

## Communication

# Women Managers in Emerging Urban Spaces

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*Unlike the metropolis, where women managers are not uncommon, these evolving urban spaces are still largely closed to the idea of women in decision making roles in the workplace. However, women have begun adorning managerial roles in these smaller towns and cities. This paper is an attempt to understand the women from small towns, the emerging urban spaces, striving to make a career in the management world.*

### Being a Woman & a Manager

Place yourself in this situation: you are a young woman, management postgraduate, university topper, aspiring to make a mark in the corporate sector. You want a factory job, at the shop floor, in the production hub. You start appearing for interviews along with your classmates – confident and dreamy. First bad news – you are not picked by major corporate players in the industry and the reason is not your performance. While your mediocre male batch mates have all been placed, you aren't. Justification: they cannot accommodate women in the factory. The openings coming through are at the non-production area that does not fascinate you. The second bad news – after initial reluctance, in a few months and fearing stagnation, you accept this job offer! Thus, yet another woman manager has begun her career with frustration and uncertainty. Such a situation may appear to be pessimistic but is true in many instances. Check out with women managers and they will have a story of compromise to narrate while making careers.

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Though the numbers of working women have increased over the years, very few of them choose to become

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managers. Women managers are more common in public sector than in the private, but even here the number of women in managerial positions is fewer than it should have been. Women's potentials as managers have not been tapped to its optimum by the corporate sector. "Although women have been guaranteed constitutional equality and have occupied permanent positions in government since India's independence, only recently have they come to assume managerial positions in business organizations. A limited survey of 33 female executives across a wide range of industries led to the conclusion that Indian women have fewer opportunities for promotion than men; but once promoted they perform as well as men in executive positions. However, despite the fact that these Indian women believed they could successfully combine the roles of wife and executive, some questioned the appropriateness of continuing to work if they had small children" (Adler & Dafna 1988).

In spite of women being successful and proficient in their corporate careers, why are they so less in number in all the countries of the world? Could it be attributed to the structural and psychological barriers they face? It is relevant here to discuss Gladys L. Symon's view on gender roles. The gender roles imposed on men and women seem to branch into their careers. Women

are constantly called upon to manage their gender identity in a masculine world of work. To pursue a career, women must first and foremost situate themselves with respect to men. Men, on the other hand, develop their careers by positioning themselves in relation to their organization. Women in business have been both hidden and silenced by male models of career and masculine stereotypes of managers and entrepreneurs.

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The Indian business houses were initially mostly male dominated and were unable to conceive jobs for women in the hierarchy. Thus while it was possible for young men with potential to rise towards managerial capacities even if they had joined in non-managerial positions, it was not so in the case of women. With the best of capabilities and efficiency, women tend to stagnate at lower level positions.

Stress is inherent in a manager's job. But the strain is more on the woman manager. Though she also is partly responsible for this situation, we must consider the hurdles she would have to struggle over.

### **Family, Marriage & Women Roles**

One of the primary conflicts of a career woman is balancing the multiple traditional roles. Managerial success

demands self-confidence, assertiveness, taking up responsibility while the traditional female role suggests submissiveness, supportiveness and dependency. These totally opposite role expectations often block a woman's career progress, whereas for a man there are no such deviations in role expectations. Hence men in the managerial positions are able to move ahead with confidence and firmness.

Marriage has different effects in men's and women's career growths. It is a blessing for a man since it adds to his stability and lessens his household burden. There is someone to take up his responsibility at the home front and this means he is all the more involved with his work. But for a woman, marriage means a totally new phase, with loads of domestic responsibility and a career dependent on her husband. Thus, as men blend with ease and gain from their career and marriage, women struggle. While a few do succeed, many do not. With the phase of motherhood that is bound to follow, women find their focus shifting to family and profession taking a beating.

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Sitting at the office, without worrying about the ticking clock is a man's prerogative. But for a woman it (the ticking clock) is a matter of concern – irrespective of her marital status. Here

also, there are confusions in expectations. A woman manager who does not mind working late nights is looked down upon as irresponsible from the family front. The woman who points out inconveniences in this regard is ridiculed as unfit and womanly.

Maternity is yet to be accommodated in career cycles of most employment providing sectors. Woman finds her upward movement restricted due to her biological clock. She has to accept delays in promotion for such reasons that are an inseparable part of her life. There are several instances when women totally give up their careers due to marriage and child birth.

Indian career women are apt examples of role conflicts. At home their roles make them dependent and restrict them to "doers". At the office, as managers they are expected to be independent and assertive. This role switching affects women's careers. By disentangling themselves from the glorified ideals of womanhood, women can make a meaningful career.

### **A Woman Manager's Self-perception**

The manner in which women managers perceive themselves depends largely on the role expectations of the society. Consequent to the traditional role models they are expected to conform to, women often get frustrated and confused in handling sexual discriminations at the work front. While some want to challenge such inequalities, many feel guilty about "neglecting" their households.

Due to these factors, insecurity persists in conducting oneself in the organization. One woman manager who was interviewed was from a small town and who was the only woman manager in her organization, said “There were lots of women employed but in the non-managerial category. In the interactions with them, I was kept at a distance since I was a manager. To them, I was an alien. In mixing with managers who were men, I could sense their resentment based on gender issues. Used to relating to women in the non-managerial category, these men hardly valued my contribution. The situation was stressful and made simple things difficult. I was judged on the basis of traditional role expectations, rather than my performance. After lot of introspection and discussions with my professors I struck upon the inspiration that as a woman and a manager, I need to just interact, not identify myself with any group. As a result my ventilation points were restricted and whatever was the problem at the career front, I never disclosed to my colleagues”.

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Similarly, some women may have to overcome lack of self-confidence. Women tend to attribute their success to providence and under rate their capacity. Such attitudes serve as self inflicted obstructions to their professional progress.

### **Career & Stereotyping**

A manager is necessarily a learner since managing calls for a lot of trial and error. What is suitable in one situation does not fit another. Women managers are already a point of focus and are conscious not to falter. For, they know by their experiences, that their mistakes will be viewed with a magnifying glass, criticized and will also lead to labelling.

### **The Spotlight Effect**

Another oppressive effect of stereotyping is the ‘spotlight effect’ due to which any woman manager becomes a model, a kind of a representative or a spokesperson for all other women. This may be something quite foreign to her wishes. But it is an inevitable result of her being the ‘only one’.

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The fact that a woman is a single example of her kind in a group, that she represents a minority of one, inevitably makes her the subject of extra attention. There are, of course, certain positive effects – she will definitely be seen and heard. The negative impacts are – no mistakes can be made, any that do occur will be magnified and may lead to stereotyping. People tend to expect that a mistake or a kind of behaviour that it is typical will be repeated. Many myths have been developed in this way, such as:

- A woman manager is often forced to be tougher and harder than a man in order to gain respect.
- A woman is always better prepared when she comes to a meeting.
- A woman manager is much more understanding and better at listening than a man would be.

The last two statements are admittedly positive, but like all other stereotyped expectations, they will divert attention from the woman as an individual, also categorizing and tethering her to a role which she has to live up to, even if, as an individual, she does not fit into it. If she is not particularly good at listening to people she will be adjudged 'unfeminine'. Unfortunately, men are not the only ones to support this stereotype. Women, particularly those who have not tried the difficult and lonely role of the leader, do it as well. There is interplay, often subtle, of stereotypical attitudes towards women and women's work in organizations, such as job of assistant seems fitting for her, as a service role with little responsibility. (Gisele Asplund 1988: 54-55).

### **Communication Patterns in the Organization**

There are two forms of communication in any organization – formal and informal. While formal communication is open, direct and disseminated officially, getting into an informal communication network is difficult. There is free flow of information in this network and it cuts across the hierarchy.

As in practice, information in an organization first flows informally and then gets formal. Woman managers do not find an easy entry into a male dominated managerial informal communication network. By virtue of remaining outside this network, woman managers often lose out on valuable, quick information.

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A HR Head of a manufacturing organization adds, "each organization also has subgroups based on power centres that stretch to all levels. These power centres keep changing and with it the politics changes. The importance of subgroups and the control they wield have a bearing on the functioning of the organizations and career growth of individuals. The most surprising fact is that women managers generally keep away from these activities".

### **The Painstaking Career Climb**

Women are preoccupied with their home front and very few of them aspire for new heights in their career. Most of them prefer a career with less responsibility. They are busy supporting their family needs that their individual career dreams take a back seat. In spite of possessing the requisite calibre many women choose to stay out of promotions since it involves transfers, increased travelling, residential training prog-

rammes and sometimes visits to other nations.

Women managers have a risk of being misunderstood while executing their duties. For example, meeting a male candidate outside office for an interview or travelling with the boss on official grounds or just extra hours of working together may raise eyebrows. Awareness of such possibilities inhibits the work atmosphere and the individuals involved.

The most painful of all is the possibility of sexual harassment. Many women undergo this soreness – being approached for sexual favours. It could be directly or indirectly asked for and the marital status here is immaterial. The consequences have always been damaging – life and careers have been doomed, not to forget the psychological scar it leaves on the victims.

Job related emotional behaviour also gets differential reactions. When a man screams at his subordinates to get things done, he is appreciated for his aggressive nature. A woman's outlet is criticized – be it crying or shouting. She is expected to be calm, soft and 'womanly' in her approach. In other words a woman's assertiveness is viewed as disrespect and a man's as showing involvement. Thus, women in management have to deal with prejudices, bias and stereotypes.

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### **What Could be Done?**

Management as a career for any woman should be a matter of choice, other opportunities being equal. The voices of women fighting their way in the managerial roles need to be heard. From its present male inclination the managerial world should become neutral in its demands. Women's way of managing and leading should be accommodated without any comparisons to the male way of doing things. This could enable more participation from women in management.

Attitudinal change into viewing both the sexes equally and objectively is a slow process. This calls for openness in accepting women as managers. The seeds have to be sown early and gender education has a key role to play in this connection. NGOs have to take up this issue more seriously.

Women should disregard their gender at work. This will speed up their endeavours to a bright career. All they need to remember is that work gets top most priority and seeking any kind of concessions on grounds of gender will only weaken their mission. They should believe that they have a great responsibility to shoulder as upholders of a challenge.

Lastly, women managers in India need to organize themselves in order to

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enable sharing of professional knowledge, experience and problems and ways of balancing their lives and careers.

### References

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