

# UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING GENDER DIVERSITY CHALLENGES AT LEADERSHIP POSITIONS: A REVIEW

C. Nikhila Reddy\*, Jyoti Adhikari\*\*, Jaya Chitranshi\*\*\*

\*MBA Student, Symbiosis International University, Pune, Maharashtra, India.  
Email: [nikhila.reddy2017@sims.edu](mailto:nikhila.reddy2017@sims.edu)

\*\*MBA Student, Symbiosis International University, Pune, Maharashtra, India.  
Email: [jyoti.adhikari@sims.edu](mailto:jyoti.adhikari@sims.edu)

\*\*\*Professor, Symbiosis International University, Pune, Maharashtra, India.  
Email: [jaya.chitranshi@sims.edu](mailto:jaya.chitranshi@sims.edu)

---

**Abstract** *In this review paper, we aim to understand the gender biases faced by women while reaching their well-deserved positions at the senior level. The purpose of this study is to uncover the challenges faced by women to reach leadership positions. Our purpose is also to see the steps being taken by the organisations and the HR departments to overcome these challenges. The results of this paper reveal that women, like men, require mentors and leadership training in order to reach their goals. It was also seen that for women to grow in the organisation it is all the more important for the men to change their perceptions about women and look at their valuable contributions without biases. Thus a safe scope for experimentation, knowledge, learning and community cooperation is critical in leadership development programmes for women. The paper focusses only on the gender-related preconceptions and doesn't focus on other diversity challenges faced at leadership positions.*

**Keywords:** *Diversity, Gender, Leadership, Perception*

---

## INTRODUCTION

We have been harping on the importance of diversity in organisations for quite some time now. Diversity is a dimension of dynamic workforce in an organisation. It is the variability amongst employees in terms of their thought, expression, abilities (physical and intellectual) and working style. Many of the countries now have legal obligations to maintain diversity in the companies. Companies even claim to have reaped great business benefits out of diversity. But, how inclusive is the diverse workforce in Organisations?

Employers assert of being diverse and claim to have employed individuals from various strata of society, upheld a male to female ratio, and provided opportunities for the disabled. However, the same doesn't get reflected in the composition of a corporate board. Why do not we see more number of women at head of corporation? Why do not we see more percentage of women in the senior managerial positions? Across the world, there is a clear trend that women continue to be concerted at the entry and middle level positions. The ratio of women over men making to leadership roles is very trivial. Unfortunately, only 49% of the Fortune 1000 companies have one or two women assigned the top roles.

Development Dimensions International and The Conference Board released a report for 2014-15 which mentions that the best 20% financial performers have more women in the leadership roles, around 37% of the critical roles.

Gender diversity is vital in any workplace. Not just because it is a commendable aspect, but it makes the bottom line of the business stronger.

It promotes a wide variety in terms of thought. Men and women have different viewpoints, market insights, emotional quotients, ideas which can lead to better problem solving and decision making capabilities.

A gender diverse workforce is access to multiple sources of information, resources and credit.

It also helps in reaching out to a larger customer base and stimulates employer branding. Attracting and retaining talent are one of the subsequent long term benefits.

It instills a sense of trust amongst the employees, especially women that the organisation would provide them career growth opportunities.

In spite of the remarkable room for better productivity that including women in leadership roles offers, why the glass

ceiling? The following section would discuss the seen and unseen barriers of fostering gender diversity at leadership roles.

## OBJECTIVES

- (a) To review the barriers in maintaining gender diversity at leadership roles.
- (b) To recommend the initiatives that the employers can take to break the glass ceiling.

## DISCUSSION

### Female Leaders: A Persistent Challenge

The glass ceiling commission in 1995 identified four broad categories as the reasons which held back women viz. governmental, societal, internal business, and business structural barriers. In this paper, various obstacles pertaining to the above mentioned reasons will be discussed.

**Education and Career Choices:** Representation of women in engineering, science and manufacturing was initially relatively lower as compared to men. Although the scenario is changing slowly (Martin & Marion, 2006). These decisions are taken in formative years of life and are generally driven by community and family more than calibre.

**Self-confidence:** The general conviction is that women are less self-confident and less self-motivated and that they lack clarity in making career decisions. This makes them less ambitious and often due to other personal commitments, women are willing to give career a backseat (Mohammed, 2011)

**Absence of a Mentor or Network:** Women often lack a mentor who could hone and sell their skill set. They fail to build a rapport with their male bosses in contrast to their male counterparts. This is either because they neglect the importance of a mentor or fail to cultivate this connect. The reasons for this may be the belief that climbing the organisational ladder using connections is inappropriate or the hesitance between women employees and senior male employees to build an association of sponsorship as it may be misunderstood as sexual interest.

**Gender Typecast:** Female bosses who are assertive, competitive and independent aren't a hit amongst their subordinates. This is because it's contradictory to the general stereotype and this might thus lower their amiability. Women's abilities are judged more austere than that of men and are evaluated more critically. Successful female employees are a threat to male employees' ego, and thus their growth is obstructed.

**Gender Communication:** Women are warmer, soft, less authoritative and more eased. This may be responsible for lower awareness of the women's capabilities.

**Scarcity of Role Models:** The coming generation does not have a lesser number of female leaders whose leadership styles the younger female employees can look up to experiment with and assess their own standards. This could be discouraging as they lack credible sources of guidance and support.

**Gendered Career Paths and Work:** Some jobs are perceived to be a better fit for men than for women. For instance, rotation in sales or operations have conventionally been seen as a stepping stone to promotions and better career positions. Due to the dynamics of the job, women less prefer these kind of jobs (Fischhoff, 2006). The behind the scenes work are often undervalued in these jobs where women excel. These practices weren't meant to be biased in the first place, but the impact is definitely disadvantageous for women.

**Work Life Balance:** A European Commission report suggests that the employment rate of women decreases with the number of children. On the contrary, the employment rate of men increases with the number of children. Women are the primary source of care during child rearing period. This is the main reason that women opt for part time jobs at times and have a lot of career disruptions. Even upon re-entry, they seek a profile which could accommodate a little flexibility, like picking up and dropping kids to school. Unfortunately, the productivity of female employees is not measured upon key effectiveness but on the number of hours spent on their desk. These inconsistencies in their career graph make them less recommendable for promotions and obtain higher positions.

**Leadership Styles:** Men are more transactional and tyrannical in their leadership approach whereas women are more cooperative and transformational (Eagly, 2003). Also, women could be better negotiators and be better at conflict management. The obstruction in women's growth to senior leadership roles could be that Organisation's definition of leadership being disposed towards the masculine traits. Hence, when there is a change in leadership style, they may be seen as potential successors to many of the male counterparts.

**Organisation Culture:** It would not be unanticipated that when one gender is in majority than the other, then the organisational culture tends to be more inclined to the dominating gender (Jackson, 2001). The automotive, sales, military and telecommunication industry are male dominated as these industries could be confrontational for the women employees. Thus, women are less involved in the front line operations of such sectors.

## Breaking the Glass Ceiling

What could an organisation do to make gender diversity a culture and be more inclusive? Support from the CEO to instill transparency in the system and overt the existing subtle indifferences and biases is definitely essential (Followell, 2011). Few other tactics to have more number of women leaders are discussed below.

### 1. Strategical Changes

- (a) A well - structured organisation specific programme to break down specific organisational, structural and cultural barrier. This may be inclusive of setting intended targets for women in the boards, decision-making setups (Robin and Thomas, 2008).
- (b) Fostering flexible work options like work from home and flexi-location to promote work life balance. Also, providing benefits like crèches in the premises would be a good investment.
- (c) An in-house committee to track the headway in diversity, monitoring women's representation.
- (d) Developing a gender diversity business case to report the mindsets of both the genders.

### 2. HR initiatives

- Learning and Development
- (i) Organizing events and mentoring programmes that recognize advance and encourage the competencies of women employees. Such initiatives should recognize successful leaders from both the genders to raise and mentor employees' ambitions and guide them to progress in their career (Rockel and Ebbers, 2005). These initiatives must be taken up by the learning and development departments.
- (ii) Leadership development programmes to build leadership skills and confidence, identify and clout one's own strengths become a risk taker.

**Recruitment:** Changes in recruitment strategy to exclude bias and setting goals such that women employees can be placed in leadership roles however without compromising on quality. For instance at entry level itself, Cummins India now tries to maintain a male to female ratio of 50:50.

**Performance Management System:** After the goal setting, the way potential appraisals are used for succession planning, a tool on similar lines should be designed to identify the potential in women candidates.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Gender diversity must be made part of the culture of a company and subtle biases must be uncovered and addressed.

It is important to change the perceptions of men with regard to their unconscious bias. Women should not mold themselves

according to the general notions, men on the other hand need to understand the issue earnestly.

Companies need to have strategic structures in place for gender diversity in the workplace; also, it would help to have women support groups.

Organisations should adopt measures being taken up by top companies like Intel and Kuwait Energy called the gender-smart measures which include sponsorship programmes and training for leadership for women to increase their presence at senior levels.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed previously, collaborative and transformational kind of leadership comes naturally to women. Over the past few years, with increasing globalisation, a democratic kind of leadership is more successful. Women employees should thus embrace this feminine advantage. Also, over the last decade women are coming across as more upfront, assertive. This would soon give them an edge in the male dominated industries as well. The business case for women in senior leadership is compelling. Studies conclude that inclusion of women in the top ranks of company leadership has a direct and positive impact on a company's bottom line and risk management. It is essential to understand that women are not looking for help; they just need to be recognised like their male counterparts. It is equally important for them to be accepted and applauded for their achievements. Therefore through good corporate governance and well defined diversity management women at board positions should become the norm rather than the exception.

## REFERENCES

- Alkahtania, A. H., & Abu-Jarad, I. (2011). The impact of personality and leadership styles on leading change capability of Malaysian managers. *Australian Journal of Business and Management Research*, 1(2).
- Alkadry, M. G. (2011). Leadership diversity and the diversity, Organizational Communication, and Citizenship Imperatives.
- Arsenault, P. (2004). Validating generational differences: A legitimate diversity and leadership issue. *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal*, 25(2).
- Athitakis, M. (n.d.). Are women and minority leaders set up to fail. Retrieved from <http://associationsnow.com/2013/07/are-women-and-minority-leaders-set-up-to-fail/>
- McKinsey, J. B., & Lareina, Y. (2011). *Unlocking the full potential of women in the U.S. Economy*. McKinsey and Company.

- Belbin, M. (2011). Management teams: Why they succeed and fail? *Human Resource Management International Digest*, 19(3).
- Bendelta. What is the role of leadership in change management? Accessed on February 23rd, 2015 .
- Christensen, T. (2003). Coping with complex leadership roles: The problematic redefinition of government owned enterprises. *Public Administration*, 81(4).
- Davidson, M. N. (2012). *The end of diversity: How leaders make differences really matter*. Jossey Bass: A Wiley Brand.
- Development Programs Addressing Issues of Diversity. Research Centre for Leadership in Action, 2010. Accessed on 10 Jan, 2016.
- Devillard, S., Sancier-Sultan, S., & Werner, C. (2014). Why gender diversity at the top remains a challenge. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Dinwoodie, D., Pasmore, W., Quinn, L., & Rabin, R. (2015). *Navigating change: A leader's role*. Centre of Creative Leadership.
- Director's Diversity in Leadership Study, Overcoming Barriers to Advancement, 2015.
- DiverCity. (2008). *The value of diverse leadership*. The Greater Toronto Leadership Project.
- Ebbers, L., & Rockel, V. (2005). The leadership Institute for a new Century: Lincing women and minorities into tomorrow's community college leadership. *Community College Journal of Research and Practices*, 24.
- Eagly, A. (2016). Gender and Work: Challenging Conventional Wisdom. Accessed on 17 Jan, 2016.
- Firestone, W. (2000). Leadership: Roles and Functions? Rutgers University.
- Fischhoff, I., & Sundaresan, S. (2012). Social relationships and reproductive state influence leadership roles.
- Followell, C. (2011). Key challenges to creating gender balance at all levels of the Organisation. White Paper - 2014.
- Ford, D., & Pande, R. (2011). Gender quotas and female leadership: A review. *Background Paper for the World Development Report on Gender*.
- Gary, Y. (2001). *Leadership in organizations*. National College of School Leadership, Prentice Hall.
- Groysberg, B., & Connolly, K. (2013). Great Leaders Who make the Mix Work. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Hogg, M. (2001). A social identity theory of leadership. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(3), 184-200.
- Jean, L. C. (2013). Diversity leadership: Influence of ethnicity, gender, and minority status. *Open Journal of Leadership*, 2(1), 1-10.
- Kandola, B. (2006). Skills Development: The missing link in increasing Diversity in Leadership. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 36(4).
- Kilian, C. (2009). *Corporate leadership: Building diversity into the pipeline*. American Psychological Association.
- KPMG's Women's Leadership Study, 2012 Accessed on 4 Jan, 2016.
- Leadership, Diversity and Inclusion, Public Service Leadership initiative. Accessed on 7 Jan, 2016.
- Mattis, M. (2006). Advancing women in business organisation: Key leadership roles and behaviors of senior leaders and middle managers. *Journal of Management Development*, 20(4), 371-388.
- Martin, J., & Marion, R. (2006). *Higher education leadership in Knowledge Processing*, 12(2), 140-151.
- Martine, D. (1998). Cultural diversity and management/ leadership models. *American Business Review*.
- Middlehurst, R. (2004). Changing internal governance: A discussion of leadership roles and management structures in UK Universities. *Higher educational Quarterly*, 951-5224, 58(4).
- Mitchelle, R. (2009). A theoretical model of transformational leadership's role in diverse teams. *Leadership and Organisation Development Journal*, 30(5).
- Morrison, M., Lumby, J., Maringe, F., Bhopal, K., & Martin, D. (2007). *Diversity, Identity and Leadership*.
- Next Generation Diversity: Developing tomorrow's female leader. Accessed on 18 Jan, 2016.
- Parcheta, N., Kaifi, B. A., & Khanfar, N. M. (2013). Gender inequality in the workforce: A human resource management quandary. *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly*, 4(3).
- Phelps, E. M. (1997). Understanding and managing diversity the personnel challenge for leaders, AU/ACSC/06071/97-03.
- Race and Leadership: Implications for Leaders of Color and Leadership. (2013). Accessed on 15 Jan 2016.
- Rodd, J. (1997). *Learning to be leaders: Perceptions of Early childhood professionals about leadership roles and responsibilities*, 18(1).
- Ryerson Institute. (2012). *Women in Senior Leadership Positions: A Profile of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)*.
- Sachs, J., & Blackmore, J. (1998). You never show you can't Cope: Women in school leadership roles managing their emotions. *Gender and Education*, 10(3).
- Sinha, S. (2013). A Snapshot of Diverse Leadership in the Health Care Sector.
- Stelter, N. (2002). Gender differences in leadership: Current social issues and future organizational implications. *Journal Leadership and Organisational Studies*, 8.

Thomas, A. D., & Ely, R. (2009). Making differences matter: A new paradigm for managing diversity. *Harvard Business Review*.

Thompson, M. (2000). *Gender, Leadership Orientation and effectiveness: Testing the theoretical Models of Bolmen and deal and Quinn*, 42(11).

West, S. (2013). Humanities Research Leadership in Europe. Stimulus Paper. Accessed on 2 Jan 2016.

Winston, M. D. (2001). The importance of leadership diversity: The relationship between diversity and organizational success in the academic environment. *College and Research Libraries*, 517-526.

Whelan, J. & Wood, R. (2013). *Increasing gender diversity through targets with teeth, Women in Leadership: Understanding the gender gap*. Ceda policy perspective.

Jen-Te, Y. (2007). Knowledge Sharing: Investigating appropriate leadership roles and collaborative culture. *Tourism Management*, 28(2).

Zafft, C. R., Adams, S. G., & Matkin, G. S. (2013). Measuring leadership in self managed teams using the competing values framework. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 98(3).

Owen, D. (2009). Privileged social identities and diversity leadership in higher education. *The Review of Higher Education*, 32(2).