



WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERSHIP-AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing trend of witnessing more working women, their share in top echelons of an organization is too lesser in percentage. There are studies predicting a significant economical strength with women occupying higher positions. Nevertheless, the number seems to be negligible and therefore the paper attempts to understand the perspective of women on leadership and its qualities. This empirical work conducted in Tamil Nadu is dependent on theories on leadership to identify the nature of a leader. Accordingly, women were asked to discuss their standpoint on what it is to be a leader and how good women are at executing it. The findings reveal that most women consider men to be better leaders with necessary leadership characteristics. The major reason for this perspective revolves around 'gender' factor as women consider themselves to be delicate in handling tasks and good at handling relationships. This trend is an impediment for India's economic growth and the nation's fight against gender discrimination.

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INTRODUCTION

The verb multi-tasking can be coupled well with working women across the world, given their duties and responsibilities towards family and workplace. This began the day women stepped out of both the virtual and real boundaries to enter job market and remains unaltered till date. The role of women in a family includes taking care of daily chores, raising children and dutifully performing the part of supportive staff to each member of the family whenever and wherever required. This determines the unflinching need for presence of woman in every household. As long as a woman restricted herself to performing these tasks, her difficulties and challenges remained constant and indoor.

As and when women began to exercise their right to freedom of education, other rights such as right to work, right to equal pay for equal work, right to expression of speech and right to fight discrimination against gender placidly followed. This eventually brought and continues to bring questions and responses, disputes and solutions, doubts and deliberations, injustices and justifications, discussions and agreements regarding women and workplace from all fronts. The participation of women in work has been there since time immemorial though the discussion of the same came in the later years. The most important reason is that women with minimal or no educational qualification join informal sectors

where the predicaments of women at workplace are given lesser importance. As women embark on formal organizational structure, the obscurity faced by women at work, organizational culture and policies, and the consequences are slowly focused.

Women and work

In spite of facts depicting that the role of working women contributes significantly to the economic growth of nations, her role is undermined. This statement is substantiated with available data on subjects such as lesser women workforce and the decreasing trend, underrepresentation of women in organization's top positions, unequal nature of labour markets and gendered organizations. There are specific apprehensions raised by working women as identified by the United Nations (UN) namely fair wages, flexible working hours, necessitating campaigns, social dialogue, collective bargaining, eliminating gender wage gap, providing maternity protection and childcare services, and lending protecting against sexual harassment in workplace (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2012 & UN Women, 2015). The existing literature on this area of study directs the researchers to handle the above mentioned problems from a gender perspective. Though there is no dearth of scope in conducting research on gender related issues at workplace, this paper attempts to study who exhibits better leadership qualities at workplace between male and female employees.

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India and women workforce participation

Among the total women population in India, around 48 per cent are employed (Catalyst, 2007). Yet, the labour force participation rate for women decreased from 37 per cent in 2004-05 to 28 per cent in 2010 (ILO, 2013, p. 79). On a global level, women contribute, on an average, 37 per cent to the GDP. Interestingly, women in sub-saharan Africa contribute 39 per cent and Indian women's contribution is one among the lowest, which is 17 per cent (NITI Aayog, 2015, pp. 148-149). In addition, there is an unequal participation of women across various sectors (NITI Aayog, 2015). It is important to state that if women's labour force participation is increased in India by 10 percent by 2025, the country's GDP would increase by 16 per cent (McKinsey, 2015).

The ILO statistics in the year 2013 (ILO, 2013) shows that only parts of Arab would hold a lower female labour force participation rates than India in 2013 apart from Pakistan (Andres, *et. al.*, 2017). From 2004-05 to 2009-10, there is a decline of 21.7 million female workers in India (Himanshu, 2011; Abraham, 2013; Kannan & Raveendran, 2012). The drop in female labour force participation is seen across all socio-economic and demographic groups (Andres *et al.*, 2017, pp. 20-21).

The women labour force participation in India is significantly high in rural areas when compared to its urban counterparts (Government of India [GoI], 2013-14; Catalyst, 2017). In rural areas married women participation is more whereas in urban areas unmarried women participation is higher (Andres *et al.*, 2017, p. 19). In India, upper caste women are discouraged from engaging in paid work (Boserup, 2008).

Women workforce and top positions

Gender is largely seen as an analytic category that witnesses extraordinary persistence through history and across societies of the subordination of women (Connell, 1987; Harding, 1986; Scott, 1986). On this backdrop, the entry of women into job markets or an organization does not ensure a guaranteed ladder-climbing in terms of hierarchy. In most of the organizations, the doorway to lower management is easy and welcoming for women and it takes a lot of effort and endurance to fight for vertical progress. Gender stereotypes say that there are natural or biological differences between men and women but empirical literature tells that they are far from natural. Discriminatory practices towards women leaders do exist and inequality between genders is a dominant practice all over the world (Lasma & Sintonen, 2001). The research conducted on stereotyping of U.S. Business Leaders Exposed in 2005 states that women "take care" and men "take charge" (Catalyst, 2007). The most powerful organizational positions are almost entirely occupied by men with the exception of the occasional biological female who acts as a social man (Sorenson, 1984). While organizations were being defined as sex-neutral machines, masculine principles were dominating their authority structures (Kanter, 1977) and it continues to remain the same.

Therefore, in India and the world, women are less seen in the higher echelons of an organization. Many research and international organizations have substantiated this statement with facts. According to the ILO (2016), there is an evident gender gap in women's representation in decision making and leadership positions across the world. The access for women

to senior managerial posts seems to be limited in many countries (Wilson, 1999). In some cases, the common job market *per se* looks unequal, facilitating the undemanding entry of men in the role of decision makers in organizations. This is more evident where socio-cultural factors influence the participation of women (ILO, 2017) along with structure of job markets (ILO, 2016, p. 45). The report of ILO says women in decision making roles are slowly increasing but not significantly; and states that the increase should be encouraged (ILO, 2015).

The reason as to why it is not only gender-neutral, gender-sensitive and gender-friendly but also beneficial for an organization to have more number of women at higher positions is the positive financial results. Many researchers have proved that companies with more gender-balanced management teams have better financial returns than those without such teams (McKinsey, 2015; Credit Suisse, 2014; Catalyst, 2015). Therefore, removing obstacles for women to scale heights and break glass ceilings in careers is affirmative for women, organizations and the society at large. In India, this gender gap is evident and participation of women goes lesser as the positions move higher. Women participation at different levels of a job in India is given below:

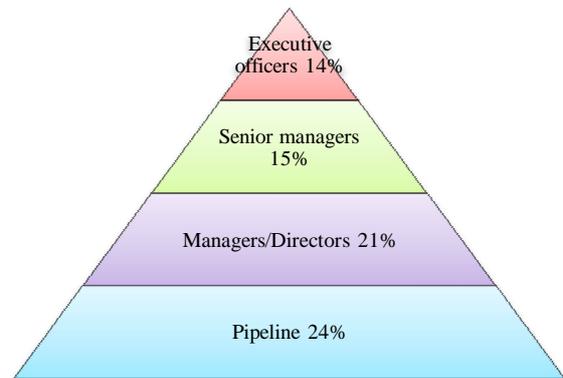


Fig 1 Organizational ladder and women participation

Source: Arthi *et al.* (2015)

For instance, almost 54 per cent of companies on the Bombay Stock Exchange have no women board directors (Banerji *et al.*, 2010) and a similar trend is evident throughout most companies, irrespective of their size, popularity, standard and business turnover. Similarly, gender pay gap increases as women advance in their careers (Paycheck India, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Based on these statistics derived from secondary sources, the following section presents the results and interpretation of empirical study conducted on leadership qualities. It explicates the opinion of women employees on leadership qualities and who is better as a leaders between men and women. The paper applies various theories on leadership to arrive at an approach as to how to study the perspective of women on leadership. The consolidated understanding of leadership theories is presented in the table below. This study is conducted in various public and private organizations across Tamil Nadu. The sample size is 42, 25 from public and 17 from private organization; the respondents are women employees from middle and upper management. Convenient sampling technique was used and age factor is not taken into consideration. Questionnaire method with both open and close-ended questions was used data analysis is carried out

using SPSS. Based on the theories mentioned below, the questionnaire was framed with questions on task orientation and relationship orientation of the leader and so was the interpretation of the analysis.

Significant Theories on leadership

Leadership is the ability to influence towards goal achievement; it can be broadly classified as formal and non-sanctioned (Robbins et al., 2013, p. 394). There are many schools of thought that discuss the nature and dimensions of leadership and the same is summarized below.

Natural leaders

The forerunner to all theories on leadership is the concept that strongly believes that leaders are born and not made. Despite the emergence and strengthening of various schools of thought on leadership, the study attempts to find if women tend to believe in this idea. The reason for this exploration is to correlate response for this to the following question on the connection between men and natural leaders. This study shows that almost two-third of the study population (56 per cent) agree to the concept of natural leaders.

Table 1 Theories on leadership

S.No.	Theory/Concept	Contributor(s)	Core idea	Explanation
1	Traditional Idea of Leadership	Many	1. Great Man Theory 2. Trait Theory (Judge et al., 2002)	Leaders are born, not made. Universal personality traits of a leader; traits are said to predict leadership (Robbins et al, 2013, p. 396).
2	Iowa Leadership Studies (Luthan, 2013, p. 416)	Ronald Lippitt and Ralph K. White	1. Authoritarian Leadership 2. Democratic Leadership 3. Laissez-faire Leadership	1. Directive, no participation, subjective 2. Group discussion, decision-making, objective 3. No leadership
3	Ohio State Leadership Studies (Luthan, 2013, pp. 416-418)	Interdisciplinary team of researchers	1. Consideration 2. Initiating structure	1. Relationship 2. Goal orientation
4	The Early Michigan Studies (Luthan, 2013, p. 418)	University of Michigan Research Centre	1. Production-centred 2. Employee-centred	1. Goal oriented 2. Relationship oriented
5	Group and Exchange Theories (Yammarino & Dansereau, 2002)	Chester Barnard	1. Positive exchange between leaders and followers	1. Mutual relationship between leaders and followers; followers' impact on leaders
6	LMX Model (Novak & Sommerkamp, 1982)	George B. Graen & Mary Uhl Bien	1. In-group associates & out-group associates	1. Leaders treat individual followers differently resulting in dyadic relationship
7	Contingency theory of Leadership (Fiedler, 1967)	Fred Fielder	1. Leader-member leadership 2. Degree of task structure 3. Leader's position power	1. Relationship oriented 2. Goal oriented 3. Position oriented
8	Path Goal Leadership Theory (House & Mitchell, 1974)	Martin Evans & Robert House	1. Directive leadership 2. Supportive leadership 3. Participative leadership 4. Achievement-oriented	1. Authoritarian 2. Friendly and approachable 3. Asks for suggestion and uses but takes own decisions 4. Sets goals and shows confidence that they will attain these goals and perform well
9	Charismatic Leadership Theories (Luthan, 2013, pp. 428-429)	Robert House & Bass	Charismatic leaders	Self-confidence, confidence in their associates, high expectation for associates, ideological vision, use of personal example, superior debating, persuasive skills, technical expertise, fostering of attitudinal, behavioural and emotional changes in their followers. 1. Exchange relationship • Contingent reward • Management by exception (active) • Management by exception (passive) • Laissez-faire
10	Transactional and Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 1978)	James Mc Gregor Burns, Bernard M. Bass & Avolio	Two types of political leadership 1. Transactional 2. Transformational	2. Leaders' shifting values, beliefs, needs of their followers • Charisma • Inspiration • Intellectual stimulation • Individual consideration
11	Substitutes and Neutralizers for Leadership (Kerr & Jermier, 1978)	Kerr and Jermier	Substitute/Neutralize following functions 1. Instrumental 2. Supportive	1. Task orientation 2. Relationship orientation
12	Authentic Leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003)	Avolio & Luthans	Qualities of an authentic leader & Positive psychological capabilities + highly developed organizational content	Confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical, future-oriented, gives priority to developing associates to be leaders Greater self awareness, self-regulated positive behavior in leaders and associations
13	Necessary skills for a leader	1. Whetten & Cameron (1991)	1. Verbal communication; managing time & stress; managing individual decisions; recognizing, defining and solving problems; motivating & influencing others; delegating; setting goals & articulating a vision; self-awareness; team building; managing conflict	
14		2. Marquart & Engel (1993)	2. Cultural flexibility; communication skills; human resource development; creativity; self-management of learning	

Most women feel that to make or create leaders are less effective than born leaders.

In addition to this response, the study population was asked to share opinion on the idea of ‘men are natural leaders’. The distribution of responses shows an unclear representation. A slightly high number of respondents (36 per cent) disagree to the concept of men naturally possessing leadership qualities. A very close number of respondents (34 per cent) accept that men are natural leaders. The rest of the respondents are neutral about this. This indicates that most women (two-third of respondents) have not convinced themselves that women are equally capable of being a leader, be it naturally or after necessary intervention. A total of 41 per cent of respondents opines that an individual’s qualities can be classified as feminine and masculine. This symbolizes that women agree to the ancient idea of stamping or categorizing characteristics of an individual based on gender. Therefore, a leader is believed to possess qualities that are associated with his or her gender and are not neutral as it is expected to be. It proves that women limit themselves in acquiring traits to groom themselves as leaders.

Best leadership type

The theories on leadership, as mentioned above, focus on various aspects of a leader and her tasks. Most of the theories classify a leader based on her orientation, whether towards goal or relationship. Adapting from these theories, this study takes Rensis Likert’s leadership style model to understand women’s perception on best leadership style and gender differences on the same. The research finding says that half of women respondents (50 per cent) find ‘participative leadership style’ to be the best among four followed by consultative style (31 per cent), exploitive authoritative style (14 per cent) and benevolent authoritative type (5 per cent). This shows that less hierarchical and friendlier approach are appreciated by women employees from their leaders. According to the respondents, male leaders are more authoritative (52 per cent), consultative (47.6 per cent) and participative (47.6 per cent); whereas female leaders are more benevolent (45 per cent). Except for authoritative style of leadership there is no distinct opinion shared by the respondents. Nevertheless, women are of opinion that men shine better in leadership positions given their masculine traits.

Who possess better leadership qualities?

Based on various theories on leadership, 10 qualities (Fig. 2) were identified and questions were posed to the respondents as to who is better at performing them.



Fig 2 Qualities of a leader

Source: Catalyst, 2007

The responses received show a scattered opinion and it does give a vague answer to the strong question as to who possess better leadership qualities. Women express that men are better

than women in planning (53 per cent), rewarding (60 per cent), delegating (52 per cent), supporting (57 per cent), team building (45 per cent) and influencing forward (52 per cent). Women feel that they fare better than men when it comes to role modeling (43 per cent), problem solving (52 per cent), networking (48 per cent), inspiring (52 per cent), mentoring (52 per cent), monitoring (50 per cent) and consulting (52 per cent). According to the respondents, both men and women fare equal in being intellectually smart to handle things at workplace. From these responses, the following interpretations are arrived at:

- The percentage indicates that women do agree that men possess better leadership qualities.
- According to women, men are better performing in terms of tasks and responsibilities as the data on planning, delegating and influencing indicate. This shows that the impact of men as leaders is direct to get things done from the subordinates.
- According to the respondents, women possess those qualities that are subtle in nature for a leader such as consulting and role modeling. This signifies that women tend to impact relationships rather than tasks.

Women and perception

From the above discussions, it is understood that women believe that men are better leaders and they possess necessary qualities to lead a group. Though there are several factors contributing to this perception, this study probes to find if it is the relationship structure within the organization. It tries to identify if the women respondents feel the presence of any discriminatory attitude towards women employees from their colleagues, subordinates and superiors. From the data collected, it is found that around 67 per cent of the respondents have felt that they were looked down by superiors on various occasions because of their gender. Similarly 60 per cent of respondents share that their actions were given less importance by their subordinates. This attitude is found lesser among their colleagues, according to women. This study, with this data, interprets that the relationship does influence the perception of women to hold leadership positions. On one hand, there is a demoralizing environment existing in most of the organizations that result in women doubting their own potential. On the flip side, women tend to accept the discrimination and prefer to not climb the organizational ladder.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to explore women’s perspective on leadership. In spite of growing number of women employees in today’s organizations, the number of women leaders is less and in some places their numbers go negligent. The causes vary from personal factors such as age, marital status and educational qualification, social factors such as caste and upbringing, and psychological factors such as inhibition and perception. This paper had taken organizational factor as the key element and it revolves around the styles of leadership, theories and traits of a leader. The major findings of the paper are as follows:

- Women believe that moulding oneself to be a leader is less effective when compared to a natural leader who is born with those qualities.

- Women agree to the idea that traits can be demarcated as masculine and feminine; thereby supporting that leadership qualities are predominantly masculine in nature whereas women tend to hold less effective traits. In addition to it, women believe that imbibing one's traits in opposite gender is challenging.
- Women consider themselves to be good at their own tasks but while leading a team they identify themselves to be more relationship-oriented than goal-oriented.
- Women employees do sense that their superiors, subordinates and colleagues are suspicious of their individual potential and leadership quality because of their gender.

This study shows that women seem to be less inclined to leadership qualities. Notwithstanding this perspective of women, their role in higher positions is highly significant according to many research reports. Therefore, it becomes essential for the organization and society at large to help women break their glass ceilings and escalate themselves professionally. It is interesting to note that governments in countries such as Norway and Germany have gender quotas for leadership positions (ILO, 2016, p. 45) to facilitate women's advancement in higher echelons. Similar attempts can be made in India by both public and private organizations. There is also an imperative need to address women employees psychologically and make them accept the fact that they are equally determined, energetic and intellectual to perform tasks and handle relationships. One way of stepping towards this is bringing in gender-neutral evaluation of jobs (ILO, 2016, p.61); performance needs to be evaluated on the same scale with equal pay. Another way is to orient women employees through personality training and workshops. Therefore, the management's role is crucial at an organizational level and personal inclination towards growth and advancement at an individual level would pay well to witness more women leaders at workplace.

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