



Labyrinth of Women Leaders : Manifestations & Ramifications

Dr. Rohini G Shetty

Associate Professor,

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's MP Birla Institute of Management

Bengaluru-560 001, Karnataka State, India

Abstract

Leadership is an activity that is performed by individuals in an organizational or societal setting. It is a function that can make unique contributions to every sphere of human activity. It is further claimed to be a process, a style or an act of different traits resulting in optimum performance and is concurrent, collective, collaborative and compassionate in nature. Now the question is - Can all this be attributed to a person's gender alone? In short, can it be claimed that leadership establishes its credential by gender and gender alone.

Leaders provide vision and meaning to an organization that embody the ideals to strive for excellence in all that is done in the work sphere. *Traditional scholars view leaders as alike and also as being genderless.* If this was the true description of leaders, why then are women unable to accede to leadership positions in greater numbers? Are men better administrators and leaders than women, simply because they are male? Interestingly, a plethora of research conducted on the said theme does not support this assumption.

The present study delves into all aspects of women leadership ranging from the leadership, negotiating and communication styles of women to how their presence in board rooms more often than not, spells firm profitability. The study also deliberates on the various barriers encountered by women to reach leadership positions and the bias that is prevalent towards them at work in particular and society in general. Finally, interesting insights and observations give the big picture on the subject.

The study is based on secondary data and utilizes the information available in Books, Journals, Magazines, Reports and Websites. The three sixty degree angle is utilized to obtain a multiple perspective on the subject and all inferences drawn are based on the secondary data. This study is a precursor for the empirical investigation that is called for in order to arrive at concrete findings

Key Words: Women Leaders; Leadership; Labyrinth; Barriers & Bias.



Women in Leadership - Myth vs. Reality

In the last century or two, leadership is being spoken about with platitude and there are several myths shrouding it. The history of leadership throws up very few women leaders and it is difficult to comprehend as to why it is so? Data available about women helps in shedding more light on this aspect.

- Women comprise almost half the population but statistics suggest, very few women occupy the board of director positions in the corporate even today.
- Women hold only 4.1% of the line manager roles, considered the “pipeline positions” to take up key positions including that of CEO.
- In the business world, women occupy only 4.6 % of Fortune 500 CEO positions and the same percentage of Fortune 1000 CEO positions.
- Income earned by women is 24% less than men in equivalent positions; this widens as women go higher up in the organization.
- Research says women have a narrower range of behaviors and need to navigate them carefully to present themselves as both credible and sufficiently feminine and not challenge societal assumptions about gender. (Sealy and Singh, 2010)
- Women are over mentored and under sponsored (Singh et al 2003).
- Both men and women accede to stereotypes about managers as male - think manager, think male (Shein 2001)
- According to Goldman Sachs, the narrowing gap between male and female employment participation rates boosts GDP.
- *Fortune 500* companies with the highest representation of women board directors attained significantly higher financial performance, on average, than those with the lowest representation of women board directors, according to Catalyst’s report -*The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women’s Representation on Boards*.
- “Clearly, financial measures excel where women serve on corporate boards,” - *Ilene H. Lang, President of Catalyst and most importantly, the Catalyst study demonstrates the strong correlation between corporate financial performance and gender diversity.*

**Data collected and culled from various sources.*

Lack of Women Leaders - A Bane for Business

Women have not been taken seriously in business in the past and hence the number of women in top leadership positions is definitely not what it ought to be at present. The glass ceiling does exist as suggested but many women are slowly smashing it and forging ahead. Women really need to get out in the open from their own protected shells and cocoons. In fact, as women moved ahead in their profession in the later part of the last century they used their masculine traits i.e. playing men in women garb to be effective leaders. Whether they were comfortable and enjoyed doing that, no one can tell, but in reality this was not what was required. Businesses truly needed the *feminine strengths of listening, nurturing & the silver lining of creativity at work* to add value to the leadership spectrum. As of now, more and more women



have realized the importance of being themselves and are proud of bringing their unique female traits to their leadership roles and into all the areas of their profession which is a blessing for all concerned. The issues concerning women leaders are plenty and it is hard but not impossible for them to be focused and determined, empathetic and generous, self-assured and assertive overcome all challenges and be successful. Many preconceived notions exist because of the stereotyping that has been happening since ages but women have to face it boldly and shrug it off if they want to lead and head organizations and get into the board rooms in bigger numbers. According to Lois Frankel, President of Corporate Coaching International the importance of being assertive at the work place irrespective of gender is very important and it is surely fine speaking up for one's self or having an outspoken disposition. Today, leaders are appreciated and popular for their outspokenness and it is seen as a merit, contrary to the view in the past.

Purpose of the Study - Women, on an average are superior in performance when compared to men in almost all spheres of life. However, many people still harbor the belief that women are less capable, competitive and productive in comparison to men in the corporate world. Women do want to be leaders and this is the truth and reality. Women exhibit the preparedness for upward mobility encountering all barriers and become role models for young women aspiring to be leaders. The present paper attempts to discuss these issues & links it up to the current state of human existence.

Methodology -The present study is based on secondary data and utilizes the information available in Books, Journals, Magazines, Reports and Websites. The three sixty degree angle is made use of to obtain a multiple perspective on the subject. Inferences are drawn based on the secondary data. The study serves as a precursor and calls for an empirical enquiry.

Leadership Style of Women

Women leaders were few and still remain so despite advancement of the status of women in business and society as evidenced by women occupying high political office and corner suites of big companies in the globalized world, today. There is a visible paucity of women in board rooms which can be attributed to social conditioning and lack of support and encouragement for female advancement in business. Gender stereotypes have made it difficult for women who possess requisite leadership skills to be accepted as leaders. Instead of appreciating successful women leaders, societies see them as aping male traits, perceived as negative traits in women. Successful women leaders find their way through this double-bind by adopting a cooperative and nurturing style of leadership to gain acceptance, generally unacceptable to many who suggest this as unsuitable in the long run to head and lead organizations.

Excellent communication coupled with exceptional networking skills and a crystal clear vision leading to high achievements with enhanced capability of taking informed decisions are key to effective leadership irrespective of gender. The sole and glaring difference observed between the genders are in the styles of management. Males are autocratic and directive while females are nurture and collaborative. As women continue their upward trajectory in the business world, they are yet to be fully appreciated for the unique qualities and abilities they bring to the workplace. At present, the capability of an individual and not gender is given prime importance.



However, it is to be noted that there are leadership styles and models with specific communication and negotiation patterns that women adopt in their work activities as leaders which gives them a sure shot lead in achieving success.

Communication & Negotiation Style of Women

As leaders, it is said that women communicate with greater precision and clarity though they use too many words and sentences to convey the message. Women naturally, use more words while transmitting messages diluting the content as seen by many and viewed as a fundamental gender difference. It is said that 25 % fewer words in conversations and e-mails can do wonders for women. Taking time to respond to a question and structuring arguments are important in leadership and business. *Being succinct is key to being heard.* The golden rule of effective communication is – “If you can say it in five words, do not use ten”. Women have taken the cue to improvise on this to be better communicators and thereby better leaders.

According to research conducted by Lisa Barron of the University of California, Irvine, women generally negotiate for less money when offered the same position as a man for fear of coming across as greedy. The study shows that women are less comfortable equating monetary consideration with their self-worth. They build relationships with others on an individual level and are uncomfortable promoting self-interests but this is a generational barrier and is likely to dissolve over time as more young women join the workforce. Another point in business negotiations is that men take control by talking more than women and interrupting frequently to air their ideas or seek clarifications. When former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, was asked what advice she had for up-coming professional women, her reply was “*Learn to interrupt.*” Women must talk and learn to talk more about themselves, their ideas and accomplishments and not shy away thinking that they may be perceived as being ambitious and money minded.

Be it communication or negotiation, anything is achievable if the *pursuit* is well understood and the *passion* for achieving it is present and currently it is seen that women are working on it. As mentioned, there are very few women on boards and heading large companies even today but it must be understood that feminine characteristics are good enough to achieve anything and everything and they must stop worrying that they do not possess the traits and characteristics to be leaders. Replacing and replicating masculine traits to get there and be noticed is not the answer. Women must realize that they are self-reliant to be effective leaders and have it all in them to take on the mantle of leadership. Women leaders must manage to balance the ability for transformational value-driven passion or “Contagious Energy,” with a disciplined distance from emotive responses. Doubts, fears and disappointments are a part of life and women must get over them and inspire themselves by motivation and reinforcement to go ahead.

Women Leadership and Bias

In the leadership context, bias plays a major role and at several levels. Many questions arise based on bias. Do women really make good leaders? Are women really suitable to leadership positions in big firms? The bias is so strong that it is not easy to shake off given that it has been there for centuries. The prejudice generally observed are in the following ways -



- *In the way, the organizations structure their leadership patterns & positions.*
- *In the way, people perceive women, including their own kith and kin.*
- *In the way people perceive women in top leadership roles.*
- *In the way, that women leaders perceive their own selves.*
- *In the way some qualities are traditionally associated with leadership*
- *In the way certain specific roles are traditionally associated with women*
- *In the way what women need to do to succeed in leadership roles?*

At each of the above levels, a woman's qualification and suitability for leadership is called in for questioning and many feel women are unsuitable for leadership roles and interestingly many women leaders themselves view leadership thru' the cultural lens that is often distorted by the "Gender Bias". Gender bias presents a significant problem not only for women but also for organizations (Hogue & Lord 2007).

Women's under-representation in leadership positions is partly attributed to gender expectation practices. Statistics point the barriers that women encounter in assuming leadership roles but most intriguing is the experience of women leaders who state that gender expectations and practices shape experiences even after they reach the top leadership positions. A fundamental challenge to women leadership arises from the mismatch between the qualities traditionally associated with leadership and those traditionally associated with women. (Catalyst, 2007; Eagly&Carli 2007) Things have not changes much even today and the study done years ago still holds good representing the general mind set of people about women and leadership.

Attitudes towards women are positive, in fact more positive than towards men. However, these views do not hold well when women occupy high positions and excel in these positions. Though women are seen as highly competent they are less liked when compared to successful men. In short, women unlike men, face trade-offs between the factor of competence leading to success and the likability factor in leadership roles. The assertive, authoritative and dominant behaviors that people link with leadership are viewed as unattractive and atypical of women which may add on to the reason for distaste and dislike observed for successful women. Unless organizations take steps to check this bias, women leaders will be misjudged even with high levels of preparation and aptitude for corporate leadership roles.

Benefits Accrued from Women's Participation on Boards

Studies show mixed results from including women on corporate boards. Having women on corporate boards, does not necessarily lead to better performance at the firm according to a few studies. However, most literature emphasizes the benefits accrued from women's participation on boards and in senior management teams:



- Women bring grace and their circular vision to the table due to their inherent feminine strengths characterized by the soft aspects of one's personality.
- Women tend to bring in skill sets that benefits different aspects of team work: empathy, flexibility, communication and collaboration.
- Women tend to be more risk-averse with implications for firms endangered by excessive risk-taking.
- Women contribute to “social sensitivity” and collective intelligence by bringing varying perspectives, opinions and expertise that would otherwise not be found on all-male teams.
- Women are more diligent in attending board meetings and influence male board members to improve their attendance.

Labyrinth of Women Leadership

In an article in the Harvard Business Review, researchers described a woman's progress to the top using the metaphor of the “Career Labyrinth”. The passage through the labyrinth was possible, but required persistence, awareness of one's progress and a thorough analysis of the road with many obstacles to cross over. A woman's progress can easily be stalled by inherent prejudices, issues of leadership styles and its authentication and stereotypes about social obligations and family responsibilities. The career labyrinth was used as a metaphor identified based on the experiences of many women leaders. Organizations had to improve gender equity statistics and they began with a few suggestions as stated below -

- Bring in gender equity to the top management table.
- Ensure a top male executive is an Executive Sponsor.
- Support with annual gender equity plan along with an annual gender equity pay analysis.
- Acquaint and build awareness with apt resources and cases available.
Example - Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (<http://www.wgea.gov.au/>)
- Train teams to make objective selection, promotion and pay decisions.
- Stop stereotyping “flexible work practices” as a panacea for working women. (Flexible work practices need to be made available for all employees.)

During a Cooperative Inquiry, women shared experiences from their personal lives, family events and transitions to the challenges of their work lives and the changing public landscape; from their ambitions, plans and questions about their professional futures, to their discovery of other interesting parts of themselves. The group responded strongly to the metaphor of the labyrinth of leadership, which they discovered in a recently published article in the Harvard Business Review. By reframing the obstacles for women as a labyrinth rather than the traditional “glass ceiling”, the authors emphasize that the route to leadership is complex and circuitous at every career stage for women. The participants explored the concept application to their own lives and identified a set of distinct features mentioned below:



- *The narrow band of women leadership:* The participants spoke of the futility of “getting leadership right”; whether they utilized command & control or facilitative leadership as their behavior was perceived in a distorted way by colleagues and superiors.
- *Ambivalence about ambition:* While ambition was identified as a critical element of leadership trajectory, fueling accomplishments and driving results, manifestation of conflicts was observed because of ambitious women participants.
- *Challenges of transition:* The participants spoke of inconsistency in being recognized for actual achievements. The sense of disequilibrium, intensified during career transitions, even among the highly accomplished and achievement oriented women.
- *Race and gender:* Race often trumps gender as a factor in the way women were perceived as leaders. An in depth understanding of how race and gender impact women’s accession to top positions and at work are of great importance here.
- *Expanding the conversation and supporting each other:* Over the course of the inquiry, some participants experimented with new behaviors and conversations and provided a feed back to the group. The women also got closer to each other by offering counsel and support to encounter current professional challenges.

While the ambitious question that launched the inquiry could not be answered in the timeframe of the CI, the group felt that they had made some inroads in identifying key issues, which in their own experience, represents the pieces which might contribute to the puzzle of this transformation. The exercise proved to be useful in terms of the insights and observations on women leaders.

Barriers to Women in Leadership Roles

The obstacles, blocks or hindrances to the success of women leaders are many with ceilings, floors and walled boundaries set to their aspirations and desires made up of something more than the glass material. Social attitudes and cultural patterns remain unchanged over centuries. Overt discrimination has lessened over the years but the circuit of old boy network’s still operate, unflinching and strong. The desired skills and confidence for career advancement are not acquired overnight and the practical challenges faced by women can vex even the most determined and focused of women leaders as they try to embrace both work & family. All said and done, women must learn to navigate thru’ these and come out unbrazen.

Perceptual Barriers - Critical impediments for women leaders, continue to hinder their progress for no reason or fault of theirs. Identified barriers to success are mostly from the socio-cultural and psychological perspective such as gender stereotyping, fewer role models and most of all societal attitudes. These blocks haunt women as also their procrastinating nature and the common adage - “It is a man’s world” and “Women are best confined to the kitchen” attitude.

Attitudinal Barriers - A Catalyst survey finds little difference between senior level businessmen and women in the U.S. on their aspirations to occupy the most senior role in their



organizations. Similarly the same study reports there is no difference in aspirations between women who have children and women who do not. However, it is to be noted that changing attitudes about working women may not change attitudes about women as leaders. Interestingly, many people in organization preferred to have a male boss to a female one depicting the miniscule magnitude of the attitudinal change that has occurred over the years.

Familial barriers- Women are more likely than men to see family responsibilities as a significant barrier for hoping to reach the top levels of corporate leadership. It is opined that it's better for a woman who wants to reach a top executive position in business to have children early on in her career than wait. Many women believe it is better to have children early on in their careers but a lot more especially the younger generation suggest that women with leadership aspirations are better off not having children at all so that the entire focus is on the career.

Women Leadership: Important Insights and Observations

Economic development and Women leadership

Economic development does not beget female leadership. There are many developed countries with low levels of female representation, such as the 11.3% female legislators in Japan or 17% in the United States and in contrast are countries with low levels of development and higher representation such as 39.2% women in the Mozambique parliament. Similarly in corporate boards, 17% of board directors are women in Bulgaria and Latvia, compared to Europe, which is below 9%. A good example is Italy with a mere 3.9% of female board directors.

Broad Career paths and Women leadership

The broadening of career paths for women has not led to a proportional increase in female leaders. Increased education and labor participation rates among women are only weakly correlated with the number of women in leadership positions in the corporate sector. Despite the increase of women working in high-paying management and professional positions the trends are not very encouraging. Available data reflects a large number of companies with only one woman on the board, which clearly indicates tokenism rather than substantive leadership success of women leadership.

Experience and Woman Leadership

Women on an average have less experience, but this does not predict leadership performance. Career interruptions and putting in fewer hours at work result in women having less experience. Data suggest a steady attrition of women as they move up the career ladder in organizations. A study of Chicago Business School MBA's by Bertrand, Goldin and Katz (2010) shows that while men and women enter the labor force at similar rates and earn comparable salaries at entry level, nine years out of school women are 12% less likely to be working when compared to men. Working women put in an average of 10% fewer hours per week than their male counterparts with a wage gap of 40% in annual earnings. The evidence on the relationship between experience and performance in leadership positions is mixed.



Experience or the lack of it really does not predict leadership effectiveness or efficiency whether it is a male or female leader.

Women advancement spillovers from Politics to Corporates

There is also little evidence of spillovers of gender advancement from politics to the corporate sphere. Even with relatively high levels of female political representation in Norway (36.4% after the 2001 parliamentary elections, the percentage of female corporate board directors remained below 7% until quotas were directly implemented in the business sector in 2003. Rather than originating from firms, however, the move toward corporate quotas has been external, largely based on a realization in the public sector that political quotas have been successful in increasing female leadership.

Barriers to Female Leadership– The Fact File

Preferences and Costs of Entry: Most women shoulder a huge responsibility comprising child and elderly care of both parents and in-laws, besides the ever increasing household chores. Little or no help comes forth from other family members who may be earning members and busy at work. Whether women choose to stay home by choice or necessity it will imply higher costs of entering and continuing in the work force for many women. As on-the-job experience is a key criterion for promotions and selection of candidates by firms for top slots thus fewer women get selected for existing and anticipated vacancies due to several career interruptions in a life time.

Aspirations and Desires: It is perfectly feasible for women to aspire to be leaders, but the fact is that many may not be aware in addition to lack motivation and morale to become leaders unless they have women leaders as role models. Women face several barriers to gain entry due to the lack of female predecessors demonstrating that women can excel in leadership roles and be successful with vast opportunities available and beckoning them.

Aversion to Competition: Women basically prefer non-competitive environments which may limit their drive for competitive corporate advancement process. Niederle and Vesterlund (2007) say that women prefer competitive engagements less than half as often as men of similar ability. This effect is strong when women compete against men, rather than only women. This may present an additional challenge to women competing in largely male-dominated fields.

Taste Discrimination: Personal tastes can cause a preference for male leaders only. Such taste discrimination is often rooted in the social norms that women should not be leaders or that leadership is a masculine activity. Kelley and McAllister (1984) and Beaman et al. (2009) demonstrate taste discrimination against women among voters in elections, while Bagues-Volart (2010) presents evidence of a preference for male candidates in the hiring process as well as seen in Spain.

Statistical Discrimination: Lack of documented and proper information about the abilities of women leaders may cause members to rely on apocryphal beliefs about average performance.



The small number of women leaders may cause such beliefs to be reeling under bias and result in inefficient statistical discrimination that undervalues the true performance of women as leaders.

Biased systems of Selection: Existing selecting systems adopted for choosing directors of corporate boards may restrict the demand for female leaders. A large body of research has shown that proportional representation systems lead to greater representation of women versus other systems (Siaroff 2000, Norris 2005 or Matland 2005).

Accessibility: Selection panels for corporate board members often utilize the networks of existing board members and top level executives, who are predominantly men. A commonly cited reason for few female leaders on boards is the lack of access of potential female candidates to informal networking opportunities, particularly to break into male-dominated networks. Since panels rely on existing networks, selection may be restricted in terms of selecting well-qualified women to the boards.

Recognition: The corporate has been painstakingly slow in the recognition of the paradigm shift in demographics and corporate culture, with women making a head-way in the industry. Tapping the latent potential in women and helping them rise to leadership positions has not been a top priority at all. Corporate interest and gender inclusive initiatives to capitalize the female talent available in the industry has been seen in the last few years. The realization has set in, that in a globalized economy, “*winning the war of talent*” is a major competitive factor and highly educated and talented women are to be considered *critical assets* not to be *under-valued, under-utilized or ignored*.

As of now the corporate gives due recognition to women as they contribute in a big way and add value to the industry. Companies are changing the ways of conducting business to eliminate all ceilings a step that is reactive and positive. Companies have realized that discriminating women can prove costly and is highly unethical. Change is taking place with the glass ceiling slowly racking as more women get promoted to jobs that otherwise would have been filled by men. Things are really looking up for women who aspire to be leaders.

“Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results not attributes. Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things”.

- Peter Drucker.

Conclusions

Gender roles are socially constructed and furthered by patriarchal society and families. It is imperative that these fundamental classifications be challenged and deconstructed. Leadership is not just a trait. It is a function which manifests in several ways. There is no single style of leadership that is universally accepted as the best and gender alone may not be that variable that will crack the differences. All of us are born equal but with different anatomies. Women leaders



reflect a nurturing & caring attitude, attributes which can be found in abundance in men and the daring and bold nature of men is reflected by a lot of women as well. More formats of leadership are yet to be captured by academia. Leadership means inspiration, nurturance, collaboration, motivational influence and exhibiting the ability to constantly learn, develop and evolve no matter what gender one belongs to. Women are as intelligent, capable and competent as men and can do whatever men can, but they need to inspire themselves that they “can” and they “will”. ***Where there is a Will there is a Way*** for all to enjoy the leadership journey.

Bibliography

- Barsh Joanna; Lavoie Johanne - *Centered Leadership: Leading with Purpose, Clarity and Impact*.
- Elmuti Dean; Jia Heather - *Challenges Women Face in Leadership Positions and Organizational Effectiveness: An Investigation Journal of Leadership Education Volume 8, Issue 2 – 2009*.
- Eagly, Alice H.; Carli, Linda L. *Harvard Business Review*, Sep 2007, Vol. 85 Issue 9.
- Llopis Glenn – e how contributor; *Leadership - The most undervalued leadership trait of women*.
- Terjesen Siri; Sealy Ruth; Singh Val - “*Women Directors on Corporate Boards: A Review and Research Agenda*,” *Corporate Governance*.
- *The Economic Impact of Women-owned Businesses in the United States (2009)*, a study by the Center for Women's Business Research

Webliography

- www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-ceos-fortune-1000
- www.filibustercartoons.com
- www.femaleleadership.org
- www.forbes.com
- gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream.
- www.hreoc.com
- <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/pdf>
- www.karass.com
- www.leadershipcentral.com
- www.sagepub.com
- wagner.nyu.edu/files/leadership/21stCenturyWomen%27sLeadership1108.pdf.
- www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/01/14/chapter-3-obstacles-to-female-leadership.