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## Review Article

# What slows the women manager's advancement to leadership roles in corporate India – A review of organisational barriers

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### ABSTRACT

Successful organisations have identified the need for a gender-diverse and inclusive work culture which will enable them to deliver the desired results effectively. There are fewer women seen at the leadership level in organisations across almost all industry sectors. Gender-diverse boards and top management are the need of the hour. There are a complex set of factors identified to be impacting the progress of women managers to leadership positions. This paper proposes to examine the various organisational barriers which impact women workers at their workplace and is slowing their career advancement based on previous studies and literature available on the subject.

This study finds that gender stereotypes and gender inequality are crucial aspects impacting women in the workplace. This manifests in several aspects of the organisation such as in its structure, culture, and policies, as male dominant hierarchy, training and mentoring challenges, and networking aspects. The methodology adopted was to review articles from journals, newspapers, and company reports and map them to these factors.

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## 1. Introduction

Women have made their presence felt in almost all spheres of work today and have made considerable progress career-wise. They are now working in almost all industries that were once considered male-dominated like manufacturing at the shop level, the automobiles sector, aviation sector as pilots and engineers to name a few. The advancement of women in the last few decades has been remarkable not only globally, but also in India wherein the patriarchal mindset of society attributing a lesser domestic role to women is quite prevalent.

In terms of higher education and skill attainment, women have been doing exceptionally well. They are enrolling in large numbers in domestic as well as international universities for achieving their dream career which will

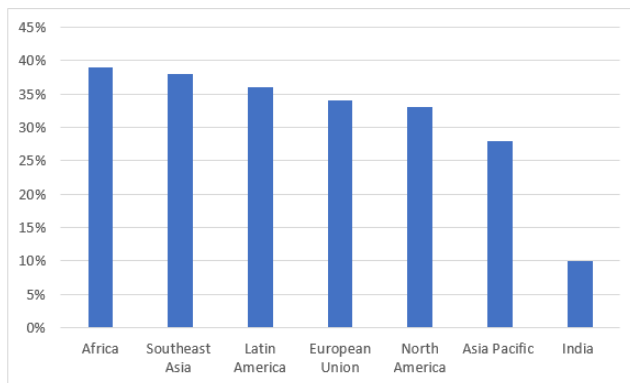
give them the status in society they deserve. India is one of the fast-growing economies in the world and this has brought in rapid changes in the education and employment opportunities for young Indians. More girls are enrolling for professional and master's degrees. As per the latest AISHE reports, there is an increase in enrolment of girl students in higher education by 18% from the year 2015-16 to 2019-20. Opportunities for women have increased and improved drastically in the last decade due to higher education levels and higher aspirations too. Multinationals setting offices in India has led to a more professional and dynamic workspace for women.<sup>1-10</sup>

All this being the case, it is very remarkable to see that women's presence and representation at the higher echelons in corporate, political, and government organisations are very negligible. 'Where are all the women disappearing' is something that has worried many academics, researchers, and authorities alike. Despite the higher human capital

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index and skills and expertise, women seem to be poorly represented at the senior leadership levels across industries which is not only a phenomenon in India, but also globally. The facts and figures give a clear picture of the situation.



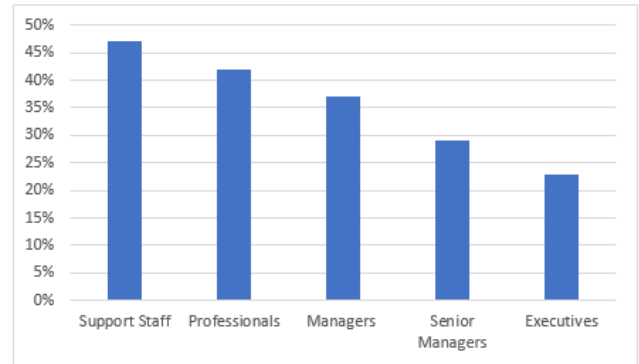
**Fig. 1:** Indicates the percentage of women in senior leadership region wise.

Source: Catalyst Report 2022

The Global Gender Gap report of the year 2022 which examines and rates countries on various parameters of economic participation, attainment of education, health, and political environment, states that women hired for leadership roles have shown an increase from 33.3 percent in 2016 to 36.9 percent in 2022. As per this report, it can be easily stated that women's representation in senior management positions across regions is at 30 to 40 percent levels and much lesser in the Asia Pacific region at 28 percent. The Indian level is much poor at 10 percent.

India is in 135th position at a gender gap index of 0.629 as per this report. According to the Catalyst study of women in leadership in India, the percentage of women in senior management positions is the highest in Banking and Financial services at 20.4 percent followed by Health Care at 16.5 percent and Consumer goods at 15.6 percent. The lowest is reported in the Energy resources industry at 10.2 percent. (Catalyst India WRC 2020). It is quite evident from these figures that women are falling off the rung at middle managerial levels.

McKinsey Report of 2021 states that "broken rung" is still a reality, women are not promoted as much as their male counterparts right from few years. Women tend to lose ground right from entry-level to the C suite, companies are not able to show sustained progress in this aspect and there is a leaky pipeline on the way to leadership. (McKinsey Report of 2021 pg. 7). The entry-level recruitment of women in at least a few sectors of industries indicates a healthy gender-neutral trend wherein an equal number of women as men are recruited. An analysis by Mercer of appx 1100 organisations globally found a pipeline issue in women getting to leadership roles, there were fewer women up the corporate ladder.<sup>11-13</sup>



Source: Mercer Analysis 2020

**Fig. 2:** Indicates the percentage of women at each level of management globally.

In India, women have done very well in professional sectors where there has been expansion, good growth, and conducive working conditions. For example, in the financial services sector, women are seen in senior management key roles like the CFO /CEO of the company. Women are heading both public sector and private sector banks in India as of today. The same is the case with the Aviation sector, today we have 15 percent of India's 8000 pilots are women, whereas this is just 5 percent globally. Though this may be the case, it is worth noting that these figures are very small in percentage looking at the overall population of educated women in India.

### 1.1. Significance of Women at Leadership

It is very important and relevant today to understand the significance of women in the top leadership rung of the organisation. Gaio and Goncalves (2022) state that board diversity brings in renewed communication, better idea generation, and a new management process ushering in better and improved financial performance and thereby enhancing the firm value. In this study, the authors analyse the relationship between the presence of women on boards in senior roles such as CEO and CFO and the firm value of listed companies of the European Union 14. The study indicates a strong positive relationship between financial performance and firm value, the market expectations of future earnings of the firm were higher when a woman was CFO of the firm.<sup>14</sup>

Several studies and company reports find that companies that had more women on boards performed well financially than the ones which had fewer. MCSI found that companies with more women on board indicating strong female leadership, reported higher Return on Equity (ROE) at 10.1 percent than companies without (7.4 percent). This report also There is a strong linkage between the financial performance of the organisation and the presence of women

in leadership roles finds a study of Fortune 1000 companies from 1998-2000 states researchers Krishnan and Park (2005). They find that companies with a higher percentage of women on the top management team showed better financial performance overall.

## 2. Research Objectives

The paper attempts to examine the various barriers challenging women at the organisational level as they progress to leadership roles. The following objectives are drawn out for the systematic review of the literature on this domain.

1. The advantages of having women at top management in organisations
2. Factors in the workspace that have a negative impact and retarding women's career progression that can be termed as organisational barriers.
3. The key organisational support systems beneficial to women and accelerate their career.
4. Important policy suggestions and recommendations for stakeholders of organisations, states, and the individual to implement to bring better gender diversity in the workplace.

## 3. Research Methodology

Relevant literature sourced from journal articles on both print and online platforms like EBSCO, ProQuest, Google Scholar, newspaper print articles, and company reports were examined for this study. Articles from the last twenty years starting from 2002 have been considered for the study with special emphasis on Indian studies. This period has seen many research studies on the various challenges and paradoxes encountered by women in the workplace and society. Despite the rapid progress made by women in the last two decades, their poor representation at key leadership positions in organisations has been a cause of concern for the corporate world and researchers alike.<sup>15</sup>

This paper includes both experimental and quasi-experimental studies wherein interventions of some kind of gender barriers have been addressed. Both peer-reviewed papers and related literature available on the domain of organisational barriers challenging women in their workplace were examined and critically evaluated. Papers and articles which had a good sample size and studied the organisational aspects as barriers on women gender only were included in the study. The data thus obtained was then mapped to various barrier themes based on earlier research studies (Kirchmeyer 1998).

## 4. Results and Discussion

Researchers have identified three major groups of barriers, namely Organisational, Societal, and Individual.

(Kirchmeyer 1998; Vinnicomb and Singh 2011). This paper attempts to examine and evaluate the organisational factors and is hence limited by its scope. The major barriers identified in this study are as follows.

1. Gender stereotypes and gender discrimination at the organisational level
2. Organisational Structure, Culture, and Policies leading to discrimination.
3. Male dominant hierarchy intimidating women
4. Training, mentoring and networking challenges
5. Lack of work life balance and Burnout

Several research studies have been conducted on these aspects establishing how these factors individually or combined can lead to challenging situations in the workplace which women find difficult to manoeuvre easily. This often leads to their slow progress to senior leadership roles (Maimunah Ismail 2007; Krishna Moorthy et al 2022).

## 5. Gender Stereotypes and Gender Discrimination

Gender stereotypes that form a bias and prejudice towards women's capabilities and leadership style pan out as preferential treatment towards men and their promotions and rise through ranks much more easily than for women. These stereotypes manifest itself in various subtle forms at several levels as discrimination and inequality towards women employees in terms of accepting their capabilities and talents as much as their male counterparts. Women who are determined and focused on their goals and have aspirations and ambitions for senior leadership roles are often termed as "bossy" and not feminine, at times they adapt their leadership style to what may suit their male colleagues says Rath et al (2016). Women are also perceived to be weak and taking decisions emotionally which may not be the trait required for an effective leader. These negative perceptions and stereotypes work as an obstacle to their advancement and progress to senior leadership roles. This has been established by several researchers (Jain & Mukherji,2010; Knorr 2005; Buddhapriya,2011).<sup>16</sup>

### 5.1. Organisational structure, culture, and policies

In their Malaysian study, Abidin, Rashid, et al (2009) states the significance of organisational structure on the career progression of women. This study conducted at a state university finds that governance and structure of an organisation is a major factor that can enable and also be a barrier for women employees. Organisational structure and framework play an important role as far as idea generation and implementation are concerned (Lene Foss et al 2013). These authors state that not only idea generation but also implementation is not gender neutral and the model developed in their study had a better fit for the male sample than the female indicating that the men's innovations were

better implemented than that of women in the workspace.

A positive organisational culture can go a long way in enhancing not only business and market share but also ensuring a happy and satisfied employee. It is the culture of any organisation which is crucial for any person to continue working and advance their career there among other factors like compensation, rewards, and appreciation. This is more so for women and when the same culture of their workplace discriminates against them based on their gender and has stereotypical attitudes and prejudices, this acts as a barrier to their progression and stalls their advancement to senior leadership roles (Virginia Rincon et al 2017)

Gender-neutral policies which are fair and the same for any gender are the need of the hour and today most well-known organisations have such policies and practices in place. Women find it difficult to manoeuvre and progress through this labyrinth of age-old practices and policies in their workplace. (Knorr 2005). Gender-sensitive policies do make a positive and significant impact on the career progression of women has been well researched and documented in the literature available in this aspect. Corporate practices of gender equity policy in recruitment, promotions, training, remuneration of equal pay for both genders, performance appraisal and incentive systems, and networking opportunities leading to a nourishing and encouraging work environment for women to contribute and add value to the organisation thereby leading to growth and progress for them as an individual too. (Knorr 2005; Budhhapriya 2011; Chris Rowley 2015).

A State Bank of India study (Rath et al 2016) which is the largest public sector bank in the country indicates that work culture, perception, encouragement, and policies played a very significant role in shaping the women employee's career and enabled their progress to this senior managerial level.

### 5.2. Male dominance

Male dominance in the organisation is a situation wherein male members of the team or male leadership have all the influence and say leaving no legroom for women to voice their opinions, ideas, or suggestions for implementation. Several research studies illustrate male domination as an organisational cultural issue that forms a barrier for the female gender as they progress to middle management positions. (Bennett et al 2006; Jain & Mukherji 2010).

Male hierarchy and dominance impact the organisational culture negatively thereby slowing women's career progress. Women at the junior level are determined to achieve roles and succeed in managerial roles by overcoming the barriers of existing masculine culture, but find the same as a hindrance to advance further in their careers. (Priola and Brannan 2009). The researchers found that women tend to adapt and develop these masculine behavioural models of leadership leading to a lack of a female model

of successful leadership. A Korean study also illustrates how male hierarchy which has predominately male team members prefer to hire more men giving less room for women to progress to key positions. Resistance from women was either withdrawal, resignation, changing jobs, or self-employment (Chris Rowley et al 2015). Women did experience difficulties in communicating and networking in a male-dominated organisational culture and as a result, there was subtle discrimination in promotion and fair performance appraisal in such a culture. This impacted their advancement to senior key positions (Aycan 2004).

### 5.3. Training, mentoring, and networking challenges

Lack of training, mentoring, and networking opportunities pose a negative influence on the career advancement of women in any organisation (Buddhapriya 2009; Adamson 2012). Training, mentoring, and the ability to network is identified as key enabler for career progress more so for women. These are found to enhance opportunities for women to add value, and knowledge and acquire new skill sets which will motivate and improve their chances of progressing to leadership roles. (Kaushik et al 2014; Tlais & Kauser 2010; Rath et al 2015).

The significance of Training as a tool for performance enhancement has been established by various research studies (Kulkarni 2002, Vinnicombe & Singh 2003). According to Wentling (2003), training is a significant enabler in women's career advancement and a majority of women who have pursued training seem to advance in their careers. Marilyn Clarke (2011) examines the advancement of women's careers through leadership development programs. The author argues that those women who attended this program found themselves more confident, it will help them "survive and thrive ". Women learned through experience sharing, and discussing strategies to overcome barriers, and women-only groups encouraged trust and intimacy.

Mentoring is a powerful tool that offers proteges both personal and professional development (Jogulu and Wood 2011) Women often find it difficult to identify mentors or guides either due to the availability of such persons committed to being their mentor or because difficult for them to identify mentors who will encourage and motivate them to set goals, develop their skills required and more importantly give valuable feedback. (Gambir & Washington 2003). Women receive less mentorship when compared to men since women get restricted access to potential mentors, and many times men unwilling to enter into a mentorship with women colleagues (Kolade & Kehinde 2013).

Developing personal rapport with people of influence through such networking events helps professional advancement. (Aycan 2004; Susan Ogden et al 2006; Helena Knorr 2005). Networking is a significant factor and the lack of time to network as their male counterparts

hinders the career progression of women according to Cross (2009) who states that visibility and networking are the two key factors identified for career progression strategy. Exclusion of women from important senior management communications, excluding potential women candidates from promotion-related matters, excluding women from important key assignments, and difficulty in getting the right connections through networks are some of the barriers managerial women come across in organisations. (Azmiya et al 2012; Elaqua et al 2009).

#### 5.4. Work-life Balance and Burnout

Women working in responsible positions are often required to spend long hours at the office impacting the time spent at home or doing other life activities. Juggling between office assignments, business meets, traveling, and home responsibilities are taking a toll on their physical and mental well-being. Revathy and Geetha (2013) state working women today are looking for a better quality of life and a healthy work-life balance. Several researchers have examined this dimension of work-life balance and its impact on people's life.

Continuous work commitments leaving not much room for work-life balance leads to a "burnout" feeling among women which is being discussed in greater detail in recent years. A recent McKinsey Study on "Women in workspace" surveys around 423 organisations employing 12 million people participated, 65000 women employees were surveyed belonging to various races and identities globally. This study finds that burnout is on the rise in corporate workspace and women are more burned out than men.

With the pandemic Covid 19, the work culture of organisations has undergone drastic changes with blurred lines between work and family times. This report goes on to state that the flexibility in work needs to set boundaries and this culture of always being available for work is leading to burnout in employees. McKinsey further illustrates this in their 2022 report which states that 43 percent of women leaders are burned out, compared to only 31 percent of men at similar levels. There is also a downside to this flexibility of work from home option companies feel those working fully remotely are less connected to the teams, and these managers mainly being women, so chances are high that their work will get fewer opportunities for recognition the work and may impact their advancement negatively (McKinsey Report 2021 pg. 7,13 and Report 2022 "Women in the Workplace" pg. 14, 25).

### 6. Challenges – Indian Context

Saini (1999) states that despite the social legislation and laws supporting women in all aspects, female empowerment is still very poorly implemented in the country. Asian societies are more collective and familial which abide

by traditions and stricter gender stereotype norms which promote women being responsible for family and traditions. This aspect explains the paradox of Indian women, on one side they are breaking many "glass ceilings", but are still being influenced by these traditional societal norms. According to Bimba and Kaliyamoorthy (2017), Indian society gives more importance to traditions, and hence Indian women often face this dilemma of family and household responsibility against career progression. The social and cultural fabric of Indian society to a certain extent conditions the perception of girls from a very early age.<sup>17–23</sup> The traditional patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes begin from home says Bandyopadhyay (2000).

All the mentioned factors of gender stereotypes and attitudes extend to the organisations and the way they function. Gender stereotype attitudes leading to bias and discrimination in the workplace are the major barrier identified by researchers. (Budhwar et al 2005; Kulkarni 2002). Dual role responsibilities of work and family at the same time leads to stress on women, especially in middle-level careers. This added to the lack of flexible work options and lack of organisational support systems are major barriers for Indian working women. Long working hours and the long commute to and from the office add to the woes of these women (Rajesh & Ekambara 2013).

Researchers Kumar & Sundar (2012) examine in their two-part study in the banking sector the aspect of relocation on promotion, higher responsibilities leading to higher demand on time and efforts on the person and find these factors challenging women. Work-life balance and work-related stress, gender bias in the office, and 24x7 work culture impact women negatively (Amer 2013; Pathak & Sarin 2011).<sup>24–27</sup> Lack of training opportunities, lack of gender-sensitive policies, and exclusion from formal and informal office networks are the major findings of studies conducted by researchers Kulkarni (2002) and Buddhapriya (2011).

### 7. Policy Implications of the Study and Recommendations

Having identified the key problem areas, this study recommends addressing the pertinent issues through policy interventions by all three stakeholders the organisation, the state, and the individual as stated below.

1. Organisations need to implement policies and practices which are gender-neutral in all activities starting from recruitment, training, and promotion process.
2. Adopt a gender-inclusive and diverse organisational work culture to foster the growth and development of all employees without any kind of discrimination.

3. Invest in training like leadership development programs, assist mentorship and sponsorships, and enable networking activities for talented women employees.
4. The state to regulate, support and incentivise companies promoting and committed to the cause of getting more women in their workforce.
5. Governments need to implement policies and reforms to support and promote women's representation in the labour workforce. Initiatives to create awareness of having gender-diverse top management can usher in positive changes in both the private and government sector.
6. Grievance addressal cell wherein the employee can explain their work-related issues if any which shall then be addressed by the department heads and solved as per the requirement. Women employees are to be encouraged to address any aggressive behaviour or related issues to the cell appropriately.
7. Top management is to be held accountable for a diverse, inclusive, and equal workspace for all.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper examines the various challenges women encounter in their career path to leadership roles from the organisational side. Gender discrimination, bias, and prejudice are found to be the main barriers identified. This can manifest in various forms and degrees in organisations that challenge women. Male dominance in the hierarchy and obvious in other functions hampers women employees' growth and nurturing leading to slow progress in their career. Lack of opportunities for training, mentoring, and networking adds to the problem which puts them at a weak wicket. Work-life balance and juggling between home and work responsibilities lead to stress and guilt feeling which impacts their long-term career plans. This often manifests as "burnout" feeling and health issues motivating to women quit the work altogether despite being qualified and skilled for better opportunities.

## 9. Source of Funding

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## 10. Conflict of Interest

None.

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