

How to get women into C-suite jobs

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HR policy should be tweaked to attract and retain the right talent. And, women must be given opportunities for line roles

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Last year was remarkable for women power: At 29 per cent, it was the highest percentage ever of women in senior management positions globally. Today, 87 per cent of global businesses have at least one woman in a senior management role. Just last week, Unilever claimed to have achieved gender parity in the top leadership globally.

Last couple of years saw many women taking up leadership positions, in business and politics, across the world. Angela Merkel, Dilma Rouseff of Brazil, Sheryl Sandberg of FB, Mary Barra of GM, Christine Lagarde of IMF, and Sheikh Hasina... the list goes on.

Two leading women — IMF's Christine Lagarde and Norway's PM Erna Solberg — put up a case for accelerating gender equality in workforce that can lead to an estimated 27 per cent GDP growth in India. Indeed a strong economic impetus for a struggling government in India to bring in more qualified women in government itself, to start with.

Various other researches also show that even for business these growth facts hold good. Enterprises with strong female leadership generated an ROE (Return on Equity) of 10.1 per cent per annum, as against 7.4 per cent for those without. Women executives with 15+ years experience must find inspiration in this data to drive themselves for top leadership roles, particularly in business. The C-suite women will only increase in the new decade, given the trend.

Numerous studies globally tried to interpret why there are so few women in the C-suite. For long it was assumed that women chose to be less ambitious for the sake of family and that they lacked the confidence needed for the corner office. But a recent

study sponsored by Facebook's Sandberg finds something different: Women aren't abandoning their careers across the board for raising kids but are yearning for promotion and higher pay. There is also no statistical or scientific evidence for them being less ambitious or confident than men. However, when given a hypothetical choice to grab the top role in their organisations, a majority of women shied away from the task.

With about 31 per cent of senior management positions occupied by women as compared to 17 per cent three years ago in the US alone, the path to the top is no more as steep as before. Despite women in senior positions sticking to their companies more than men do, they don't pass the big promotion test. On an average, compared to men, women are 16 per cent less likely to be promoted to the next level, which incidentally means gender parity at the top will not befall until 2100!

What steps enterprises can take — starting at the very top — to nurture more women leaders? How women are represented and treated at work depends on the tone set by the executive office, as always. Here's an action agenda for India Inc to consider, and make 2020s a decade for women leadership.

Action plan

First step is to ensure that adequate women candidates are included in the pool when evaluating and interviewing candidates for higher positions, at every level. HR policy should be tweaked to attract and retain the right women talent. Research indicates that bias against women in certain job positions still exists in most organisations. The Hollywood movie *Molly's Game* outlines this bias in a stunning manner.

Enterprises shall also make promoting and advancing wo-



Moving ahead Unlike before, women are yearning for promotion and higher pay

men a key performance indicator (KPI) for managers, and link this to their compensation in order to make them walk the talk. Companies that execute strategy well will have KPIs aligned to business goals and this concept of women in key roles should have a business rationale such as revenue or value growth. For instance, sales teams that are selling to female decision-makers should reflect the gender composition of the client. Or in businesses that cater to women, the team can have more women members. (Direct selling industry is where women buck the trend and there men are probably discriminated against with 75 per cent being women).

One of the annual features of many business magazines is the gender pay parity survey. While parity will still be elusive for some time here's a different proposition: Stop asking questions on previous salaries while negotiating the remuneration package for women. It will be better to offer packages based on current merit and value to the organisation. Just last year we have seen a major fiasco at a leading media organisation over significant disparities in salaries of men and women at the editor level.

Another step is to adopt a "blind" evaluation and selection policy. In the 1990s, two economists — Claudia Goldin of Harvard, and Cecilia of Princeton — found out that blind selection in orchestras was the direct cause of a concurrent increase in the number of women hired for orchestra positions. They learned interesting things on the way — including the fact that some orchestras used carpeting to disguise the difference in sound between male and female footsteps.

In a similar way, "blind" selection was found to be more favourable to selection of more women software coders. When the gender is unidentifiable, women found more acceptances and better pay. So, to the extent possible, hide gender in application and evaluation process.

HR-centric

It is seen that most women tend to occupy staff roles such as HR when they reach VP level, which is the typical first rung of C-suite, as compared to men. Women fall short in showcasing tangible value creation because of this. So, here's the final action agenda for India Inc: Don't slot women disproportionately into "R" jobs (HR, IR, PR, etc.) — make sure they

have opportunities for line roles.

Experts argue that age is not a barrier for women looking to further their careers later in life. This is not just because they have more education and experience than previous generations but because women who take it slow midway for maternal responsibilities are in many ways better suited to shift into high gear at a later age than men. In 2020, women can have it all!

Look at all the positives: Those who raise children and look after parents bring a different set of skills and perspectives to their career when they come back to corporate roles.

Many progressive groups including the Tatas and Mahindras are tapping into this talent. In the end, the better candidate always wins, almost. The gender divide is expected to narrow this year and the opportunity is here and now for those who are career-minded.

If you are a woman on the rise, remember Jessica Chastain's (the *Molly's Game* heroine) words: "Do not let men to define you." That in essence means, learn to talk really loud to be heard.

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