

## CHALLENGING ROLE OF WOMEN EXECUTIVES - A PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*In this article the author highlights how women face strong prejudices and discrimination at every stage of their professional career. Thus recommends and calls for major alterations in the deepest and psychological structures instead of the slow subtle changes.*

In the formal organisational hierarchy, executive is that person who gets the decisions of the board of directors executed. Yoder, while tracing - out the history of the executives contends that executives are to be distinguished from administrators. Administrators are required to determine the policy, whereas executives are those who execute the orders.<sup>1</sup> Executive is the top level manager of an organisation. Now the term executive has been given a broader meaning to include top manager, middle manager and even the junior manager.

Most of the studies concerning executives define the term with reference to the expected qualities or characteristics of the person. Unlike the other professions where a person is an expert in a particular discipline, the executive is not required to be an expert in one narrow field of specialisation. The executive has to deal with finance, personnel, marketing, production, and technical know-

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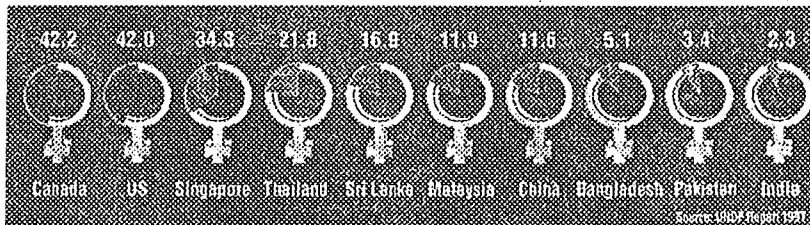
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how, not as specialisations in separate compartments but as interrelated aspects of the single management task. The executive is a diplomat as well as a manager, a communicator and a decision-maker. The executive/ manager should be innovative, alert, risk taking, progressive, tactful, impressive and must possess leadership qualities.

Like the other modern professions, management has been a male preserve in the past. Women's entry into it in India is looked upon with an awesome wonder due to the prejudice that women lack aggressiveness and leadership ability which are essential for the executives.

Management is strictly regarded as the male domain. Cultural sanctions, legal restrictions, corporate obstacles, political climate and women's disinterest, differential socialization, the informal activities in corporate life etc., act as hurdles in managerial field worldwide. But the importance of each varies from one country to another. Cultural sanctions in India, Japan and Saudi Arabia, current economic trends and political climate in Singapore and China and the legal structures in the Western nations may be considered as the dominant constraints. Compared to other nations, in India very few women have succeeded in making a difference by crossing the sex barrier in order to enter the managerial field as shown in the pie chart below. Women's representation in higher posts is very low in India. There are, on an average, 27.4 per cent of women managers and administrators in industrialised nations and 10 per cent in developing countries. Some of our neighbours fare better than us.<sup>2</sup>

GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION (PIE-CHART)  
WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS AND MANAGERS (As per cent of total)



Source: UNDP Report, 1997, Adopted from India today, "women Administrators and Manager", February 2, 1998, p. 16.

Sex role stereotypes predominate in the lives of executives since this profession is considered as a 'masculine task'. The masculine ethics of bureaucracy, rationality, rules and competition so dominate the world of management that women are routinely assigned to people-handling job such as personnel

department and thus are excluded from the main streams of the organisation. Women executives have to develop masculine characteristics in order to succeed as executives. The sex typing of managerial roles as masculine is perhaps the most important factor responsible for the problems women face as executives. Network is the connections that help an executive in the corporate world and women are not accepted into the elite network of the corporation. They are usually left behind with the remarks such as 'uninformed', 'do not know the ropes' or 'lack clout'. Also the practice of 'fast tracking' -identifying the top management candidates early in their careers and grooming them creates many dilemmas for women. Most executives are men and hence they do not sponsor a woman executive, however efficient she might be. The elite business culture also is unfavourable for women in an orthodox society. Often business dinners are held in clubs without inviting women executives. Although women have entered the corporate sector into managerial positions, most of them work in the area of public relations, banking, labour welfare, etc. In the masculine functions of marketing or finance, there are very few. A woman executive has to be a super woman -combining the masculine traits that are essential for an executive with her feminine traits in the world of management where sex role stereotyping reaches its peak.

Women executives constitute a modern and urban phenomenon in India. It is a phenomenon which involves social transition. The entry of women into the world of work has created an ambivalence with regard to the definition of new social values, moral norms, interpersonal relationships, attitudes and cultural standards. Through socialisation men and women have internalised their future roles. The male is socialised into work-force participation and into the belief and expectation that his will be the dominant presence. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for a male to accept a female into his sphere of male life and to permit her full participation, for to do so would require an interpersonal recognition of the female role which may result in a deviation from the traditional social prescription. For the female who may be forced into a sphere where she has not been socialised to participate, and which may also be perceived as stepping out of her prescribed role. There is a risk of rejection from this sphere as well as its impact upon the performance of the traditional role to which she has been socialised. In both cases there is uncertainty about the role expectations which are likely to interfere with optimal work-place relationships and productivity. Women are expected not to clamour to achieve positions of power, privilege or positions of importance. They are also expected not to attach too much of importance to their work role and make serious attempts to excel at it. Even in the case of a professional, her success as a woman would be judged by her performance as a mother and wife.

In South-East Asia, commerce is open to women. In Jakarta, wives of senior civil officials run shops and make jewellery. In Thailand, many large hotels are run by women. Philippine women are adept in real estate business. In India, women have entered into technical, medical and administrative fields and the male preserves of police and army. At the international level, women are employed as pilots, astronauts, police officers, ambassadors, ministers and heads of nations. In Israel, they are serving in territorial army and do the most difficult and dangerous job of espionage. This situation calls for a change from 'traditionalism' to modernity.

Hence, work organisations exhibit a combination of both traditional and modern attitudes which govern the relationships between men and women. In the traditional Indian society, sex-segregation has been practised to a very large extent. But men and women work together in modern organisations. While the ideal situation calls for normal and congenial interpersonal relationship in reality, the relationships among men and women in work organisations are not always smooth. Occupational culture is defined in masculine terms - male experiences and masculine paradigms. Women are treated distinctly inferior. The classic problem of 'tokenism' - exclusion by male colleagues - exists in certain cadres and positions at the higher levels of occupational structure.

Women have to go through many psychological problems created by the male co-workers and the male bosses. Sometimes, the male boss with the advantage of his position and official status try to exploit women sexually. Male colleagues also try to take advantage in the same manner. Males are still reluctant to treat women on equal terms. In India, men and women are isolated from each other and are not allowed to mingle freely with each other. But the professional role demands that they interact with each other. Therefore, the required behaviour pattern in work organisation is not yet defined and this causes confusion in relationships. If women are reserved, stern and strict, they are labelled as too harsh and unfriendly and they are looked down upon with contempt by their male colleagues. On the other hand, if women are courteous and kind they are mistaken to be interested in men. Further, their husbands and family members also have rigid traditional attitude towards their interaction with their male colleagues.

Family demands do detract women executives from an effective role performance as it is quite demanding in the corporate world. There is a need for women to work very hard to excel in a 'masculine' task of management. An executive's life is not based on fixed working hours. The informal activities beyond the working hours are of great importance in corporate life. Generally business is transacted to a great extent in informal meetings in clubs and golf courses.

Women are denied access to the informal network due to their preoccupation with family obligations and cultural constraints. Success in corporate life involves vertical mobility, aggressiveness to achieve it, taking risks and no fixed time to return home. Such a success pattern seems to be a difficult goal for women in a traditional society.

Guilt feelings of neglecting family, tension and conflict with family members due to the life style of the corporate world and career interruption due to family obligations have a negative effect on the career performance of women executives.

Women professional are forced to make some compromises in their profession. Career development of men generally follows a progressive direct line, but in the case of women there is a fragmentary approach towards career development due to the various types of compromises demanded by the primacy of familial role.

Regarding gender based discrimination in occupations, it is observed that it does not begin when a woman enters an occupation, but the roots reach far back to the cumulative effects of earlier gender discrimination process and early childhood socialisation for "appropriate" gender roles, differential treatment and expectations accorded to boys and girls by their parents, teachers and peers, differential opportunities for access to admission in schools and colleges, etc. As a result, when they enter the world of work, most women have already internalised interests, aspirations, expectations and life experiences that are different from their male counterparts. Thus women may not perceive discrimination even if it is practised against them so long as they are constrained by their socialisation. Similarly, men will continue to view discrimination as natural and fair. The concept of gender inequality is rooted not in biological differences between men and women but in the social, cultural and economic structures of society. While women have been socialised to accept the male authority, the social and cultural values have strictly defined the status and role of women in society. Forms of discriminations and prejudices may range from informal-subtle-social-pressures to explicit-legal-statutes discriminating against women resulting in isolating women from taking active and equal part in social and economic life. The types and forms of gender inequality have varied according to the normative structure of society on the one hand and the level of development and progress in each society on the other.

In modern times, inspite of widespread social movements for the emancipation of women, gender based prejudices and discriminations do persist in our society. Hence it has become a major focus in most of the sociological studies on women and work. Women have to face strong prejudices and discriminations at every stage of their professional career. Discriminatory policies - obvious,

subtle, deliberate and inadvertent - against women professionals are identified in work organisation. Women have received discriminatory treatment in admission to professional courses, recognition of capacities and skills, recruitment, job assignment, salaries, deputation for conferences, promotion, etc. There are also beliefs such as a woman who is successful in her profession is not successful in her familial role, successful career woman is not feminine (which is widely held by men and women), and woman should not be more competent than her husband. Due to these beliefs, many highly capable women in professions restrict their performances.

Expanded opportunities for women in modern professions have not brought about a corresponding expansion in attitudes. Advancement in economic realm is not accompanied by progressive values and this indicated a classic situation of cultural lag. We need major alterations in the deepest social and psychological structures - not the slow subtle changes.

## Endnotes

1. Quoted by Kraisonswasdi, Napasri, *Women Executives: A Sociological Study in Role Effectiveness*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 1989.
2. Quoted from India Today, "Women Administrators and Managers", February 2, 1998, p. 16.