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Women's Empowerment and Their Decision Making Positions:

A Sociological View

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Abstract

The low proportion of women among economic and political decision makers at all levels reflects structural and attitudinal barriers that need to be addressed through positive measures. Government need to have a system to asses public sector performance from a perspective of gender equality. Women are also entering in the high-level decision making positions in both public and private sectors. Women have come through tougher challenges that typical men never face. Many women are coming up as entrepreneurs / employers as well. These women, with their innovative ideas supported with foresight are running successful businesses. Women leaders have an enormous potential to influence the way people live and work, by promoting fairer management practices, a better balance between work and family life and reducing gender disparities within the workplace. The United Nations Fourth World Conference of Women deliberated that Women's organizations, non-governmental organizations, trade unions, social partners, producers, and industrial and professional organizations need to play an active role by building solidarity among women through information, education and sensitization activities. Support from family is very important for working women. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992-1993) in India reserve 33 percent of seats for women in three tiers of government. At last, women themselves must have the courage to work against all odds in order to prove their grit. They must be self-motivated to actualize their potentials and must fix their priorities and focus must be maintained in face of all the diversions.

Women in India today constitute a large proportion of workforce but only 14 percent are in top management. Government, private sector organizations, public sector organizations, and other organizations, do not seem to make full use of women's talents and potential as top-level managers and policy makers. They have to face discriminations of different types at the workplace. Society certainly needs to change its attitude towards women, especially when they are exhibiting their capabilities in every field because the changes at workplace can be brought about only through changes in society. Utilizing the capabilities of women will not only help reduce gender imbalance but will also help organization adding value to its products and services. There are many problems at each level viz. individual, family organization, and government policies regarding women and their effective implementation and the attitude of society.

Even in the 21st century, it is not easy for a woman to succeed in the arena of workplace. Sex ratio, literacy rate and other statistics about women in India do not present a very optimistic picture.

It seems justified that in a free society, every individual must be given equal opportunities in decision-making and leadership and to exercise legitimate power at all levels. But various researches and studies have shown that women face discrimination in this area besides many other spheres of life. According to findings from the Grant Thornton International Business Report (IBR), 38 per cent of businesses do not have any women in senior management roles, a figure, which has remained unchanged since 2004. Only in 22 per cent of the businesses worldwide, senior positions are held by women. Women constitute around 48.3% of India's population as per 2001 census and are a precious human resource.

Women Employment – Present Situation: It is essential to take an overview of total employment situation of women in the lower, middle and top management levels because women who are at lower and middle level today are the ones who would probably take higher positions in future. Workforce participation of women has been considered as one of the indicators of gender imbalance. It is estimated that 124 million work in India (National Sample Survey Organization, 2000). This represents 31 percent of total workforce. Government's Economic Survey for 2003-2004 estimated that there were 4.95 million women in organized sector which constituted about 18.1 percent of the total organized workforce.

As per the Ministry of Labor's (Government of India) statistics as brought out in 2005, there are about 5.07 million working women in the organized sector in India (Business Today, 2007). Of these, the Central Government employs about 0.6 million; the State Government and bodies under the state governments employ about 1.7 million; local bodies employ a little under 0.6 million; and the private sector and the smaller establishments employ about 1.8 million and 0.3 million respectively. A survey by Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) showed that percentage of women employed in medium companies was 18 percent, large companies 4 percent (including heavy industries where women intake is very low), on an average these companies had 6 percent women on their rolls. At junior management level, women constitute 16 percent, middle level 4 percent and senior most level, just 1 percent.

Statistical analysis for 1983, 1987-88, 1993-94, 1999-2000 and 2004-05 2006-2008, shows the work participation rate of women increased to some degree, especially in urban areas. About 6% more women, mainly younger women, joined the labour market in 2007-08. The population of working women has risen from 13% in 1987 to 25% in 2001. The ratio of educated women to educated men is 40:60 (graduates and above). Women comprised 5.68 per cent of the total workforce of Public Sector Units in the year 2001, up from four percent in 1991. The figures relating to working women, when compared with the statistics of male population, clearly indicate the women are under-represented in governance and decision making positions. At present in India, less than 8% of parliamentary seats, less than 6% of cabinet positions, less than 4% of seats in high courts and the Supreme Court are occupied by women. Less than 3% of administrators and managers are women. Though exact statistics are not available, women in PSUs head not even a handful of companies. Between 20,905 women managers and 250 top jobs, only one or two could make it to the top by 2005. The rest were stuck at the lower and middle levels of the managerial hierarchy. A study by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), published in the year 2008 titled 'Women Top in Education: Why miss Top Positions?' (Only 3.3% of women make it to key posts in India, 2008) has shown that 78.9 per cent of them despite putting hard work are able to reach only at middle management cadre at the end of their career.

Decision Making Positions of Women: A decision-making position can be considered as a position from where it is possible to take or influence a decision within a domain (at organization level) where the scope is limited to organizations having a major influence in the domain at the national level and within an organization (at hierarchical level) where the scope is limited to those levels that have a major impact on decision-making in the organization. This section discusses the participation of women in decision making position and the possible reasons for success of these women. As observed from the data given in the previous section, such percentage is small but it deserves a mention. Despite all the social hurdles, a few women have become successful in their areas. India, in its history, has for the first time elected a women president in the year 2007. Women are also entering high-level decision making positions in the private sector. The phenomenon is witnessed internationally. Among Fortune 500 companies in 2006, 10 were run by women. Women leaders have an enormous potential to influence the way people live and work, by promoting fairer management practices, a better balance between work and family life and reducing gender disparities within the workplace.

It is also essential to understand the opportunities that exist for women because first identifying and then using these opportunities is one of the basic requirements for ultimately reaching the top. In 1996, there were 8.4 million unemployed educated women registered with the Employment Exchange. This is primarily because of lack of awareness about opportunity (Business World). Banking and insurance have provided new areas of opportunity for women, and nationalization has been a key factor in countering some aspects of gender discrimination. In area such as electricity, construction, trade, transport and communication, finance and insurance, and community services, employment in the public sector is an important factor in boosting women's employment. A study by Kaila (1998) brought out certain interesting facts about women managers. While men work for money, status and satisfaction, women work for the same, but in a reserve order. If job expectations are not fulfilled it leads to stress and anxiety in 64% of them. Thus women seem to want to give their maximum to their work. 66% think that they do not feel that they are breaking into man's world. This is indicative of the increasing confidence in their capability. But these are the findings of a single study and it might not be safe to generalize them for the entire country. Nevertheless, it does indicate towards some trends.

Many women are coming up as entrepreneurs / employers as well. These women, with their innovative ideas supported with foresight are running successful businesses. Women entrepreneurs constitute one tenth of the Indian entrepreneur universe (The Economic Times, 2007). A research conducted by Dhameja (2002) on Women Entrepreneurs found that these women feel that the qualitative shift in women entrepreneurship has taken place from low cost, low technology to high cost, high technology and more socially respectable entrepreneurial areas. They are also venturing into rather unconventional sectors like setting up Industrial Security firm, aviation academy, bartending academy and so on. Increased women education was considered to be main reason which has been instrumental in increasing their participation in entrepreneurial activities. Several researchers have attempted to explore the reasons for success of this handful of women. Woods (1976) found that the ten essential traits for women to succeed in management are competence, education, realism, aggressiveness, self-confidence, career mindedness, feminism, strategy, support of influential male and uniqueness. The inherent traits of women managers like democratic and participative leadership style, sharing power and information and attempt to enhance follower's self-worth perfectly fit-in today's organizational structure and style of working. Differences in leadership styles of men and women have also formed a topic for many studies. On the basis of

various studies Robbins (1999) concluded that women have a democratic leadership style while men feel more comfortable with directive style.

These are indicative of transformational style of functioning. Transformational leaders are better visionaries and more inspirational in approach. They tend to communicate a clear and acceptable vision and goals, with which employees can identify and tend to engender intense emotion in their followers. This could perhaps be one of the reasons for the emergence of women executives in the present times in various professions where people may be preferring democratic leadership style. Transformational leader has a major impact on the quality and efficiency level of their subordinates (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Hackett and Allen, 1995).

Reasons for Gender Imbalances: Despite their inherent talents and skills and increasing educational levels, the percentage of women in high positions of decision-making remain very small when compared with males in power. In 1997 ratios of women to men in managerial positions in India was found to be 2:100 (Neft & Levine, 1997). Though this percentage has shown an increase since then, yet the number remains very low.

Table-1: Proportion of Women in Top Management in Various Sectors

Sector	Proportion (% of Women in Senior Management)
Information Technology	8
ITES/BPO	14
Retail	12
Financial Services	40
Telecom	7
FMCG	11
Manufacturing	6
Hospitality, Travel	45

(Source: *Business Today*, September 23, 2007)

Table-1 shows percentage of women in top management in different sectors on the basis of a survey (Business Today, September 2007). All the sectors shown in the table have less than fifty percent women in the top management. The concept of 'glass ceiling' that explained this imbalance may now be replaced by the concept of 'labyrinth' – a full of turns and obstacles, according to an article in the Havard Business Review (Business Today, 2007). Women have come through tougher challenges that typical men never face. Various studies have tried to delve into this issue. It has been stated that women who work, carry a double load as employee and housewife (Abraham 2002).

They are playing varied roles and reconciling between tradition and modernity. Van Fleet and Sourage (1984) in their research findings stated that although women can assume the role of a business career, they do experience difficulty in shedding their role as housewife or mother. This gender imbalance at the top exists not only in India, but also in other Asian and European countries, though the situation in terms of numbers is better in European countries. In Grant Thornton International Business Report (IBR) Netherlands with 27 percent women in top management stood at the lowest position. Philippines, with 97 per cent of businesses accommodating women in senior

management positions the highest in the survey was the only country where women on board in various countries also remain very low, as depicted in Table-2.

Table-2: Percentage of Women on Boards in Certain Countries

Country	Percentage of Women of Board
Kuwait	2.7
Italy	2
Japan	0.4
US	13.6
Norway	22
Taiwan	13
Philippines	13
Hong Kong	9
Spain	19
Sweden	9

(Source: *Business Standard, Women Make gains in Arab Boardrooms, 20, May 2008, p 6
 **More Indian women in senior management: Survey 'Business Line, 2007)

There are many constraints that seem to slow down the pace of career advancement of women in India. The work culture is changing fast but the attitude of society towards women is not changing at the same pace. Late hours at work place, mixing freely with male colleagues and other such issues may still be a problem for working women. This has been corroborated by many surveys and studies. Various constraints have been classified and discussed as follows:

Balancing Work and Family Life: Women are required to fulfill many expectations in various roles that they play. This often results in excessive stress and burnout. Generally, a man is considered successful if he does well in his career, but a woman is successful if she is accountable and has a great work-life balance. A woman has to always overachieve to be on par with a man. In Kaila's study, about 66% women feel that they could have achieved more professionally, had they been a male. They are not able to involve in various socializing activities considered important for furthering career due to time constraints (Singh 2002). Such situation definitely affects their prospects of reaching to the top. Women face a lot of problem pursuing their career, especially after marriage.

Restrictions on Mobility: Generally, mobility of working women gets restricted after marriage due to various family commitments. They usually end up compromising with their choice of job and work, which is also a deterrent in their climbing higher rungs of career. Even if a woman chooses to live away from her family to pursue her career, life for a single woman may not be easy. Findings from my observation show that women are faced with problems of mobility and slow promotions due to time constraints and family responsibilities and social constraints. These women delayed their promotions rather than take transfers to different cities. They give quality time to children and do not give priority to promotions and career growth. In Assocham study (2008) 34.66 per cent respondents found it difficult to travel with home responsibilities and were not eager to take a transfer and job promotion for family reasons and remain satisfied with their current position. They may even have to leave jobs or take long leave without salaries when the husband gets transferred.

Preference of Jobs: Women may not always be in a position to choose any job of their choice because of family constraints. Part time jobs or jobs with flexi-timings may be viewed as be more suitable in the present Indian scenario because of their conditioning towards family commitments.

Low Occupational Prestige of Wife's Occupation: After marriage, women may have to leave a job and restart with new career possibilities. This breaks the continuity with adversely affects their career advancement and their chances of reaching higher levels because usually employee reaches at higher levels in organization only after having worked for several years and gaining experience. Male is rarely expected to do so after marriage. It has been stated in a study that when husband and wife work in India, the wife's occupational prestige is lower than that of her husband. (De'Souza, 1998)

Gender-specific-Traits Stereotyping: Working women at high positions face another dilemma of unique kind. In society a successful leader is supposed to be aggressive, competitive, achievement oriented, self-confident and independent. These traits tend to be more often associated with men and women. Women are generally depicted as emotional, passive, dependent, nurturing, intuitive and submissive. A women officer is often faced with a paradox. If she displays the culturally defined traits as a woman, she is rejected as an unacceptable officer. Is she acts according to male defined role of a leader; she is condemned as being unfeminine. This dilemma may affect her capability of handling different situations effectively.

Gender Stereotyping: Gender stereotyping may also be an obstacle. It involves generalization of women's abilities and willingness to accept positions of responsibility and decision making. This type of attitude assumes that all women have similar interests, visions and constraints. This is obviously not true as they do not belong to a homogeneous group. The result of this may be that women may be placed in less strategic areas of activities of an enterprise or organization crucial factors for climbing the ladder to top management jobs. This situation forms a vicious circle, as surveys of chief executive officers of companies reveal their view that few women possess appropriate business experience and that they have not been long enough in a variety of management positions to be selected for top executive jobs.

Perceptions Regarding Women: A study has shown that companies with more women on their boards perform better than those with very few women ('Firms with more women directors perform better', 2007). One conclusion from the studies pertaining to the gender context perspective indicates the importance of 'perception' as compared to 'actual behaviour'. Significant differences have not been found to exist between men and women managers when factors like age, education and level in organization, are controlled. Women managers possess the personality traits and the motivation to manage and also have the leadership skills, etc. that are required to be successful managers. However they are perceived as not in possession of such skills (Gregory, 1990). Thus if one has to improve upon differences in the situations of women and men in management, one should work on the 'perceptions' that prevail about women managers.

Lack of Family Support: The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) study (2008), found that the main challenges, the women face in their professional career, come from their family. The study claimed majority of the women (75%) felt that their husbands are not supportive and due to family reasons, they prefer to stay with their current small job position rather than take a transfer and job promotion. The key factor responsible for women not being able to make for the top position include the time constraints in their lives to achieve

higher positions as 42 percent working women felt that men could stay on late at work and do networking and liaison, which helps in job promotions.

Lack of Political Will: There seems to be some lack of political will in the country on the issue under discussion. This is in spite of the fact that much has been promised for upliftment and empowerment of women by different governments that come into power in India. This is evident from the fact that the Women's Reservation Bill providing 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures has been a non-starter through seven Lok Sabhas, from 1996 onwards. Successive governments have placed it on the floor of the house, only to have it shelved. In a significant development, the Union Cabinet approved on October 22, 2009 a proposal to increase reservation for women in urban local bodies from the present 33 percent to 50 percent. The provision will apply to the total number of seats to be filled by direct election, offices of the chairpersons and seats and offices of the chairpersons reserved for the SCs and STs. In this context, I & B Minister Ms. Ambika Soni said that the amendment would bring women into the decision-making process more effectively, but it is still a long way to go.

Female Education: Female literacy is also direct impact upon their work status. The Economic Survey has noted that in states with higher female literacy, there are more women working in organized sector. The increase in the number of educated women may contribute to the increase in number in organized sector, leading to increased probabilities of their reaching the top. It is generally seen that women who are at top are usually the ones who come from educated and / or financially sound families. There are only rare examples of girls from poor, rural backgrounds reaching the top. Such women at grass root level are yet to be empowered.

Table-3: Female Literacy Rate 1951-2001

Year	Percentage
1951	8.86
1961	15.35
1971	21.97
1981	29.76
1991	39.29
2001	54.16

(Source: Census of India 2001)

Recommendations: The low proportion of women among economic and political decision makers at all levels reflects structural and attitudinal barriers that need to be addressed through positive measures (www.un.org). Various policy reforms promoting women's rights may remain unsuccessful due to the lack of proper implementation and monitoring and accountability. Government need to have a system to assess public sector performance from a perspective of gender equality. Strengthening the effectiveness and transparency of these systems, and ensuring that all public services adopt and promote gender equality can help to address systemic gender biases. The United Nations has established a comprehensive code of corporate conduct focused on empowering and investing in women worldwide. These principles provide companies with a set of goals to measure progress, and investors a set of guidelines against which to assess corporate performance on gender equality. (www.un.org/ga/president).

Equality in decision-making is essential to the empowerment of women. Actions by various governmental and private sector organizations must be taken to build a critical mass of women

leaders, executives and managers in strategic decision-making positions. Criteria for recruitment and selection to senior positions in various bodies must be reviewed to ensure that the criteria used to not discriminate against women. Considering the restraints faced by women as discussed in previous section, career development programmes in various organization may be restructured to provide level playing field for women of all age groups. The United Nations Fourth World Conference of Women deliberated that Women's organizations, non-governmental organizations, trade unions, social partners, producers, and industrial and professional organizations need to play an active role by building solidarity among women through information, education and sensitization activities; advocating at all levels to enable women to influence political, economic and social decisions, processes and systems, and work towards seeking accountability from elected representatives on their commitment to gender concerns; establishing, consistent with data protection legislation, databases on women and their qualification for use in appointing women to senior decision-making and advisory positions, for disseminations to governments, regional and international organizations and private enterprise, political parties and other relevant bodies.

Free vocational training to girls in school and colleges can go a long way teaching them skills and encouraging entrepreneurship. To encourage girls for higher education, reservation may be introduced for them selectively. Women organizations and other non-governmental organizations may take the responsibility to educated women about their rights. Laws regarding sexual harassment in workplace should be compulsorily make known to all women employees. This problem is potentially demoralizing and demotivating for women to work. They must not hesitate to seek redressal in court. In India every 42 minutes, an incident of sexual takes place (www.unicef.org). In 1997, Vishakha guidelines were issued, making sexual harassment at workplace a violation of fundamental rights.

Support from family is very important for working women. The family must understand that she is not a superwomen who can do everything single-handedly and fulfill everybody's expectations at the same time. Her ambitions and expectations must be given due importance. Employers must provide equal opportunities to women and must not forget that women have to shoulder extra responsibilities at home as compared to men folk and therefore must be provided with extra facilities like flexible working hours, crèche facilities etc. this will reduce turnover rate and enable women employees to work with the organization as well as take care of their family. In a survey it was found that 90% of working women feel that they would continue working if their employers provided onsite crèches. In a sample survey of 2,143 educated housewives across Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, (A Businessworld Special; March 2002) 98.7% said they would have worked if they had got a flexi-work option.

Specific career-building strategies which have been found to help women advance include networking, career tracking and mentoring. Networking includes involvement in informal networks in organizations for obtaining information, visibility. Contacts and support for performing effectively and obtaining higher-level jobs. Career tracking involves identifying employees with high potential, and helping them gain visibility and experience through challenging and high-profile assignments. Another concept (Wirth 1998) Total e-quality strives to improve quality through emphasis on various aspects of business practices (Total Quality Management) and views employees as collaborators. Thus total e-quality implies encouraging a greater contribution from women and a better recognition, use and development of their aptitudes, recognizing that they may differ from those of men. These practices can go a long way in positioning women at top levels in organizational hierarchy.

Equal opportunities need to be provided at grass-root level. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992-1993) in India reserve 33 percent of seats for women in three tiers of government. For some, including women in the purdah (Veil), and low caste women, just attending the panchayat meetings is a big step forward. Others, including much marginalized women, have taken their participation much further to become women's activists. Little percentage of women who are at the top may facilitate other deserving female employees in reaching the top level. The study, by Haverford College Economics Professor Linda Bell, reveals that having a woman at the helm of a company is instrumental to the success of other executive women in quantifiable and significant ways; Women do best in women-led companies. Lastly, women themselves must have the courage to work against all odds in order to prove their grit. They must be self-motivated to actualize their potentials and must fix their priorities and focus must be maintained in face of all the diversions.

Conclusions: Concepts like gender equality, education for women and economic independence for women are slowly gaining grounds in this country but Indian women have to go a long way to achieve equal rights and position because traditions are deep rooted in Indian society. Working women will have to learn to tackle the problems and turn the disadvantages to their advantages. The recommendations given in the paper have the possibility of tackling the problem only if women are ready to demand their rights. The new women in workplace are simply demonstrating that it is not only possible to get to the top as a woman, but by bringing feminine talents to the stale industrial scene and being a women is actually an asset. Their traits can help make them better managers in the era of empowered employees who demand freedom in work and fairness in treatment. Various governmental and non-governmental organizations need to play an active role in this regard. Indian women are slowly gaining prominence in the professional and public sphere. Women are slowly trying to redefine the laws made for them. They are poised to because a power which can no longer be ignored.

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