

REDISCOVERING INDIAN WOMENS' LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

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Abstract

Women empowerment is a global theme. Indian challenges are not far away. This paper summarizes some of the thoughts, ideas and points based on the Round Table by HRD Network Bangalore on 15 March 2008 as well as some conceptual ideas on the theme.

About the authors



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Both India and Indian women have moved from strength to strength, knocking milestones, achieving so called unachievable, making the inevitable happen with seeming ease and poise. Surely there have been hurdles, drawbacks and massive challenges, yet the spirit soars high. Indian legacy is rich with cases of women leaders, scholars, scientists, artists, poets, philosophers and even political leaders. However, the legacies although inspiring, have also been burdened with issues such as gender discrimination, social exploitation, lop sided legal system, absence of clear mandate for the advancement in economy and society.

Culturally and historically, women in India had a prominence - perhaps unequal to

many other nations. From being the inspiration for art to being warriors, priestesses, prime ministers, queens, saints, teachers, philosophers, artists and even Goddesses. Indian women have been revered, worshipped and invoked respect equally from men and women.

What Then is the Significance of Celebrating Womens' Day?

International Womens' Day is the global day connecting all women around the world and inspiring them to achieve their full potential. International Womens' Day celebrates the collective power of women past, present and future. In India too Womens' Day is celebrated with great fervor. Several womens' organizations,

government and civil society initiatives like girl child education, reservation of seats in local panchayats, etc. have led to empowering the Indian woman today.

However much more still needs to be addressed to make women equal citizens both in the public and private domain. There is an immediate need to turn the sporadic successes and achievement to more planned efforts to bring in assured consistent results. There is also a need to have a built-in mandate that deliberates developmental initiatives towards more women empowerment in terms of economic, social, and legal status in India. The International Womens' Day thus serves as a reminder of how much we have achieved and how much more still needs to be done.

Women want to partner in India's growth. India today offers rich opportunities that need to be focused and worked upon. India is poised to be a super power and will be looked upon by the world. India will not only be the great economic power to reckon with, but will also be an exemplary nation in terms of democracy balanced with economic, social and also spiritual growth. Indian women would like to partner with their counterparts in society and economy by richly contributing to national growth. While India will take the strides to global power, Indian women would like to take this opportunity and build an agenda towards empowering women among all the sections of society and economy.

In an endeavor to generate understanding rather than simply create awareness, NHRDN Bangalore chapter decided to create a platform for the women initiative. With this spirit, a Round Table Conference with a two panel discussion was arranged on 15 March 2008. Dileep Ranjekar, CEO, Azim Premji Foundation was the Program Chairman. Ranjekar, in addition to his active participation at the event, gave

immense guidance to culminate the event from concept to reality.

The following Women Leaders participated in the Panel discussions

- Ranjini Ranganath – Sr. Managing Director, Cisco Systems
- Hemalatha Mohan – Head -Operational Risk Management - ING Vysya
- Jayashree Krishna – Head – Learning Center, Talent Quest Inc.
- Nandini Ashok – GM – Facilities, Sasken Technologies
- Elaine Mathias – GM (Corporate Finance) BEL
- Lynn Tarter – Director – Business Dev.
- Aperian Global
- Sadiqa Peerbhoy – Author & Career Counsellor
- Sangita Singh – Sr. VP- Wipro
- Priya Rajagopal Chetty, VP-Stanton Chase, Moderator
- Chitra, Director, Chittam - Moderator

Startling Facts and Figures

As a Program Chairman, Ranjekar in his keynote address gave a good insight into Indian woman's status. **Woman's role in the family has been that of the "doer" or in the true sense "manager".** In the urban and semi urban areas, the higher income categories women have been primarily in charge of the household. They nurture, take care, manage children, elders and extended family along with the family budget and other resources.

Here are some startling statistics: In India male literacy is 78%, while among women, the literacy rate is only 52%. The men-women population ratio in 1901 was 1000:972, which in the year 2001 became 1000:933. Only 10.42% of IAS are women,

3.8% in IPS, and in parliament only 8% of MPs are women.

Leadership Will Carve the Way Further

It is not enough for best employers and HR leaders to simply focus on increasing the "number" of women in the workforce - either at the entry-level or at the mid-executive level. The priority should be also on including women in top-management positions; at the Board of Directors, President-level or CEO-level.

Many women leaders have felt the existence of the glass ceiling. Some of the leaders also pointed out that many many corporates are grappling with the situation as there has been no well crafted company vision towards women leaders. Further, the company tries to use 'One shoe fit all' kind of attitude which becomes ineffective.

In Indian context, many industries have yet to develop full-fledged agenda towards bringing HR policies and practices that will bring and support more diversity at the work place and thereby giving leadership opportunities to women. Women on the other hand have their own monsters to fight with. While working women is the reality now accepted widely in society, absence of professional support system options in the areas of child care and care for old and invalids, non availability of health care options, few educational opportunities for middle-age women make them choose a role of lesser prominence. Unplanned approach to career growth and secondary treatment towards professional development further causes damage. Hence the growth of the majority of women remains accidental than planned.

Women leaders so far have felt that their strength has been to be compassionate, to bring in the spirit of inclusiveness and also to be able to bring in a lot more sensitivity to corporate practices and processes. Although almost all corporates have primarily developed their HR policies in

keeping only men as employees, they are steadily but surely making initiatives to suit women professionals at the work place. This is also due to some of the path breaking performances of Women leaders so far.

What will Indian women leaders offer? Indian women are in many ways more than one of the symbols of India. Indian women leaders display the 'spirit of tolerance' and 'ability to reach out and weave inclusivity'. This comes with decades of socio-cultural background.

What does the Indian woman need to do? Leaders emphasize that first and foremost women must invest in their personal growth. Women must consciously stay away from falling prey to stereotypes. Professional bodies like NHRD must help create network among professionals, mentor and coach the future leaders; celebrate and share success stories on individual level and organizational level.

Emerging New Realities in Society and Corporate

The best global companies are also recognizing that recruiting, retaining and advancing women is no longer a matter of social responsibility. Successful corporations have understood the strategic and economic significance of women as executives, investors, customers and clients in the global economy. They make a clear "business case" for diversity and inclusiveness in the organization.

Emergence of the need to have diversity at the work place is also the need of the hour as more and more organizations are investing in research and development. Women also offer required competencies in the area of creativity and innovation. This has given emergence for some of the new realities in social and corporate context.

Although there is no formal research available yet, there is a growing acceptance of 'working wife' or 'working mother' in Indian families today. On the other hand the corporate world is yet to create jobs/roles specially carved to tap competencies that women managers can offer.

Equal Pay : C & B Based on Merit

Some of the new realities have contributed to empowerment of women managers. Increasingly Corporates are transparent about the compensation and benefits offered to women managers. This is a very positive step to develop diversity at the work place. Many industries have adapted the policies of equal pay among genders and largely the compensation package is being designed based on merit.

In the Indian context, IT sector is where women managers have been very effective at almost every level of the organization. Corporates have taken measures such as flexi-timing, work at home options, conveyance from work to home, facilities like video conference and other IT enabled solutions. However, many other industries like manufacturing industry, Retail and CPG, Service industry are yet to ape such initiatives. Under such circumstances, it is challenging to the HR managers to understand the real needs of their employees and promote such practices.

Gender Diversity in the Workplace

In the past, all women in the workplace were automatically assigned to temporary, part-time or low responsibility jobs because it was understood that their first priority was taking care of their families. Unmarried women were likely to quit as soon as they married (often to an upcoming executive in the company). Married women were likely to quit as soon as they became pregnant. Women with children were understood

to take more care of their children than about work. In addition, there was a widespread belief that women were not as capable as men, either physically, mentally or emotionally.

Organizations have been slowly adjusting to these changes; learning to treat women as equal to men and not as a potential date! In fact, many organizations now keep their employees well informed about their policies against such harassment. Some organizations are also offering help in terms of availing legal advice, counseling and communication through email and blogging.

The corporate world has been, and is one, where men can escape away from home. Men made the rules, and when women come into this world, they were not sure how to conduct themselves. In the Indian context, men learn to see women as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. The idea of women as colleagues and as equals is very new and quite intimidating. Training initiatives will help build the ambience of trust and mutual respect.

Women too, coming into the corporate world, are awed by its norms. Previously, their socialisation was only about their home and family. Study and work outside the home are all short-term activities, in preparation for the homemaker role. Small surprise, then, that those women are not prepared for the workplace, do not last long and only a few get to the top. In the last decade, women in other parts of the industrialised world have experienced what is popularly known as the '**glass ceiling**' phenomenon, which means women find that they can only rise to a certain level in corporations and no further.

What Can be Done to Take it Further?

Women managers in corporates and society are going to be recurring source that

will contribute to future growth. Corporate policies and practices will further empower them. Even today, some strategic decisions need to be taken in terms of creating opportunities for building diversity not only at entry level but to the highest possible level.

Some of the practices needed, are to develop and monitor built-in retention policies so that it will ensure the diversity and inclusiveness towards women managers. In keeping with the fact that women have several challenges, perhaps society and corporates need to bring in 'positive discrimination' towards women.

Communities and Networks

Communities and networks aim specifically at women to address feelings of isolation and exclusion from social and professional networks. Such spaces offer new avenues to get people together, share ideas, meet like-minded people, learn from each other's experience or find out about opportunities. Real life discussions to engage all levels of industry, including designers and company directors help reflect on critical issues faced by women.

Many initiatives of Government and NGO's go unnoticed due to lack of information and knowledge. Communities and networks can create the awareness to reach out.

Visibility

Initiatives to improve visibility – providing opportunities for women to be heard and seen – like networks, provide something individuals can identify with, and also, significantly make individuals feel that they are wanted. The benefits of visibility initiatives result from the attention they brings to the issues being addressed rather than just the spotlight they put on individual designers or IT professionals.

Role models are also believed to play a key part in the power of inspiration. More importantly achievements should be celebrated.

Training and Education

Training and education in softer nontechnical skills may help women feel confident and inspired. Core technical skill acquisition is rarely an issue among the highly qualified women. Additional sources of information through websites and internal communication systems such as employee blogs, magazines, bulletins are also a good way to keep upto date with events and training.

Women Centric Policies at Workplace

To encourage the diversity at the work place, there is an urgent need to have HR policies in terms of recruitment, placements as well as training and development of Women professionals.

Mere copying of the HR policies from US or Europe may not be practical in India. Hence the policies must be based on the Indian context. Some corporates have introduced initiatives in terms of flexitimes, extended maternity leave, crèche facility at work place etc. Women professionals have to use these flexi options and demonstrate commitment to work. However these seem to be only sporadic efforts. Initiatives based on research and understanding are the real needs of Indian working woman.

Conclusion - Empowerment Strategies

We are living in exciting times in India.

1. Women managers have by their achievement so far proven that they bring in excellence towards work place and society and will be a major source of contribution towards Indian growth. What they expect from the society and at workplace is a mentoring; coaching and networking opportunity.

2. It is important to distinguish and address individually the more tangible barriers to women's participation in the field, (e.g. Work-life balance) and the problems of perceived competence in doing the job or the unwritten gendered work cultures. Initiatives need to address the issues that appear to disadvantage women at a practical level (childcare, better access to finance, entrepreneurial opportunities), whilst not neglecting the importance of building confidence, providing inspiration and building female friendly networks and spaces.
3. Networks, visibility and learning are all critical to achieving gender inclusion and are all forms of empowerment.
4. Empowerment strategies offer a good way to address the tensions emerging from gender inclusion through the judicious use of women-friendly spaces open also to men.
5. Empowerment strategies also need to be informed about the wants and needs of target users. Empowerment strategies flagging also often touch upon their ability to listen to and talk to various (gendered) users in an original and effective manner.
6. Empowerment and other inclusion strategies, by increasing the proportion of women, may promote further changes

in gendered cultures and practices and create a more welcoming space for women.

7. The empowerment of women needs to be endorsed at industry and company level, as well as by individuals themselves leading to higher productivity, organizational effectiveness and harmony.

At this stage keeping diversity at work and empowerment of women in background, the following Action Agenda/Implications for NHRD appears before us. This could be explored further and are listed below:

- Forum for mentoring working Women at local chapter level .
- Guide corporates to design policies for bringing in Diversity at work place — more influencing policies of the organizations.
- Coaching HR professionals to build in gender neutral HR policies specifically in recruitment, training and career advancement.
- Celebrate success at both individual & organizational level.
- Collaborative research between NHRD, Academia & participating organizations (other chapters of NHRD can collaborate too).

* The authors acknowledge the support from Divya Shetty, Oracle India in this paper.