each of these needs. Examples include Enrich, an executive sponsorship program for high-potential women leaders to help them step into even senior roles, Begin Again, a program for women who want to restart their career

after a hiatus, whether it's due to a sabbatical, parenthood, senior care, pursuing a passion, etc. and HerCode, a program that aims to boost the performance of women in tech through learning, networking and career advancement opportunities.



Figure 4: A snapshot of Wipro’s DEI journey from 2008 to 2024

One of Wipro’s more successful programs is WoW Mom, which specifically addresses the needs of women during and after maternity. This typically occurs during the early to mid-stage of their career and requires nuanced understanding, sensitive interventions, and sustained support from multiple stakeholders. In the next section, we will explore WoW Mom in greater detail.

WoW Mom: Retaining New Mothers

The WoW Mom program is a comprehensive initiative crafted to address the needs and challenges faced by women as they transition into motherhood. The primary goal of WoW Mom is to support, engage, and ease the journey for women associates during and after maternity leave, fostering a supportive work culture that encourages new mothers to return to work. This effort is part of Wipro’s commitment to reducing voluntary attrition among women, especially at pivotal career stages.

Pre-Maternity Leave: Proactive Preparation

In anticipation of maternity, Wipro conducts preparatory sessions for would-be mothers and new parents addressing topics such as work-life balance for new moms. It also provides e-learning modules aimed at helping both women employees and their managers navigate this period with understanding and sensitivity. The program's two-track approach tailors one track for women associates, guiding them through every step from pregnancy announcement to post-maternity adjustments, while the second track prepares managers—regardless of gender—to facilitate smooth transitions and address maternity-related conversations thoughtfully. Additionally, Wipro's mandatory Unconscious Bias e-learning module has specific scenarios on maternal bias at the workplace.

Expecting mothers and new mothers also have access to an exclusive mailbox monitored by the DEI team, where they can write to ask questions about maternity benefits or policies, seek support or assistance, and raise concerns about their workplace experience. Extensive Sessions are held for Returning Mothers and Parents on topics like handling mother's guilt, work-life balance for new moms, etc. Additionally, e-learning modules are also in place to support maternity transition with step-by-step guidance on the transition to maternity, return, and beyond for women associates and various sensitization and awareness sessions for managers. They can also access the services of mental health counsellors and wellbeing coaches through Wipro's 24x7 free-of-cost wellbeing program that's open to all employees.

The physical well-being of expecting mothers is also taken care of through on-demand work-from-home options, home pick-up and drop services in the third trimester and ergonomic foot and back support in the office. Together, these initiatives create a supportive environment where both employees and managers feel well-equipped to manage the impact of maternity on work responsibilities.

During Maternity Leave: Staying Connected

Recognising that a prolonged absence can lead to feelings of disconnection from the workplace, WoW Mom ensures that employees on maternity leave have the option to stay in touch, keeping them informed of major developments and making the eventual return feel less daunting. In addition to the 180 days of maternity leave mandated by Indian law, Wipro offers an additional 30 days of paid maternity leave for illness or serious complications that may arise post-delivery, helping new mothers to balance career responsibilities during the critical early stages of childcare. The organisation also has an unpaid gender-neutral parental leave program that parents can use to take up to 90 days for childcare.

Post-Maternity Leave: Thoughtful Reintegration

Returning to work after maternity leave is often accompanied by a host of new responsibilities and adjustments for women. WoW Mom addresses this by offering them secure role continuity—if the employee's pre-leave role or project is available, she is reinstated directly; if not, she has 90 days to secure a new project, a time frame that is double the standard time frame Wipro employees get to be assigned to new projects.

Employees returning from maternity leave get a half-day, half-pay option for a gradual transition back to work. Additionally, they are offered training programs to help them upskill both technically and behaviorally, preparing them to re-engage at work with confidence.

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“When I was returning from maternity leave, I had a lot of apprehensions about how I'd be able to manage work and my baby while doing justice to both... But the transition was really smooth, thanks to my managers who guided me to overcome the challenges I was facing in my journey. I have been with Wipro for 8+ years now.”

- Poonam Bisht,¹² Returning mother

¹² All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the concerned persons.

To support project assignments post-leave, WoW Mom also maintains a dedicated dashboard offering real-time metrics on skills, billability, and role availability for returning mothers. This level of visibility not only streamlines their reintegration but also supports managers in making well-informed decisions, ensuring a smooth, ambiguity-free return.

Infrastructural support provided by Wipro includes access to breastfeeding and mother's rooms, along with subsidized daycare facilities. These facilities are available both on-campus and through external partnerships, catering to children as young as six months.

Beyond Work: Support for Life's New Realities

An interesting aspect of the WoW Mom program is that it extends support beyond traditional work boundaries. New mothers receive access to practical resources like the WoW Mom handbook that contains information about daycare facilities, lactation consultants, postpartum mental well-being, etc. Additionally, to ensure smoother integration of returning mothers and support them as they take on new responsibilities, Wipro has various inclusive policies and practices in place:

- The hybrid workplace approach prioritises the well-being of employees while aligning to clients' evolving needs. Besides this, employees can opt for Temporary Remote Work for 30 days/year for caregiving or self (including health). Half-Day Working Policy to provide additional
- flexibility to balance commitments at work and outside Medical and insurance benefits including maternity benefits, infertility coverage (including IVF & Egg Freezing), pre/post-natal
- expenses

Wipro also connects new mothers with internal support networks, including WoW Connect and Affinity Groups, where women can openly share concerns, seek advice, and receive mentorship from colleagues who have navigated similar journeys in the past. They are also invited to leadership connects and mentorship opportunities that provide returning mothers with visible examples of female leaders who have advanced despite similar challenges.

According to a survey of 24,000+ Indian women by Aon,¹³ 53% of women who have visible female leaders in the organisation reported feeling confident in their career growth, 52% said that it had a positive impact on their culture and 41% saw women leaders as role models. The presence of female leaders also reduced the perception of unfairness in three aspects: performance review, promotion and compensation. Thus, this aspect of the WoW Mom program gives new mothers a renewed sense of career aspiration.

“

“I am very grateful for these spaces of open dialogue and sharing. I got to share my challenges, which was validating and empowering...and listen to insights from senior leaders who’ve been through it. I have to say that this has been a catalyst for my personal growth.”

¹⁴
- Sabina Jameel, Returning mother

Impact & Outcomes

WoW Mom's impact has been considerable, with 99% of women employees who took maternity leave returning to work since FY22. In addition to return to work, another metric that is reviewed is the retention rate i.e. the number of women who have stayed back 12 months post-return from maternity leave. While this metric was at 99% for FY22 and FY23, this metric has seen a dip in FY24 (78.5%). This drop could be attributed to the transition to a hybrid work model following the pandemic—a shift observed across the Indian IT industry where most major Indian IT companies have reintroduced hybrid or fully on-site models in response to evolving business needs.

Table 4: Employee retention rate post parental leave

	FY24		FY23		FY22	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Number	4685	3395	4819	3081	3004	2124
Retention Rate	100%	78%	100%	99%	100%	99%

The work-from-office (WFO) policy, while beneficial for collaboration and culture-building, presents specific challenges for new mothers balancing family responsibilities with career

¹³ Voice of Women survey | Aon

¹⁴ All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the concerned persons.

demands. For new mothers, the shift away from remote work can be particularly demanding, necessitating adjustments to routines and family support structures. Wipro's WoW Mom program, however, continues to offer flexible work options within this framework to accommodate the needs of returning mothers.

Aparna Iyer, Chief Financial Officer believes that hybrid work has gender-neutral benefits for both men and women, especially for those who work in metros with high commute times. She says,¹⁵ *"...in a city like Bengaluru, when you're working from home, say, two days a week, it does give people that much more time, perhaps at their desk or clearing emails, etc. It's the right balance, but certainly even more for women. Many women are caregivers or primary caregivers and they would like to have that option. But that said, we've also seen women who would like to come into work all five days, because they feel that this is the place where they can work without any distractions. To each their own, but having that option really helps."*

Wipro has made notable strides in supporting women returning to work post-maternity by actively gathering feedback through quarterly surveys. These surveys help refine initiatives and ensure that returning mothers can continue their careers in their areas of specialization, contributing to one of the highest return-to-work rates in the industry. The Employee Engagement Survey reflects this success, with inclusion scores for returning mothers at 88%, compared to 85% for overall employees. Additionally, 93% of returning mothers reported a positive experience in surveys about their pre-maternity and return-to-work journeys. Initiatives like experience-sharing sessions on balancing work and motherhood further enhance the program's impact.

As **Neha Sinha, a returning mother**, shared: *"After I returned from maternity leave, the organization really helped me transition smoothly from being a new mother to a full-time working mother. I will always be thankful to Wipro and my managers who guided me to overcome the challenges I faced along this journey."*

The Path Ahead

Wipro's commitment to supporting women through career-defining moments like motherhood has led to tangible successes, from high retention rates to positive employee feedback. There are also a number of other WoW programs in place to help women feel seen, supported and empowered to grow, particularly at critical mid-career stages to prepare them for leadership

¹⁵ [Companies need to hire more women](#)

roles. Wipro is taking a data-informed approach to these, seeking the participation and feedback of its employees to refine the DEI offerings and policies in a way that most benefits them.

The challenge ahead lies in sustaining the momentum of WoW initiatives in a landscape where workplace expectations are shifting. Iyer puts it this way, “It is crucial that companies have more women at the entry-level and then they are able to nurture and retain them through the tougher years. We have got to make sure that we help them stick with the company through their critical life ¹⁵phases and that can pay off...The technology sector may be well represented in terms of gender diversity but it is better only compared to other industries as the gender representation is still not 50:50. We would like it to get even better.”

Wipro’s ongoing efforts to expand its support mechanisms reflect a broader vision of inclusivity that DEI practitioners, CXOs, and HR leaders can draw from to bridge the gender gap in a meaningful and lasting way. In particular, the focus on listening, learning, and tailoring initiatives to women employees’ unique journeys shows how DEI can be more than a policy. This is what transforms DEI into a cultural commitment that creates empowering lived experiences for women at work.

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