Enhancing Gender Parity and Women's Participation in Management by Understanding the Changing Nature of Work, Family and Careers

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Abstract: *Objective* – To discuss the importance of promoting women's participation in management, specifically at the middle and higher levels and the economic impact of inclusivity on the economy, with a view to suggesting how organisation need to review and rethink understanding of work, family and careers and develop women friendly policies that would work towards achieving the goal of gender parity. *Design/methodology/approach-* Relevant research articles were reviewed as well as specific Government of India reports, Indian Census and other relevant information gathered from various governmental agencies, NGO's, research agencies and World Bank and ILO websites. *Findings-* Women's participation levels in management in India are abysmally low; more specifically mid career stage for women managers is a critical phase where there is a heightened 'opt-out' rate. Organisations need to build new policies, structures and mindsets that will take into account how concepts of career, family and work have changed to ensure more women reach top management positions. *Originality/ value* – Though this is not a new problem, Indian economy and industry stands to gain heavily if women can be retained in management positions, it is a question of understanding the new age problems and developing adequate women centric policies.

Keywords: Gender Parity, Women's participation in Management, Career pathing, Mid-career women, Indian industry.

Paper type: Literature Review

Contribution to the body of knowledge: There is very little research in India that connects career progression of women managers specifically in the mid career stage and the benefits of retaining these women for organisations and the economy. Indian Industry needs to understand their specific needs and how concepts of work, family and career have changed. Formulating new policies, guidelines and structures, and changing mindsets will help in ensuring a greater level of gender parity in the top echelons of management.

INTRODUCTION

"Achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls, rests upon **unlocking the full potential of women** in the world of work. When economies are geared towards achieving women's rights and gender equality, the benefits, such as fairer societies and greater economic growth, accrue to everyone."- NITI Aayog

The National Institution for Transforming India, (aka NITI Aayog), was constituted in 2015 to replace the Planning Commission and is the Government's premier 'Think Tank'. In keeping with the Government's pledge to guarantee Gender Parity in India through a specific focus on women's economic empowerment, the NITI Aayog in its Vision Document also proposes key reforms to encourage women's workforce participation across sectors in India.

To this end a number of new initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Skill India, Make In India and Digital India have helped in creating new job opportunities, promotion of entrepreneurship and skill building and have also helped in furthering access to women in new age employment sectors and industries such as ICT (Information and communications technology).(NITI Aayog).

However achieving these goals is going to be no mean feat as the gender ratio has constantly been skewed against women in India for many decades. According to the Census Survey of India (2011) this situation is worsening, the report states that for every 1,000 men, there are 940 women, which makes the female population approximately 47 per cent of the total population.

Concurrently amongst the emerging markets and developing countries, India has one amongst the lowest female labour force participation (FLFP) rates which stood at around 33 percent in 2012. (FLFP is defined as the portion of women that are employed or seeking work as a share of the total working-age female population). India's FLFP rate is well below the East Asia average of around 63 percent and the global average of around 50 percent and is amongst the widest in all the G-20 economies. (World Bank Report, 2012).

STARTLING STATISTICS: POOR PARTICIPATION RATES AND GENDER INEQUALITY AT ALL LEVELS.

In 2014 India's population was an estimated 1.26 billion. Taking this into consideration, an FLFP rate of 33 percent suggests that out of 380 million working-age Indian females just about 125 million are employed or are seeking work (Census of India 2011). India ranks 127th on the gender inequality index and 108th on the global gender gap index, which is not astonishing when the latest government statistics are considered, which put forward that the women's labour participation rate dropped nearly 7 percent from 29.4 percent in 2004-2005 to 22.5 percent by 2011-2012.

The labour force gender gap is seen to be predominantly severe in the 15-59 age groups. In rural India employment rates stood at 32 percent for women as against 83 percent for men and in urban areas it stood at 21 percent for women compared to 81 percent for men. (ILO Report). According to other ILO statistics a total of 62.8 percent of women were employed in the agriculture sector, 20 percent were employed in industry and 17 percent in the services sectors in 2011-12.

WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT

Surprisingly not just in India but even in the developed economies, the figures for women in management are also poor. In the United Kingdom, of the 100 top FTSE companies 22 of them do not have a single woman on their boards. Figures related to the European Union are not much different; in 2010 the author Kat Banyard cited some astonishing facts in her book 'The Equality Illusion, The Truth about Women and Men Today' regarding women's participation in higher levels of business, administration and management, she states, "women constitute only 4 per cent of CEOs and heads of boards and overall only 11 per cent of the top executives in the fifty largest publicly traded corporations".

According to Centre for American Progress Fact sheet (2014), even in the United States, women fall significantly behind men in numbers with respect to leadership positions; in the Fortune 500 companies only 4.6 percent CEO positions are held by women and they occupy only 16.9 percent of all the board seats. Furthermore they make up only 14.6 percent of all executive officers and only 8.1 percent of top earners.

In India very little research into women's representation in management has been conducted, however, of the few statistics that are available it is seen that women are lagging far behind men in numbers when it comes to managerial jobs. To quote some of the studies, Koshal, et al (2006), state that for every 100 men only 2 women take administrative and managerial positions in India. Other studies by Kulkarni (2002), Chadha (2002), Mehra (2002) and Singh (2003) state that women's participation in administrative positions ranges among a low of approximately 3 percent to a high of 5.8 percent. Though there has been an improvement in these figures over the last decade the changes still are fairly insignificant.

In another study "Understanding the Levels of Empowerment of Women in the Workplace in India" conducted by The Confederation of Indian Industry in 2009, reported that at junior management levels women composed only 16 percent of the total workforce and this figure reduced to 4 percent both at middle management and senior management levels respectively, this figure further dropped to 1 percent for organizational leadership positions i.e. (CEOs).

WORKING WOMEN AND THE IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY; THE BENEFITS OF INCLUSIVITY

Gender disparity in the workplace (and at home) creates a harmful impact not just on women, but more widely affects economies and ultimately a country's growth; A relevant and compelling example of this is in a recent McKinsey report which states that by 2050 India's annual GDP could additionally gain as much as 2.9 trillion just by reducing the labour force gender gap.

In another study by the research agency Catalyst of 353 Fortune 500 companies it was revealed that companies which had the most female officers delivered as much as a 35.1 percent higher return on equity and a 34 percent higher total return to shareholders than companies who didn't employ female officers. This is a very persuasive reason for Indian organisations to try to retain women employees, particularly at higher levels of management.

Encouraging women to fracture the glass ceiling and enter top management levels is not just a moral responsibility anymore, since the Companies Act 2013 and as a result the Securities and Exchange Board

of India (SEBI) directive has made it mandatory for all listed companies to appoint at least one woman either as an executive or a non-executive director on their boards before April 1, 2015, It has become even more urgent than ever for organisations that they support women through the critical phases of their career and ensure that more women reach the top echelons of management.

By bringing more women into the workforce and making them economically and mentally independent other issues such as negative patriarchal norms, gender discrimination and violence against women at home would also reduce. However, this goal is not one that can be achieved overnight and will take considerable efforts from all stakeholders.

If more women are to work and furthermore reach the top of their occupations, a comprehensible shift in perception of the various 'roles' women play, nature of work, definitions of career and life with respect to women's needs should be debated in business and scholastic circles and even more importantly there has to be changes in policy and laws and legislature and finally a clear, transparent and focussed implementation of these changes.

CHALLENGES FOR WORKING WOMEN IN INDIA

Notwithstanding the fact that education enrollment rates and female literacy has been on the rise in the last couple of decades, there is still a vast gender gap in terms of employment figures in addition to the 'kind' of work women are occupied in. Since India is still largely an agricultural economy a significant proportion of the working women in India remain occupied in rural and /or agrarian activities, however experts argue that with industrial growth and increase in spread of urbanization, more and more women ought to be entering more productive sectors of the workforce like manufacturing and services for enhanced economic progress, unfortunately though this has not been the case.

1. Social and Cultural issues

Over the last twenty years though there has definitely been a change in parental attitude towards girls in both rural and urban India, and parents are ever more agreeable to spending in educating their daughters, the thought of a woman working outside the home however is still culturally hard to accept for many. Added to this is the concept of "family honor," and the ingrained ideology of 'the correct gender role' for a female, (Vishwanath and Palakonda, 2011). This is coupled with an unfounded fear regarding the societal norms of a woman being economically empowered which prevents many from allowing even highly educated daughters to work outside the home.

The horrendous gang rape of a student in New Delhi in 2014 has compounded the ever-growing concerns about the safety of women, growing reports of sexual assaults and violence against working women in the media from around the country has added to the public opinion that women who step out of the house for work are at a huge risk and this further acts as deterrent for women seeking meaningful employment outside the home.

In rural as well as urban settings if women are in some way able to break the bonds of such societal limitations many find it difficult to get stable and better paying jobs, for many they end up in clerical, menial or informal, semi-or unskilled sectors, where pay is limited and most other job benefits non-existent (Haq, 2013).

Added to this is the fact families have become nuclear where both the spouses go to work and the joint family system is gradually vanishing and is an almost superfluous concept in urban India (Patel 2005). A recent survey conducted in New Delhi amongst 1,000 working women found that subsequent to having a child only 18-34 percent of women went back to work.

This is largely due to the fact that in India childcare responsibilities are still majorly borne by women, at the same time studies have found that many employers fall short in providing sufficient maternity and childcare support to working mothers, leaving them crippled on both work and home fronts. (Singh, 2004).

2. The Changing concept of the 'Family'

Human resource professionals across the world need to understand the impact on organisations of the increasing variety in family structures that is seen in the workforce today, it is imperative that the boundary between work and family relationships be studied in all its varied assortments as each family type will lead to different issues and problems.

In a large proportion of the industrialised world the traditional breadwinner father, homemaker mother, and children family pattern is becoming a redundant concept (Nieva, 1985; Burley, 1995; Lewis and Cooper, 1995; Burke, 1997). There is a dramatic change in gendered family roles (Cowerman, 1989; Burley, 1995; Lewis and Cooper, 1995; Burke, 1997).

Studies have shown that successful executives aspire to spend more time at home, and wish that their private lives could be more rewarding, but in fact, unfortunately, they rarely get to act on these desires due to organisational demands and pressures and fear of being penalised (Kofodimos, 1995). In the western countries it has been found that not just more and more women but men as well are considering the importance shorter working hours and have reported that they would substitute income for less working hours if it meant that they would be able to spend more time with their family. (Lewis and Cooper, 1995).

These shifts in family patterns and structures affect men and women in different ways (Burke and Greenglass, 1989; Gallos, 1989) It has been reported that these effects are normally more noticeable for women (Cowerman, 1989; Burley, 1995; Lewis and Cooper, 1995; Burke, 1997). For example, studies cite that, women carry out two or three times extra domestic work than their partners, regardless of their employment status (Demo and Acock, 1993). Organisations, however, have not yet fully thought out or understood the ramifications that these changes will have on career and work patterns of managers (Burke, 1997).

A study by Parasuraman and Greenhaus (2002) reported that parts of the workforce may face certain distinctive pressures on the work-family front, however most of these employees have hardly any sources of support. This is another area in India that is also neglected by Human resource professionals and organisations, for example, single mothers, or widows or women with other caring responsibilities are severely under-represented in policy and other matters, whereas essentially these sets of individuals are probably the ones who require the most support, employers have still not been able to perceive the different types of needs that these people would have and develop adequate support systems or policies for them.

3. Changing Job demands and pressures, how the concept of 'work' is changing

The pressures at work, for the working population, have been intensifying in recent decades. Factors such as the progresses in information technology and increases in information load, the need to respond quickly

to issues in the workplace, the weightage attached to providing quality customer service and the ramifications on the employee who is expected to be constantly available and eager to serve, all put stress on the employee and demand adjustments in both time and interference in personal space.

Morgan (2003) reports that due to the prevalence of mobile phones and the internet organizations can keep in constant touch with the employees 24 by 7. Furthermore in India especially in the IT industry and service industries increasing workloads, new job structures and demands have pressurised employees to be at their places of work for longer durations of time (Ishaya and Ayman 2008). In fact it has been observed that in dual-income families domestic tasks that were once the responsibility of a stay-at-home spouse are being juggled by both sexes. Such employees are not benefitted by the conventional "one-size fits all" human resource policies, which can compel rigid time and place limitations. (Wattis, Standing and Yerkes, 2013).

3.1. The changing concept of Career patterns and paths and why mid career is a great concern for women

Career can be defined as "the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur *et al,* 1989), inside an "occupational or organizational context" (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). Inkson, (2004) further states that to define career using a path allegory implies that it is a' journey' or 'movements', this metaphor accounts for two important aspects i.e. time and direction (Adamson *et al.*, 1998; Inkson, 2004).

Baruch (2004) and Inkson (2004) further assert that both males and females are shying away from traditional career paths within organisational settings and hence for many career paths will not remain unidirectional or upward in nature.

This implies that in this new age, career movements could be forward or backwards, up or down, even sideways or in a totally new direction. Schein (1996) in fact implies that a multi-directional career path is actually a personal choice indicating an individual's direction in their work life on the whole rather than a specific internal career

Research in the field of career patterns and paths over the last couple of decades has opined that women are avoiding the traditional "career ladder" and in its place more frequently choose a "career tree" pattern (Ciabattari, 1986), this pattern gives them more flexibility to take career breaks, change job types as opposed to the linear path which is seen as rigid.

Kelly Global Workforce Insights (KGWI) - a premier research agency conducted a survey in India in 2016 on Women in STEM (science, technology, engineering & mathematics) which interestingly revealed that women tended to exit the labour force at distinctly two critical stages in their lives, i.e. either during their childbearing years and/or afterwards when they reached mid-management levels.

Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) and Sullivan and Mainiero, (2007) coined the term "Kaleidoscope career" to define the shifting career patterns many women adopt in their careers which are suited to the current scenario and needs in their lives. Furthermore, they state in the mid life stage many women think about changing careers or jobs or of becoming entrepreneurs, updating themselves by returning to academics or taking up social and/or voluntary work.

Finally, they suggest that the phenomenon of women "opting out" of the labour force is fuelled by a combination of factors not just due to work/life or career progression reasons. Another study claims that one of the biggest factors for this phenomenon is that women feel that organisations do not give them any genuine choices when it comes to career options which limits them (Shapiro *et al.*, 2008; Stone, 2007).

It is safe to conclude therefore that women face overpowering obstacles when it comes to family and career choices, the problems far outweigh the positives. However even in this scenario it has been found that women can derive meaning and satisfaction in their lives when a blend of personal, organisational and job/career features can be provided that helps them negotiate these tough career and life stages. (Auster, 2001).

The conclusion of these studies is that profound and extensive changes are required in policies, practices, mindsets and within organisations themselves additional options must be developed and offered such that women should not feel the need to choose between their family and career.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

The economic benefits of inclusivity and the imperatives of promoting women's participation in management have already been discussed; however there are specific measures that organisations can initiate if they want to retain their female talent especially at the middle and higher levels of management.

What organisations can do

1. Organisations have to understand that the concept of 'One size fits all' will not work**,** Human Resource initiatives are still based on the 'factory' concept of work where people and process were uniform and coordinated, this supposition will not work anymore. Women will have different needs at different phases of their lives; organisations must develop more flexible policies and options regarding career advancement, development and progression of women, which takes into account changes in family, family structures, women's changing roles, societal and cultural pressures and changes in the nature of work.

    When human resource professionals devise policies and guidelines to tackle issues such as retention, satisfaction, morale, and productivity in the workplace, inputs that consider other facets of an employee's life warrant serious consideration.

2. Gender should be treated as a core issue in business strategy, this means inclusion of women specific issues but tempered with measurable targets and accountability so as to avoid failure. Organisations must start to think differently i.e. a change in thinking, philosophy and mindsets and development of an 'enabling framework' within organisations is a must, wherein processes should be frequently assessed and modified so as to remove any biases against women, starting from recruitment and including policies on pay and promotion.

3. Commitment from Top Management to set the right tone in the organisation for a gender positive culture which could include proactively pursuing change management, introduction of gender sensitisation training and removing perceptions related to stereotyping of women and their roles and abilities.

4. Building and developing support systems that empower women, not just from within the organisations themselves but also partnering with external agencies could also be considered, so as to aid women and help them achieve an even playing field where responsibilities could be shared or help could be sought.

5. Setting up mentorship and coaching programmes which will enable women to get timely and correct advice and also allow them to network freely along with men.

6. Specifically address key 'opt-out' stages in a women's life i.e., mid career and/or childbearing years and try to develop more women friendly policies that enable and help ensure women receive support at these critical phases, so that they can be retained in the long run.

7. Career counselling and options for women (and men –if they require it) to pursue different career patterns as and when their life stages require it, for example lateral moves within the organisation to less critical or demanding positions, and the option of returning to core career areas later on.

As well as options such as extended leave, extended work from home options (where work roles permit). Indian industry also needs to consider certain options which are - as of now - not so freely available to employees, such as job splitting, part time working options or job sharing.

The concept of 'Agile working' is also something that organisations can consider

To conclude, for over four decades there has been increasing debate and concern regarding problems and challenges in the work-family domain. This interest has occurred on account of issues such as the influx of growing numbers of women into the workforce and changing definitions of 'work' itself.

Also, just as definitions of 'work' and what it constitutes are changing, so are definitions of what constitutes 'family' and 'career' are also changing, these changes are generally acknowledged to be felt more acutely by women. Unfortunately Indian Industry has not seemed to have caught up with this fact. To accommodate these new definitions a new perspective is of vital importance.

Understanding exactly why women 'opt-out' of jobs and careers will definitely help in retaining them, however caution must be exercised as framing too generalized policies will defeat the purpose, though this could prove to be a challenge for organisations, the advantages of undertaking such studies and implementing consequent policy and structural changes are infinitely great.

Finally, Indian Industry needs to see the larger picture, just as they are responsible to shareholders they are also responsible to the society that they operate in, helping the government in achieving nation building and gender parity goals should be an equally important issue as is making profits. Ensuring women reach top management positions would act as a small but significant step in that direction.

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