

Interview with Ms Smita Saha, Vice President-HR, AstraZeneca Pharma India Ltd.

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Executive Overview

Diversity has been part of Indian ethos as well as embedded in its constitution and democratic traditions; however, valuing women at formal workplaces in general and promoting women leadership roles in particular have been a challenge. In this interview with a woman human resources (HR) leader with diverse HR roles across industries, particularly in multinationals, the author explores her personal journey as a HR leader and elicits her insights into gender inequalities in India. Among other things, she shares her experience about the specific challenges and impediments for women in leadership roles, the role of government and her suggestions to young women leaders. The interview also provides useful and timely directions on possible future action plans by individuals and organizations to take gender equality to new heights.

Smita Saha has 20 years of professional experience in large multinational corporations. She is considered a thought leader with a deep understanding of business with a proven track record of driving people strategy and organizational transformation to achieve business results. She has been working as Vice President–Human Resources, India since November 2011 with AstraZeneca. In this role, she is responsible for driving and supporting organization-wide transformation and restructuring to align AstraZeneca India to the company’s new global strategy. Recently, she also assumed leadership of Corporate Communications for India, which includes guiding the media strategy. This role is of critical importance due to the evolving regulatory environment and ethics governance both within the company and pharmaceutical industry.

Prior to this, she held multiple HR leadership roles for various businesses at Oracle, Cisco Systems, IBM and Siemens Information Systems. She is an alumnus of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, with a Masters in Personnel Management and Industrial Relations.

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Can you briefly describe your career trajectory?

Back in high school, I met an HR Manager. The passion and conviction in her voice as she explained her role in shaping an organization got me excited about the possibilities of a career in HR. Thereafter, it was about getting the right education and finding the right career breaks.

My first job was with a start-up in Mumbai, a great opportunity to set things up. Information Technology (IT) was a booming industry a few years back and I moved to the IT hub of Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore) to capitalize on this opportunity. Over the years, I have worked with some really great organizations and experienced various global cultures. I have supported global leaders in setting up their India businesses, was the HR lead for many large acquisitions, built talent strategies and have been an Executive Coach for business leaders in the Asia Pacific region. About three years back, I moved to my current role in the pharmaceutical industry. At AstraZeneca, our story is about business transformation. HR is playing the role of an important strategic business partner in driving this transformation.

Have you faced gender-based challenges in your career? If so, how did you manage such challenges?

It is true that gender-based challenges exist and I have faced them as well. An obvious one that many of us face is managing competing home and work priorities. My mantra has been “every matter has its day”. By that what I mean is that sometime I place work demands first and sometimes I prioritize home before work, based on which need is more urgent at that time. And the prioritization varies from day to day and issue to issue. During hard times, there is a need to be creative without any guilt. Like the days when I had to work from the hospital when a near and dear one was hospitalized and there were important deadlines at work as well. I think women become great at juggling competing priorities due to this constant prioritization and re-prioritization that goes on.

From my experience, another typical gender-based challenge is breaking the accepted stereotype. There are set biases in every workplace. For instance, women cannot work late hours or women will not travel. What has worked for me in such situations is to have a frank discussion about the role expectations and be committed to deliver them. My view is that consistent performance is a great way to neutralize any such bias.

Who have been the major people who have assisted you in your career and what was their role?

My career has been built with the strong support of my family, my husband and my mother. Both of them are ambitious for me and have great belief in my capabilities. They are always there to back me up on home priorities and totally understand when I confront a tough balance or choice. My husband is very invested in my career. My success makes him proud and any professional setback I face,

troubles him a lot. Likewise, my mother supports me in taking care of my son. So in a way, my career is built on the combined effort of my family. And, I have seen that if my family perceives any injustice at my workplace, they are very vocal to make me address it.

What is the most important event or issue that has assisted you in reaching a senior position?

My achievement-orientation and interest to take on new blue sky initiatives, that I know little of when I get started, has stood me in good stead. This has enabled me to pick up diverse work experiences and build my skills. Then, in the early years it was my parent's desire to see me succeed that propelled my endeavours to make them proud. And, finally the most fundamental decision has been to have a life partner who values my career as much as his own and does not allow me to wallow in the guilt of being a working mother.

How do you manage work and family life?

This is all about prioritization and focusing on what is urgent at that time. It is sometimes about juggling both and what I call "work-life integration". For instance, working at the school while you wait for the football match to end, or joining a doctor's consultation on the phone since you have a business presentation to make in an hour. My family's support and their pride in my career has been an important success factor. Besides personal support, it is important that you work for an organization that understands and supports women to stay and develop their careers.

In the global context, what do you think are the reasons that not many women are found in the upper levels of organizations and in company boards?

In my mind, there are three main reasons why we see fewer women in upper levels of the organization. First, many women make career adjustments, especially during middle years of their careers, due to simultaneous escalating demands on career and personal fronts. If we stay resilient in our mid-career, I think we will definitely rise to senior levels. Another reason is that women tend to be completely work focused at the workplace, to the exclusion of all else! Most women are driven by "checklists" that include both personal and official tasks to be accomplished. In this intensity of getting things done, we do not prioritize the time to network; to try and understand what is happening in a broad sense at the work place. Hence, sometimes while we were busy delivering on our tasks, an exciting project or business priority just goes past us. Lastly, women tend to be shy in talking about their achievements and asking for recognition. In all the prioritizing, getting things done and dealing with our personal guilt about balancing, we tend not to recognize or showcase our fantastic contributions and achievements.

If I talk about AstraZeneca specifically, women make up 51 per cent of our workforce, and account for about 28 per cent of the leaders reporting to our Senior Executive Team. We want to have more women in leadership roles. We are therefore focusing on building leadership and management capability to build and lead diverse teams, strengthen fairness and transparency. This approach has worked for us. In 2014, AstraZeneca was included in the Top 10 of the National Association for Female Executives' List of Top 50 companies for female executives for the sixth consecutive year. We were also named as a "Best Place to Work for LGBT Equality" by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation and as "100 Best Companies for Working Mothers" by *Working Mother* magazine in 2014.

In the specific context of South Asia, what special issues and challenges do you see in terms of gender equality?

I think, in South Asia corporate culture tends to be male dominated. Specifically in the pharmaceutical industry, the sales job has daily in-city travel and sometimes out-of-city travel. In addition to the obvious infrastructure issues in most such countries, other practical challenges exist, for example, finding clean toilets or safety issues. So we see fewer women in these sales job roles which in turn reduce the pipeline for management and leadership roles. This trend perpetuates the essentially masculine nature of this industry. At AstraZeneca, to address these challenges we have identified specific sales job roles that work better for women. In large metro cities with better infrastructure, we focus to hire more women employees to bring a balance in the work force. We realize that our patients are diverse and our business is built on harnessing different skills, capabilities and ways of thinking to drive the innovation that is essential to our success. This makes diversity core to our success strategy.

PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi said, "Women can't have it all." What are your views on this?

I think she was being frank and upfront with her opinion. My view is that as women we are constantly prioritizing and re-prioritizing to achieve our work and personal demands. In this process, there is some give and take and obviously there will be consequences of the choices we make and then we are ridden with guilt. Instead, if we embrace the choices we make, knowing that there are consequences to these decisions, and then we will be more at peace with ourselves and the choices we make.

In her book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg exhorts women that rather than waiting passively for others to address gender inequality, they should become bold, ambitious and take charge. Your views on this?

I totally agree with her view. We must be unafraid to clearly define our personal and professional goals and then drive to achieve them boldly. Being ambitious and assertive are not gender-based virtues. We must embrace it and take charge of our lives. Success will surely follow.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella was recently embroiled in a controversy by saying something to the effect that it is bad karma for women to ask for a salary raise. What is your reaction?

My personal view is that you should ask for the raise if you believe you deserve it. Most good employers have processes to identify good performers and do what it takes to retain them. If your organization does not have such processes, or if for any reason you believe you are being overlooked, then it is imperative to showcase your achievements and ask for that raise! It does not make sense to “suffer in silence”. And again this advice holds good for both men and women at the workplace.

What role do you see for the Human Resources function as a change agent in addressing diversity management in general and gender diversity and equality in particular?

Human Resources play the role of the conscience keeper and ensure that the principles of diversity are embedded in our organization. We drive the transformation at the workplace by ensuring that the focus of the leadership and senior management is there. At AstraZeneca, we are embedding diversity, fairness and transparency into our processes for recruitment, talent management, career progression and work–life balance. Specific initiatives include taking a closer look at the career advancement of women in the company to identify factors that enable and support it. And, more projects will follow as we continue to develop our diversity and inclusion strategies.

As an organization we will know that we are getting it right when we are the company that people want to work for, and where everyone feels they are part of the same team, with the same opportunities to build their careers and help the business succeed.

What is the role of the top management on this?

Leadership behaviour should follow the “Walk the Talk” principle. It is important for leaders to be aware of their actions and how it perpetuates the values of the company. This is a powerful tool to define work culture. At AstraZeneca, we are committed to build an inclusive culture and one of our key work streams to enable this is leadership- and management-capability enhancement. We are working to integrate diversity and inclusion at the deepest levels within our leadership and management culture. This would increase the awareness and mindfulness on the subject so it then becomes an innate part of how we behave and what we do.

What are the specific challenges and impediments for women in leadership roles?

I believe the early years are easier, when personal life demands are lower and one can focus on career. Thereafter, life stage goals and work goals go in parallel. Further, a family with two career-oriented spouses is a tough situation that many

women in leadership positions face. In a traditional South Asian culture, it is the woman who majorly bears the childcare and domestic responsibilities as well. Organizations are increasingly recognizing these complex situations and striving to build a work culture that supports women employees in managing work and family pressures. At AstraZeneca, we are committed to create an environment where employees and specifically women, feel supported in managing the demands of work and personal life. Leaders are encouraged to be mindful about this and openly discuss work–life balance. This brings in the legitimacy that this issue demands and paves the way for easier conversations for our women employees.

Can you comment on the impact of organizational culture on women's careers?

Work culture is a clear enabler. An inclusive work culture is an asset for attracting and retaining diversity. For instance, if the team building events at an organization are stereotyped to include overnight staff picnics, it automatically excludes those employees who are not comfortable or unable to make it to such events. This may sometimes put them at a career disadvantage. On the other hand, if an organization has a suite of opportunities for team building, there is something to appeal to each person, and this inclusiveness builds stronger teams. It is important to understand that the culture must be conducive and supportive for all employees, both women and men. After all, both genders have to balance a professional role and social role; the work culture must recognize that. At AstraZeneca, having a diverse workforce is imperative to our business as it helps us to better reflect and understand our patients and the healthcare professionals we serve. And ultimately this helps us develop medicines that the society needs.

At the macro level, how can government policy help address gender inequality?

In India, representation of women in company boards of organizations of a certain size and above has been made mandatory. Such measures are welcome. This would be further strengthened if an organization can demonstrate that an actual change in women representation at board and executive level, does ultimately translate to benefits for the organization. At the same time, it is important to ensure that such senior role appointments should be based on merit and competence and not just based on gender. In the end, it is the best that wins.

What specific advice would you give to young women aspiring to be future leaders in tackling gender inequality in the workplace?

My advice to young women professionals has always been about defining your life goals and career goals and understanding that both of these influence and impact each other. A person cannot live two lives separately. Personal decisions like the city you want to live in or the personal values of your partner or spouse

would have some bearing on your career. Similarly, the choice of career is an important decision that does have an impact on personal life. Taking up a sales role in a pharmaceutical company versus specializing in a niche functional area and consulting in that field would have different bearings on your family. These are critical decisions. So once you are clear about your goals, making choices and taking decisions is easier. This would make you a happier person and a stronger professional at the workplace.