

**WOMEN MANAGERS  
FROM MYTHS TO REALITY**

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**JUNE, 2003**

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**ABSTRACT**

The role of women worldwide is undergoing a dramatic change. Women today share the podium with men in almost all the fields, be it in kitchen or in defence. Workingwomen are no longer a rarity and are now accepted as an integral part of the working force. Indian organization has experienced a steady increase in the number of women employees and this pattern is bound to continue in the future as well.

Women recently began to join the ranks of managers in large number. The paper, 'Women Managers: From Myths to Reality addresses the impact of external and internal environment, facilitators and inhibitors of growth, roadblocks face by women and the road ahead.

The paper explores the multifaceted world of women which changes like a kaleidoscope with every responsibility, accountability and multiple pulls and pushes from diverse settings and people.

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**INTRODUCTION**

India is a country where simultaneously juxtaposition of the ancient and the new, the traditional and the modern, the agrarian and the technological, the rural and the urban and the concept of east and the west coexist. The living reality of these juxtapositions is experienced in all spheres of life from be it women living in purdah to women wearing a business suit working in corporate offices taking international business decisions or men carrying loads on their back, tilling the soil to flying planes and designing state of the art technology. This transition both social and technological pushes women and men across the country to take new roles and to walk on a new path leading to an entirely new world, where there are three F's: Freedom, Fame and Fortune. (9)

Last century has witnessed Indian women in a new persona. Apart from being daughters, wives and mothers, they entered into educational institutions and equipped themselves to take roles in the health sector and to become nurses and teachers. Then came the freedom movement and Indian women joined in the freedom struggle. When the time came for building the nation, women joined the educational institutions and finally entered into the fields of management in formal and industrial organizations. This spiral of women's history suggests that wherever the women have entered they have carved a niche for themselves.

However, the acknowledgement and acceptance of this transition and transformation of women's role is a slow process. A large number of women, larger number of men and even larger portion of the society takes a much longer time to acknowledge and accept the reality of women's capabilities and competencies. As the critical mass of women enters the new and diversified occupations the image of women will undergo change.

Across time women have walked the path of traditions. However, in walking these paths, they have made slow but steady departures. As and when the opportunities have come their way and as and when there are challenges thrown their way women, men and organizations have believed that women will not respond. Many women have surprised the world by taking those challenges and working against the odds. In times of crises and in times of immense emotional stress women have risen to the call to take charge of their families, home and destined to give shape to it and move forward. (6)

Entering the organizations has been a formidable challenge. Moving from infrastructural roles of the sixties and rising to managerial roles and responsibilities which is almost a Herculean task, and rising into senior management position is an uphill struggle. For women to occupy the position of CEO's in the present scenario, which was a rarity and almost impossibility, today is a reality.

In this movement, let us take a look at the supportive and inhibitive forces, which has either facilitated or retarded women's growth:

### **EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT**

The external environment has created the universalisation of education and the government has formulated policies to encourage the girl child for higher education. The educational institutions facilitated women to discover their competencies and achieve and succeed.

The external environment provides women the awareness and opportunities of career and occupation. Men simultaneously compete for these opportunities. In a fair for all arenas of job markets, women bring to the organization their education, their achievements and competence their determination and resilience. With this they also bring their doubts, emotional vulnerabilities and fragilities, which become the hallmark for women. Caught between competence and doubts, achievements and roadblocks of guilt and success and anxieties, women carry a unique juxtaposition of determination and ambivalence about breaking new paths and taking new roles.

## **INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT**

The internal environment of women consists of parental home and their own home, the society, neighborhood and community as well as the internal dynamics of the work place.

Having entered the organization and having successfully competed with the male world, women encounter the labels of preferred treatment, having a godfather or using femininity as a means of entry. Having entered the organization in managerial positions with responsibility and authority, there are allegations of women entering the position through quota system and not merit. Women respond to these with some defiance, some defensiveness and some self-protection only to be labeled as insecure, unprofessional. By and large, the women are undervalued by the system. If her capabilities and competencies are accepted, respected and translated into operational roles, she creates anxieties, hostilities and aggression in others.

Similarly, in the home setting women are propelled to be educated, pulled to stay at home, pushed to take jobs to enhance the quality of life and condemned and accused for not playing their social roles. At another level, there is recognition of their achievements, supported to excel and encouraged to be professionals.

Women themselves accept that they have other meanings in life besides only the social roles and they have an internal evocation to enlarge their life space through commitment to growth.

Put together, the external and internal environment create opportunities and challenges as well as roadblocks to growth. These are present in varied intensities and it is up to the women to carve out a road map and niche for themselves.

### **FACILITATING PROCESSES AND SUPPORT SYSTEM**

Now let us look at her social, personal and familial environment.

The family and parents educate the women and open up a new path of occupation and a world of work for women. The women aspire for the future of a job and a career eventually to grow into a professional. (7)

Once she completes her education often excelling and proving her competence, marriage is around the corner. She marries and often than not compromises or marginalizes her career. If she does not, then automatically, it is assumed both by her personal family, the husband and his family that she is compromising marriage and her multiple social roles viz. that of a mother. (5)

Women today share the workspace with men in almost all functions and areas. But women in top management positions are still a rare species. Globally, according to the Fortune 500 companies, less than 4% of the women are in the upper most ranks of CEO and less than 3% of the women are top corporate role holders in India. We may be able to find a handful of companies headed by women or women at the helm of strategic business units. (4)

Formal organizations have structures, which are dominantly male focused. Similarly, management has traditionally implied maleness and thus has often carried with it particular managerial and leadership qualities. These qualities are what woman lack. The model of the successful manager has historically been a masculine one and the male managerial perspective is far more operative. As women have entered the formal work organization a decade later than men, and with social, cultural, and familial stereotypes it has taken women much longer to be in senior management positions and taking leadership roles. It is within this '*discrimination*' and masculine paradigms that women learn to become managers and leaders in their own rights. However, women as managers face a long uphill path and with little or no support from the society, management and from within the family. For women, to be a manager and a leader they encounter some as well as deeply embedded issues in the organization themselves.



1. Women need to have the clarity of the role definition of what a manager is. They need to explore and discover their own language as a manager rather than getting caught and tied down with male models of managerial roles.
2. Women need to encounter the given reality that they play multiple roles in multiple systems. They need to integrate these roles and arrive at clarity of choices and roles and squarely face the dilemmas of choices.
3. The third issue is adept, adopt and adjust or redefine and redesign the existing role so that they can be effective and contribute to the systems they are a part of.

For women climbing the ladder of success to the top management level is an uphill meandering tempered with a lonely struggle. Backed by knowledge competency and skills, the women feel some of their path as well as the destination; however, there are many times when they get caught with the deeply embedded role attitudes and social and organization processes, which make them, sway from determination to helplessness. (1)

## **INHIBITORS TO GROWTH**

Another spectrum of women not gaining the managerial position is because of three categories of behavior habits and styles of operating

1. Women managers are not given high risk, high profile assignment necessary for promotions, because on the way up the ladder they are cautious and avoid taking risks. Women are more cautious and more likely than men to reflect rather than to act.
2. Women concern for others and sense of responsibilities for the team can make them too detail oriented 'moving them into a rescuing and mothering mode' and not leaving time for managing the broader challenges.
3. Women who had to be tough and even righteous about their agendas in mid-level positions find these characteristics are hard to shake when they reach to the top level. They become defensive about challenges to their ideas or agendas and too insecure to think and interact with creative flexibility.

Essentially, the women get entrenched into their initial positions of anxieties and insecurities and find it difficult to relocate themselves in their achievements, accomplishments and success. Unless this takes place, women would find it difficult to grow and earn the respect of the group of the organization. (11)

To be successful women managers, women need to shed the deeply embedded baggage of the past as well as own up their courage convictions and work with analytical as well as rational abilities. She needs to be more responsive to the challenges and accommodative as the managerial scenario is unpredictable and tends to be in a flux and constantly reconfiguring. It is in this ambiguous pace that she will find the new road map to charter new path for herself.

However, various studies show that the impediments in the path of successful women managers are many. Male colleagues believe that their female counterparts are soft in decision-making. Similarly there is a common belief that the women are far more emotional and can get swayed when there are tough decisions around tasks and/ or human consideration. However, these are the unique resources and strengths of women in a highly task and achievement and targets and result focused organization. These emotions need to be channalized in the right directions, which will enhance and strengthen women ability to be more perceptive, more friendly and aware of people around them. Organization need to ensure to translate the resources of women to transform

the organization into both task and result focused as well as sensitive to the human aspects without compromising either.

A common criticism about women manager is that they are not good leadership material as they do not invest enough on enhancing their knowledge and leadership skills through training programs and interaction with peers. They are caught up in managing home and children in whatever time, which is available.

(3)

As quoted by one male manager:

*“... the leader is always chosen not just for his performance but for his ability to lead a team and impart a clear vision for the organization to the team and women just do not seem to realize it because their energies are focused on just superior performance of the job at hand...”*

Such perceptions and other self effacing evaluation will remain part of the organization culture as long as women, men and organization fail to accept that for women multiplicity of roles are a reality and the organization need to facilitate such role taking processes. This is possible only when men also learn and accept the social role responsibilities as legitimately part of their roles to create a home and manage family.

Such criticism disheartens or creates anxiety in women. This also does not let them own up and enjoy their achievements and success. Women managers need multi-source support from the family, neighborhood and from the organization. Without their support women managers struggle becomes harder. By supporting women's entry and integration in work as a part of life and not separate from it, the organization will create a diverse working environment, with gender equality, gender equity and fair and just process for everyone in the organization. (11)

## **ROADBLOCKS TO GROWTH**

Major roadblocks for women who aspire to achieve and succeed in organizations are the presence of social and role of constraints imposed upon them by society, the family and women themselves. These constraints, are referred as myths fostered and sustained with preconceived ideas and unsupported evidence, which generate guilt in women.

## **MYTHS APPLIED TO WOMEN IN BUSINESS**

1. Women switch jobs more frequently than men
2. Women would not work if economic reasons did not force them into the labor market
3. Women fall apart in a crisis

4. Women are too concerned with the social aspects of their jobs and cannot be trusted with important matters
5. Women are more concerned than men about working conditions and they are not willing to travel extensively for the organization

Many of these stated attitudes are still prevalent within the corporate structure. Women must be equipped and prepared to encounter these attitudes as they grow in the corporate level. Women managers need to go into their jobs knowing that there will be some barriers. They will not receive a welcome when they are making drastic and dramatic departures from the well-defined social roles. However, they also need to be aware of the fact that across time women have broken the chains and shackles of centuries and that they have the capabilities, abilities as well as intellectual competency to achieve success as well as retain their own identity. (2)

Although the number of women in the work force has increased and will continue to increase in the field of governmental service and in educational area, the advancement of women into the management has not kept pace with the increase of working women. The reasons are:

1. Society has its own stereotypes and biases against women in executive positions. Women are viewed as fragile and lacking in the qualities that are considered beneficial to be effective managers. Traditional masculine traits have higher perceived value than the feminine traits in management world.
2. The position which the individual hold within the organization shapes the traits and the behavior they develop or possess. Women often secure positions that have titles with little real power or supervisory authority.
3. Mentoring plays an important role in the advancement of women into management positions. However, mentoring are often limited for women, which in turn results in a lack of access and training that aids in advancement within the organization.
4. Women managers had to face the glass ceiling. Majority of women because of glass ceiling are unable to advance in their career.
5. To complicate matter worse, women often have to deal with the complexities of the dual role as working women and mother. Women stereotypically have the roles running the household and raising the children. Such duties take away from the time, which the women can spend on the job subsequently, which slow down their careers. Women managers with children are often looked on less favorable than those without children and they are viewed as being less committed.
6. Lastly, women managers also have their own inner battles, which need to be fought and overcome. Women need to develop the confidence and appropriate skills and attitudes which are needed to succeed in business.

Women manager needs to establish their career goals and acquire determination to overcome the obstacles that exist to keep women from accomplishing their goals.

However, in order to overcome such insurmountable obstacle, women need to seek support. Success today requires organizations to best utilize the talent available to them irrespective of the gender. To do these, barriers to upward mobility for women needs to be removed. Organizations need to redefine and restructure the organization systems to respond to the dilemmas faced by women managers. Organization has recognized that female executives offer a wealth of talent. Often women become '*Super Woman*' to respond to being equal. (2 & 10)

The striking part of women managers is that they are very good at juggling around the tasks. One of the strongest skills is their ability at multi-tasking. Also women managers bring with them a different style and different skills. Research also confirms that women managers see things laterally, intuitively and differently. They can handle more contradictions, can tolerate more and deliver much more than men.



The belief that women managers are uncertain of themselves, look for constant reassurance and tend to be aggressive are stereotyped responses which feed and multiply on themselves. The reality is that women in general and women managers in particular have a different value system, which they bring to the organization.

For women managers it is truly a case of twice the work and half the reward. It is a trying process for women to prove oneself again and again. However, women do feel that it is unfair to brand them as '*women manager*' or to compare them with their male counterparts. Women have journeyed a long distance to enter the corporate boardrooms, take the leadership roles in organization and institutions and work as managers and employees across the levels of hierarchies in the organization. However, when we look around it is also a glaring fact that nothing has changed so far for million of women across the world where they live with the baggage of past traditions and are still shackled and chained by the traditional role definitions, which are compulsive and oppressive and which gives them no space and identity to be themselves.

In any case, emphasis must be laid on the delivery of work and shouldering of responsibility and not assess quality or results by gender differentiation. Ultimately, it lies in the hands of women and enlightened men at the helm of organization to ensure that the people are employed on the basis of their merit and competence and not because of their gender. (3)

## **ROAD AHEAD**

Women managers and women in leadership roles are today a reality. The momentum will continue and the chains will break and the shackles will fall. The glass ceiling will shatter and the women will bring a tempering of the masculine organization structure with gentler and softer human processes. However, this does not mean that compromises would be made on setting standards of excellence or achieving tough mileposts for results. What will happen is that men will take on more challenges and women will walk side by side to respond to challenges. Men will test their endurance by over engagement in achieving targets and women will ensure that a balance is kept and wholesomeness of life space is retained. Time will come to pass when women will bring creativity and innovativeness and men will join to make it a reality. It is the rhythm of the two polarities that a new order organization would be created. Work will pull the best resource and not the gender specific response or gender stereotypical response.

Essentially, society, family, organization and the external environment impacted and pulled and pushed by the media would create spaces for changes and guilt free resolution of dilemmas. In all of this the women need to let go the part of the baggage and shed the externally induced guilt of social roles. They need to listen to the inner voice of silence and fortitude and discover new paths. They need to walk to and discover new directions and accept their own substantiveness and

value themselves. It is in this process that the world order will change and transform the existing skewed world order and create a new rhythm. (8)

Women are working in this multifaceted world. The organization scenario changes like a kaleidoscope with every responsibility, accountability and multiple pulls and pushes, which women have faced and came out with success.

In the new order, women will put down roots of a family and discover the freedom of sailing in the open seas. The women will visualize a new horizon and identify directions and make tough decisions. In the cacophony of sounds echoing of the past the women will cross the threshold to listen to their own voices. The silence of centuries will find the first voice, which will beckon women to sail into the unknown and uncharted land to lay the foundations of their growth to contribute to a partnership.

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