

Women in Managerial Roles: Challenges and Opportunities ahead

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Abstract

Over a passage of time there has been a paradigm shift in the roles and responsibilities of women at workplace. To some extent an awakening has developed to treat women with equity. However, largely their role is still confined to that of 'primary caretakers' for the family and people around. Be it education or any profession there are very less number of women excelling and this is due to the conventional attitude towards women. The modernization era with its technological advancements has thrown open myriad challenges for the woman of today. She is intensely occupied in balancing work-life spheres. Despite her untiring efforts and perseverance, she is unable to scale heights which she, undoubtedly, deserves in business sectors. Women, at workplace, are relegated to middle or low positions, very few of them managed to rise to the management ranks. Significant changes, at societal level, are taking place as women are spearheading in banking, health, education, entrepreneurship, hospitality and entertainment, fast moving consumables goods, etc. A lot of research studies have proved time and again that women perform better in certain situations. The present study is an exploration into how women themselves and by others are perceived for managerial roles. The challenges posed to women and how have they overcome them also, form a part of the description. Additionally emphasized, are the opportunities that women come across during their career growth and development. In order to gain an insight on the above issues, a conceptual analysis of available information from secondary sources has been undertaken.

Keywords

Paradigm, awakening, equity, attitude, work-life, perseverance, challenges, opportunities.

Introduction

In the present increasing global economy there is a high demand of talent pool. India, with its great human resource, has immense opportunities to give tough competitions to many developing and developed nations. The growth of the nation depends upon the progress of its people. Women, though, at secondary level have always played a vital role in writing the history of their land. Like any other civilization Indian society too, has not been very supportive in bringing forth its fairer sex. With the passing of time it has been realized that the development of human society is impossible without the development of its women force.

A woman is said to be the creator of a family. Right from her childhood she is trained to take care of the family thus weaving the threads of love and affection among the members. She is the pivotal around which the family life runs. Be it at home or at work place she is expected to be compassionate, patient and adaptable. At domestic front, she manages the family matters taking note of everybody's needs and wishes meticulously. If she performs her role so explicitly, then why is it that even today she holds very less or no place in executive boardrooms. The woman of today is neither less educated nor mentally inferior compared to men to handle professional assignments confidently.

In past ten years or so, within India, the literacy rate has gone up due to the thriving efforts of the Government of India and its various supporting schemes. Women too, have become literate to achieve something better in their life. According to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2011¹, India has the lowest percentage (23%) of women employees. Upon completion of their education girls aspire to go in for a job of their choice. They face initial refusal from their parents who believe in marrying them off to a suitable boy. After procuring highest degrees and developing expertise in areas of work they are not encouraged to work and become career-oriented. If, somehow they manage to secure a job for themselves then it would be in BPOs, KPOs, banking, entertainment and hospitality industry etc. Very few of them are seen in automobile, mining, agriculture, food and beverage, health and chemical industry. At many places they still play very limited roles like back office operations, front office duties, data entry operations etc. Though educated and qualified they are yet refrained from challenging roles which can heighten their level in organizations. In multinational corporations there is lot of emphasis on gender equality and capitalizing on women talent but when it comes to pay, women are paid less than their men colleagues. It is widely accepted that women do not enjoy workplace settings owing to their stereotyped image as projected by the society. Discrimination against women manifests itself in various forms, including: job segregation, wage gaps, sexual harassment, the denial of career development opportunities (including mentoring and poor performance evaluations), and a lack of promotion opportunities (Cansu 2013)².

Including India, lot of companies in the US, the UK, Denmark, Spain, Finland, Canada etc. have integrated women workforce at all levels. The scenario has definitely changed for women in these countries as they are holding prime positions like chief operating officer, chief finance officer, chief executive officer, chief information officer and so on.

Historical Journey

Women, for ages, have remained circumscribed to the four walls of house. Their role has been to marry, rear children and take care of the family members. In India itself, women for years were not allowed to participate in the decision making process. Their plight was pitiable unless great reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Michael Madhusudan Dutt raised voice for the cause of women. Later, Mahatma Gandhi too vehemently fought against the injustice meted out to women in India. These efforts bore rich fruits and women emerged actively in India's freedom struggle. This, in turn infused immense confidence among them. They decided to shape their life by being an effective contributor in the progress of the nation.

Moreover, the opening up of Indian society under the spell of western influence paved way for women to step out of their homes, in search of bright and better future. The girls showed inclination towards education and persuaded parents to allow them to join schools. Some of them later, sought admissions in colleges and universities for higher studies. Nevertheless they had to face lot of resistance from the relatives and the outside world. At that time there were few opportunities for them to go for specialized or professional courses like medicine, engineering, architecture, law etc. A major turn took place when in 1981 the liberalization of Indian economy encouraged more women to pursue higher studies and build career like any other modern "new woman". The new woman felt a wave of freedom to write her own destiny. She got inspired by women like Margaret Thatcher, Hillary Clinton, Marlyn Monroe, Indira Gandhi, Queen Elizabeth, Martina Navratilova, Mother Teresa, Shahnaz Hussain, Benazir Bhutto etc. Once the journey started, she never looked back. Her growth since then has been constant but may not be

encouraging like that of man. She has obtained highest degree in education, has taken up a job but might not have reached to the topmost level or rank in the employment. Women, today, at global level, form around 50% of the total workforce. This includes both the organized and the unorganized sectors. Every year, more and more women are graduating from colleges and great many are turning into entrepreneurs yet, very few reach to the top levels of business.

Empowerment through Education

The road to women's education was not a smooth one. It was more like a roller coaster; going up and down, switching from positive to negative to positive again. Over a passage of time, things began to fall in place when people felt the need of sending their girls and women to institutions for earning professional degrees. The Indian history is replete with the valor and acumen of women leaders like Rani Laxmibai, Jijabai, Rani Padmini, Sarojini Naidu etc. who, at different stages, showcased their strengths and skills to bring out the nation from utter turmoil. Their magnificent performance set an example before the rest of the world. This prompted social thinkers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar to put forth a strong argument in favour of women's education. Even a staunch ruler like Napoleon once asserted, 'Give me a few educated mothers; I shall give you a heroic race.'

Mary Wollstonecraft rightly called 'the mother of Feminism', in her magnum opus in 1792 "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" voiced at length about the unequal treatment towards women of her age. She vehemently opposed against the "patriarchal society"³ where women had no role to play because of their being not educated. Mary, in her rhetorical piece, propagated a "theoretical utopia"⁴ where women are educated and become more reasoned to take rational judgments in life. The Women's Rights Movement began in 1848 with a basic question that why women as human lives were unfairly constricted when they toiled day and night to make the life of earth dwellers comfortable. In India too, the semblance of change was felt due to the feminist movement of the west. Back at home, women began to feel strengthened and united against the hackneyed thinking.

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate an entire family. The women's education received a great impetus when the Indian National Policy of Education (1986) recommended the empowerment of women through education. In every five years plan adequate thrust is put on women's education. Under the literacy mission too, women have been encouraged to eradicate illiteracy by further teaching their children and the deprived ones. It is, hence proved that no nation can progress until its women are educated.

Likewise, in the field of management, women are still a long way in reaching to the level of men. They are grossly under- represented in higher management education. (Basu 2008)⁵ has adequately focused on policy and regulations in promoting gender diversity and quality contact in management for women. She further added that a collective will is required to change the mindset of people to overcome gender differences at the educational and organizational levels.⁶

Women as Management Professionals

From time to time lots of theories and research studies have proved that women's emancipation is indispensable in any nation's development in particular and global development in general. Various economic and social theories as propounded by thinkers, also affirmed this thought. (Berger et al., 1998; Berger, Ridgeway and Morris Zelditch, 2002, and Phelps, 1972)⁷ suggest that increasing the percentage of women in positions of leadership and management will have positive economic and

social consequences at the macro level. (Lucas 2003)⁸ in an experiment observed that the institutionalization of female leadership positively affected the influence of women in positions of authority.

The cultural and social changes have positively affected the thinking of society at large. The growing gender diversity has created a pathway for women to enter into the management realm thus holding executive positions. Along with different forms of education, women are now turning to business schools for formal education in management. Is it because they want to become manager? The answer could be yes. Women, like any other profession, want to cherish the managerial roles as they plan, organize, manage and control their domestic front. This, they have been doing for centuries and are quite skillful in the craft. A report by McKinsey & Company (2007)⁹ found that companies with a greater percentage of women in management and leadership positions experienced positive impacts on both organizational excellence and financial performance. In another study it was found that as the percentage of women on managerial teams increased, the innovation capacity of companies also increased (London Business School, 2007)¹⁰ cited in (OECD 2009).¹¹

Looking at the performance of women both at personal and professional front, numerous government policies and schemes like [Swashakti](#), [Swayamsidha](#), [Streeshakti](#), [Balika samrudhi yojana](#) and other projects have been initiated to bring forth women. Various women organizations like FICCI Ladies Organization, National and State Commissions for Women, Women Studies Centre and Forums play a dominant role in up scaling women in sectors of development. To equip girls in science and technology, a large number of institutions especially for girls have been set up. International agencies and organizations are adequately promoting women's education, and participation in creating sustainable and harmonious global environment. Goldman Sachs in 2008 initiated a 10,000 women program across globe to improve entrepreneurial skills of working women in 16 countries by giving them access to a world-class business and management education. On the completion of the program, the women compete with men at workplaces thereby proving their capabilities and expertise. Besides INSEAD, more than 30 of the world are leading business schools are participating in the program. These include Harvard Business School, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Oxford Said Business School, the Indian School of Business, Tsinghua University School of Economics and Management, and the Fundacao Dom Cabral in Brazil. Non-academic partners in the program include Ashoka, Vital Voices, and the International Centre for Research on Women.

At senior levels in the financial services, it's quite clear that we are just not capitalising enough on women power (Piyush Gupta (2009)).¹² He further added that there is probably a fairly even distribution of women at the lower levels, but when you get to where the rubber meets the road, the leaders, the business managers, the people who are going to set direction, we just don't employ enough women.¹³ The number of women is increasing in higher and professional education but still very few reach to executive suites and boardrooms. As far as gender equality is concerned women still in many countries face lot of barriers in achieving highest echelons in management. In giant corporations both men and women are treated at par at entry level positions but gradually from mid level positions women are declined challenging roles and opportunities. Their caliber though at times stronger than their male counterparts they are deprived of significant positions.

In a Catalyst study examining the impact of women on corporate boards in Fortune 500 companies, (Joy 2008)¹⁴ found that companies with higher percentages of women on the boards of directors financially outperformed companies with the

lowest percentage of female board members. The report concluded that increasing the number of women on corporate boards is important for both financial performance and gender diversity in the corporate officer ranks.

In a survey conducted by Economic Times only 16% women were found to be on director's position in 30 sensex companies. Among 100 BSE companies only 50 (5.3%) women were found to be on directorship position against 923 men directors and in the BSE 500 companies there were only 192 (5.4%) women directors as compared to 3650 men holding directorship positions (Kulkarni & Bakhare 2011).¹⁵

Empowerment of women can be achieved when men are sensitized towards the problems of women. Changes in societal attitudes and perceptions, towards the role of women, in different spheres of life need to be drawn. This paradigm shift has somewhat taken place. In a decade or so, there have emerged some names in multinational corporations as women leaders. Chandra Kochar, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of ICICI bank, Indra Nooyi, Pepsico Chairman and CEO, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Chairman and Managing Director of Biocon, Sulajja Firodia Motwani, Joint Managing Director of Kinetic Motors and Managing Director of Kinetic Finance, Naina Lal Kidwai, Group General Manager and Country Head of HSBC India, Swati Piramal, Director, Strategic Alliances and Communications, Piramal Healthcare, Preetha Reddy, Managing Director, Apollo Hospitals, Geetanjali Kirloskar, Chairperson, Kirloskar Technologies, etc. are few women leaders who have touched the pinnacle of success by giving tough competition to their male counterparts. It could be said that many of these women are fortunate to have inherited business acumen from their parents however, taking their venture to great heights, was their commitment and dedication. An average Indian woman may not find similar conditions to excel, like these corporate daring women had. According to the Gender Diversity Benchmark for Asia 2011, India is consistently the worst performer in terms of representation of women in the total workforce at junior and mid level positions. At senior positions also, it is generally men who rule. The gender disparity is gradually diminishing as more and more women are encouraged in industries like media, hospitality, banking, IT/ITes, BPOs, law, engineering etc.

Challenges Encountered

After having broken the age old shackles of traditions, women, finally succeeded in creating a space for themselves. This journey has not been devoid of pain and miseries. But somehow, they have managed to gather their strength to move further, boldly. Obtaining the best possible education as per their interest, the Indian women decided to enter the workforce. With the advent of globalization they got an opportunity to prove their talent in the male-dominated professions like advertising, banking and finance, civil services, engineering, IT, manufacturing, marketing, defence etc. Despite their academic accomplishments and skills, women face enormous challenges to get assignments and recognitions from their organization.

1 Gender Stereotypes and Perceptions

The cultural and social attitudes towards gender inequality in education and training have resulted into occupational sex segregation in professional work. According to a study conducted by (Basu 2008)¹⁶ Indian men managers associate managerial success with men more than with women. Generally for the position of manager it is always men who are given preference. The image of a woman does not come first to the mind. It could be because the role of a manager is seen that of a boss, an authority, decision maker, giving orders, etc. and these terms do not match with the compassionate nature of a woman. Thus, women are deprived of

such roles. It seems clear that women continue to face stereotyping, biases in performance appraisal, promotion and salary and difficult work-life tradeoffs (Punnett et al., 2006).¹⁷ They are seen fit for PR, HR, teaching, nursing or administrative positions at low levels. At entry level positions women are denied strategic roles and are assigned conventional responsibilities which block their progress in the organizational hierarchies in which they work.

2 Works-Life Balance

One of the major challenges for working women is to strike a balance between their personal and professional priorities. This problem is exacerbated in more family-oriented cultures like India where women still perform a major share of household tasks in addition to childbearing. They juggle between the two roles of an active employee and that of a mother, wife or daughter. (Yuzuak 2012)¹⁸ emphasised that social pressures towards women in India are comparatively higher than the men. At times, women have to forgo assignments in response to family responsibilities, and therefore tend to be behind men in career advancement.

3 Relocation and Security

Travelling, relocation and safety are other issues because of which women hold themselves from taking challenging assignments and therefore, they concentrate on assignments of more local in nature. Indian society still does not permit a single woman to travel all by herself to unfamiliar places of work. It could be at senior positions where women have enough support to manage themselves either from company's side or with the help of their colleagues or network. But at low or mid-level, it is quite difficult for women to arrange any of the resources for their security. The expansion of global business across boundaries to extreme rural areas demands regular trips, meetings, deliberations at the sight etc. To carry out such daunting tasks, women encounter problems. Associated with travelling is an issue of safety when women have to move from one place to another, at times during odd hours. In 2009 commuters trains exclusively for female passengers – Ladies Specials – introduced in Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai, and Calcutta to provide a safe haven from the harassment women face when using public transport (Hewlett and Rashid 2010).¹⁹

4 Workplace Cultural Diversity

Diverse workforce may act as an impediment for women employees in carrying out the tasks. The women may feel more thwarted than their men colleagues in adapting to a different environment other than where they have had maximum stay. Acclimatizing in a new environment with different organizational values and culture, local norms and standards might hamper the growth of women.

5 Lack Result-Oriented Values

While playing managerial roles both men and women are expected to drive results out of their actions. Their actions depend upon the values they possess either inherited from their parents or acquired from their environment. Generally, by nature men are seen encompassing assertiveness, achievement orientation and competitiveness whereas women encompass care for others, compassion, and concern for the quality of life and the environment. In other terms, men values task achievement and women focuses on people and their satisfaction. In this fast evolving business trends, it is imperative to have assertiveness and boldness reflected in employees' behavior in handling cross country and overseas clients. Negotiation skills where women are not found confident in cracking deals, may result in great losses. The kind hearted image and philanthropic feeling of women may come in the way of their promotional ladder.

6 Lack Skills Updating

Apart from regular or routine work women are required to take up assignments of different nature of which they are not aware of. To perform such tasks, women need to keep themselves updated with the new and current practices of business. They might have to undergo some training, take up some courses in the areas of specialization or get associated with diverse projects to become effective in handling novice assignments. Women have many personal commitments because of which they find it difficult to make any value addition in the form of training programs, higher studies, and overseas assignments to their career, consequently their progress gets affected. After some time their chances of growth in the particular organization become dingy and that might lead to dropping out of the career at important stages.

The above challenges do hamper women's performance in management but that does not deter them from being stoppable. The modern woman is determined to prove her mettle and be remained a significant contributor in achieving harmony, success and prosperity.

Opportunities for Women in Management

With the upsurge of Indian economy there arose a demand of talented workforce. The impact of globalization has been so immense that traditional Indian society and women, in specific felt the winds of change.

1 IT Sector

The influx of IT and ITes sevices in the liberalized economy paved way for women, to equip themselves with the knowledge of softwares to work in any part of the world. Moreover, for working in the IT sector one does not have to acquire much of formal degrees rather it is the knowledge of IT systems and hands-on experience that matters. (Rajan 2012)²⁰ commented that Indian services sector has the highest participation of women in IT/BPO sector. Every business, these days, require software computing and its application, and which can be attained in a very short span of time. Also, in the BPO sector the number of women is increasing as they provide flexi hours timings along with work from home facility, overseas certified training at company's expense and other perks and incentives. Hence IT is one such area replete with growth prospects for women. NASSCOM is an organization that promotes women leadership in IT sector.

2 Mentoring Program

Mentoring helps in building a talented and experienced workforce who gradually adds to organizational advancement. As a part of executive training and development, companies conduct mentoring and networking programs for its employees and some women-specific programs, too. In the World Economic Forum report 2010 on corporate practices for gender diversity in 20 countries, 59% of the companies surveyed say they offered internally led these programs (Ibarra, Carter and Silva 2010).²¹ Through these programs women got an opportunity to know how to prepare themselves to bag challenging assignments and understand the possibilities of how to go up for senior or leadership positions. WILL Forum India organization is a platform to bring together senior women executives to share workplace practices and mentor women on corporate issues.

3 Brain Power over Muscle Power

The workplace is now becoming tough and competitive. New technologies being discovered at a rapid pace, may label a worker inefficient in as little as a year. The worker, be it man or woman has to keep abreast of the changes that lie ahead.

(Toffler 1991)²² remarked that we are now shifting away from an economy based on muscle-power to one heavily based on mind-power and that eliminates a crucial disadvantage for women. Women now have an environment to develop their brain power to retain position and qualify for promotions within the organization. The workplace is no longer built on muscle power but it is now more about skills, knowledge, negotiation, innovation, creativity, generating ideas, and the value one can bring to the table. Leading a quality life does not any longer depend on male supremacy.

4 Networks and Forums

Relationship building through networks and forums help women develop the ties, visibility, and organizational know-how essential to professional success (Hewlett and Rashid 2010).²³ Various companies like Siemens, Google, IBM, GE, Intel TCS, and Infosys have set up forums to provide guidance and training to women employees to fight isolation and gain visibility as well as achieve their business goals (Hewlett and Rashid 2010).²⁴ Besides, through networks women are able to share their experiences with senior women executives and learn how to adopt mechanisms or strategies to resolve workplace issues. This builds lot of confidence in women to deal with unique challenges.

5 Women Achievers as Role Models

Earlier, working women did not have ideals or role models to relate to but the present generation has role models in the form of corporate managers, entrepreneurs, social activists, educationists, etc. to get inspired and motivated. Women, aspiring for professional career, can always identify themselves with the trials and tribulations of great achievers. Learning from the biographical representations of top women, the average woman may seek guidance from senior and experienced women or choose a mentor for themselves.

6 Academia-Industry Interface

While being on managerial positions women can also pursue their interest of imparting practical knowledge to the students of business schools. This is an opportunity for the working women especially, in management to train MBA students on business practices so that when they join the corporate houses they are well familiar with the nitty-gritty of managing a business. Moreover, corporate houses always feel a gap while hiring students for their companies. The students do not match with the requisites of the company and also of a particular job profile.

Apart from, what is discussed above, there could be some more avenues for women in management as supporting factors to reach to senior positions and perform adequately better.

Conclusion

In order to allow women to work with an open mind, the Indian society has to maintain a positive attitude towards women, in general and working women, in particular. Positive and favorable changes, at workplace are desirable to let women work with ease and comfort. Providing women-friendly workplace environment, mentoring program through career guidance and general counseling, initiating programs for intellectual well-being, feedback and consultation, policy pertaining to recruitment, promotion, performance appraisal and review processes, including women for crucial issues like discussing business strategies, seeking advice on major decisions related to organization's progress are some of the measures to be adopted by the organizations to create supportive work environment for women.

The 21st century will have its significance, if the empowerment and emancipation of women is emphasized strongly.

The present analyses based on secondary sources calls for further in depth study of women's positions in managerial roles at international level. This would give a global picture of women's standing in multinational corporations as far as managerial responsibilities are concerned. It would also help to understand the attitude of human society towards women at large right from the beginning of their career.

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