

INDIA INC YET TO WALK THE TALK ON GENDER DIVERSITY

When the Companies Act 2013 regulation mandated the appointment of at least one woman director on the boards of listed companies, we went about providing this opportunity to the handful of senior women leaders available. Of these, one well qualified woman was finally appointed onto the board of the flagship organisation.



She had over 25 years of experience and was leading an expert function at the time of the appointment. She attended two board meetings, after which the dismayed CEO and one other director sought to speak to us about her worrisome performance. They were concerned as she had not spoken a single word throughout both meetings.

We asked the woman director how she felt about her contributions, and she admitted the discussions in the room were too intense and male-dominated, where aggressive people wouldn't let her get a word in. She struggled to find a voice, leave aside make meaningful contributions. In private conversations, she further revealed how her upbringing in a conservative family did not permit her to assert in the presence of men, especially in the middle of animated discussions.

We intervened with coaching and getting her support from the CEO — and this issue did eventually settle down. But the point to note is that this is not an uncommon experience for women who make it to the insides of a board room.

In fact, there are several experiences and stories of being marginalised on assignments, shouted

in meetings, being interrupted and not heard. Worse, still not being invited to meetings at all. I am talking about the 15-17% women who do make it to the mid to senior levels within Indian organisations, but struggle with being included.

Asserting in the presence of a male authority, networking in a male bastion without being misunderstood and, most of all, feeling under-confident and not supported are common challenges experienced by women. While there are exceptions, as a few do work around these challenges, this is predominantly still a work-in-progress area for women in Indian workplaces.

A 'JobsForHer DivHERsity Benchmarking' report showed last year that several companies are making investments in initiatives to hire, retain and advance women at the workplace. But India's female labour force participation remains one of the lowest in the world at 26% against a global average of 49%. Additionally, with social norms, patriarchal mindsets and gender roles expectations playing a defining role in dissuading women from pursuing careers seriously, gender diversity is still nascent in most companies in India.

More recently, the idea of women equality, empowerment and inclusion is beginning to appeal to many employers. However, there is little action on the ground, unless mandated by boards or by regulations. Having said that, women returnee programmes for some Indian companies have surged from 10% to 78% in a survey of 300 companies. Many companies invest in mentoring, engagement and recruitment initiatives to strive for an 'employer of choice' status among women professionals. But gender wage gaps continue to be discouraging, with women being paid on an average 34% less than their male counterparts.

Today's 'Always-on, always-available' workplace culture appears to be a key factor in holding back gender diversity, especially at mid to senior levels. Individuals often prioritise work over family, personal commitments and well-being to rise to the top. Men are maybe more predisposed to making the trade-offs, while women end up picking the slack in household and other non-work responsibilities, thereby disadvantaging themselves and being unavailable to deliver and participate in the 'Always-on, always-available' expectation.

Research shows that even the presence of physical diversity results in better performance. However, when it comes to gender diversity and inclusion, making change has been agonisingly slow. Women overall continue to be undervalued, work more number of hours and have fewer choices.

The privileged English-speaking, urban, educated, financially independent woman in the Indian workplace struggles against stereotypes & biases and expectations of communal behaviour associated with being a woman. These include being affectionate, helpful, friendly, kind, sympathetic, gentle and soft-spoken. Compare this to the agentic behaviour associated with men and leadership effectiveness — assertiveness, being aggressive, dominant, self-confident, forceful, self-reliant and individualistic. Women leaders find themselves in a double bind of confusion that causes people to be more resistant to a woman's influence than that of men.

Fear of failure and the imposter syndrome is another commonly experienced phenomenon that causes impediments in the journeys of women at work. The imposter syndrome is a debilitating phenomenon — a mixture of anxiety and a persistent inability to recognise one's own success. The Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship's research shows 28% of working women feel that the imposter syndrome stopped them from speaking up in a meeting or prevents them from suggesting a new alternate idea at work.

Women leaders during coaching have sometimes confessed to the inverted consciousness syndrome or the patriarchy in action, submitting to male superiority, where they often believe their male colleagues to be smarter, more leader-like and superior to themselves.

While women need to work harder at overcoming their own self-imposed barriers to success, organisations need to shift the needle on inclusion by:

- Enhancing a sense of belonging for everyone, and focusing on inclusion to leverage the true benefits of diversity
- Providing empathetic leadership, which is key. Many organisations have men as diversity partners or 'allies for women' initiatives to enable men to create inclusion moments for women and mentor them to success
- Taking a bottoms-up approach to culture as this is vital, so culture-building is seen as everyone's responsibility
- Not having inclusion as just a training programme, since it's in everyday moments, actions and behaviour
- Not emphasising only on numbers and quotas, as these alone don't enable inclusion. Like one leader said, the numbers obsession leads to lowering the bar on quality of talent. Diversity & inclusion is about opportunities, not numbers, reservations and entitlements
- Providing psychological safety to speak freely and making engaging connections, as this is key to becoming inclusive
- Knowing how important sisterhood is, as women include other women. One leading company that has progressively employed 40% women was alarmed at how women did not apply through IJP for jobs that reported to women bosses. Encouraging women leadership to succeed, while women leaders offer key roles to other competent women, is ever so important to set off a virtuous cycle of inclusion and success
- Revisiting the idea of 'culture fit' to not perpetuate biases, affinities and inner-circle hiring.

'Fit' can exclude, whereas real inclusion is a philosophy that everyone has something of value to contribute and that everyone has a right to belong.



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