ACCELERATING WOMENS INFLUENCE IN GLOBAL CORPORATE MANAGEMENT - "FROM BARRIERS TO BREAKTHROUGHS: THE CHANGING PANORAMA OF WOMEN IN CORPORATE LEADERSHIP"

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ABSTRACT:

The landscape of corporate leadership has undergone significant transformation with the increasing recognition of gender diversity as a strategic imperative. This study explores the evolving role of women in business management and underscores the critical importance of their inclusion in high-level decision-making processes. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that leadership teams with diverse gender representation foster enhanced innovation, collaboration, and overall organizational performance.

Despite measurable progress, women continue to face persistent barriers in ascending to managerial and executive roles. Structural biases, gender stereotypes, and unequal access to opportunities remain significant impediments to achieving true equity in leadership. In response, a range of interventions—including inclusive workplace policies, mentorship programs, and advocacy for equal pay—have emerged to address these disparities and promote a more equitable corporate environment.

Moreover, women leaders are noted for their distinct leadership styles, often characterized by empathy, collaboration, and effective communication. These attributes contribute uniquely to organizational culture and strategic direction. This study emphasizes the need for continued efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and leverage the full potential of gender-inclusive leadership for sustainable corporate growth.

Keywords:

Women in Leadership, Gender Diversity, Corporate Management, Inclusive Leadership

I.   INTRODUCTION

The presence of women in corporate management in India, as of mid-2025, reflects a nuanced picture of progress intertwined with persistent challenges. While legal mandates, such as the Companies Act of 2013, have successfully increased women's representation on corporate boards. Key barriers contributing to this include deeply ingrained gender biases and stereotypes, demanding corporate careers, limited access to crucial informal networks, mentorship, and sponsorship opportunities, and the persistent gender pay gap.

Despite these hurdles, significant breakthroughs are reshaping the landscape for women in corporate management. There's a heightened awareness of gender bias, leading to more robust Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives within companies, including bias training and flexible work arrangements.

Transition of women's role in corporate -Ancient to contemporary: - The role of women in the corporate world has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from largely invisible or marginalized positions in ancient times to increasingly prominent and influential roles in the contemporary era.

Ancient Times: Limited Formal Corporate Roles: - In ancient civilizations, the concept of "corporate" as we understand it today was largely absent. Economic activities were primarily agrarian, domestic, or small-scale artisanal.

Limited Public Sphere Participation:- In many patriarchal societies (e.g., ancient Greece, Rome, and later, parts of Mesopotamia), women's public lives were restricted. While some wealthy or elite women might manage estates, engage in private investments, or even own businesses (as seen in Mesopotamia and some periods of Roman history)

Pre-Industrial to Early Industrial Era:- The pre industrial and early artificial ages largely collaborated the domestic sphere for women, particularly for middle and upper classes.

World War I and II: These wars created immense labour shortages, pushing women into roles in factories and industries to support the war effort. This demonstrated women's capabilities in diverse fields, challenging traditional gender norms.

Post-War "Return to Domesticity" : After both wars, there was a societal push for women to return to their homes, and many were laid off to make way for returning servicemen.

20th Century: War, Social Change, and Gradual Entry:- The 20th century marked a dramatic shift, largely driven by two World Wars and evolving social movements.

Mid-20th Century Expansion: From the 1950s onwards, women's labour force participation steadily increased, through **Increased Education**, **Technological Advancements & Economic Pressures**

II.   MODERN ERA

Enhanced Industry Representation: Women are present in almost every industry and at every level, from entry-level to executive leadership. Growth in Executive Leadership: Although they are still under-represented at the highest levels, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of women in senior leadership roles, such as CEO, CFO, COO, and CIO. **Board Positions:** Women's representation on corporate boards has seen more significant increases due to various initiatives and mandates, but still falls short of parity. For instance, in India, women's representation on NSE 500-listed companies increased from 5% in 2011 to 18% in 2023.

The current status of women in commercial leadership: - CEO and C-suite Roles: The representation of women in top executive roles remains significantly low. Only 7% of CEO roles and 17% of finance director positions in developed countries are held by women (Equileap 2023 survey).Grant Thornton's 2024 report indicates a sharp decline in female CEOs in the global mid-market, dropping to 19% from 28% in 2023.While some organizations boast 30-50% women in leadership (23%) and a trailblazing 12% have surpassed that, over half (56%) still struggle with only 10-30% female leadership representation, and a concerning 9% lack any women leaders at all.

Key Challenges & Barriers: - Despite Barriers and Breakthrough, women in the corporate world still face: **Gender Pay Gap, "Glass Ceiling" and "Broken Rung"**, **Unconscious Bias**, **Lack of Sponsorship and Mentorship**

The "Broken Rung" vs. "Glass Ceiling": Research by McKinsey and LeanIn.org consistently highlights that the biggest hurdle for women is often the "broken rung". While the "glass ceiling" (barriers to the very top) still exists, the pipeline issue is critical. Lack of Sponsorship and Mentorship, Limited Access to High-Visibility Projects, "Onlys" and Isolation, where Women, especially in male-dominated industries, often find themselves as the "only" woman in a room, leading to feelings of isolation and increased scrutiny.

Breakthroughs for Women in Corporate Management:- Diversity & Equality, Leadership Development Programs for Women, Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs, Flexible Work Arrangements, Addressing Unconscious Bias, Promoting Pay Equity: Regular pay audits and transparent compensation practices, Highlighting Female Leaders, Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), Legal Mandates, Increased Awareness on growing recognition of Bias, implementing

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, Redefining Leadership Styles Etc., are initiated and introduced in the modern corporate Era.

III.   REVIEWS

1. Role in Innovation & Corporate Strategy: - Khushk, Zengtian & Hui (2023): A meta-analysis of 35 empirical studies (2013–2022) shows that firms led by female CEOs are more likely to innovate and adopt eco-friendly practices, suggesting women leaders contribute uniquely to organizational creativity

MDPI (2022): A global review concluded female top managers favor exploration and exploitation differently—women enhance efficiency and innovation but may take fewer high-risk growth steps like acquisitions

2. Critical Mass & Board Influence - Financial Innovation (2023): Research on Chinese manufacturing firms reveals that boards with at least three women demonstrate significantly better intellectual capital efficiency—highlighting the "critical mass" concept

3. Emerald (2023): A global meta-synthesis confirms that women directors notably improve corporate sustainability, CSR, and environmental disclosure—especially when they reach critical mass, Additional studies show board gender diversity boosts financial performance—but results vary significantly across countries and institutional contexts

4. JMRA (India):- Highlights three interconnected barriers—organizational culture, societal expectations, and compliance structures—that slow women's advancement, recommending mentoring, flexible policies, and anti-bias training

5. Individual & Network Dynamics: - Herminia Ibarra et al.: Women's limited access to key networks and sponsor relationships impedes their progression into mission-critical roles and leadership identity formation

Intersectional Social Norms

FINDINGS

1.Continued (Though Slow) Progress in Representation:- While women's representation has increased at every level of corporate management over the past decade, the gains are still modest, and representation declines significantly as women advance to more senior roles. For instance, women made up 29% of C-suite positions in 2024, up from 17% in 2015. However, there's still a significant gap, with only 19% of female CEOs in the global mid-market in 2024 (a sharp decline from 28% in 2023)

2.Gender Bias and Stereotypes: Women continue to face subtle or overt gender bias that questions their abilities and leadership qualities, leading to them being overlooked for promotions and high-level assignments. Traditional stereotypes can lead to women being judged differently and less favourably than men, even when performing the same tasks.

3. **Flexible Work and Family-Friendly Policies:** Policies like flexible work arrangements, paid sick days, menstrual leave, maternity/paternity leave, and childcare support are strongly correlated with higher representation and advancement of women.

Suggestions: - For women aiming to break into and excel in corporate management, a strategic approach cantered on continuous development and proactive engagement is essential, with the following.

1. Prioritize **skill enhancement and lifelong learning**
2. To stay current with industry trends and technological advancements.
3. Cultivate a strong sense of **proactivity, visibility, and resilience**
4. Develop the confidence to articulate ideas
5. Finally, understand organization's dynamics, build strong relationships across departments, and consistently seek feedback for continuous improvement. Embracing challenges and

learning from setbacks will build the resilience necessary to navigate the complexities and pressures inherent in corporate leadership.

IV.   CONCLUSION

The transition of women's roles in the corporate world is a story of gradual but persistent progress. From being largely confined to the domestic sphere or informal labor, women have steadily gained access to formal employment, broken down barriers, and achieved significant leadership positions. While much progress has been made, the journey towards full equality and equitable representation in the corporate world continues, with ongoing efforts needed to address systemic biases and create truly inclusive environments.

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