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Perspectives on Women in Management in India

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Introduction

Today, India is a force in the global economy, with a high demand for talent. A key source of talent is educated Indian women. While Indian corporations have not yet fully recognized or utilized this talent pool, the growing gender diversity in Indian managerial ranks now offers a pathway for change for Indian women. Cultural and societal change means a shift away from traditional views, stereotypes and societal attitudes, with increasing opportunities for Indian women in management. While change is slow for Indian women to gain executive positions, they have made progress in management in a relatively short time.

This article provides a glimpse into the status of women in management in India. Based on in-depth interviews by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) with Indian professional men and women and findings from Indian research studies, this article aims to present perspectives that offer an increased awareness of the challenges and opportunities for women in management in India. Both Indian and non-Indian audiences will find this information insightful: Indian women considering career choices and/or aspiring to managerial roles, multinational corporations doing business in India, Indian corporations seeking a pipeline of talent and those wanting to learn about women managers in the Indian context.

Cultural Context

Historically, India has been a male-dominated society. Yet, in the past two decades or so, social change has opened the possibility for women to attain managerial roles in corporate India. As more Indian women enter the workforce, particularly in the corporate world, this change is in dramatic contrast to the traditional Indian culture, where a woman's

expected role has been to marry, raise the family and take care of the household. Amartya Sen, Indian author and winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, discusses gender inequality in his book *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. He points out that the social movement for Indian women had been—until recently—primarily focused on achieving better treatment of women and their well-being: “In the course of the evolution of women’s movement [...] women are not passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help brought about by society, but are active promoters and facilitators of social transformations. Such transformations influence the lives and well-being of women, but also those of men and children—boys as well as girls. This is a momentous enrichment of the reach of women’s movement.”¹

Remuneration Act of 1976, address equality in the workplace.² Yet, with long-held traditional and social views of women, and despite legislation, change can be slow. While female students graduate with honors from excellent business and engineering schools, most top positions in Indian corporations are still held by men.³

The percentage of women in management in India is roughly 3% to 6%,⁴ with approximately 2% of Indian women managers in Indian corporations.⁵ However, almost 96% of women workers are in the unorganized sector,⁶ and most statistics focus on labor in the organized sectors, leaving out the many workers in the unorganized (informal), unstructured sectors of the economy. According to the Office of the Registrar General in India, the 2001 India Census shows that the work participation

The growing gender diversity in Indian managerial ranks now offers a pathway for change for Indian women.

Historically, the “girl child” in the Indian family often did not have formal educational opportunities. Slowly, the literacy level of girl children is increasing, and gradually, women have begun to attend universities. Today, the number of women students in business schools has grown significantly. These changes are in large part due to a significant cultural shift in parental perspective—that is, an increased acceptance of giving education to girls—that allows for the possibility of women working outside the home, contributing economically to the family and even pursuing a career. With more Indian women in the workforce, a number of employment laws, such as the Equal

rate of female workers in rural areas is 31% and 11.6% in urban areas.⁷ Employment numbers for women, further detailed in *Women Workers in India in the 21st Century—Unemployment and Underemployment*, indicate that of India’s 397 million workers, 123.9 million are women: 106 million women are in the rural areas and 18 million in the urban areas. However, only 7% of India’s labor force is in the organized sector (including workers on regular salaries in registered companies), with the remaining workers (93%) in the unorganized or informal sectors.⁸

As a brief comparison, in the United States in 2008, of the 121 million

women ages 16 years and older, 72 million (59.5%) were labor force participants. Women comprised 46.5% of the total U.S. labor force (68 million women were employed in the United States—75% of employed women worked in full-time jobs and 25% worked on a part-time basis). Women are projected to account for 49% of the increase in total labor force growth between 2006 and 2010. In 2008, the largest percentage of employed women (39%) worked in management, professional and related occupations, and women accounted for 51% of all workers in the high-paying management, professional and related occupations.⁹ Globally, the number of women senior managers in large corporations is low. The March 2009 report, *Women CEOs of the Fortune 1000*, published by Catalyst (the U.S. firm working to expand opportunities for women and business), identifies the women CEOs of the *Fortune* 500 and 1000 companies. Of the *Fortune* 500 companies, 15 CEOs are women, including one Indian woman, Indra K. Nooyi, PepsiCo, Inc. (#59). Of the *Fortune* 501-1000, there are nine women CEOs.¹⁰ The statistics at the CEO level of these large companies clearly show that there is much progress to be made for women worldwide at this level of management.

Movement for Change

As social values change, Indian women have been entering the workforce in the past couple decades. Globalization has brought an influx of multinational corporations to India, with Western HR practices and concepts such as gender diversity in leadership roles. As opportunities for women in management in India slowly increase, women are entering professions previously seen as the domain of men in the corporate world: advertising, banking, civil services, engineering, financial services, manufacturing, police and armed forces, and emerging fields such as IT and communications.¹¹

At a recent speech to the Ladies' Circle International, Her Excellency,

the President of India, Shrimati Pratibha Devisingh Patil, showed her strong support of women and their potential to bring about change in society. She pointed out that to bring about gender equality, it is necessary to focus on educating and empowering women. Ms. Patil emphasized the need to strengthen processes that will promote economic and social development of women and urged this organization to increasingly concentrate its energies in this area. (To read the entire speech, please go to <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/sp210809.html>).¹²

Women in India have held important roles in politics, social organizations and administration. As noted by Dr. Sudhir Varma, a specialist in the field of gender and development in India, with a 36-year career in the Indian Administrative Service (the national civil service in India), “in spite of cultural and social taboos, more and more educated women are able to reach very high levels in the government, and the number of women in the corporate sector is gradually growing. There is no doubt that they have to constantly prove their efficiency to go up each step of the ladder. Corporate Indian women, earlier docketed into the routine repetitive work sectors like information technology, now head several national and Indian offices of international banks. They are also heading business and manufacturing houses.” Dr. Varma, currently the Director of the Social Policy Research Institute (SPRI) in Jaipur,

India, points out that “it is true that women face a certain amount of opposition from their male colleagues, but they now have full government support to grow along with men in their respective spheres. More and more women are now enrolling in MBA and other highly professional courses, and there is no bias against them during their placements.”

Generally, the Indian literature about women in management is limited. Yet, while research reveals a challenging environment for women in the business world in India, there is positive movement. Professor Pawan S. Budhwar, Head of Group, Aston Business School at Aston University in the United Kingdom, has written extensively on human resource management issues in India. In the 2005 study *Women in Management in the New Economic Environment*, he and his research team point out that “developments in information technology and related services sectors are helping women in India to move out of their traditional household roles and develop a career in organizations.” At the same time, they emphasize that merely having programs for women in the workplace will not be sufficient. Rather, there must be a true commitment on the part of senior management to hire women managers, including a policy for advancement linked to the business strategy.¹³ Indian women as managers offer key strengths, as noted in Figure 1. In fact, a good example of an Indian organization

Figure 1 | Key Strengths of Indian Women as Managers

- Ability to network with colleagues
- Ability to perceive and understand situations
- Strong sense of dedication, loyalty and commitment to their organizations
- Ability to multitask
- Collaborative work style—solicit input from others, with respect for ideas
- Crisis management skills
- Willingness to share information (interactive leadership style)
- Sensitivity in relationships (e.g., compassionate, empathetic, understanding)
- Behaving in a gender-neutral manner

Source: Adapted from Budhwar, P. S., Saini, D. S., & Bhatnagar, J. (2005, June). Women in management in the new economic environment: The case of India. *Asia Pacific Business Review*, 11(2), 179-193.

well-known for its women management is ICICI Bank Limited, India's largest private bank. Its Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer is Ms. Chandra Kochhar, who began her career with ICICI as a management trainee in 1984 and has headed the major functions in the Bank in different assignments over the years.¹⁴

Significant change in the workplace takes time. An article published in *India Together* points out that while media headlines project an image of great change by highlighting the few women who make it to the top, such news coverage can be misleading. There is much work to be done to achieve gender equality within Indian corporations, with systemic changes needed, to make sustainable change a reality.¹⁵ At the same time, Professor Sujoya Basu, a member of the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, argues that transformation in the Indian context for women in management can happen through policy and regulations that promote gender diversity and quality contact. She emphasizes that change can occur through the collective will to change the mindset of people to overcome gender differences at the educational and organizational levels.¹⁶

sector organizations provide economic growth and prosperity. Further, entrepreneurship has provided women in India the opportunity to enter social and political circles previously closed to them. Family background and support play an important role to achieve independence and move above the confines of a male-dominated traditional society. Experience in the sector, social class, caste and education are important. For most women entrepreneurs, financial stability in the household and family support are critical for their success.¹⁷

However, women in management face challenges due to stereotyping. A 2002 study *Gender Stereotypes at Work: Implications for Organizations* notes that stereotypes and perceptions of Indian women in the workplace appear to have had a significant negative impact on the position of women managers. This study suggests that Indian male managers are viewed, stereotypically, as working in the areas of sales, marketing and production; being good leaders, decision makers and bosses; and handling challenging assignments. On the other hand, Indian women are viewed as working in PR, HR and administrative positions at low to junior levels, and in fields such as fashion and beauty.

(“think manager—think male”). In contrast, Indian women managers did not project gender stereotypes on managerial positions.¹⁹

A 2005 study of senior women in public and private sector firms, titled *Women in Management in the New Economic Environment: The Case of India*, found that women look for work from economic necessity and for personal goals. Women in lower to middle socioeconomic status seek income opportunities, and those in the upper middle class pursue a career for professional ambitions. Women with higher education have more interest in independence, are career-oriented and interested in quickly moving up the organizational ladder. At the time of this study, 40% of female students attended management institutes in India. The key challenge for women managers is managing both their traditional role as housewives and their career. Women experience great pressure to work hard to prove themselves in the workplace, and one of the greatest obstacles is how women managers are treated by men. They often receive differential treatment, reinforcing the stereotypical view of being inferior and less important than men, resulting in not being offered challenging jobs and not being part of important organizational issues. Yet, despite social and attitudinal barriers, Indian women have gained some equality. Indian organizations are beginning to realize that women can do the same work as men, although in some cases, they have different needs.²⁰

“A supportive family, both before and after marriage, is a key factor for Indian professional women to succeed.”

Research Studies

The Indian literature on Indian women managers highlights challenges and opportunities for women and for organizations. A number of studies, spanning the years 2002 to 2008, document positive progress for women in the Indian management space as well as barriers to their progress. Research shows that the economic development of India has been positively influenced by entrepreneurial enterprises. The 2007 study *Women Entrepreneurs in India* notes that nonprofit and for-profit

Women in Indian organizations felt that such stereotypes result from not being given challenging assignments. Yet, male managers saw women as being treated more leniently than men when making mistakes.¹⁸ A 2008 study *Gender Stereotypes in Corporate India: A Glimpse* explored existing gender stereotypes in corporate India. According to this research, Indian men managers held similar managerial gender stereotypes as found in earlier Western studies. That is, they associate managerial success with men more than with women

Finally, a 2006 study *Women Managers in India* explored key issues for women managers in corporate India in service and manufacturing sectors and considered perspectives of men and women managers. The study found that when it comes to hiring practices, most men and women managers see employment as based on merit, not gender (90% men and 79% women), but only about one-third think that organizations look for ways to increase the number of women in senior management roles. In terms of organizational percep-

tions of importance of gender issues, overall, Indian organizations lack sensitivity about these issues and underappreciate women’s capabilities and talents. The study also examined management skills and leadership style and found that generally, men tend to want women to act like men, and most men are not comfortable working for a woman manager. Overall, women prefer an interactive style, and men prefer a command and control style. To be successful in business, women develop management styles that make it more comfortable for men to work with and/or report to a female manager. Lastly, the study concluded that major barriers to women’s advancement to corporate leadership include lack of mentoring of women, lack of awareness by women of company politics and an inhospitable corporate culture.²¹

Perspectives of Indian Women Professionals

To learn more about Indian women managers, SHRM conducted interviews with four Indian women professionals:

- Archana Bhaskar, HR Director, Shell Companies in India
- Hema Hattangady, Vice Chairman and CEO, Schneider Electric Conzerv India
- Dr. Juhi Kumar, Assistant Professor, Weill Cornell Medical College

- Navodita Varma, SPHR, President, Maanasvi LLC

Each of them offers a broad range of experience from her respective career—physician, business owner, HR director and CEO. Their perspectives reflect many of the research findings about Indian women managers. All emphasize the importance of family support, higher education, mentors, belief in one’s capabilities and a strong focus on personal and professional goals. While biases still exist in Indian society, each of these Indian women professionals sees expanding opportunities for women in India. As one of the interviewees points out, “we have indeed come a long way, from a nation condoning practices like female infanticide, dowry deaths and sati to one that endorses and encourages education, economic remuneration for the family, and economic and social reforms that have resulted in macro-level changes in the country and within organizations.”

Socioeconomics

As mentioned earlier, changes in the Indian economic environment are helping to shift traditional attitudes about women in the workplace. Dr. Juhi Kumar, Assistant Professor in Pediatric Nephrology at the Weill Cornell Medical College, New York City, remarks on the changes that she has seen. “In the past 10 years that I have been away from my country, things have changed tremendously,

and what gives me immense pride is the evolving role of women in the Indian workforce. Ten years ago, there were limited numbers of women in the workforce, in traditional professions like teaching and clerical-level positions in banks. Now, when I go back to India, I see women in increasing numbers in managerial positions.” As a result of economic changes, the earning potential of women has increased in importance. As one woman notes, “with the economy growing so fast and more people moving into the middle class, there has emerged a need for both the husband and wife to work in good jobs to maintain a quality of life that has become the order of the day.”

As Archana Bhaskar, HR Director for Shell Companies in India, observes, “there is certainly positive change for women in India in the workplace. There is a gap in the Indian talent market, with significantly more jobs than talented people. Today, women are thought of as great managers, often pursued strongly by search firms. In fact, several firms have targets to achieve on women numbers.” She goes on to explain that more and more women are now in professional careers. Multinational corporations have clearly led the way with their practices on diversity. The real change, though, has happened with the advent of the IT and business process outsourcing (BPO) industries, which has employed significant numbers of women and brought in best practices to enable women staff. In her experience, “Shell is absolutely a fantastic place for women to work. The diversity and inclusion practices and thinking are very advanced and well engrained. The core values of respect and inclusion for people and work/life balance, as well as flexible work practices, are seriously pursued, resulting in an environment where women thrive.”

Hema Hattangady, Vice Chairman and CEO of Schneider Electric Conzerv India (formerly Conzerv Systems), notes that the presence of Indian women managers ranges between a high of 6% and a low of

Figure 2 | Recommended HR Management Practices to Create a “Women-Friendly” Organization

- Senior management commitment to gender issues
- Career development programs for women
- Exposure of women to top management
- Leadership development programs for women
- Job rotation for women
- Recruitment of women at senior-level positions
- Regular survey of women to assess job satisfaction
- Mentoring programs for women
- Child care facilities at work

Source: Adapted from Saini, D. S. (2006). Labour law in India. In H. J. Davis, S. R. Chatterjee & M. Heur (Eds.) *Management in India: Trends and Transition* (pp. 60-94). New Delhi: Response Books.

3%. Women can be seen mainly in HR, IT, administration and other support functions. She emphasizes that there is still a lot to achieve with regard to women in management positions in India. “Although ever-evolving HR practices, diversity practices and factors like education have led to an increase in the number of women working in India, there is still a lot left to be done to develop, encourage and empower women for management positions.”

Family and Education

Education is the key differentiator for women in India. “Education of women is being given great importance, and what is heartening is that this change is permeating not only to the middle class but even to the less well-to-do lower-class families,” states Dr. Kumar. “Change in India is painfully slow, and it will probably be another decade before this shift to education for women reaches the villages where most of the India population resides.”

The stories of the four women interviewed for this article point to the criticality of family support and education for career success. As principal of her own HR consulting firm, Navodita Varma, SPHR, points out that coming from a family that valued education was very important. “I come from a well-educated upper-middle-class family. My grandfather was a professor of political science and had written many books on that subject. My father has a master’s degree in physics, and my mother, a master’s in history. After getting my MBA in human resources, I was fortunate to get good jobs. My husband pushed me to achieve as much as I could.”

Hema Hattangady, who heads up India’s largest energy management company, had unexpected changes that strongly influenced her life. The loss of her father when she was 19, and the resulting financial situation, contributed to learning some tough lessons. “It was at that time that I vowed never to depend on anybody for financial support again. Consequently, my education has played a

key role in my professional success in terms of helping me get some leverage in the business world where credentials can play an important part with regard to ‘getting a foot in the door.’ The fact that I was armed with an MBA from IIM, one of the premier management institutes in India, helped convince my people that I could definitely be of some use in our then small family-run enterprise.”

Born into a family of teachers, Dr. Kumar received constant encouragement from her family on her professional journey. Her mother had a dual master’s in Hindi literature and history, and a bachelor’s degree in education, and this level of education was unusual for women in India at that time. “It is these major influ-

ences that continue to guide me and help me live my life by a certain set of values and principles,” says Dr. Kumar. She points out that her husband provided tremendous support, and through his encouragement, after moving to the United States, she got a master’s degree and then went on to do her residency in pediatrics and fellowship in pediatric nephrology, and now has a teaching position at a prestigious medical university.

“Today, most urban Indian men want educated and well-informed life partners.”

ences that continue to guide me and help me live my life by a certain set of values and principles,” says Dr. Kumar. She points out that her husband provided tremendous support, and through his encouragement, after moving to the United States, she got a master’s degree and then went on to do her residency in pediatrics and fellowship in pediatric nephrology, and now has a teaching position at a prestigious medical university.

Education and family support strongly contributed to the career aspirations of Archana Bhaskar, who now has a high-level position in human resources in a multinational corporation. She came from a typical middle class background in a tier 2 city (tier 2 cities are “emerging” with fairly good-value propositions of increasing interest for business investment and strong local political support). “My parents laid great emphasis on excellence in education and were willing to go to great lengths to support me in getting the right academic opportunities. My mother is very well educated (a dual master’s in political science and law), but she

Social Expectations

In India, the roles expected of a man, as the bread-winner, and a woman, as the home maker, have been refined. Yet, as do many career women in Western countries, Indian women struggle with work/life balance. India still has strong traditional social expectations, and not all women can easily juggle both family obligations and a professional career. Ms. Varma notes, “The expectations from the husband’s family after marriage—which include the woman giving up her career after marriage, childbirth

and then expectations that if she works outside of the home, she still needs to look after the in-laws, the house, the children and the husband—can prove to be too much for many women to handle, and they end up giving up their careers midway.”

As noted in Indian research cited earlier in this article, social attitudes and the difficulties of work/life balance are often among the major challenges for Indian women professionals. Ms. Bhaskar’s experience illustrates some of the difficulties in the workplace for women. “When I started working after my post-graduation in business management, there was not much support for women managers. You had to be like one of the men to succeed, work/life balance was almost thrown out of the window, and the one or two women that were in my organization were busy trying to compete with each other rather than help! Male colleagues and managers consistently refused to take me seriously, saying I was in the job for entertainment rather than to make a professional success.”

Success Factors

As the four Indian women professionals point out, a number of factors contribute to success for the modern Indian women in the workplace. Ms. Varma emphasizes that “a good education, effective communication skills (both written and oral), as well as a very professional attitude toward your work and co-workers, are the key to attain managerial roles. Mentors are also important, and I was lucky to get good bosses early in my career who gave me full freedom to work and to take decisions and who were mentors for me.” Hema Hattangady’s mentor,

Finally, as Archana Bhaskar shares from her experience, success is a mix of tradeoffs, perseverance and focus. “I succeeded largely due to my professional excellence and intellectual abilities and, of course, unstinting support from my husband. However, there were times when I had to often make choices and limit my sphere of impact (that is, perform below my capacity) in order to optimize my life and career. Somewhat later into my career, sponsorship and mentoring played a key role in getting the right breaks. Being able to define clear personal/professional choices was important.”

women should derive inspiration from positive role models, such as India’s President and First Lady, Shrimati Pratibha Patil, and Shrimati Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the ruling party, the Indian National Congress Party. He also notes that the Indian government provides tax breaks for working women, a privilege provided in very few countries. In his experience, companies are trying to increase the number of women in their workforce through various diversity programs.

SHRM also interviewed Vijayan Pankajakshan, Director of HR at an Indian subsidiary of a global supply chain organization. He points out that “due to strong societal changes, there is now a dialogue, beginning at the very top, about inclusive growth, with India now having its first woman President, and legislation is likely to follow, to ensure a certain percentage of women are represented in the Federal Parliament, the 30-plus state legislatures and even in local/community groups. This could well result in Indian industry having to voluntarily take affirmative action quickly or fall in line with the law, and think hard about how to increase the number of women in management, particularly at senior levels in their organizations.” He further explains, “Disadvantaged sections of society (across gender), for many years now, have and are still provided reservation quotas in various walks of life, like education, jobs in public sector and even in federal/state legislatures. This has resulted in more women, with caste as the segmented variable, to enter various walks of life that were hitherto a male-dominated bastion.”

Mr. Pankajakshan continues, “One main reason that India is not yet getting sufficient traction on the subject of women in management is that leaders in most Indian organizations, in general, do not see including more women as a way to diversify the quality and variety of their workforce. In most cases, organizations are hesitant to go outside the framework used for the past many years, and thus stereotypes are handed down. Line and hiring managers are risk-averse

“Go above and beyond—consistently exceed performance expectations.”

Mr. T. Thomas, the former Chairman of HLL India and Unilever’s first Asian director, was instrumental in her success: “Once you have a mentor who backs you, you have the confidence to move forward.” Some of her challenges included being a novice female CEO in a male-dominated technical marketplace, supervising a father-in-law, brother-in-law and husband, and creating a brand from scratch. “Mentoring is one of the principle reasons that I was successfully able to turn a fledgling family-owned concern into a world-class energy management organization.”

Being a lifelong learner is also essential for success. According to Ms. Hattangady, “tacking a new education line onto your resume proves to your employer that you’re committed to improving your skills and that you care about being good at your job. Besides simply raising your salary and hopefully earning you a little more attention, a master’s in business administration can also help decrease the gender gap. While women without a bachelor’s degree earn on average 9% less than their male counterpart, an MBA decreases that gap to about 4%.”

Perspectives of Indian Men Professionals

To provide balance to this article by offering the Indian male perspective, SHRM spoke with two Indian human resource executives who are men. Both of them clearly point to change through society and strongly acknowledge the value of women in management. One of the men interviewed is a Vice President of Operations, with responsibility for strategic HR, change management, global staff and talent management, at a global IT company. He notes that globalization has had an immense impact on the traditional Indian society and, consequently, on women. Society is trying to catch up with a changing world but slowly. From his viewpoint, “the good news is that it is moving forward and not backward. I had a lot of female members in my offshore team who used to work late in the night and were as effective and, in some cases, even better than their male counterparts.” He has also points out that women with family support are much better positioned to do well in corporate India. He adds, “Men are willing to accept women as their managers, but they would expect them to display the two Cs [character and capability].” He suggests that

to experimenting with new ways of workforce diversification. It will eventually be the external pressure from society that will change this.”

Mr. Pankajakshan emphasizes that “including more women should not be about percentages and quotas—rather, the end result should be to better align the organizations with the changing societal values and norms, rapidly changing dynamics of customer behavior and the transforming interfaces with society and the global environment. The way to reposition the debate is to focus on the missing opportunity to better serve the customer.” One of the difficulties,

highly developed unique competencies that men cannot easily match (e.g., listening skills, conflict resolution, multitasking—due to their significant roles in the family space). Although this is beginning to change, women in India still have to bear the burden of unique family and societal expectations, such as taking care of the family, and this results in women dropping out of their careers at important stages. In dual-income families, more often than not, on relocation to a new city, it is the woman who has to ‘postpone herself’ and follow her spouse. The Indian federal government does this process much better for its civil

focuses on setting a strong agenda for women executives—including private and public sectors and multinational corporations—to leverage the large talent pool of women, creating opportunities for them and, ultimately, sharing the rewards of best practices to make a contribution to business and society. These forums have been hosted by major corporations such as Infosys Technologies, Indian Oil Corporation, Tata Consultancy Services, Deloitte, KPMG and ONGC Ltd.²² Another organization that promotes women leaders is India’s National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) through its IT Women Leadership Summit.²³

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he notes, is that talent bench strength, irrespective of gender, continues to be a problem: “Indian companies tend to emphasize more the importance of qualifications (e.g., an MBA/engineer for most jobs), and hence they are missing a lot of differently qualified and able people who have the competencies and talent but do not fit the commonly emphasized criteria. If we profile senior management roles in various Indian organizations, there are very few atypical examples (e.g., qualified in anthropology, mining, liberal arts, experience of having served in the defense forces). There is an overreliance in the hiring processes of India Inc. [a common term used in India to refer to the corporate sector of the nation] to tend to fall back on what has worked in the past. Most organizations are reluctant to go beyond comfort zone parameters.”

Finally, Mr. Pankajakshan states, “I strongly believe that women have

servants and ensures that if the couple are both working, roles and locations are found where both can be stationed together. The private sector has not done enough on this front.”

Industry Forums and Networks

In India, there is a growing number of industry forums and networks that actively help women managers deal more effectively with corporate challenges, particularly with progressing in their careers. A leading organization for women is the Forum for Women in Leadership (known as WILL). Founded by Poonam Barua in 2007, WILL brings together senior women executives from across corporate India. The purpose is to develop an open dialogue on women’s aspirations and opportunities, nurture mindsets, and mentor and harness the rewards of collective thinking to improve the workplace. WILL

Such groups and forums provide opportunities for women to learn, grow and become leaders in their fields. They fill a need in the marketplace, because both society at large and Indian organizations have to work together to make the Indian workplace supportive for women.

Finally, the U.S. business magazine *Forbes* recently published its 2009 list of “The 100 Most Powerful Women.” Such listings provide visibility to women, further promoting public credibility. A number of Indian women are on this list: Ranked at #3 is Ms. Indra Nooyi, Chief Executive, PepsiCo; #13 is Ms. Sonia Gandhi, President, Indian National Congress Party; #20 Ms. Chanda Kochhar, Chief Executive, ICICI Bank; and #92 Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, Chairman, Biocon.²⁴

Recommendations for Indian Organizations

As cultural mores change and Indian society more broadly supports Indian women in managerial positions, organizations need to be more open and make appropriate changes in their workplace. From the Indian research study *Women in Management in the New Economic Environment: The Case of India*, the following are recommendations for Indian organizations to promote a supportive workplace for women.²⁵

- Develop policies that create a women-friendly workplace environment.
- Establish training programs for women, such as mentorships, career guidance and leadership development.
- Promote awareness initiatives that highlight the value of women managers.
- Elicit input from women employees regarding policies, promotion and performance review processes.
- Make accommodations for women in areas such as need-based postings. That is, as done in civil services, have a policy to post both spouses to the same district or state.
- Have a true commitment to hire and promote women and include women in the annual business strategy.

In Closing

In today's global economy, Indian corporations need talent in order to be competitive. Generally, women as managers are underutilized in corporate India. To advance women in managerial roles, support by top management is essential. Promoting diverse management practices and opening doors to women in management—through proactive human resource policies and programs—is one way for Indian organizations to expand their talent pool and, ultimately, their leadership pipeline. As highlighted by the Indian women professionals interviewed for this article, specific success factors—a good education, mentoring, family support, strong communication skills and life-long learning—are essential for Indian women managers today. While traditional Indian cultural viewpoints are slow to change (and not all women want a career in management), positive change for women in the business world in India is moving forward.

Endnotes

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