An Equal Workplace for Women: A Myth or Reality in the Corporate Workplace.

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Abstract:

Women have expanded their career aspirations and they are no longer opting only for the teaching and nursing profession. They are now entering the previously dominated male bastions like accounting, medicine, law, banking, engineering and research and development. Their integration should however not be misconstrued as acceptance and equality. Work life balance and stress related conflicts are yet to be addressed. This research paper is an attempt to bring forth certain pertinent issues which affect women in their progression of their professional careers. More women are receiving degrees today than they were getting earlier. This roughly translates to the fact that women will rise to higher level positions, but research proves otherwise. There are many factors which hold the women back more than men. This has led to the overall gender inequality and a huge wage gap at the workplace. Professional women are still enduring in their struggle for equality. This research paper is an attempt to find out the reasons for women's delayed advancement to senior leadership positions. It dwells into the myth and reality notions of an equal workplace for women. The various Companies report about their high commitment towards gender diversity and inclusion, but that commitment has not translated into a meaningful progress for women.

Keywords: Gender Diversity, Senior Leadership Positions, Equality, Work Life Balance

Introduction:

Our Society believes that men play the crucial role of turning things around in the Corporate World. They happen to be the COO's, CFO's and CEO's. This trend can be held to be true, say about 50 years ago, but today we are changing. And changing for the better. More educated and confident women are entering the corporate world. The ratio of men to women is reflecting an even out trend. Two important facts need to be stated here, namely the increase in women participation in the workforce and an increase in the women's level of education. There are many factors which hold the women back more than men. This has led to the overall gender inequality and a huge wage gap at the workplace. However, current research work has shown that women in the leadership roles bring higher profitability and effective leadership styles to their companies.

Women have expanded their career aspirations and they are no longer only opting for the teaching and nursing profession. They are now entering the previously dominated male bastions like accounting, medicine, law, banking, engineering and research and development. Their integration should however not be misconstrued as acceptance and equality. Work Life Balance and Stress Related Conflicts are yet to be addressed.

This research paper is an attempt to bring forth certain pertinent issues which affect women in their progression of their professional careers and also to find out the reasons for women's delayed advancement to Senior Leadership Positions.

More women are receiving degrees today than they were getting earlier. This roughly translates to the fact that women will rise to higher level positions, but this Research proves otherwise. There are many factors which hold the women back more than men. This has led to the overall gender inequality and a huge wage gap at the workplace. Professional women are still enduring in their struggle for equality. This paper explores the reasons for Women's Delayed Advancement to Senior Leadership Positions. It dwells into the myth and reality notions of an equal workplace for women. The various Companies report about their high commitment

towards gender diversity and inclusion, but that commitment has not translated into a meaningful progress for women.

There are more similarities than differences in the leadership styles between women and men. But the vertical gender segregation at top management levels is still rampant. There is an urgent need to identify the underlying mechanism embedded in organizational structures that reflects women as less suitable for senior leadership positions than men, although evidence suggests that there is no substantial gender difference in their leadership styles or behaviours.

Objectives:

1) To Place into Perspective the Position of Women in Higher Level Corporate Positions at the Workplace.
2) To understand the Causes behind the Gender Gap and Under Representation of Women in the Higher Echelons of the Corporate World.
3) To Suggest Real Options for Companies to Decrease the Gender Gap and Build an Inclusive Culture for Women.

POSITION OF WOMEN AT THE WORKPLACE:

Research findings through Secondary Data and Semi- Structured Interviews conducted on men and women working in the Corporate Offices in India show that there is gender difference in the Selection Rates for Positions in Senior Leadership. With women becoming an integral part of the

workforce, managers must examine their reliance on stereotypical views about women in the corporate workplace. Gender is a socio-cultural aspect and organisations are an important part of a given culture. Organisational analysis needs to take into perspective the relationship between gender, gender stereotypes and organisational life. We need to examine issues of gender stereotype, gender discrimination and sexual harassment on a pan India basis to analyse the situation holistically.

Discrimination: All of us irrespective of our gender expect to be judged purely on the criteria of our Merit, Knowledge, Skill, Abilities, Unique Talents and Sincere Efforts. But this is far away from the reality at the workplace. Men tend to get more crucial and important assignments leading to faster career advancement as compared to women. The men's projects have budgets twice as big, with three times as many staffers as compared to the women's projects. More Men are given the P & L responsibility as compared to Women. Such assignments get a great deal of attention and insight by the top management as compared to the women. This roughly translates to the fact that management has good intentions, but the execution is not perfect as women are not getting the "hot jobs" needed by them for their career advancement.

Statistics reveals that both the number and the percentage of women fall off dramatically in the higher ranks of organizations. The number of women in the corporate ladder is dwindling. On an average, women made up 53% of Entry Level employees, 40 % of Managers, 35% of Directors, 27% of Vice Presidents, 24% of Senior Vice Presidents and only 19% of Executives in C-Suite.

Work Life Balance: Research has shown that 60% women worked well past the birth of their second child and they were not pushed out of the system. These women pursued their careers for an average of 11 years. 90% women left the workplace not to take care of their families but, because of workplace issues like long working hours and frustration.

Hiring and Promotion: Gender Gaps are very wide especially early in the pipeline due to faulty hiring and promotion policies. Women are often overlooked at this crucial juncture leading to a

non-inclusive culture. The few women who are still in the pipeline feel less supported and safe at work. Hiring and promotion are the two key drivers for representing women. But companies are not addressing this issue from the beginning. This is disadvantaging women even though they have more bachelor's degrees than men. And they are less likely to be hired in the entry level jobs as well. From stage one at the entry level to the managerial level, this disparity and gap widens further. Research Data proves that for every 100 men promoted to the level of Manager, only 79 women are promoted. Due to these gender gaps, men end up holding 62% of the managerial positions, while women hold a meagre 38%. This proves that women are less likely to be hired into manager level jobs and are also less likely to be gradually promoted into them.

CAUSES OF UNDER REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE HIGHER ECHELONS:

Since the onset of liberalization in the 1990s, India has witnessed a growth in the number of educated middleclass women in professions. However, only a few women find representation in the prime leadership positions and decision-making bodies. Some typical assumptions about women in the workplace are that they work for supplemental income, place family over work, lose interest in their jobs and hence lack the drive to succeed. Others believe that women take negative feedback personally and are unsuitable for top management positions because they are emotional, sentimental and lack the much needed aggressiveness.

While the earlier ideology and mindset of the ideal woman as a homemaker has been replaced by one which portrays her as women of substance, a woman's role in the family continues to be pivotal and is even viewed as central in defining the Indian culture. Based on the fact, that gender is socially constructed, this paper analyses gender inequality aspects in Indian

organizations through secondary data and semi-structured interviews conducted on men and women working in the corporate offices.

Research Findings: This paper depicts how the various practices and norms played out in the specific Indian socio-cultural context, constructs and maintains masculinity at the workplace and deprives opportunities to professional women. This important socio-cultural construct affects their rise to the higher echelons of leadership positions. This also answers questions regarding why Women are Underrepresented in Elite Leadership Roles.

The research findings show reproduction of a gendered normative order through two types of norms and practices. The first norm and practice, that favour men and the second, socio-cultural norms which undervalues women in the public spaces and open forums. This practice maintains a higher order of masculinity at the workplace. The above analysis reflects that even though these practices may exist in other parts of the world, the style in which they are played out reflects the National Cultural Norms. Following are some of the reasons validated for woman's under representation leading to an uneven playing field:

I.   ***Gender Stereotyping:*** leads to resistance to women's leadership. These women at the forefront are often tagged as 'deceitful, pushy, aggressive, abrasive, self-serving' whereas ambition in men is a valued leadership trait. Another thing often heard is that women are not ambitious. This myth holds back the women from setting and achieving goals.

II. ***Issues with Leadership Style***: Women often struggle to cultivate a style of leadership, which they and others feel are comfortable. Another belief is that women choose to satisfy other's views on how they should lead rather than following their own gut instinct. This leads to a feeling of inauthenticity which results in a lack of trust in the person. When a leader is not trusted, her decisions will not be accepted and enforced. In addition, women are known to prefer the more collaborative and participative leadership style, which also leads to the perceptions like *they do not trust their decisions* and therefore, cannot lead with authority.

III.   *Demands of their Family Life:* Women are still the primary caregivers in families and have the primary responsibility in family matters. They are required to interrupt or sacrifice on their careers for their families. As a result, companies take the view that work or career is not their first priority. Research shows that women who made it to the management levels are often childless or waited to attain career success before starting their families. The perception is that a woman with a family needs to give her time at home in the evening and cannot undertake work responsibilities that might need a stretch in work hours.

IV.   *Difficulty in Building Social Capital:* A very important aspect of reaching a leadership position is that, he/ she is the face of the company and adds to the company's standing in corporate and social circles. The balancing of family and work leaves women with no time to socialize professionally or attend out-of-hours professional functions. Effective networking is responsible for understanding the pulse of the industry, new business opportunities and collaborations. Even if women make efforts to join in, more often the networking activities are more male-orientated like golf or clubbing.

V.   **Lack of Mentors/ Sponsors***:* Mentorship has been a long-term issue, especially in areas where the senior people are men. So, they may be more understanding, supportive, encouraging and helpful to young men as compared to young women. This could be because of specific laws surrounding governing appropriate behaviour in the workplace. Men may therefore be reluctant to initiate mentoring a woman for fear of negative repercussions.

VI.   *Own Values:* The main problem for women being underrepresented in top management of public organizations represents their own values, namely low level of competitiveness, cooperation instead of performance, and more attention that they pay to the requirements of their family and also to their personal life.

The negative stereotypes about the work ethics of women keep them from advancing in their careers. In general, society does not encourage women to become leaders in the workforce, only

leaders in the household. Other factors contributing to lack of gender diversity and under representation are everyday discrimination, sexual harassment and experience of being "The Only" woman in the board room. "The Only" tag leads to a lack of critical mass which is an important prerequisite to ensure majority while taking strategic decisions at the workplace. More than 80% women who are "The Onlys" are facing a lot a microaggression in their workplaces. They are more likely to have their abilities challenged and subjected to crude and unprofessional snide remarks.

REAL OPTIONS FOR COMPANIES TO DECREASE THE GENDER GAP AND BUILD AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE FOR WOMEN:

Companies world-wide need to take decisive actions by considering gender diversity more like a business priority, setting targets and holding leaders accountable for results. Following steps can to be undertaken to ignite the progress while creating respectful and inclusive culture for women to feel well supported at work:

- *Organisational Analysis*: Organisational analysis needs to be undertaken, to take into account the relationship between gender, gender stereotypes and organisational life. Job-related factors like infrastructure, HR functions, organizational climate, legal pursuit, empowerment, training and development, ethical concerns and mindset should be considered crucial for women employees in Indian organizations. Companies need to underscore the fact that bad behaviour is unacceptable. HR teams should be aptly trained to investigate claims of harassment with an audit process well in place. The aim should be to foster a respectful and inclusive culture for women.

- *Closing the Gender Gaps in Hiring and Promotions:* Gender gap (men hold 62% of manager positions and women hold a meagre 38%) have to be closed, especially early in the talent pipeline when women are most often overlooked. Even though women have

more bachelor's degree than men, they are less likely to be hired in the entry level jobs. This gap widens further up to the level of manager. They are less likely to be hired directly into manager level jobs and also far less likely to be promoted into them. Companies should hire and promote women and men to manager levels at equal rates to get closer to parity in management (48% women versus 52% men)

- ***Revisiting the Talent Pipeline:*** Companies need to drastically change the way they hire and promote the entry and manager- level employees to ensure meaningful progress. An early inequality leads to a "hollow middle" (fewer women to promote from within and fewer women with the right experience level to hire in from outside). This is a wake-up call for companies to close the early gaps in hiring and promotion to avoid underrepresentation.

- ***Legal Actions:*** Forbidding discrimination relating to hiring, firing, promotions, layoffs, pay, job assignments, harassment, training, wages and benefits.

- ***Organisational Practices:*** As discrimination against women is deeply entrenched in tradition and societal values, it is essential for companies to adopt organisational practices for equality like changing the mindset of women themselves, adopting zero tolerance policy to gender discrimination, acknowledging female traits as strengths, and creating formal processes to build relationships.

- ***Make the Senior Leaders and Managers Champions of Diversity***. The Only woman experience should be rare. Explicit opportunities should be created for women with huge emphasis on meritocracy, potential and participative decision making.

- ***Work-Life Balance:*** Offer the employees the flexibility to fit work into their lives by promoting policies of work-life balance. Make existing female executives more visible as role models to the employees who aspire to leadership positions.

- *Selection Criteria:* Choosing candidates who fit the corporate culture may produce bias against women. Selection criteria should be only based on the known qualities of effective leadership, self-awareness, learning agility etc. The Content designed for Development Programmes for Women Managers and Executives should provide them support and encouragement for preparing for positions of major responsibility. They should categorically deal with women's issues in Leadership. Specifically, Multi-Rater Feedback, Executive Coaching, Mentorship and Networking are recommended for Women Leader Development.

Conclusion:

Research on the underrepresentation of women in positions of leadership suggests that inequalities in promotion rates is not caused by women's lack of desire to advance in their careers but as compared to men, women are less optimistic about their opportunity to attain a leadership position. They also anticipate more difficulties once in such positions, which makes them doubt their leadership competencies.

Biased differential treatments during the leader selection processes significantly leads to women being disadvantaged. Both men and women tend to endorse the belief that effective leaders should show stereotypically masculine traits. When it comes to leadership succession decisions, those at the top, who are generally men, show a preference for promoting others with whom they share similar traits and characteristics or, those with whom they have a positive interpersonal relationship. In this way, a preference for leadership successors that match traditionally (male) notions of leadership also develops similarity at the top level in organizations. This limits the career possibilities of those who do not fit within a masculine culture. The current exploration

into this domain found that despite a lack of significant difference in style and performance between men and women, biases against women in selection and access to developmental opportunities is abundantly clear and remains a problem. Unless the Top Management is convinced that diversity brings competitive advantage, all the steps mentioned above can do nothing to increase women's representation in the leadership roles. Consequently, women themselves have to create an alternative culture that will challenge the embedded traditions.

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