

Career Dynamics of women in India: A Critical Review of Literature

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Abstract: The number of women entering the corporate sector in India is rising across all the sectors. Liberalization of the economy as well as rapid growth of the service sector over the past two decades has led to a surge in demand for the skilled employees. The number of females enrolling for higher educational and technical courses has also raised leading to an increasing number of women entering the workforce. But they are still under-represented at the senior positions in organizations. Women continue to face challenges as they are subjected to gender based stereotyping, excessive scrutiny, discriminatory policies and practices of organizations coupled with the challenges like maintaining work life balance and domestic commitments etc. as they attempt to stabilize their jobs and rise up in the organizational hierarchy. The purpose of this study is to understand the factors faced by women at workplace which lead to discrimination and barriers affecting career advancement of women in Indian corporate sector. Study of Organizational Barriers cannot be completed without taking into consideration the workplace culture which comprises of various dimensions like Power Distance, Masculine and Feminine cultures. Perception of women about the work culture forms an integral part of the study along with the barriers.

Keywords: Career Advancement, Barriers, Women employees

I. INTRODUCTION

Women constitute a little over half the world's population, but their contribution to measured economic activity, growth, and well-being is much lower than the actual potential. This has serious consequences for the industrial and economic growth of the countries. India has a population of over 1.3 billion which makes it the second most populous country after China. Women comprise 48.5% of this general population (Census, 2012). Women constitute about 30% of all economically active individuals (World Economic Forum, The Gender Gap Report, 2013). The Indian workplace has undergone significant changes in the last two decades with rising participation of women at workplace and the changing social dynamics but there is a divide along gender lines and progress towards gender equity is very slow. For women's economic participation, India ranked 136th, (towards the bottom of the 144 countries listed in the 2016 Global Gender Gap Index), and for women's educational opportunity, the rank was 113. At present India is experiencing an increasing rate of urbanization and one of the youngest workforces. The demand for skilled workforce is much more than the supply. This has led to women's enrolment into technical and professional courses (University Grants Commission, 2011). In the year 2011-2012 the percentage of women enrolled in specific undergraduate degree programs included 29% in Engineering/Technology, 37% in Computer Science/Computer Application, 32% in Management and 32% in Law courses (Govt. of India, Ministry of HRD, 2011). Women can be seen in greater numbers in engineering, management and other "male-dominated" professions.

Despite a higher number of women enrolling for technical and professional courses like engineering and management, they are underrepresented in the organized private sector in India. The number of

women pursuing higher education from rural and urban areas is higher than the number of women who have joined the workforce. Moreover, the number of women at top management position is miniscule. The presence of women executives is mainly seen in human resources, technology and service activities but they remain largely unrepresented at senior management level.

Women are underrepresented in senior management positions both in the public and private sectors globally (ILO, 2009). Women are less likely to occupy senior management and leadership positions in private sector companies (Powell, 1999; and Lyness and Heilman, 2006), and this is also the scenario in organized private sector in India (Patel and Parmentier, 2005). Only 3% of women in India are in legislative, management and senior official positions (World Economic Forum (WEF), 2011). According to India's 2011 Census, only 20.5% of women work in the organized sector. Out of these, very few women progress to senior level management positions having decision making authority. The rate of leaving the workforce at middle level is particularly high. India has the lowest national female workforce with 28.72% at the junior level, 14.9% at the middle level and 9.32% at the senior level.

Forum for Women in Leadership" WILL Forum India, says they have found that though 40% women now occupy the workspace, only 10% occupy leadership roles; the rest are stuck in mid-level jobs." The corresponding figure globally is 30-40%. Even worse, of the 10%, only 3% occupy boards. And of the 3%, 1.5% are owner-promoters like Swati Piramal or Rajashree Birla. This means only 1.5% women leaders, from a population of 500 million women, are in company boards on merit," she says. According to statistics prepared by Barua's WILL Forum, almost 90% of women are stuck in mid-level jobs. India is amongst the bottom three nations in terms of proportion of women in senior management roles in business. (Article in Business Standard, 16th March 2015)

Though the ratio of women at senior management positions is quite low but an interesting finding is that a slightly larger proportion of women than men in India aspire to be into managerial roles with increased responsibilities, 97.2% of women (compared to 95.6% of men) aspire to jobs with increased responsibility (Bagati and Carter, 2010).

The overall industrial growth and economic performance of the country is affected by the participation rate of women in workforce. A lower participation rate of women in the workforce results in a loss to the GDP (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2013; and Khambatta *et al.*, 2013). The UN and ILO in 2012, noted that India could have a projected growth rate increase by 4.2% if more women contributed by active participating in the workforce overcoming the barriers for their inclusion.

The large proportion of educated and skilled women which is not participating in workforce represents a vast pool of untapped talent which must be tapped to ensure that adequate skills to meet the employment demands of the future and make significant contribution to industrial growth. It is therefore important for the companies to understand the specific needs of women to effectively develop and retain them for longer term commitments and competition for top jobs. For achieving this, mere representation of women in the companies is not enough, rather companies have to create policies, structures for gender inclusion.

The purpose of this study is to understand the career dynamics of women in India by exploring the barriers that inhibit women for staying in the workforce and rise to senior managerial positions coupled with the challenges posed by increasing gender diversity at workplace.

II. BARRIERS INFLUENCING CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Indian society is undergoing a transition phase characterized by urbanization and increasing number of urban women entering the industry which is further complicated by the diversity within India's billion- plus population. The educational experiences and career paths of women are mostly shaped by their families and class backgrounds and, upon marriage, those of their spouses. Educated and well-

qualified women in India have gone ahead and created a distinct identity for her but society has by and large remained tradition bound and social factors are the realities which women have to face irrespective of their educational level. These forces continuously put the burden of fulfilling multiple role expectations which can derail women's careers. A number of factors that hinder the advancement of women at workplace have been identified and described at organizational, societal and individual level in the literature (Buddhapriya, S. 2009, Budhwar and Sparrow 2002; Kulkarni, 2002; and Nath, 2000).

Gender differences in IT careers seem to be affecting the competitiveness of companies globally. There are barriers faced by women throughout the different phases of their career. In the career stages of choice, persistence and advancement, the societal and structural factors pose challenges for careers of women (Ahuja M.K. 2002).

III. ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

The organizational barriers are explained as discriminatory policies and practices that limit the scope for women to nonstrategic roles in organizations and which inhibit them to use their decision-making powers ultimately influencing their career progress (Brown, 1979; Eagly, 1983; and Oakley, 2000). There have been several studies on hindrances like sex role stereotyping and sex biases at work (Broverman et al., 1972; Heilman, 1983; and Schein, 2007).

Organizational barriers are also evident in discriminatory practices being followed by the organizations for appointments and promotions. There is resistance to women's leadership and no policy framework to ensure their inclusion and integration in the workforce. At higher level, this leads to absence of women in the boardrooms with no strategic measures adopted by the organizations to counter the disproportionate representation in organizations.

Women in pivotal strategic roles are not encouraged to join forums, unions and other bodies outside the organization as they are seen in a mere representative role on the board without any strategic role or decision-making capabilities. This further limit their advancement opportunities by depriving them of leadership and training opportunities to demonstrate their competence in a power structure of an organization (Parikh and Sukhatme, 2004).

Organizational level barriers also include differential treatment given with regard to access to internal resources, support mechanism, professional networks, mentors and power (Adler and Izraeli 1994; Griffith, MacBride-King, and Townsend 1998; Ragins and Cotton 1999; Schaubroeck and Lam 2002). Some of the other barriers indicated in the literature are the "Absence of Role Models and Mentoring". Role models are vital and are often the key to the development of aspiring young managers.

Role models are individuals whose style, action and traits are imitated by others. For females, role models are important irrespective of level and age, but they are more crucial for newly employed females. But there is a small number of females who occupy the executive managerial positions and therefore there is dearth of female role models.

At the organizational level of analysis, barriers and gender inequalities are reflected in the organizational culture in the form of procedures, informal rules of behaviour, incentives and organizational priorities (Carrillo and Gromb 2006). Employees in an organization are selected on the basis of a good fit for the organizational culture. Emphasis on "good fits" and uniform cultures create a kind of inertia which leads to segregation of work or jobs in terms of masculine or exclusionary (Carrillo and Gromb 2006, 744). It is therefore generally seen that men are employed in important positions and women are employed at positions which are low-paying, less prestigious and offer little scope of moving to important jobs.

Organizational structure is not considered as gender neutral. In fact, the gendered nature is deeply embedded in the organizational structure, processes and thinking. This gendered nature is hidden behind the hierarchical structure and jobs but in reality masculinity pervades organizational processes overlooking women and contributing to maintenance of gender inequality in organizations Acker J (1990).

IV. SOCIETAL BARRIERS

Societal barriers exist in the form of gender roles constructed for males and females in terms of roles, responsibilities and expectations. India is a patriarchal society. The masculine and feminine roles, attitude and behaviour are largely derived from the socio-cultural setting.

In such a setting, men are seen in dominant roles and women are more accepted in subordinate roles within the social and organizational culture (Kulkarni, 2002; and Naqvi, 2011).

In the literature, Schein, Mueller, Lituchy and Liu (1996) described the existence of a psychological barrier for women's advancement; the 'think manager–think male' perception. Therefore, it is assumed that men possess the desired skills for managerial positions and key strategic roles in organizations.

Women have to work much harder as compared to their male counterparts to secure top positions in organization. A large number of women enter into the organizations at same level but the advancement of women takes place at a very slow pace Wirth (2001).

Many companies are hiring women in large numbers but most of these women remain at the lower and middle level and do not progress to higher levels as they should have been.

Simard et al. (2008, 4) report that the odds of being in a high-level position are 2.7 times as great for men as for women [in technology sectors].

Acker (1990) argued that gender bias or disparities are so deeply ingrained in the organization policies and practices that it becomes a subtle part integrated with the culture itself.

Organization structures act as barriers and the gender-biased practices are embedded in the group members. There are organizational structures that act as barriers (Acker, 1990) and ensure gender-biased practices among group members pertaining to promotions and performance evaluations.

V. INDIVIDUAL LEVEL BARRIERS

Individual level barriers comprise of the barriers concerned with the individual personality, traits, characteristics, attitudes, traits and behavioural skills. In a male dominated work environment, individual barriers will encompass various personal dimensions like Self-motivation, performance indicators for complex assignments, self-confidence, and autonomy etc.

Gender bias is likely to be there because of expectations from women around behaviours such as self-presentation, negotiation, and communication (Schein et al. 1996).

The preferences based on Gender differences in terms of hope of success and self-efficacy is evident from the choice of education and career being pursued by men and women. Females preference for courses and careers focusing on communication/human interaction (versus physical science and/or technology), myths about women's lack of aptitude for the technical trades and 'nerd' stereotypes inhibit girls from engaging in technology, engineering and computer sciences. Cukier (2009)

VI. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE, IMPACT OF BARRIERS AND WOMEN CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Workplace culture refers to the deep structure of organizations, which is rooted in the values, beliefs, attitudes, practices, norms, customs, and assumptions held by organizational members and that

characterize a workplace environment (Denison, 1996; McLean, 2003). The perception of women towards workplace culture is very different from that of male counterparts. Literature reveals that women view organizational cultures as competitive wherein career advancement is a function of networking, gaining power and influence. Women are less likely to see the workplace as true meritocracies.

Other factors such as lack of mentoring, opportunities for social networking and dearth of role models make it difficult for women to progress in their careers. Strategic Projects and high visibility assignments are also not given to women at the first place. Since the organizational culture is not very conducive to career advancement of women, they move far away from the leadership positions in the organizations.

According to Wirth (2001), there are invisible barriers for career advancement of women. Even after being well educated, they are pushed into a narrow range of opportunities characterized by lower pay, less challenge and responsibility and few opportunities for advancement. A miniscule percentage can climb the corporate ladder but most of them remain at the lower and the middle level.

Studies by Snizek, W. E., & Neil, C. C. (1992) investigated women's motives to pursue a career in top management. In many studies the dimensions of characteristics of masculine and feminine culture has been explored. Masculine cultures prevailing in the organizations form a component of the glass ceiling.

Research Studies by Itzin and Newman (1995) provide an empirical evidence of organizational life as experienced by women. It depicts the gender based discrimination and disadvantage at workplace faced by women employees at every level and in every dimension of attitude, belief and behavior in the organization.

Studies by Jandeska and Kraimer (2005) dealing with culture and work attitudes revealed that inhospitable cultures contribute to opportunity gap between men and women in corporate America. Two dimensions of culture were considered as more relevant for the study – Masculine and Collectivistic. Code of conduct in Masculine Culture is easily identified by men but women remain excluded and the culture thus becomes less hospitable to careers of women.

In studies related to gender and organizational culture, the dimension of masculinity and collectivism has been used widely. Studies by O'Reilly, C. A., Chatman, J., & Caldwell, D. F. (1991), focused on the development of OCP, Organizational Cultural Profile based on the 54 value statements. The focus of developing the instrument was to assess the person-organization fit.

Internationally, several studies have examined cultural bias in the advanced technology sectors. Xia and Kleiner (2001) described youth-oriented hiring practices (where experience is not a valued asset), disrespect for women and a significant increase in age and sexism complaints lodged with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Likewise, Simard et al. (2008, 10) described the technology sector as 'masculine, white, and heterosexual, associated with hard programming, obsessive behaviour, and extensive working hours'.

Simard et al. (2008) also comment on industry practices that undermine the ability of women to attain leadership positions such as gender discriminations in hiring, promotion and evaluation practices (including salary levels) across all the levels in the organizations.

Studies by Vianen and Fischer (2002) highlighted the role of organizational culture preferences in the persistence of the glass ceiling phenomenon. The results revealed that organizational culture preferences were predictive for ambition of non-managerial employees, but not for that of middle management employees. It was found that women were less ambitious as compared to men. Women

who were ambitious also perceived conflicts in work life as a significant barrier to their career progression.

The studies by Malach-Pines, A., & Kaspi-Baruch, O. (2008) depict the influence of culture and gender on the choice of a management career among men and women MBA students in Israel, the USA, the UK, Turkey, Cyprus, Hungary and India. The study revealed large cross-cultural differences and small gender differences in the aspirations associated with a choice of career in management.

The risk propensity of women is low and they prefer to build a good system and are less likely to self-promote than their male counterparts. Dearth of female mentors and the perception that majority of the industries are “an old boy’s club” continue to hinder the development and progress of women’s careers.

Cross-Cultural study of the relationship between organizational culture and women's advancement to management in organizations, conducted by Bajdo and Dickson indicates that aspects of organizational culture typically associated with women are related to women's progress. The organizational cultures where members possess shared values and beliefs of high humane orientation and high gender equity exhibited high percentages of women as compared to other organizations. It further stated that in addition to high humane orientation, high gender equity, other dimensions like high performance orientation and low power distance are also found to be positively related to high percentage of women in management.

Organizations, therefore, must focus on cultural practices, particularly related to gender equity to provide increasing opportunities for women for their career advancement Bajdo, L. M., & Dickson, M. W. (2001).

Sex-role differences are incorporated into the self-concepts of men and women forming the stereotypical metaphor of masculine and feminine characteristics. Masculine characteristics are positively valued more often than feminine characteristics. Masculine characteristics which are positively valued entail competence whereas positive feminine characteristics relate to soft – warmth expressiveness Broverman, I. K., Vogel, S. R., Broverman, D. M., Clarkson, F. E., & Rosenkrantz, P. S. (1972). A study in India found that women managers have to continually face factors that constrain their career growth and advancement. They remain stressed due to their work overload or under load (Budhwar *et al.*, 2005).

Existence of preconceived notions about women such as they are incompetent as managers or leaders, gender stereotypes, lack of support structures to facilitate their advancement, dealing with male egos at work, discriminatory practices limiting women’s access to network of power and authority leave them dissatisfied (Budhwar *et al.*, 2005). Suitable organizational policies, cultural practices and supporting structures are required to facilitate career advancement of women at workplace.

Budhwar *et al.* (2005) also discussed the key strengths of Indian women as manager such as greater sensitivity in relationships, networking abilities among colleagues, intuitive ability, and stronger sense of dedication, commitment and loyalty to their organizations, multitasking capabilities, crisis management, and readiness to share information and power, gender neutral, ability to seek feedback.

There are different set of expectations from men and women derived from stereotypic sex differences. Presence of men in high status roles in organizations infer them the right to make demands and presence of women in lower status roles are expected to meet those demands. But in case of equal formal status also, the gender based differences have been found owing to masculine and feminine stereotype in hierarchical social setting Eagly, A. H. (1983).

A significant representation of women on board is very much desirable for contemporary organizations to reduce the inhibitions of women to occupy leadership roles Eagly, A. H., & Chin, J. L. (2010).

In their IT review essay, Soe and Yakura (2008) noted that organizational culture and climate plays a significant role in women's participation and job performance. Women in IT sector organization perceive that the organizational climate is more favourable to their male counterparts. Bartol and Aspray (2006) noted that women perceive the IT workplace environment is dominated by men and is not welcoming to women. McCracken (2000) reported that turnover of women is high if they perceive that women tend to leave a company if they find the male dominated culture dissatisfying.

VII. CONCLUSION

Women play a significant role in economic growth but companies are struggling with their retention as they reach mid-managerial levels. The organizations are losing on the well qualified and talented pool of women workforce which has an economic as well as social cost. As per the World Economic Forum data, there is a strong correlation between countries that are most successful at closing the gender gap and those that are most economically competitive.

The study of literature brings out the various dimensions in the area of career advancement of women. The body of research in this area in India is not very extensive and is confined only to some specific dimensions like work life balance and work-family conflict etc. The impact of workplace cultural characteristics as well as various individual factors like personality of women, their level of motivation for pursuing a career, confidence and attitude on the career development has not been studied in detail.

There are number of factors related to society, organization and individual inhibiting the career progression of women at the workplace. Therefore, it is urgently needed for organizations to dig deeper and look for ways in which they can create an enabling climate for retention of women employees and build an ecosystem that is gender inclusive and conducive to career advancement of women. This is necessary otherwise the organizations will continue to lose this talent pool ultimately affecting their growth as well as growth of the economy.

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