

Today's Paper » FEATURES » OPPORTUNITIES

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Quest for top positions

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While there is a growing presence of women in the professional and services sector, with women accounting for over thirty percent of the workforce in India, their presence in key decision making and board-level positions is a dismal 7%, according to survey results posted by Myhiringclub.com on IBN Live.com.

It is not that we are bereft of success stories. Women are at the helm of at least ten major financial institutions in India. An article on women CEOs in CNNIBN live.com notes women business leaders like Chanda Kochhar of ICICI Bank, Shikha Sharma of Axis, Naina Lal Kidwai of HSBC, Vinita Gupta of Lupin, Leena Srivastava Reliance Infrastructure, Radha Singh of Yes Bank, Renu Sud Karnad of HDFC Ltd, as some of the women who have made it to top jobs, cutting across sectors, and who are now role models and a source of inspiration to millions of professional women around the country.

However, considering the huge number of highly qualified women who are now entering the workforce and choosing to build long term careers and professions, the numbers just don't seem to match up.

The problem, it appears, is not in the intake- but in the upgrade. While more than 30 percent of the workforce in India today is made up of women, only 15 per cent are in executive roles. The numbers decline dismally as one goes higher up the pecking order.

Reasons for low incidence of women in top jobs

The problem is that many women employees allow themselves to be bracketed into traditional areas like HR or marketing, and once they find their groove, they are quite reluctant to step out and explore other areas.

Top people are usually required to have wide cross functional experience across key disciplines, and to be able to make the cut for board-level posts, women have to step out of traditional job brackets and move to areas where they can get cross functional experience and where their contributions are more likely to be noticed and valued.

A lack of female role models and mentors can create a climate of discouragement and apathy in women when aspiring for top jobs, notes Ms. Pallavi Sharma, General Manager – Human Resources, Fiserv India.

“Although many of the structural barriers that might impede women in their attempts to climb the corporate ladder have been removed through legislation to promote gender equality and to combat discrimination, there is no denying the reality that men continue to predominate in the upper tiers of management. It is partially due to a lack of female role models and mentors encouraging potential women leaders, as well as the barriers derived from stereotypical attitudes and perceptions that continue to compartmentalise people and leadership qualities by gender.”

She adds, “The real problem that women face is not a lack of leadership abilities, but the ability to make tough choices, especially when it comes to work-life issues. Women do not have a problem developing an effective leadership style; however they struggle more than men with work-life issues, are not able to spend time/energy in socialising and networking as they would save this for their family and personal life.

This factor may have contributed to the increase of female entrepreneurs who have exited the corporate rat race to develop their own successful businesses,”

Mr. Madhu Raghunath, Head, Human Resources and Organisational Capability of TVSundaram Iyengar & Sons Ltd says, “The reason for them (women) not advancing in the Indian context is more to do with social factors. This is changing now and we can find women accepting roles which require them to travel extensively stay independent of their families and yet manage their social context just as men do.

However this still to a large extent depends on the support which they receive from their families and from the organisation in the form of women friendly policies and practices.”

Are things changing?

The popular prediction is that the increasing participation of women in the workforce will have a cascading effect in the next half decade or so, and the corporate heads we interacted with couldn't agree more.

“Recent trends show increase in the number of women being hired. Since this is a recent phenomenon, it is imperative that it would take some time for these young budding corporate women to come up to the top of the career ladder in management roles,” says Ms. Sharma of Fiserv.

Striking a similar note, Mr. Madhu Raghunath elaborates, “We will see far greater change in the next half decade with women participating in the workforce on par with the other South East Asian countries. For this we will need to have a strong and robust IT system and progressive policies to retain talented women. We must encourage and actively seek

out women applicants for all jobs across functions.”

Ms. Srimathi Shivashankar, Associate Vice President, HCL Technologies opines, “To succeed in today's global economy, it is imperative to identify, motivate and guide women professionals. Inspiring women to assume leadership positions is a top management priority at HCL.”

As she rightly points out, women are no lesser than their male counterparts when it comes to professional qualifications or business acumen. “One's gender does not decide one's success path, it is the true grit, will and determination that an individual must possess in order to climb the ladder of success and emerge a winner.”

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