

Walking through the labyrinth

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It is only when companies start to focus on women as an asset to their business that they will discover what women can actually do really well that male leaders struggle with. Aashruti Kak finds out how high the glass ceiling has moved up.

We think we live in an egalitarian world, where men and women are held as equals in the eyes of society, and yet, a woman is still considered as a 'token female' in certain professions—a major concern that has always been blissfully maintained in the vertical career growth of a woman, especially in science. Most policy makers are short-sighted enough to believe that as long as there are more women getting higher education, and are placed in the workforce, the issue of equality would take care of itself. To eradicate the issue from its roots, there is a need for appropriate policies to be devised through studying the very barriers that hinder women's way to succeed in their scientific careers.

The working woman

It seems that research and development (R&D) has more women takers in pharmaceuticals, followed closely by marketing, finance and communications. "More women are in the area of R&D, in technical, international regulatory affairs, marketing and HR," says Shyam Sharma, Vice President-HR and Corporate Communication, Claris Lifesciences. "Because of the set paradigm in the industry, that sales includes more of leg work that requires quality time and a lot of effort goes out into selling a product, women are not expected to willingly step into the field. However, many women are now getting into business development functions where you don't sell, but promote a product," he adds. Sharma also mentions that because research is more knowledge based, after studying pharmacy and science, pursued by most women, they often become a part of back-end research, which is more comfortable and secure. After all, it is the flexibility of timings and work processes (including the possibility of home-based working) are certain parameters that draw and encourage women to take up more work.

"The pharma industry has evolved as an employer in India. Previously women were to be found primarily in the factory working as packers. With education and change in societal norms, much of this has changed. The pharma industry is now attracting woman talent like never before," informs Ranjit Shahani, Vice-Chairman and Managing Director, Novartis India. "There is increased competition from women for all jobs, particularly in marketing and sales, including field jobs. For many, even the constraints of travelling, particularly heavy travelling, outside their headquarters is not a challenge, and jobs such as research and medical affairs are drawing women in large numbers. Women, in fact, with their inherent multi-tasking abilities and higher emotional quotient, are treated as assets in the pharma industry." But, even though the participation of women in the field of research has escalated considerably, it is still irregular across scientific and technical fields, especially when it comes to their access to senior positions.

In 2005, an international workshop on 'Women in scientific careers' was held jointly by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the French Government, in Paris, and a lot revealed and discussed there is and will be applicable in time to come. Data from various background papers and presentations at the workshop had indicated then that female participation in the labour market varied considerably between countries, age groups, areas of work and educational background. Participation rates seemed to be higher in Nordic countries, North America and a few Western European countries, but lower in Asian OECD countries.

Female authority

There are many factors that can influence a woman's career in the pharma industry. Firstly, even if women enter their research careers (at an early or a later stage) they are more likely to work part-time or on temporary work contracts. Gender bias is another steady factor that never fails to be a good reason. Certain senior recruitment committees may not incorporate women in their considerations for promotion due to stereotypical organisational attitudes towards family/work balance issues that may be seen as a disadvantage, or lack of role models, leaders and mentors in the workplace that could encourage women.

There is a world of difference between being a boss and being a 'female boss', especially in an industry which had once been male dominated for decades. As women start their climb to the top, there are many men who do not appreciate female authority over them. But, there is a way to deal with every obstacle if the opinions of colleagues are taken into account, their views are respected, and they are allowed to grow in their own space. A boss needs to treat his/her team as equals if he/she does not want any ego issues to arise.

Shahani says that the world today has changed with an increasing number of women getting into the workplace in positions of authority and the pharma industry is no different. He further says, "The pharma industry today has women at various positions, be it in line or staff functions. Knowledge and skill are what count and not gender. Women bosses are recognised and appreciated for their experience and the value add they bring to the table."

Highlighting his own work experience, Sharma says, "Personally, I have reported for about eight years to a female boss. In my company itself there are women who are heads of various departments—from global and domestic business development, to heading R&D, US and Europe regulatory affairs. Major examples from my days are Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Swati Piramal and other heads in other companies, who are very well accepted as well."

Treating gender disparity

Considering the gravity of the situation, a lot of companies are taking initiatives to bridge the gender gap through various policies and programmes. Shahani says, "Novartis has been a long time supporter of gender equality, and diversity and inclusion (D&I) is accorded the highest order of importance. This is in fact ingrained in the Novartis DNA. There is a D&I Board that includes members from various countries with key representation from India. The D&I team has taken various measures and initiatives to establish a climate of inclusion, taking advantage of the diversity we have in our organisation. These include employee

development, employee and family engagement, work life balance, and above all, bringing about a mind set change wherever required."

Giving Claris' example, Sharma says, "One of the paradigms we as a company have is that we treat a person as an individual, and promotions are based on merit and on the fair potential to grow. In my team of 15 senior managers, four are women. I think it is their functional capability and their boldness to travel that makes the difference." They also involve family members, by showing them the manufacturing facility, and have annual sessions, so that their family comes to accept their work.

It is a priority for the management of a company to treat all its employees as equals, irrespective of their gender. Many a times it has been seen that a man and a woman at the same level/designation get paid different sums as salary. On top of that, women have also been dismissed from giving their viewpoints, probably due to their supposed lack of rationality. "The pay packages are attached to a job and the role a person plays, and is not gender specific," informs Shahani. "A differentiation with regard to gender is not even in question. We have women at senior level across the organisation in various positions and functions right up to the Board level. The climate of inclusion where women represent their roles and position with equal strength as men ensures that every member contributes and is taken seriously."

The management also needs to acknowledge that there are certain tasks that can be performed better by women than men, and vice versa. It can be said that there is a difference between the ways in which men and women manage people. Women are better at connecting employees, rather than ranking them. They tend to be more interactive and collaborative in their leadership, they encourage the sharing of information and feedback, they are flexible and they respect and appreciate cultural diversity. "A woman gives a different dimension, adds many other aspects that men may not be able to, for instance, aesthetics, listing varied point of views, etc," opines Sharma.

On the other hand, certain theories and studies have suggested that men can exercise authority much better than women. Both at in a position to reach the top, and hence, both can learn from each other's abilities.

Encouragement and inclusion

In order to encourage more women from opting for the research careers in public and private sectors, especially in processes where there still are very few women, there need to be equal opportunity, policies, flexible working hours, maternity and parental leaves, and so on.

"Women who have opted for a career in pharma are well qualified for the jobs they aspire to hold. A climate supporting inclusion would further boost their presence in all processes of a pharma set up," says Shahani. He further says, "It would certainly help to have more opportunities to get training in their respective fields, to network, to advance their careers and to strike a work life balance where a woman plays many roles both at home and on the work front. Supportive ecosystems both at office and home are also important."

To be specific, companies need to encourage the nomination of women to top senior positions so as to increase the number of role models for younger women, because only when they get inspired will they try to emulate their role models. They need to ensure that the initiatives that they are taking for the cause lead to some concrete results and are fully supported by all employees, promote women's entrepreneurship, thereby promoting alternate career opportunities for women who have graduated in the related fields. And most importantly, they need to share with the industry the various strategies for attracting and retaining women in their respective processes.

- Shyam Sharma

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