

# Breaking stereotypes

Women leaders in corporate India may seem dismal but change is definitely brewing as organisations adopt more inclusive policy changes

BY RAJIV DOGRA

**T**he needle that marks gender equality in the corporate India is moving forward at a painstaking pace. Generally, high on emotional intelligence (EI), focused on maintaining work-life balance, empathetic and resilient, among others, are some of the distinct traits that women bring to the table as heads of any organisation. There are a few women who are making their own mark. In the bargain, they are breaking stereotypes.

## Quite distinct

As per the report from the Bureau for Employers' Activities of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), an increase in female employment at national level is positively associated with gross domestic product (GDP) growth. The finding is based on an analysis of data from 186 countries for the period 1991-2017. Gender balance at workplace is hence, a bottom-line-issue and not just a human-resource-issue alone. "As a head of any organisation, a woman can play a key role in bringing gender inclusivity and diversity at the workplace. We are living in an era of skill shortages and gender balance can help make enough of the impressive and massive talent pool that women represent," says Mumbai-based nutrition and lifestyle consultant Munmun Ganeriwal, who is the founder of Yuktahaar.

Research has clearly shown that gender diversity within the leadership team leads to better decision making and ultimately has a positive impact on

Munmun Ganeriwal





the profitability and culture of a company. A good leader can create an environment, which empowers and motivates the team to be their best self. “I believe a woman leading an organisation brings a different perspective from her own experiences; transformational in nature, functions as a role model, inspires her team by investing time in coaching and nurturing and is a good listener,” says Nisha Popli, vice-president, HR, Moglix.

Women leaders think both vertically and horizontally, thanks to a high level of emotional quotient, a key ingredient in leading and coaching large teams, says Gayatri Ojha, vice-president, OEM Business, Total India. “As a result, they are able to really take their teams along on the path of success. I personally believe that one needs to manage an employee as a whole and not just a part that comes to work. Women leaders are able to establish a work-life balance that ultimately brings the best in people. In a cut-throat competitive environment, it is the human variable that makes a difference. They also have a high level of adaptability to change and hunger for inno-

vation that is very palpable,” says Ojha.

According to Anuradha Bharat, head, people operations, Razorpay, the balance of logic and emotional quotient is something not many people give importance as they should when it comes to leadership role specifically. “Women as part of a team and holding leadership skills are able to balance both of these, very specifically logic to the table,” says Bharat.

Mumbai-based Dr Soma Sarkar, founder and medical director, Dr Soma’s Dermatology and Aesthetic Clinic, feels that a woman brings stability, lot of empathy and team work to the organisation. “I feel women are more systematic and sincere and it makes the workplace more conducive,” says Sarkar.

Expert in mental health, Dr Prakriti Poddar, director of Poddar Wellness Ltd. and Managing Trustee of Poddar Foundation, feels that women have to be far more resilient to work their way up the corporate ladder due to the prevalent gender equality issues. “They are known to be more empathetic and, therefore, better at leading teams. Also, women achievers are in general very focused on maintaining



Anuradha Bharat, Head-People Operations, Razorpay

work-life balance as part of their lives. This is because as mothers they need to balance work as well as their families. Therefore, they respect others and their boundaries,” says Poddar.

### Scaling challenges

Gender specific stereotypes and absence of women from leadership

role continue to remain quite a challenge. However, hope builds on witnessing a slow yet steady change in the trend in corporate India. “I, in fact, see this trend changing to being more inclusive of female leaders across the globe. On recognising these challenges, we as an organisation ensure that our goals towards equality and diversity

are not just a mere process but are in our DNA and a part of our values in principle and action. Decision making, organisation design, policies and processes are aligned to these goals. As a result, 17 per cent of our leadership team consists of women,” says Popli.

Similarly, Bharat says that the company looks forward to bringing in more



women leaders so that a balance is maintained. "About 27 per cent of our workforce comprises women, while 18-20 per cent is the industry average," she says, adding that one of the key things that they also look at is towards empowering women and bringing them up the corporate scale.

Many a times, women face a chal-



Dr Prakriti

lenging phase pre and post maternity. According to Shubika Bilkha, leadership coach and partner, EdpowerU, one of the areas where they actively work with organisations is on the retention and development of women in mid to senior roles. "Our research has discovered that organisations lose over half of their female workforce post maternity and hence it is absolutely critical for them to introduce programmes and initiatives that provide the requisite support during this transition. Our programmes relating to pre-and post-natal transition coaching and building a network of women mentors in organisations have been

particularly relevant. We also work with the managers to educate them on the challenges that women face during this critical life transition phase," she says.

It is often presumed that when women come back from their maternity leave, they need a longer duration for them to get back into the groove in their careers, says Bharat. "However, it all depends on the kind of encouraging environment that you create within a workplace; we have seen cases whereby they become a lot more constructive. For instance, we had a lady who within a matter of a year and a half of her pre- and post-delivery phase got a



Dr Shamoly Khera



Dr Soma Sarkar



Shubika Bilkha,  
Partner, EdpowerU

promotion and went to take on a large team. Breaking stereotypes is one thing but encouraging them and giving them the space to grow within the system is very important,” she says.

In addition, quite often responsibilities at home after work prevents women from joining post work meetings, points out Dr Poddar. “The boys club of ‘meeting over drinks’ often makes the conservative employees uncomfortable in these arenas,” she says, adding that flexible schedules, or part-time working from home options should be made available.

Further, she adds that corporate India has recognised and imple-

mented the PoSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace) programme, maternity leave policies, and the introduction of crèches, among others have made it easier to retain female employees over their career lifespan.

A final word of motivation comes from Dr Shamoly Khera, who is a certified public-speaking coach and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) expert, she says, “Constant positive motivation is fodder for a strong mind. Personally, visualisation is one of the strongest techniques. I have gone through the process of having a child and coming back to my pre-baby weight. Knowing

that I was once of a certain size and weight really helped me believe that it is humanly and bodily possible to achieve that again. Visualising myself back in my previous size clothes gave me a great boost to hit the gym more regularly. I also made sure I surrounded myself with ‘fit mummies’ because it reiterates to your mind the fact that —it is possible. If someone else has achieved it, you can too.”

The road may seem long but, as organisations are evolving, there is bound to be representation of more and more women leaders in the workforce as they start climbing the corporate ladder. □