Gender Stereotypes and the Career Development of Women in Corporate Management

Dr. Rita Latha D'couto, Associate Professor and Head, Department of Commerce
St. Joseph's College for Women, Alappuzha

Abstract

Although there has been a significant increase in the number of women entering the workforce and pursuing managerial careers, there seems to be an obvious disparity in terms of advancement into powerful positions at the top level of management. Global research has highlighted that gender role stereotypes prevalent in organizations constrain the promotional opportunities available to women. However, research studies reveal that developing women's managerial presence in corporate organizations is linked to enhanced productivity and performance. This highlights the need for examining whether stereotypical thinking about women restricts their upward mobility in corporate organizations. This research study examines the perceptions of 121 women managers working at the middle and senior levels of Indian corporate organizations in the private and public sectors as to whether the gender stereotypes generally considered to hamper women's career advancement prospects were prevalent in their organizations. The findings reveal that stereotypical assumptions about women's career aspirations, career commitment, competencies and suitability for managerial roles may influence their career paths and developmental opportunities, thus hampering their progress into top positions with power.

Keywords

Women in corporate management, Gender stereotypes, Sex role stereotypes, Women's career development, Career advancement of women corporate managers

Introduction

One of the changing social trends facing organizations today is the rapid influx of women in the labour force. A gender revolution appears to have been sweeping the corporate organizational structure with women steadily moving into occupations, professions and managerial jobs previously dominated by men. Women's access to education and training has improved significantly over the years, providing them with the necessary qualifications to aspire for jobs at the highest level of management. Governments, enterprises, and organizations have devoted much thought and energy to overcoming the attitudinal and institutional discrimination that hinders women's career progress and have committed themselves to policies and programs to advance women (Gupta, Koshal &Koshal,2006).

Management experts claim and various research studies suggest that women possess a unique interactive management style which needs to be better utilised by organizations (Jelinek & Adler, 1998). The previously unacknowledged "soft skills" that women possess like communication and teambuilding are now seen as vital within many companies when it comes to strengthening internal and external relationships(Haywards,2005).Research studies have also shed light on the positive contributions women make to organizations in the form

of unique perspectives on market, environmental and ethical issues and fresh insights, ideas and approaches to business deliberations(Burke, 1994).Enhanced productivity, competitive advantage and financial performance have also been suggested as three reasons why developing and promoting women managers are in the best interests of employers(Indvik, 2003).

However, the greatest challenge in achieving gender equality in organizations seems to be the slow pace in achieving a critical mass of women in top jobs with power. The increasing participation of women in the labour market and in managerial careers has not been accompanied by a significant increase in the proportion of women in the senior levels of management. They are still concentrated in the lower levels of management and breaking through the "glass ceiling" to reach the highest echelons of management appears to be an elusive goal for all but a select few(Wirth, 2002). The "glass ceiling" refers to a term coined in the United States in the seventies to describe "the invisible artificial barriers caused by attitudinal and organizational prejudices that block women from senior executive jobs." Women also have to contend with the "glass walls" which refer to the difficulty of attaining line positions that involve profit-and-loss or revenue-generating responsibilities, which are seen as critical for advancement to the highest levels (McRae, 1995). The majority of the women in the labour force also have to deal with the problem of the "sticky floor" which describes the forces that keep women stuck at the bottom of the economic pyramid. The number of women managers all over the world have increased at the lower and middle level positions, in non-strategic sectors such as human resources, personnel and administrative fields. The nature of these positions is such that they become dead-end after some time and do not offer scope for progress to the most powerful positions in organizations (World of Work: The Magazine of the ILO, 1998).

In this context, the present study examines the role played by gender stereotypes on the career development and upward mobility of women in corporate management. This study examines a number of explanations from the literature on career development of women in corporate management and also analyses the empirical data arising from the survey of women managers. The perspective studied is that of 121 currently employed senior and middle level female managers in a wide range of organizations, both in the public and private sectors.

Gender Stereotypes prevalent in Organizations

Stereotypes may be defined as sets of beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people. The tendency of perceivers to group people into categories and associate attributes with those categories is called stereotyping. It usually occurs when a given characteristic of an individual is particularly obvious or salient-such as sex or race (O'Leary& Ryan, 1994).

Gender stereotypes are organised consensual beliefs and opinions about the characteristics of women and men. These stereotyped attributes that people associate with men and women are both descriptive and prescriptive. Gender stereotypes are considered to affect allocation of resources and responsibilities, decisions about developmental opportunities and expectations of appropriate leadership behavior. Data from research studies indicate that most

organizations use gender as a basis for many decisions that ultimately affect the advancement of employees to senior positions. (Hale, 1996).

A large number of studies provide evidence of stereotyped thinking about women and suggests that this reduces their opportunities for attaining senior management positions. Stereotypes do not only influence recruitment and selection to a particular position; they also affect ongoing career development and performance evaluation.

Brenner, Tomkiewicz and Schein (1989) suggest that the single most important hurdle that women in management have to contend with is the stereotype that associates management with being male. The characteristics considered important for managers are the ones generally identified more closely with men than with women.

According to Powell, Butterfield and Parent (2002), the assumption that the good manager is inherently masculine is still found to operate, although the preference for masculine characteristics appeared to have decreased in recent years.

In the view of Ruderman and Ohlott (1992), preconceptions of women managers as less competent have led to the need for women having to prove themselves repeatedly in each new situation. As a result, women may not receive assignments having developmental potential and involving real risk and responsibility until they have excelled in trial situations.

Research shows that a narrower range of acceptable behaviour exists for female managers. Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky (1992) found that male managers were positively evaluated when they exhibited either autocratic or co-operative behaviour, but female managers were evaluated positively only when they behaved co-operatively.

Basu (2008) in his study of gender stereotypes in the corporate domain in India, explores existing managerial stereotypes in Indian corporates, the antecedents of such stereotypes, and the possibility of reducing stereotypical inaccuracies. The findings of this study revealed that Indian male managers see men managers as more likely to possess characteristics necessary for success in the workplace than women managers. However, this study brought out that women managers held more positive associations in terms of the traits possessed by women and managerial effectiveness. This study argues that a basic transformation at the level of policy making, along with a collective will for changing the mindset of the people is needed to overcome gender differences in organizations.

The present study

This research study examines the perceptions of 121 women managers working at the middle and senior levels of corporate organizations in the private and public sectors as to whether the gender stereotypes generally considered to hamper women's developmental opportunities were prevalent in their organizations. The women managers surveyed were presented with a set of stereotypical beliefs which were considered to impact the recruitment of women to managerial positions as well as their advancement to the highest levels of management. They

were asked to state to what extent these stereotyped beliefs regarding women, their abilities, attitudes, and career commitment were prevalent in their organizations. Their opinions were tapped on a 3 point scale ranging from "Highly prevalent" to "Not at all prevalent".

The responses of women managers were averaged to create mean scores for various categories of respondents regarding their perception of the prevalence of each stereotyped belief in their organization. The overall scores of these different groups on perception of prevalence of gender stereotypes were also computed.

Sector-wise comparison of prevalence of gender stereotypes

Table 1 presents a comparison of the mean scores of women managers from different sectors regarding the prevalence of gender based stereotypes which were likely to impact the career advancement of women.

TABLE 1

Comparison of Gender Stereotype Prevalence Based on Sector

Stereotype	Private			Public			z	p
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	n		
Women are less committed to their career	1.4	0.6	61	1.9	0.7	60	3.91*	0.000
Women don't fit into the corporate culture	1.1	0.3	61	1.2	0.5	60	1.66	0.099
Women value extrinsic factors like pay ,status and security more than intrinsic factors like job design, growth and achievement	1.6	0.6	61	1.7	0.5	60	0.73	0.465
Women should be placed in routine jobs with less risks and soft responsibilities	1.4	0.6	61	1.2	0.4	60	1.77	0.078
Women cannot take important decisions	1.1	0.4	61	1.3	0.5	60	2.38*	0.019
Women are generally not ready to relocate for the sake of career advancement	2.1	0.6	61	2.3	0.7	60	1.59	0.114
Women do not like to be given challenging assignments	1.3	0.4	61	1.7	0.7	60	4.06*	0.000
Women are less competitive than	1.3	0.5	61	1.5	0.6	60	2.68*	0.008

their male counterparts							
Family responsibilities impose constraints on work efficiency of women managers	2.1	0.6	61	2.2	0.6	60	1.22	0.225
General opinion regarding prevalence of gender stereotypes	13.3	2.6	61	15.0	3.2	60	3.22*	0.002

Source: Field Survey

*Significant at 0.05 level

From the table, it can be observed that a stereotypical belief felt to be widely prevalent is that women are not ready to relocate for the sake of career advancement, as evidenced by the high mean scores of 2.1 for private sector managers and 2.3 for public sector managers. Another stereotype which is perceived to be highly prevalent is that family responsibilities impose constraints on the work efficiency of women managers, with women managers from private sector and public sector having high mean scores of 2.1 and 2.2 respectively. The stereotype that women are motivated more by extrinsic factors such as income and security rather than by intrinsic factors such as job design, challenge, etc, seems to have fairly wide prevalence, with respondents from private 3and public sectors having mean scores of 1.6 and 1.7 respectively. However, in the case of these three stereotypical beliefs which appear to be more prevalent, there does not appear to be any significant difference in perception between women managers from the private and public sectors.

The stereotype that women are less committed to their career seems to be more prevalent in the public sector, with the respondents from this category seen to have a mean score of 1.9 as compared to the lower mean score of 1.4 of the private sector women managers. The z-test for the difference in means yields a value of 3.91 (p<0.05), suggesting that the difference in perception between the two groups is significant at the 0.05 level. The stereotype that women are not interested in challenging assignments is also found to prevail to a greater extent in the public sector. The z-statistic (4.06, p<0.05) for the difference in the mean scores of 1.7 and 1.3 of public and private sector managers suggests that the difference in perception is a significant one. The stereotypical perception that women are less competitive than their male counterparts is also seen to be more prevalent in the public rather than the private sector, as seen from the mean scores of 1.5 and 1.3 respectively. The z-statistic (2.68, p<0.05) indicates that the perception of prevalence of this stereotype is significantly higher in the public sector than in the private sector. Although the stereotype that women cannot take important decisions is relatively less prevalent, it seems to be found more in the public sector, the z-statistic (2.38, p<0.05) revealing that the difference in perception is significant at the 0.05 level. The stereotype that women should be placed in routine jobs with less risk and soft responsibilities seems to be more prevalent in the private sector, as seen from the mean score of 1.4 in comparison to the score of 1.2 of public sector managers. The stereotype that women do not fit into the corporate culture seems to be perceived as the least prevalent by managers from both sectors, with private sector and public sector managers having low mean scores of 1.1 and 1.2 respectively.

With respect to general perception of prevalence of gender stereotypes, women managers from the private sector have an average score of 13.3, while public sector managers have a higher mean score of 15.0. The z-statistic (3.22, $p<0.05$) suggests that the respondents from the public sector have a significantly higher perception of prevalence of gender-based stereotypes that are likely to impact career advancement prospects of women managers.

Findings of the Study

The significant findings that emerged from the research study are:

1) The gender stereotype that women are not ready to relocate for the sake of career advancement is widely prevalent in both the public and private sectors

2) The stereotype that family responsibilities impose constraints on the work efficiency of women managers is widely prevalent in both public and private sectors

3) The stereotype that women are motivated more by extrinsic factors such as income and security rather than by intrinsic factors such as job design, challenge, etc, seems to have fairly wide prevalence in both sectors.

4) The stereotype that women are less committed to their career seems to be more prevalent in the public sector

5) The stereotype that women are not interested in challenging assignments is also found to prevail to a significantly greater extent in the public sector

6) The stereotypical perception that women are less competitive than their male counterparts is also seen to be significantly more prevalent in the public rather than the private sector.

7) The stereotype that women should be placed in routine jobs with less risk and soft responsibilities is more prevalent in the private sector,

8) The respondents from the public sector have a significantly higher perception of prevalence of gender-based stereotypes that are likely to impact career advancement prospects of women managers.

Conclusion

The salience of gender as a characteristic of individuals has led to the formation of various gender based stereotypes which tend to influence the career prospects of women, both with regard to initial recruitment into managerial positions and their subsequent career advancement. The study examined the perceptions of the women managers with regard to the prevalence of gender based stereotypical thinking in their organizations regarding women's traits, capabilities, and career commitment. The findings suggest that the main stereotypes found to be more prevalent in corporate organizations, irrespective of sector are that women are not ready to relocate for the sake of career advancement and that family responsibilities tend to impose constraints on the work efficiency of women managers. Another stereotype which seems to be widely prevalent is that women are more motivated by extrinsic factors such as income, status and security than by intrinsic motivators such as job design, challenge and achievement.

Two gender stereotypes which appear to be more prevalent in the public sector than the private sector is that women are less committed to their careers and less competitive than their male counterparts. The stereotype that women do not like to be given challenging assignments also seems to prevail to a greater extent in the public sector. In general, it can be

seen that women managers from the public sector have a significantly higher perception of the prevalence of gender-based stereotypes that are likely to impact their career advancement prospects, in comparison to the respondents from the private sector.

The perceptions of the women managers regarding the prevalence of gender stereotypical thinking in organizations highlights the fact that women's promotional opportunities are likely to be constrained by assumptions made about their career aspirations and career commitment, even if there is no overt gender discrimination in the recruitment process. However, in organizations where there is less prevalence of gender based stereotypical norms, there is likely to be more acceptance of women's right to career advancement.

References

Basu, S. (2008): *Gender Stereotypes in Corporate India: A Glimpse.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Brenner, O.C., Tomkiewicz, J., & Schein, V.E. (1989). 'The relationship between sex role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics revisited'. *Academy of Management Journal*, 32, 662-669

Burke, R. J. (1994). 'Women on Corporate Boards of Directors: Forces for Change?' *Women in Management Review*, (9)1, 27-31.

Eagly, A., Makhijani, M., and Klonsky, B. (1992).'Gender and the evaluation of leaders: A meta-analysis'. *Psychological Bulletin*. 117, 125-145.

Gupta, A., Koshal, M., & Koshal, R. K. (2006). 'Women Managers in India: Challenges and Opportunities'. In H. J. Davis, S.R. Chatterjee & M. Heuer (Eds.), *Management in India: Trends and Transition*, pp.285-312. New Delhi: Response Books.

Hale, M. (1996). 'Gender equality in organizations: Resolving the dilemmas'. *Public Personnel Administration*, 16(1), 7.

Hayward, S. (2005). *Women Leading*, pp. 15-16. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Indvik, J. (2003). 'Women and Leadership'. In P. G. Northouse (Ed.), *Leadership Theory and Practice*, pp. 265-299. California: Sage Publications.

Jelinek, M., & Adler N., (1998). 'Women World-Class Managers for Global Competition'. *Academy of Management Executive,* V. (2), 11-19.

Mc Rae (1995). *Women at the Top: Progress after Five Years*. The Hansard Society, London: King-Hall Paper.

O'Leary, V. E & Ryan, M.M. (1994). Women bosses: Counting the changes or changes that count. In Morgan Tanton (Ed). *Women in Management: A Developing Presence.* London: Routledge.

Powell, G., Butterfield, D. A., & Parent, J. (2002). 'Gender and managerial stereotypes: Have the times changed?' *Journal of Management*, 28(2), 177-193.

Ruderman, M., & Ohlott, P. (1992). *Managerial promotions as a diversity practice*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management, Las Vegas, NV.

Wirth, L.(2002). *Breaking through the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management.* Luxembourg: ILO.

World of Work: The Magazine of the ILO. (1998) '*Will the Glass Ceiling Ever Be Broken: Women in Management Still Lonely At the Top?* (24), V. (2), (February), pp. 6-7.