

Chapter 16

Perspectives on the Glass Ceiling in Indian Enterprises

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ABSTRACT

The genesis of the present study is from the widespread observation that only a small proportion of top level managerial positions in corporate organizations are occupied by women, both globally and in India. Although women are making their entry into the corporate arena in increasing numbers, with credentials equivalent to those of their male counterparts, they do not appear to be progressing to the ranks of senior management at comparable rates. It is felt that in their quest for career advancement and career success, women face hurdles which are not experienced by men. A glass ceiling, which can be conceptualized as a subtle barrier comprising attitudinal and cultural biases, appears to constrain the upward mobility of managerial women. This phenomenon of low representation of women in the highest echelons of management seems to be in sharp contrast with the trend highlighted in recent human resources management literature which views the management skills and leadership styles traditionally attributed to women as ideally suited to the needs of modern organizations. Hence, the present study was undertaken with the objective of exploring the various individual and organizational influences which serve to constrain their progress to positions of power and influence in corporate organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Women represent more than 40 per cent of the world's labour force and half the world's population according to the United Nations Report (2000). The United Nations publication (1993)

on 'Women Challenges of the Year 2000' documents the striking statistic that 'women constitute half the world's population, perform two-thirds of the world's work, but receive only one-tenth of its income and owns less than one-hundredth of its property.' There is no doubt, however,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2952-3.ch016

that significant progress has been achieved in furthering the cause of gender equality in the labour markets over recent decades. Women's access to education and training has improved significantly over the years, providing them with the necessary qualifications to aspire for jobs at the highest level of management. Governments, enterprises, and organizations have devoted much thought and energy to overcome the attitudinal and institutional discrimination that hinders women's career progress and have committed themselves to policies and programmes to advance women (Gupta, Koshal, & Koshal, 2006).

The number of women in managerial positions has increased over the past several decades although it still does not reflect their overall proportion of the labour force or population. These women appear to be making their entry into the world of corporate management with credentials on par with those of their male counterparts. However, it is a recognized fact that they are not entering the ranks of senior management at comparable rates (Gatrell & Swan, 2008). Despite having made great strides in achieving middle management positions, in every geographical region and in many industries, women pursuing managerial careers appear to be less likely than their male counterparts to reach the corporate pinnacle (Powell, 1999).

During the past few decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of women who are pursuing managerial careers. Although it is evident that these managerial women are well educated and trained as their male counterparts and are being hired by organizations in approximately equal numbers, there is an obvious disparity in the rates at which they are entering the ranks of senior management in both public and private sector organizations in all developed and developing nations of the world. Female managers in every country remain only a tiny fraction of those in senior positions. In India, although

women constitute approximately 25 per cent of the economically active population, the number of females holding administrative and managerial jobs is two per 100 men managers (Gupta et al., 2006, p 10). An ILO report states that although substantial progress has been made in closing the gender gap in managerial and professional jobs, the 'glass ceiling' is still in tact and the chances of it being broken in the near future appear remote. The report highlighted the major factors holding women back from attaining higher-level jobs as social attitudes, cultural biases, and male prejudices (World of Work, Magazine of ILO, February 1998). Women are still a minority in Indian board rooms and in the higher echelons of the corporate world.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Despite predictions that globalization will increase the number of women at senior management levels, there has not been a significant change in the proportion of women in the executive suite (Osland, Adler, & Brody, 2002). It is argued that the intensification of global competition leads to a definite escalation in the opportunity cost of relying on the historic male-dominated pattern of senior leadership. This concern is echoed in the view of Harvard professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter who emphasizes that in a global economy, 'Meritocracy—letting talent rise to the top, regardless of where it is found and whether it is male or female—has become essential to business success' (Nichols, 1994).

With women playing an increasingly significant role in purchasing decisions, companies realize that failing to understand women's perspectives and needs can seriously disadvantage them. From this viewpoint too, the representation of women in senior management positions is increasingly

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