

Building Cultures & Plugging Gaps: Paving the Long Road to Women's Inclusion at Work

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Abstract: Diversity and inclusion are currently extremely popular subject matters of discussion at work places. While the global female labor force participation has remained fairly flat over the last three decades, in India it has declined. Many companies speak of their earnest commitment to gender equity. However, to what extent have these discussions and claims of commitment, translated into meaningful progress? Women still remain under-represented at every level. Processes of hiring and promotion continue to favour men. Income disparities remain significantly noticeable. We must develop cultures of work wherein all employees feel respected and have equal opportunities to grow and advance. This article explores the inequalities that continue to persist, the factors that contribute to gender gaps and our recommendations to address these gaps in the work sector. We place emphasis on the need for companies to take more decisive action by treating gender diversity as a business priority and embedding it into policies that make work places more welcoming for women.

Keywords: Women at workplace; Glass Ceiling; Diversity and Inclusion; Female labor force participation; Gender gap

Nearly half of the world's population is women. Yet, women face poorer income opportunities compared to men across the world. The global labor force participation rate for women is barely over 50% compared to 80% for men (The World Bank, 2022). Women have fewer options for business expansion and career advancement, as well as a lower likelihood of working in formal employment. And even when women work, they earn less - 77 cents for every \$1 paid to men (The World Bank, 2024). With respect to India, the World Economic Forum ranked our country 135 out of 146 in its Global Gender Gap Index for 2022 (Global Gender Gap Report, 2023). While men earn 82% of the labour income in India, women earn 18% (World Inequality Report, 2022). Recent evidence suggests that these gender gaps have exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Collins, Landivar, Ruppanner, & Scarborough, 2021; Villarreal & Yu, 2022).

Are women less likely to actively seek work? In 2016, ILO and Gallup surveyed women around the world and found that this was not true. An overwhelming 70% of women wanted to be in paid employment (ILO, 2022). However, a persistent set of socio-economic barriers keep them out of the

workforce. Globally, while female labor force participation has remained fairly flat over the last three decades, in India it has *declined* from 34.1 per cent in 1999-00 to 27.2 per cent in 2011-12. The current gender gap in India stands at 50.9, with only 19.2% women participating in labour workforce as opposed to 70.1% men (ILO, 2022). Researches undertaken to analyze this baffling trend of low and declining female labor force participation in India have focused on explanations like rising education and income effect, measurement issues leading to underestimation, lack of employment opportunities, the structural transformation of the economy, and the socio-cultural set up (e.g., Mehrotra & Parida, 2017; Rangarajan, Kaul, & Seema, 2011; Sanghi, Srija, & Vijay, 2015). The lack of basic facilities is another critical factor keeping women from entering the workforce. For instance, many employers in India have failed to provide sufficient and separate toilet facilities for female workers, leaving them struggling to find safe sanitation. In March 2022, the Union Finance Ministry asked all public sector banks and financial institutions to take the necessary steps to provide separate toilets for female bank workers, in response to such grievances received from the Bank Employees Federation of India (BEFI) (Bandyopadhyay, 2023).

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Women representation in corporate India is around 17%. GCCs (global capability centres) in India, however, have made good progress in promoting gender diversity, with nearly five lakh women currently employed, representing 28% of the total employees according to a recent Pure Storage and Zinnov report titled 'Towards a Gender Equitable World' (Nearly 5 lakh women employed in Indian GCCs, 2024). Despite these encouraging numbers, it is sobering to note that at the senior level (9-12 years of experience), the representation of women falls to 15.7%, further declining to 6.7% in executive roles. The percentage of women holding board seats in corporate India stands at 18.3% (lower than the global average of 23.3 per cent), those chairing boards drops to a dismal 4.1%, and women CEOs still only at 5.1%. A similar glass ceiling can be seen the world over. For instance, women account for only 8% of Fortune 500 company CEOs (Hinchliffe, 2021) and 30% of S&P 500 directors (Spencer Stuart Board Index, 2021) in the U.S.

Maximum attrition is seen at mid-senior levels due to factors such as family and caregiving responsibilities, limited access to career advancement and opportunities, and poor work-life balance. Researchers suggest that women in comparison to men face higher role overload, a sense of having too many responsibilities to handle in a reasonable amount of time, specifically across the work-family interface. The paths between family-role overload and total-role overload and between family-role overload and perceived stress are significantly stronger for women in comparison to men (Duxbury, Stevenson, & Higgins, 2018). After all women are mothers, caregivers, daughters, wives, sisters, friends in addition to employees. We are not suggesting that men do not occupy multiple roles, but that women must juggle them with greater difficulty and accountability.

A study published by the Society for Human Resource Management (2022) showed that as women move up the ladder, they also become increasingly disillusioned about equal access. Women are less likely than men to feel included in key networks at their organization and to feel taken seriously as a leader. Additionally, women are less likely to say that their manager encourages them to take on leadership roles. Organizational practices of sharing internal job

openings further unfairly advantage men - more men are promoted internally than women. Female managers of color are even more disadvantaged: they are over five times more likely (21%) than their white female counterparts (4%) to say they have quit a job after being overlooked for a leadership opportunity at work.

Research suggests that although engaging in networking is crucial for career success (e.g. Wolff & Moser, 2009), women's professional networks are often less powerful and effective than men's (Hanson, 2000; Renzulli, Aldrich, & Moody, 2000; Rothstein, Burke, & Bristor, 2001). Not only do women face extrinsic barriers of structural exclusion resulting from work-family conflict and homophily, but also the intrinsic barrier of their own hesitations to instrumentalize social ties. As recipients, women are careful not to over-benefit and emphasize the moral aspects of reciprocity; as donors, they run the risk of underestimating and poorly marketing their own contributions in a professional context due to gendered modesty (Greguletz, Diehl, & Kreutzer, 2019). Earlier research on the 'feminine modesty' effect (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989) has shown that women underrepresent their achievements in public to avoid being perceived as unfeminine and to appear noncompetitive, perpetuating persistent gender inequalities at the workplace. Lack of self-promotion by women places them at a disadvantage relative to men in communicating their true qualities and achievements to employers, leading to suboptimal hiring and promotional opportunities, and ultimately, gender gap in labour force participation.

Another issue that continues to remain significant and under-addressed is the safety of women at the workplace. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act) was introduced over a decade ago to safeguard women from workplace harassment. The law requires an employer with more than 10 employees to form an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) with whom women employees can file a formal sexual harassment complaint. ICCs have to be headed by a woman, have two or more employees, and an external member such as an NGO worker. The ICC should have a minimum of four members, at least half of whom should be female. The law also mandates the

creation of local committees (LC) at the district level to register complaints from women working in companies with less than 10 employees and from the informal sector. However recent events have revealed significant shortcomings in the implementation of the law. In 2023, the Supreme Court of India called out the problems in the constitution of ICCs, citing a report that 16 out of 30 national sports federations in the country had not constituted an ICC. It also pointed out the improper constitution of ICCs where established, suggesting that they either had an inadequate number of members or lacked a mandatory external member (Munjal, 2023). One concern is that the Act does not satisfactorily address accountability. It does not specify who is in charge of ensuring that offices and other workplaces comply with the Act. Neither is it specific about who can be held accountable if it is not followed. Moreover, although the informal sector employs over 80% of India's working women, the law is still largely inaccessible to them. Despite the law having been in existence for more than 10 years, workplace sexual harassment cases remain highly under-reported in India. Power dynamics of organizations, fear of professional repercussions, stigma, lack of trust in the system, a tendency to normalize sexual harassment, tend to deter women from filing complaints (Ahuja, Padhy, & Srivastava, 2019). Sexual harassment has serious mental health consequences. Using longitudinal survey data from the Youth Development Study, combined with in-depth interviews, Houle et al (2011) found that sexual harassment is a stressor that is associated with increased depressive symptoms. Their quantitative results showed that women and men who experience more frequent sexual harassment at work have much higher depressed mood than non-harassed workers, even after controlling for prior harassment and depressive symptoms. Moreover, sexual harassment early in the career, has long-term effects on depressive symptoms in adulthood. Negative experiences at work may be especially detrimental to mental health if they occur repeatedly through the career, as the accumulation of workplace stressors may exert larger effects than a single isolated incident (Avison & Turner, 1988).

The Road Ahead

Boosting gender diversity is not just a moral or ethical issue, it makes business sense too. When women thrive

in leadership roles, organizations benefit too. Organizations with a higher proportion of women in leadership are more likely to report improved business outcomes, such as greater creativity and innovation and increased productivity. One meta-analysis suggested that having more women on firms' boards of directors impacted its overall financial performance. Further, women's leadership was associated with sales performance (Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2018). And when affective or social outcomes for employees, the organization, and other stakeholders are taken into consideration, the impact of women's leadership becomes even more meaningful (Huffman, Cohen, & Pearlman, 2010). From an economic standpoint, reducing gender gaps in labor force participation could enhance global GDP considerably.

What needs to be done?

First, we need to reexamine various policies and programs implemented to boost gender diversity, such as maternity leave, child care leave, etc. According to the Maternity Benefit Act, 2017, employers allow expectant mothers to avail up to 26 weeks of paid leave, among other benefits. However, a 2018 study by HR services company TeamLease showed that maternity benefits discouraged many companies in key sectors such as aviation, education, real estate, IT, and e-commerce from hiring women (Banerjee, 2022). It is high time India Inc. introduces a mandatory paternity leave act. This will redefine the responsibilities of childcare and both the parents, not just the mother, will play an equal role. We need more role models like Ranveer Singh and Virat Kohli.

Second, women need to be encouraged to network and self-promote. Decades of research (e.g., Rudman, Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Nauts, 2012) has highlighted a double-bind, whereby if women do not self-promote, it is seen as lack of ambition or 'leadership' acumen; if they do, it is interpreted as lack of femininity. Engendered cultural norms expect women to be selfless, humble, and empathetic. In the workplace, such norms and the unwillingness to promote our achievements make women invisible to employers doling out promotions. The double standard for self-promotion is a significant barrier to women's equitable treatment, as while self-promotion is necessary for career advancement, only women are subject to

negative consequences for it. We need to thus change the negative connotations attached to female self-promotion. Interestingly, there is evidence that while women feel uncomfortable when engaging in self-promotion, when promoting others, they do not (Smith & Huntoon, 2014). In this sisterhood perhaps lies the key to reducing the gender gap. Policies aimed at changing the social environment where females self-promote or at least promote other women could be effective in closing the gender gap.

Further, special attention must be given by organisations to create ecosystems conducive to sustaining growth for women returning to work, whether after a maternity break or an even longer one till children grow older and begin school. Returnship programs may also be implemented to engage women who may have left the workforce during the pandemic. Returnships provide valuable opportunities for organizations to access untapped female talent that could not find a way in the workforce due to resume gaps. Programs like these can assist women in reentering roles that are more in line with their experience and knowledge and engage them in meaningful ways that are consistent with their career aspirations, as opposed to settling for roles that are not appropriate to their expertise. For instance, Wipro's Wow Mom program aims to support, enable and engage with women employees proceeding for and returning from maternity leave. The company's 'Begin Again program' is an inclusion and diversity initiative for women, who are looking to re-launch their career after a break – be it for a sabbatical, motherhood, elderly care, travel, or other personal reasons. Dr. Reddy's Laboratories is another gender-inclusive company that has led several initiatives to employ and empower women at the workplace. The company has attempted the deliberate hiring of women in their sales force and manufacturing, which makes up 60% of their workforce across all levels. The SHE (Special Hospital Executives) program is an initiative involving an all-women sales team of medical representatives. The company provides extended support to women transitioning back into the workforce after a career break by assembling a team of SHEs. There is also 'Career Comeback for Women', a platform that enables the hiring of women who are on career breaks. Women's careers are supported by part-time working

hours, limited workload, and single-client management for SHEs, compared to regular medical representatives who work long hours and deal with multiple clients and products. To promote safety as well as enhance employability, 'pick and drop cabs' for women are driven by women.

From a more long-term perspective, allowing women to better balance work and motherhood is essential for all modern societies. Women are needed in the force work and yet the survival of the human species demands that women devote time to child-bearing. Countries that do not allow for women to transition back to work after marriage or motherhood entail the risk of either losing out on women as employees or witnessing negative birth rates. The second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 2010) that entails decline in the total fertility rate to below replacement level (2.1 children per woman) is due as much to modern contraception as to personal aspirations of women for more opportunities regarding self-career development (Gu, Andreev, & Dupre, 2021). The case studies of the companies mentioned above demonstrate that change is possible. The starting point seems to be sensitive leadership that recognizes the benefits of gender equity at the workplace and formulates policies that strategically promote diversity. Leaders must then call for appropriate training of all employees, sensitization programs, flexible work schedules and the creation of safe spaces at work that are imperative to creating gender-equity.

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