

# Women in Leadership: A Step towards Feminism

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

### Article History

Published Online: 12 June 2019

### Keywords

Gender Diversity, Women in Leadership, Women in Corporate World, Women Upliftment.

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## ABSTRACT

*Gender diversity, particularly in leadership, has become a priority globally. Wide selections of reports on women in leadership support the significant benefits of having women in leadership roles. But still people in our society have doubts on women capabilities, they don't seem to question the men's capabilities and assume them (men) leaders. It has become important for businesses to look at the challenges women often face in corporate world. Some corporate worlds long believed that creating a work environment where women can prosper, and implementing initiatives that support, advance, retain and reward them, is not only the ethical thing to do but it is a strategic and smart business approach. The study describe the prevailing landscape in which females in leadership positions live and work, both at national and global level. The path to leadership in the corporate world, and its associated obstacles and opportunities, is the focus of the paper so that concrete steps can be taken to encourage more women into leadership position. Society's assumption that men are capable of doing things, lack of confidence of women on themselves, gender inequality at top level of management & cultural expectations leading to stress related to work-life balance and the lack of support by employers to relieve that stress are some of the challenges identified. This study found that Women in leadership positions are still battling demands on the home fronts as well as in this (now feminist) world. However, the corporate world is making some inroads to improve gender diversification, especially at the executive level. There are certain challenges faced by women in executive positions-especially those that create barriers to success-could be solved by women themselves if they believe themselves. Current paper identifies some of the recommendations that are designed to improve the industry understanding to the concerned issue.*

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## 1. Introduction

Marketplace is defined by complexity, disruption and change, today's most successful enterprises are those that bring different perspectives and experiences to new challenge every time. Along with doing the thing in a right way, diversity and inclusion offers a strategic advantage-especially at the leadership level. That is why it is critically important for businesses to look at the challenges women often face, and clear the path for talented and dynamic leaders to rise at the top.

The study explores the qualities and experiences that contribute to women's leadership and advancement in the workplace. In addition to outlining the challenges and opportunities, the study also offers concrete steps that can be taken to encourage more women into leadership positions. It is researcher's keen belief that this study will inform and encourage leaders to take clear and decisive steps to develop the leadership potential of their female employees.

A report by KPMG (professional services firms) posits that perception of women regarding leadership begins not with the academic success in college, her first big break or when she's named to a position of power. The trajectory of female leadership starts much earlier and is defined by key influences throughout life. Imagine a young girl-perhaps a daughter, niece or a girl down the street. She is smart. She is ambitious. She believes in herself and her abilities. From a young age, she has the desire to lead, to inspire others, to

greatness, to fulfill expectations, to better the world. Yet as she grows up, two factors will affect her ability to lead: confidence and connections. Throughout her life, she either will receive what she needs to build these two crucial components of leadership or she won't.

There are many women who serve as role models for how to lead and how to become leaders. They've taken corporations, governments, academic institutions and other organizations to new heights. They show other women the possibilities and the power they have in their own hands. In spite of all their achievements, these women represent too small percentage of overall leaders. What experiences moved these women forward? How can more women be empowered to follow in their footsteps? The answers to these questions could be significant to empower all women-and all businesses. Specifically, this study sought to identify how women were socialized to leadership growing up and uncover which characteristics are associated with leadership and discover ways to help more women move forward into leadership roles. The researcher hopes that the insights derived from this study will help companies identify actions that will contribute to women achieving their potential.

## 2. Objective of the study

The study sought to describe the prevailing landscape in which females in leadership positions live and work, both at national and global level. The path to leadership within this

'feminist' world, and its associated obstacles and opportunities, is the focus of the paper.

### 3. Research methodology

The study follows literature review method to provide evidences from the available data namely reports, journals, insurance websites, research articles, etc. It also describe the prevailing landscape in which females in leadership positions live and work, both at national and global level.

### 4. Review of literature

#### 4.1. Leadership:

Leadership is lightning in a bottle. There are as many definitions for it as there are leaders. Any rules that could be agreed upon as to what constitutes leadership could be quickly contradicted by an example of an effective leader who thumbed his nose at all the rules. There are changes in the tides of what styles of leadership are fashionable at any given moment. And there are differences in taste: some people will always want to follow a street smart leader who came up through the trenches, while others will respect the leadership of someone with advanced training that has them focusing on big picture strategy while remaining above the fray of the day to day activities of a given organization. But trying to unlock the secrets of effective leadership as a code of behaviours may be putting the cart before the horse. When done well, leadership is better understood by looking at its results than the methods it uses to get those results. In a competitive world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, leadership capacity and its function are getting more complicated with the increased globalization, a sustainable advantage of globalization depends on the skills and abilities of a leader who can cope with diversity and implement increasingly complex business strategies. Global leadership effectiveness has been seen as a major issue of world business, social issues, human resource and development. Effective global leadership is a key to unlock the mystery of working with diverse employees as effective workforce diversity management is crucial for business success globally (**Okoro, 2012**). However, Gender differences are one of the challenging international leadership practices in diverse workplace that need to be taken care of by the organizations.

Leadership studies began in early phase in the twentieth century by examining traits, or personal qualities of leaders. A couple of problems with this approach were that there was little agreement about universal traits (**Bird, 1940; House & Aditya, 1997**), and such lists of traits gave little perception about what an effective leader actually does. The next logical step was to examine leader behaviour to find out which practices were most effective. In general, the researchers posit that focus on people rather than production brought higher work-unit productivity, whereas over-emphasis on direction at the expense of relationships damaged worker satisfaction and loyalty (**Champoux, 2000**).

A flexible relationship between global leaders and their followers is essential in the workplace. Globalization, technological innovation, demographic changes brings a tremendous transformation into human life and work. For the organizations to remain competitive in the global market, a

close emotional interdependent link and an ongoing development of trust and loyalty between leaders and followers must be established. The leader recognizes the diversity of the followers and ensures unity of common values and directions without destroying the uniqueness of the person. The leader accomplishes this through innovative flexible means of education, training, support, and protection that provide each follower with what the follower needs within the reach and scope of the organization's resource.

One of the biggest elements that contribute to leadership style is the social interaction or interrelationship between a leader and their follower. This is crucial component where men and women vastly differ in their leadership approaches. Women by nature of their communication style, value workplace relationship more than men, show that female leaders may foster closer bonds with their followers than male leaders (**Merchant, 2012**). On the hand, men's status and power-oriented communication style suggests a more controlling authoritative leadership approach.

#### 4.2. Status of women in leadership field:

Women in leadership have grabbed attention all over the world both in terms of conversation and initiatives. Earlier the focus is on women's political leadership but women's corporate leadership has also taken front stage to ensure greater representation of women as compared to men. Significant progress has been made in political and civil service positions as women participation is concerned, there is still much to be done to boost women's leadership in corporate world both in public or private. Women have been leaders throughout history and the laws and customs for women leaders can be found in the same (**Christ, 2014**). As per **ILO report 2015**, Women in Business and Management: Gaining Momentum, there are more women in decision-making roles than around ten years ago. Between 2000 and 2012 among 25 countries, women's share of management increased by more than 5 per cent. Women make up 30 per cent or more of all managers in 70 countries. Despite gaining success in every profession, women were underrepresented in all areas as far as leadership is concerned such as in corporate world, colleges and universities, politics, courts, religious institutions, non-profit organizations etc. men simply outnumber women in leadership. Pay gap also exist between men and women having similar work profile (**Tate & Young, 2015**).

As per the **ILO report 2016**, the global female labor participation rate decreased from 52.4 to 49.6 percent. In Southern Asia and Eastern Asia the gender gap participation has grown even wider. At the global scale, however, with the exceptions of Colombia, Jamaica and Saint Lucia, there are more men than women in management positions (**ILO, 2015g**). Over time, in some countries, including Canada, Germany and Spain, the share of women in management positions actually declined between 2000 and 2011 (**ILO et al., 2014**). In India, till February, 2015 the total number of female participation in state-owned enterprise board members comprise of only 54 (8%) as compared to male 598 (92%). In other Asian countries also like Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan the position of women are not satisfactory (**Baseline**

**Data Report, 2015).** Women representation in leadership will change only if changes take place in culture, policies, and practices of the organization where they learn and work. Only 5% of the companies in the Standard & Poor's index represent female CEO, for Asian and black women the condition is even worse i.e. only 3% women represent board directors of Fortune 500 companies and 17 % of workers in S&P 500 companies (**Catalyst, 2014; 2015a; 2015b**).

As per Catalyst, 2017 report globally women labor force participation decreased from 52.4% to 49.6 % between 1995 and 2015 and held only 12% of the world's board seat in 2015. In India women labor force participation continue to fall from 34.8% in 1990 to just 26.7% in 2014. Women held only 11.2% of board seats and 16% of senior leadership roles in 2015 & 2016 respectively. However, the scenario is quite different in developed countries like in Australia labor force participation has slightly increased i.e. over 28% since 1978 and women's growth in top management positions has also improved. Canada has also seen an improvement in women's participation in the workforce from 47.3% in 2016 as compared to 37.1% in 1976. Women share of the total labor force was 46.8% in 2016 in the United States and they held 51.5% of management, professional and related positions. The condition is not very favorable for organizations as women leader can benefit the company in earning higher return on investment. **Catalyst (2007)** report revealed that significant high correlation exists between women representation on board and higher return on equity, sales and capital invested. Women participation in the decision-making and leadership position must be encouraged to grab the benefit of diverse skill, knowledge and ability of workforce.

#### 4.3. Why women in leadership?

Gender diversity, particularly in leadership, has become a priority globally. High-potential women advance more slowly than their male counterparts, in terms of both career progression or growth and pay, even though they employ career management strategies similar to men's. Organizations that neglect this critical talent-management issue risk lagging their competitors in attracting, developing, and retaining the best candidates to serve as the next generation of leaders (**Catalyst, 2002**).

1. **Diversity of thought:** In contrast to leadership teams that are comprised predominantly, if not entirely, of men from very similar demographic and professional backgrounds, groups that are more mixed will consider a wide range of issues, from a variety of perspectives, and generate more innovative solutions.
2. **Better governance and organizational performance:** Earlier researches reported that when women and men work together on boards, much better governance and economic performance results. This is termed as the business case for gender diversity.
3. **Leveraging human capital:** Women have higher participation and completion rates in tertiary

education compared to men, and they are increasingly out-numbering men in education achievement. To get the best leaders organizations need to select candidates from the widest possible pool of talent. The lack of women in leadership roles shows a failure to exploit the available pool of talent.

4. **Representation:** Previous research shows that the interests of women, children and families are most likely to be taken into account by women. Workforce diversity promotes a better understanding of a diverse market place. International data suggests that women are responsible for eighty per cent of household purchasing decisions.
5. **The business case for gender diversity:** The evidence-based business case for gender diversity is well documented and widely accepted internationally. There is a concerted global effort to increase the number of women in leadership.

Many international studies revealed that companies with a larger proportion of women on their boards perform significantly better than their competitors in economic terms. In addition several other studies also have reported that companies with a higher proportion of women on their boards performed better than their competitors during the recent financial crisis.

#### 4.4. Women leadership roles in the present scenario:

According to a study on gender diversity in corporate leadership, women do not participate in global economy to the same extent as men do (**Noland et al., 2016**). But that doesn't mean women shouldn't participate more. It's hard to nail down the exact performance bump a woman's presence can lend a company, only around half of the companies studied had any women leaders at all. But studies revealed that having a woman in an executive position does lead to better performance, and the more women the better the performance.

The study points out that diversity in general probably lead to higher performance. A single CEO doesn't perform better than her male counterpart when controlling for gender in the rest of the company, but a higher rate of diversity throughout the organization has an impact. The Peterson Institute study is one of the largest study on gender diversity, as it undertakes 21,980 firms from 91 countries. But it's not the only one to be released recently that points out the benefit of female leadership.

The "Women on Boards" study performed by MCSI (designed to provide in-depth research, ratings and analysis of environmental, social and governance-related business practices to companies worldwide) is more concrete in declaring the benefit of gender diversity. Companies in the MCSI World index with strong female leadership generated a return on equity of 10.1 per cent versus 7.4 per cent for those without, the study states. Like the Peterson institute, MCSI says that having a single woman on a board does not necessarily lead directly to more profits. This study suggests

that at least three women are needed for their voices to be heard and for the dynamics of the board to change, substantially.

The study provides evidence from previous research summarizing a few of the most salient points. One study using mathematical modeling asserts that groups of randomly selected problem solvers outperformed groups of high ability problem solvers because the latter group's greater ability is more than offset by their lack of problem solving diversity. Informational diversity among group enhance performance, according to field research; the more complicated the task that required interdependent work, the more pronounced the effect of diversity. While homogeneous groups felt more confident about their decisions than diverse groups, the former group's decision were more often wrong compared to those of diverse groups. Despite the evidence of these and other studies on diversity, the percentage of women in leadership roles is still frustratingly low, and it isn't changing.

Growth in the percentage of women directors is growing glacially in the market-such as the US-where regulatory mandates to improve women representation do not exist, the MCSI research says. MCSI suggests that 30 per cent female representation in leadership roles is attainable without imposing an undue burden on companies. Boards are expected to hit that 30 per cent number by 2027, but it could be accelerated with conscious efforts to improve diversity.

Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer (COO) at Facebook, is well known for championing gender diversity. She sums up the effects, women can have on a company pretty concisely. Endless data shows that teams diversity make better decisions. "We are building products that people with very diverse backgrounds use, and we all want our company makeup to reflect the makeup of the people who use our products", says Sandberg to USA Today in 2014.

The latest figure of International Cooperative and Mutual Insurance Federation (ICMIF) suggest that 29 cooperatives and mutual organizations within ICMIF's membership (220+ organizations) have decided that the best person to lead them is female. In 2005 this figure was just six.

### 5. Challenges of women in leadership roles

When one looks at the history of the last years and the leaders and news makers, we would be hard pressed to find women. Why is that? We have heard so much that women have come such a long way. Obviously, they have not come far enough.

If one looks at the Indian households, one would be confident to say that the majority of them are ruled by women. Women do variety of work such as organizer, cooker, cleaner and child minder to name a few. In a nutshell, this requires a lot of leadership ability. When we look at political parties, large corporations and the likes where all the women leaders are? Realistically this is the fact behind challenges of women in leadership. People don't seem to question the men's capabilities, they just assume them (men) leaders. And they say behind every good man there is a better man. A society that does not establish pathways to leadership for all of its

citizens is a society that is denying itself a possibility of excellence (Griffin, 2009).

Studies show that only two per cent of Fortune 500 CEO's are women. It seems that closing the leadership gap between men and women has been one of the challenges in the previous years. From all indications it doesn't seem to be working. Let's take a look at what leadership means, it may help us understand why it seems so hard for a woman to obtain this. In simple words, leadership means inspiration, delegation, collaboration, communication, influence, knowledge, respect and the ability to constantly learn and change. The competitiveness in today's society is so intense and serious in this day and age, it would be good to see more people and businesses support and nurture the workforce diversity rather than force them to comply. The society is forcing people to feel men belong at the top and women follow.

Based on previous studies it can be posits that there are many challenges to women in leadership (Elmuti et al., 2009; Choge, 2015; Gipson et al., 2017). Many of the challenges come from other people. While some of them come from the women themselves such as negative thoughts, family priority, work-family balance, avoid leadership position etc (Elias, 2018). Women need to be confident in them and their ability to do anything anyone can do and not just a man. Know who they are as a person and express that. Demand and expect the right to be fairly treated. Society is required to start accepting women as capable to accomplish anything. Success must not be dependent on what gender you are. However, even though the challenges of women of leadership are still exists in the society, it is still less than it was 50 years ago, and is hopefully less than it will be 50 years from now.

### 6. Connotation for women upliftment

It is notable to find that there is no shortage of ambition among the women. Six in ten (64%) of the professional working women indicate that they aspire to be senior leader of a company or organization, and more than half (56%) aspire to serve on a board of a company or organization. Yet the women reported hesitancy. The results reveal a critical disconnect. Women want to lead, but there is something that is holding them back. The significance of confidence and connections is evident throughout the study, highlighting key opportunities that influence a woman's perceptions of leadership.

Being a leader is a professional goal that is attainable to the majority of women. They are more cautious about taking step toward leadership roles. Women also reported challenge in envisioning leadership in their future. In fact, 59 per cent women indicate they sometimes find it hard to see themselves as a leader. The study indicates the important role that encouragement plays in addressing the hesitation. Women who were encouraged to be leaders growing up are more likely to aspire to be a senior leader of a company or organization and to aspire to be on board of a company in the future than those who did not receive that encouragement growing up.

A woman's inclination to lead doesn't originate in adulthood-it starts years earlier, in her childhood. Providing opportunities to lead-and effective training on how to do so-could offer a sound foundation or base for future leadership. There are many things that can be done to encourage more women into workplace leadership. Some of the considerations are as under:

1. **Actively engage potential leaders:** Identify and invest in high performing women with traits such as assertive, aggressive, empathy, ego-strength, stress tolerance and energetic along with the capacity and inclination to lead, and give them the confidence to do so.
2. **Establish relationships and networks:** Actively connect junior-level employees with female senior leader mentors/sponsors and create a networking opportunities regardless of level.

**Enhance the visibility of role models:** Highlight female senior leaders.

**Chart the path to leadership:** Articulate clear steps for career development, starting with employees in their twenties or earliest stages of their careers.

**Combine 'soft' and 'hard' rewards:** Reinforce and validate women's performance and confidence with clear and consistent personal feedback, together with the more conventional rewards of raises and promotions.

## 7. Conclusion

The world is making some inroads to improve gender diversification, especially at the executive level; however the industry and the women who would like to advance within it are still evolving, and still experiencing challenges. Even more remarkable, as the study demonstrates, some of the challenges faced by women in executive positions-especially those that create barriers to success-could really be solved by women themselves. As an ancillary to development, women in boardrooms seem keenly aware of the importance of networking and of mentorship. For example, social media is playing a prominent role in women's effort to network. Further, the number of women acting as a mentor and/or engaging a mentor rose dramatically year over year. Yet the number of women acting as executive sponsors or engaging a sponsor of their own is markedly low.

Women also continue to face challenges related to both cultural expectations that create stress related to work-life balance and the lack of support by employers to relieve that stress. Around the world, efforts to boost gender diversity and open doors for women who aspire to serve at the highest level of their organizations are as varied as the cultures they represent. In total, women continue to be underrepresented at senior-management levels in companies across all vertical markets in Asia, Europe, and North America (Barsh, et al., 2012).

From the discussion above, it's clear that women are advocating for formal leadership development opportunities, and those opportunities are diverse throughout the corporate world. Women in leadership positions are still battling demands on the home fronts as well as in corporate world. The qualities that women in corporate leadership believe are necessary to advance professionally haven't changed much over year. The study could not possibly take into account all the gender-based behaviors, lifestyle choices, generational and cultural differences that the women in corporate scenario comprise. Further, the obstacles to women's professional development that may be tied to those differences-along with institutional expectations that clash with the aspirations, work and life needs of this high potential talent-cannot be dismissed. That said, there are barriers to success that women can control, and those they cannot. The following recommendations are designed to improve the industry's understanding and response to the issues raised by this analysis:

## 8. Recommendations

Promote the commitment to build a talent pipeline by targeting the acquisition, development, advancement, and retention of females with high-potential. This means doing more than developing a mentorship/executive sponsorship/leadership program; it means creating a culture around professional development. Organization should promote flexi-time and other work/life balance programs that help female employees resolve the home and family challenges that make them less productive. Organization can enlist the support of females from all levels within the organization to identify and respond to new and emerging challenges. Assign programming responsibility to those who offer the best ideas. Organizations should emphasize on benefits that are important to women such as onsite childcare, maternity benefits, women's networking groups, mentoring and development. It has been identified that those companies that have active policies in place that believe in equal rights for women and have taken active steps to redress that imbalance, are more successful.

Apart from organizational step to promote women in leadership women need to encourage themselves to become a leader. Women have made progress and they can make more by overcoming any challenge by themselves rather than relying on some role model. Women are required to identify their unique talents, understand what they bring to their work environment to best enable success, and then, make sure that their voice is heard. Speak up, speak out and contribute.

## 9. Scope for further study

The current study is based on literature review and conclusions were made accordingly. Some empirical work regarding effect of women leadership style on organizational performance can be checked by future researcher. In addition, researchers could also see the mediation effect of organizational support/personal characteristics on the relationship between women leadership style and organizational performance.

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