

Employee Perceptions of Gender and Diversity in India: Do Men and Women Think Differently About Diversity?

Sangeetha Lakshman*, C. Lakshman**

ABSTRACT

Purpose: We seek to address a research gap by exploring individual (managers and employees) perceptions of a variety of issues surrounding diversity, in the Indian context. We focus specifically on how people perceive diversity and its influence on diversity management and its effectiveness. Design: The objective is to identify broad diversity issues and understand their organizational implications. We contribute by qualitatively exploring differences in perceptions of diversity by conducting in-depth interviews with 46 managers working in different sectors. Findings: We identify six broad themes: multifarious experience, mindset versus characteristics, managerial characteristics, prudent versus human strategies, few versus many challenges, and misconceptions about diversity that are likely to be useful in theorizing diversity issues, critical to organizations. Research Limitations: This study was conducted with one executive per company. Future research should include more employees of different age, gender, hierarchy, region, and religion from the same organization to crosscheck experiences and identify variances. Practical Implications: The discussion about broad diversity issues in India, and their analysis to understand organization challenges, facilitate management in developing diversity management strategies at workplace. Originality/ Value: Although researchers have emphasized the value of diversity and equality management practices to firm performance, much of this research has been restricted to western nations. Despite its importance to organizational performance, very few studies have addressed diversity in India. This paper presents a specific approach that may be useful for top

* Adjunct Professor, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida.
Email: sangilak78@gmail.com

** Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida.

management to develop strategies to overcome challenges to diversity for better organizational performance.

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INTRODUCTION

Workforce diversity is widely seen as a critical element of initiatives to address not only social issues but also as a contributor to organizational performance (e.g., Cooke & Saini, 2010; Konrad et al., 2016). Using theoretical perspectives rooted in strategic human resource management, researchers have noted the value of diversity/equality management practices to firm performance (e.g., Andreovski et al., 2011; Kundu et al., 2019). Much of this research has been restricted to western nations and very little if any exists in countries like India, which are rapidly emerging with explosive growth (e.g., Cooke & Saini, 2010). Diversity research in India also seems to be more focused on gender issues (e.g., Budhwar et al., 2006; Gupta, 2017) rather than broader diversity issues (e.g., Nair & Vohra, 2015). The early research has focused on issues such as diversity management practices of MNCs (e.g., Cooke & Saini, 2010), inclusion practices (e.g., Nair & Vohra, 2015), egalitarian HRM practices, and gender-role expectations (Panicker et al., 2018). Very little work, if any, has focused on how people perceive diversity, resulting in strategies to implement diversity management and its importance to organizations and society. However, managerial mindsets are a critical predictor of diversity- or inclusion- management strategies (e.g., Nair & Vohra, 2015). We seek to address this gap by exploring individual (managers and employees) perceptions of a variety of issues surrounding diversity, in the Indian context.

We do this by interviewing 46 managers working in different sectors (private, public, MNC) to represent differences in autonomy and bureaucracy in strategic business decisions and to explore their impact on diversity challenges. This research provides an important contribution to our understanding and knowledge of the factors that are critical for effectively managing diversity. This study makes unique contributions that differ from those of previous studies. Rather than identifying the general nature of diversity, it focuses specifically on how people perceive diversity and its influence on diversity management and its effectiveness. The findings of this study could be used by academics and practitioners as a basis for adding new dimensions to investigate diversity barriers/

challenges at the workplace. This article is structured as follows. The next section presents the literature on diversity practices in the Indian context. The research methods used to collect and analyze data are discussed in the following section. Findings and managerial implications are presented in the final section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

India's societal context of diversity is vastly different from that of western nations, but yet it is one of the most diverse countries in the world (Sowell, 2002). The meaning of diversity in India is very broad-based and ranges across age, education, religion, caste (e.g., scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other depressed classes, forward castes, backward castes etc.), gender, language, regional background, ethnicity, economic well-being, and lifestyle (e.g., vegetarian vs. non-vegetarian) (Venkata Ratnam & Chandra, 1996). India is often referred to as a sub-continent by virtue of the immense regional, religious, and linguistic diversity that it possesses. Millions of indigenous people occupy different parts of the country, and it is the home and breeding ground for several major religions of the world (Lakshman, 2015).

Gender inequality in education is relatively high, even in urban India. One source reported that there is a great deal of variance in the role of women in India, ranging from the extremely traditional gender role stereotype of women as home-makers to the modern notion of women as key breadwinners for the family (Budhwar et al., 2006). Whereas girls in rural India do not get the opportunity to get an education as much as boys, urban India presents a different picture with much more opportunities in this regard. This is reflected in the different female literacy rates in rural versus urban India and is primarily as a result of the prevailing traditional gender role stereotypes. However, women in rural India participate in much larger numbers (89.5%) in the workforce compared to women in the cities (see Lakshman, 2015).

Moreover, women in India have held the positions of the President, Prime Minister, Chief Minister, Speaker of the *Lok Sabha* (lower house of parliament), and Leader of the Opposition in parliament, among other key positions. In the private sector, one research study reported that 11% of companies in their sample had women CEOs who were quite powerful in a global sense (see Lakshman, 2015). In March of 2010, the upper house of India's parliament approved a bill reserving 33% of the seats in the

Lok Sabha and all state legislative assemblies for women. Thus, overall one finds instances of traditional gender role stereotypes in practice at one end of the spectrum and disappearance of such stereotypes at the other end, including a great range of variation between the two (see Lakshman, 2015).

In this context, we sought to build on the embryonic literature by exploring individuals' perceptions of diversity in the workplace and their consequences for seizing on opportunities, addressing problems, facing challenges etc. Given that some sources expect India to be the second-largest economy in the world by the year 2020 (see Lakshman, 2015), we think research on diversity issues in India is imperative for MNCs around the world (Harris, 2002). Previous work has provided a discussion of the social, cultural, economic, and technological factors influencing women managers and their success (Budhwar et al., 2006). Based on the perspective that gender is socially constructed, more recent work has provided a perspective of gendered normative order in India that favor men and devalue women (Gupta, 2017). Other work has focused on diversity management practices of MNCs and identified the unique challenges of transferring globally-based HRM practices into India (Cooke & Saini, 2010). Instead of addressing only gender issues, we sought to address how men and women, working in Indian organizations view the different aspects of diversity and how such views affect organizational practices.

The literature has identified a number of problems with perceptions such as biased attributions and the *think manager–think male* stereotype (Haynes & Lawrence, 2012; Heilman & Haynes, 2005), which has been identified as a global phenomenon. This stereotype is such that both males and females perceive that successful managers possess characteristics, attitudes, and temperaments more commonly ascribed to men in general than women in general (Schein et al., 2016). In essence, this stereotype constitutes a serious barrier for women managers to be considered successful. We wanted to explore, within a broader set of objectives, if such a stereotype exists among men and women in India. More recent research has contextualized this *think manager–think male* stereotype and identified a more nuanced *think crisis–think female* stereotype (Ryan et al., 2011), whereby female managers are perceived as better at handling crisis. We incorporated this contextual factor of organizational performance by identifying the performance context within our qualitative (interview) approach in the study. Our broad research questions for the study were:

- How do individuals (men and women) define diversity in the workplace and what impact, if any, does this have on organizational practices?
- How do individuals describe successful managers (male and female) and are these descriptions subject to known stereotypes that exist in other parts of the world?
- What strategies do individuals use to overcome diversity challenges?
- What do individuals think is the biggest challenge in the domain of diversity?
- What are the common mistakes individuals make in thinking about and addressing diversity issues?

METHOD

Our objective is to identify how people think about diversity and how they manage diversity effectively. We intend to inform theory development rather than test theory (Yin, 1994), creating theoretical themes from empirical evidence (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). A qualitative approach was adopted using a combination of semi-structured interviews and companies website/archives to collect data.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 46 executives (one per organization) working in various sectors (public, private, MNC) to derive rich descriptions on the diversity challenges across multiple sectors to build the cases, which were subsequently comparatively analyzed (see Table 1). All interviews were conducted either by phone or skype based on respondent's availability and convenience. In view of the broad consensus among researchers that effectively managing diversity will lead to better organizational performance, we purposefully targeted individuals varying in religion, ethnicity, region, gender, and working in organizations that are different in their sectors, nature of their business (public, private or MNC).

We contacted participants through social networks, described our research objective, and requested their participation. Forty-six individuals working in different sectors agreed to participate in our research and all wished to remain anonymous (see Table 1). All of our participants worked in organizations that are relatively large, performing well in their business and have domestic/international operations. The companies represented a range of businesses, including Banking, IT, Healthcare, Oil & Gas, Mining, Education, Defense, Manufacturing, Media, Agriculture, Utilities, Power Infrastructure, and Financial Services.

Table 1: Sector & Position Description of Respondents

Sr. No.	Participant (M/F)	Age	Position	Location	Industry	Sector (Pvt, Public, MNC)
1	F	31-35	Product Manager	Delhi	Audit	Pvt
2	M	31-35	Regional Head-FOREX	Delhi	Bank	Pvt
3	M	31-35	VP - Technology	Delhi	Manufacturing	Pvt
4	M	31-35	Manager	Delhi/Mumbai	Bank	Pvt
5	F	41-45	Educator	Chennai	Education	Pvt
6	F	31-35	Consultant/Educator	Chennai	Education	Pvt
7	F	31-35	Accounts Executive	Chennai	Manufacturing	Pvt
8	F	41-45	HR Manager	Chennai	Healthcare	Pvt
9	M	41-45	Marketing Head	Coimbatore	Media	Pvt
10	M	46-50	Chief Superintendent	Chennai	Indian Railways	Public
11	M	31-35	Deputy Manager	Chennai	Bank	Pvt
12	M	41-45	Sr. Relationship Manager	Chennai	Power Infrastructure	Pvt
13	M	41-45	VP HR	Chennai	Manufacturing	Pvt
14	M	36-40	SAP HR Lead Consultant	Chennai	IT	Pvt
15	M	36-40	GM HR	Chennai	IT	Pvt
16	M	36-40	Manager-Tech Documentation	Chennai	IT	Pvt
17	M	31-35	Executive VP Regional Head	Mumbai	Bank	Pvt
18	M	31-35	Program Manager	Mumbai	IT	Pvt
19	M	31-35	GM – Strategy & Planning	Mumbai	Oil & Gas	MNC
20	M	31-35	Manager	Delhi	Agricultural Supply Chain	MNC
21	M	31-35	CEO	Mumbai	Education Skill Building	Pvt
22	M	31-35	GM	Mumbai	Coal Mining	Public
23	M	31-35	Executive VP	Mumbai	Bank	Pvt
24	M	51-55	Director	Malvi, MP	Education Institution	Pvt

Sr. No	Participant (M/F)	Age	Position	Location	Industry	Sector (Pvt, Public, MNC)
25	F	31-35	Educator	Mumbai	Education	Pvt
26	M	51-55	Executive Engineer	Chennai	Utilities	Public
27	F	31-35	Sr. Brand Manager	Mumbai	Consumer Products	Pvt
28	M	51-55	Sr. Officer	Kolkata	Bank	Public
29	M	46-50	Regional Manager	Bangalore	IT	MNC
30	F	31-35	Manager	Mumbai	Consulting	Pvt
31	M	31-35	Cross Border Acquisition Devp Manager	Hyderabad	Healthcare	MNC
32	F	31-35	Sr. Product Manager	Mumbai	Consumer Goods (Food)	MNC
33	M	31-35	Founder Director	Guwahati, Assam	Manufacturing Apparels	Pvt
34	M	41-45	Safety Health Officer	Indore, MP	Education Institution	Public
35	M	31-35	Sr Manager – Corporate Strategy	Pune	IT	Pvt
36	M	31-35	Chief Manager – International Operations	Hyderabad	Bank	Pvt
37	M	51-55	Colonel Officer	Bangalore	Defense Forces	Public
38	M	31-35	Regional Manager-Asia Pacific	Bangalore	IT	MNC
39	F	31-35	Asst. VP	Hyderabad	Corporate Banking	Pvt
40	F	31-35	Consultant/Manager	Mumbai	Consulting	Pvt
41	F	31-35	Product Manager	Mumbai	Fashion	Pvt
42	M	31-35	Sr. Product Manager	Bangalore/Mumbai	Telecommunication	Pvt/MNC
43	M	31-35	Software Engineer	Chennai	IT	Pvt/MNC
44	M	56-60	Director	Gurgaon	Education Institution	Pvt
45	M	51-55	CEO	Chennai	IT	MNC
46	M	46-50	Executive	Pune	Financial Services	Pvt

Note: Pvt – Private, MNC – Multinational Company

We purposively sampled individuals working in different industries to avoid bias and the possibility of reflecting the same specific contexts (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We adopted the standardized open-ended interview method to enable the respondents to narrate their own experience (Thomas, 2006). An interview schedule using open-ended questions was developed and pilot-tested with researchers (either subject matter experts or with significant diversity experience or both) who checked the face validity of the questions. We used a total of 18 semi-structured questions, in addition to background questions such as the roles, location, gender, position they hold in the organization, and the type of business. We asked identical questions to all respondents, but the responses were open-ended, which enabled participants to provide detailed information based on their experience, while at the same time enabling us to pose follow-up questions, especially on facets unaddressed spontaneously by the interviewees. The interviews lasted for about 45-60 minutes. We conducted all the interviews in English and digitally recorded them with the participants' permission. We also took detailed notes during the interviews. In addition to the main source of data from interviews, we also used archival data from websites of these companies.

Two coders independently coded all the interviews soon after the data collection process, while also triangulating with other sources such as company websites, in all instances. Coding differences were discussed and reconciled in all cases where there was a difference. We examined the data that were collected for interpretation, looked for patterns and relationship among the data, and identified the themes to which the responses belonged. During the analysis process, we accessed the original coded transcript and the tape-recorded version from which the code was transmitted (Thomas, 2006).

FINDINGS

We report findings related to the identification of diversity differences across gender, race, religion, region, age, and hierarchy. The analysis of our data suggests that all companies in our sample are facing challenging issues in dealing with diversity, and none have implemented a strategy to successfully handle it.

Based on the interviews, we identified six themes: multifarious experience, mindset vs characteristics, stereotypical managerial characteristics, prudent versus human strategies, few vs many challenges, and misconceptions about diversity in response to a) Similarities/Differences in respondents' diversity experiences; b) Respondents' definition of diversity; c) Respondents' perception of Men/Women Managers; d) Strategies to address diversity issues; e) Challenging aspects of diversity; and f) Common mistakes people make in the diversity domain.

MULTIFARIOUS EXPERIENCE

Our first observation is that the male respondents in our study reported having experienced diversity issues in a broader range of areas than our female respondents did. Our female respondents reported having experienced or encountered diversity challenges in the domains of gender, age, religion, and language. In contrast, our male respondents also reported having experienced or encountered diversity issues and challenges in domains such as education, region, rural/urban, caste, culture/personality, and community. One common theme, especially in India, is that the multidimensional issue of diversity is often artificially reduced to a single dimension pertaining to gender diversity. Although there may be underlying structural reasons, our findings suggest that women may be a greater contributor to this artificial reduction from a multidimensional conceptualization of diversity to a single dimension. To the extent that it is attributable to cognitive differences between men and women, perhaps gender diversity issues are the most salient ones for women, borne out of their own everyday experiences. If this is true, then the cognitive differences between men and women may be contributing to a worsening of the situation caused by some structural differences. Women have lower levels of geographical, hierarchical, and career mobility compared to men, which may contribute to a vicious cycle of limited mobility causing limited experience and learning from that experience, resulting in the lower level of skills in handling diversity challenges. For instance, two female respondents described their experiences as:

“Most of the managerial positions are held by men. Also, age and hierarchical difference exist at our organization. Unconsciously people think women are not comfortable” – Asst.VP, F39.

“I have observed qualification and position differences in our hospital. Sometimes highly skilled doctors have to work with semi-skilled technicians and unskilled labor which is a challenging aspect” – HR Manager, F8.

Men are more likely to have experiences with the region, religion, and education diversity issues as they are more mobile both within their companies (willing to accept transfers across regions) and by way of job-hopping (see also Gupta, 2017). In contrast, Indian women are less willing to accept transfers due to a variety of reasons, including security, hardship, and family.

There is a high demand for public sector bank jobs, which are very lucrative, with a number of perks like comfortable work hours, job stability and security, regular pay, and a sense of respect and dignity. However, these jobs are subject to routine transfers, where people are moved across locations, sometimes spanning different regions of the country. In the private sector, mobility of a different kind -via job-hopping, more common among men than women, results in a similar consequence (see Gupta, 2017).

One of the other structural reasons for cognitive differences between men and women is hierarchical mobility, or the lack thereof. Many women, including some in our sample, are not located in positions higher in the hierarchy, which benefits from more exposure to diversity challenges of a broader nature. Although many of our female interviewees were in managerial positions, our male respondents were in relatively higher hierarchical positions. Some male respondents described their diverse experiences as:

“Diversity practised in terms of race, religion, and gender. Sometimes, preference is given to a person from a particular region to avoid the language barrier. Promotions are mostly given to men as their workload is preferably higher than women. Qualification requirement is higher in the corporate sector than retail” Regional Head, M17.

“Among other diversities, culture is extremely challenging when working with people from different regions. Every region has its own identity. As a result, it is difficult to get the work done and expect professionalism” – Cross Border Acquisition Manager, M31.

Regardless of the cause of the difference in male/female diversity experiences (i.e., cognitive v. structural), our respondents' accounts are limited by their experiences, in a manner that is typical in the Indian scenario.

MINDSET VERSUS CHARACTERISTICS

In exploring similarities/differences in how individuals conceive of diversity, we found a few interesting patterns. We grouped these conceptions/definitions by gender. First, there are a number of commonalities in the definition of diversity provided by men/women across sectors: encouraging, respecting differences, and work/skill set is more important- not diversity. Both men and women stated that recognizing, encouraging, and respecting differences is a critical component of diversity (see Table 2). For instance, our respondents defined diversity as:

“Diversity is not culture, background, caste or gender, but the mindset of people. How we perceive about others is real diversity”
– Finance Executive, F7.

“The real diversity is accepting people as they are. Understand the differences and encourage difference of opinion” – Product Manager, F32.

“Knowledge and capacity is diversity. I always want to learn uniqueness from others and respect them as human beings” – Sr. Engineer, M26.

Next, although slightly higher among men, both men and women respondents indicated that the work and skill sets individuals bring are more important than diversity itself, with some explicitly saying that both men and women can handle a variety of tasks in the workplace.

There are some important differences in how individuals think about diversity as a function of their gender. Women's accounts of their conception of diversity-focused on the mindset surrounding diversity, with one respondent explicitly suggesting that diversity does not result from cultural differences alone but more from differences in mindset among individuals. Other women stated their conceptions, which add to this cognitive 'flavor' in the definition of diversity. More women than men noted components of diversity such as consciously recognizing differences

by focusing on cultural beliefs rather than gender/caste/religion etc., valuing and respecting these differences, challenging stereotypes, and finally treating people equally and as human beings. Overall, women provided an account of their conception of diversity, which tended to focus on how people perceive, cognize, and hold the appropriate mindsets, which then affected their actions. In contrast, men provided a very rational perspective by stating values that ought to be components of diversity such as equal importance accorded to people, focus on strengths rather than stereotypes, and finally acceptance of whatever individuals bring to the workplace without much questioning. Although some women agreed, a slightly higher proportion of men stated that the priority should be work, skill sets, capabilities etc. and not diversity.

Our analysis of these differences led us to the conclusion that women focus more on mindsets and cognitive factors, perhaps as a result of their everyday experiences of being stereotyped, under-valued, and disrespected. Thus, the mindsets of males are more salient for women than for men. We saw in responses to other questions that stereotyping is prevalent in terms of the experiences of our respondents. While many reported instances of stereotyping women, others reported stereotyping based on individuals' regional affiliation, age, (dis) ability, religion, caste affiliation etc. Thus, we conclude that those at the receiving end of such treatment are more likely to focus on cognitive aspects of the concept of diversity and to perhaps address diversity challenges on that basis. Men, on the other hand, focus on addressing diversity challenges by focusing on improving work outcomes first, but by accepting differences, respecting differences, and according to equal importance to different people. These suggest that men would take people as they come but look for ways to maintain the effectiveness of work outcomes, given the people that they have. These are more than subtle differences as they translate into action on the diversity management front.

One other important observation made by some of our respondents is that whereas diversity is a multidimensional issue/challenge, there is a tendency in India to reduce this to a single dimension of gender diversity. Consistent with this viewpoint, many respondents' conceptions of diversity seemed to focus a little more on the gender component than other dimensions of diversity.

Table 2: Diversity Definitions of Respondents

Sector	Women Participants (12)	Men Participants (34)
Bank/Audit	Encourage differences, Men/women can handle any tasks.	Lack in gender diversity, recognize subtle differences, equal importance irrespective of culture, gender, see strengths than stereotype, diversity focus should be customer service, work, not on differences.
Education	Gained new friends, learnt new skills, respect differences/opinions.	Understand the differences, accept what individual bring along with them, difference in education, cultural, social, technical & personal background, multiple dimension is real diversity.
Manufacturing	Diversity is not culture, gender, but mindset of people.	Managing demographic/psychographic culture, understand the differences.
Healthcare	Consider as human-being rather than culture, background.	Understand skill level of people, take people as they are.
Consumer care/Fashion	Value women in workplace, challenging stereotype thinking.	
Consulting	Consciously recognizing differences, focus on cultural belief, not on gender, caste, religion.	
Media		Everybody should grow.
Railways		Work is priority, not diversity.
Power Infrastructure		Respect diversity, inclusion among others.
IT		Change according to situation, behavioral patterns, styles, customs, no discrimination, talent diversity, background & gender diversity, Individual skill ability, talent.
Oil & Gas		Accept people from different background.

Sector	Women Participants (12)	Men Participants (34)
Agriculture		Respect other differences.
Mining		Accept the differences.
Energy		Knowledge & Capacity.
Defense Forces		Work with what is common for everybody.
Communication		Focus on skill set, forget others, gender & socioeconomic differences.
NBFC		Varied culture, customs, traditions are different due to geographical location.

MANAGERIAL CHARACTERISTICS: STEREOTYPES?

We asked our respondents to describe successful men/women managers and how similar and/or different they were from each other. About half of our participants said that women/men managers were similar, perhaps to avoid stereotyping. However, the other half said that women/men leaders are different. Most of the women respondents provided some description of what men managers are like. But, they did not describe what female managers were like. This is mainly because there were either no women managers or fewer in number compared to their male counterparts, in almost all sectors. Women respondents described male managers as possessing networking skills, the ability to adapt to new technologies, convincing skills, and flexibility. Although considering women for specific a job and treating them fairly is a common practice in most of the organisations in our sample, a few women complained that men lack gender sensitivity. For instance, one of our respondents said that her boss used abusive words in the presence of others for not meeting the standards/underperformance, which embarrassed her. She complained to HR and the boss was advised to be careful in handling women employees in a group.

Our men respondents described women managers as fair in leadership, better than men in HR, good at communication skills, empathetic, but less strict than men. Additionally, they said that women managers not only understand and support the employees but also understand their personal

lives and help them manage and provide solutions for any issues. They were also characterized as conservative, effective time managers, effective team & quality managers. Women managers motivate employees (give momentum) and this way of motivation is different from men managers (take employees outside and provide dinner or lunch party). Our men respondents also characterized women managers as straight forward, soft spoken, strategic, consultative (not authoritative), but lacking in 'demanding & competitive characteristics'.

Our men respondents described men managers as strict in business dealings, but still, friendly with team members, focused on performance, strong listening skills, strong collaborative skills, communication skills, conservative, not aggressive, motivating/rewarding employees (take the employee out for lunch/dinner). They also characterized male managers as bureaucratic, dominating, skilled in planning & implementing ideas, knowledgeable about markets, powerful, motivating, commanding, and possessing the ability to not show power. For instance, the respondents commented as follows:

"Women leaders are different, straight forward, soft-spoken, strategic and use right words" – Cross Border Acquisition Manager, M31.

"Our manager uses his great experience to lead the team, not overrule anybody, try to better understand others and get the best out of them and maintain a good relationship." – Regional Head, M17.

"Each leader has their own characteristics and differences in people and leadership skills. Their objective is to get work done by employees effectively and learn new technology" – Colonel Officer, M37.

"Very limited women leaders exist at the workplace. Men managers possess networking skills and adapt to new technologies" – Asst VP, F39.

The above descriptions are consistent with the *think manager-think male* stereotype among many but not all of our male respondents. Male respondents use characteristics, attitudes, and temperaments that have a close match with those commonly ascribed to men when describing successful male managers. When describing successful women managers on the other hand, their descriptions match with those commonly ascribed to women more than they match those of successful managers (Schein et al., 1996). Table 3 reflects the above ideas.

Table 3: Characteristics of Men/Women Managers

Sector	Women Respondents	Men Respondents
Banking/ Audit	Limited women leaders exist. Men have net-working skills, adopt to new technologies.	Women are less, but fair in leadership. As of HR, women do much better, communicate well to employees. Men are strict in business, friendly with team. Corporate level – mostly male dominated, no women manager. The target for Men managers are performance oriented. Women leaders are different in leadership, show empathy, less strict, understand personal life in addition to professional one, Men leaders are performance oriented, listening skills. Although Men/Women manager styles are different, idea is the same, not aggressive, sales oriented. No women managers. Women leadership styles are different according to their personality, men are strong collaborative, and have effective communication skills. As policy, EEO is given to all.
IT		No women managers, For Men, company is first, people are next. Women managers exist, men are explicit. Men/Women have conservative, style, function is different, time, team, and quality management is same. Men/women managers are different based on their experience, background in every department, but sales are male dominated. Men/women are different in motivating employees. Women give momentum after successful task, men take us to party. No women boss, men are bureaucratic. No women boss (fired), not because of the gender, but not meeting the performance requirement.

Sector	Women Respondents	Men Respondents
Education/Skill building	More Women employees in our workplace, less men. Teaching requirement same for men/women. Men/women have same characteristics.	For Men/women, same people skills and same characteristics. Women employees exist, no boss. When it comes to key positions, not many women leaders, men are always dominating. No men/women differences.
Health Sector	No differences between men/women.	Women leaders are straight forward, different, soft spoken, strategic.
Manufacturing	No response available.	Women leaders are less, men responsibilities including planning, implementing ideas Women exist in HR because they are effective in that domain.
Consumer goods/Fashion	Men/women value the work, characteristics are same. Women/men have behavioral differences. Very limited female boss, but men understand the gender differences.	
Media		No female boss, male dominated, show bureaucracy, power, references, skillset priority.
Telecommunication		Women at top positions only. Women behavior/attitude are different according to regions (North, West, East, South). Men possess market knowledge.
Railways		Women boss are less, men are powerful among others, don't expect protocol.

Sector	Women Respondents	Men Respondents
Power Infra-structure		NA
Oil & Gas		Women boss exist, but still consult their boss before taking any decisions. Men managers motivate, promote; bad managers – show power distance.
Agriculture		Women leaders are less, their characteristics are different according to their personality, men are always commanding.
Coal Mining		Women leaders are in corporate level only, men are proactive.
Energy		Men/women characteristics are different.
Consulting	Men/women have same power, expectation, more competent. Women are less, men have convincing skills & flexibility.	
NBFC (non banking financial)		Men/women characteristics are same, women have to display demanding & competitive characteristics.
Defense Forces		Women (30+) are in officers category, men have leadership, people skills. Men/women characteristics are different

PRUDENT VERSUS HUMAN STRATEGIES

We found that men and women differ in their approach to handle diversity challenges. Our men respondents seem to describe a rational decision-making approach in which data that has been obtained through observation is used in making decisions that are long-term. We found that key executives (men) have to coordinate all the activities and have responsibility for goal achievement. Hence, they adopt a rational approach to decision making. See Table 4 for the same. For instance:

“There is no specific strategy. We cannot follow global value. Our strategy is to work practically and focus on how the work is to be done” – Regional Manager, M29.

Table 4: Diversity Strategies

Sector	Male	Female
Banks	Collect information about corporate client, understand, what they want, provide service accordingly. No strategy, take it as it is. Inform employee selected based on skill/knowledge, education & not based on race religion, culture. No promotion for women post-delivery due to discontinuity in job/service. Align Individual and Organizational goal because rural employees' background, lifestyle are different. Adapt culture in working environment.	Organization supports a lot in handling problem is diversity. No discrimination for minorities (Muslim), get people from different culture/region. Arrange for lunch, celebrate anniversaries to reduce differences. Upper & middle management are friendly, open to differences, sensitive to differences. Significant bias at lower level.
IT	Help each other, hire people through reference to get same work culture, help business to grow, ongoing training, understanding culture for different interaction, no specific strategy, work practically, no teams willing to include women not because of gender, but for low performance level (expectations are important), make employee (from different region) feel ease at work, need to understand, anticipate thinking & reactions when dealing with people across culture.	----

Sector	Male	Female
Education	No specific strategies, cognizant of bias, not affecting decision making. Communicate in language of listener. Talk to people (other regions) about their food first before work related issues. Conscious strategy – women, non-engineers (minority) get 5 extra point during selection admission process.	Treat others as human, not based on region/religion. Ignore those disrespecting me.
Health Sector	Mix well besides hierarchy.	Job rotation, grievance redressal.
Manufacturing	Local language work (other countries). Put employees. on leadership intervention, come out of regional, consider global perspective. Focus is only gender diversity.	Voluntary socialization with colleagues, made them consider me among them which worked and helped.
Consumer goods/fashion		Equal commitment to work, interact a lot with people (different culture), learn from each other. Similar task immaterial of gender. Job rotation – learnt new skills.
Media/Telecommunication	Removed ego, communicated across ages (age diversity). Want to support end customers irrespective of their diversity. Keep my boss in loop whenever decisions are made, resistant, flexible.	
Railways	Motivated women(minority) to continue in their job, removed ego to communicate across different age group.	

Sector	Male	Female
Power Infrastructure	Team meeting, coaching, job enlargement.	
Oil & Gas	Understand others' perspective, prevail, adopt the situation.	
Agriculture	Communicate, keep record (rural vs urban)	
Coal Mining	Understand the differences, share experience, try & find common ground.	
Energy	Accept & digest	
Consulting		Creating comfortable work environment (virtually connected). Understand others' background.
NBFC	Bring common objectives in picture, embrace diversity.	
Defense Forces	Realize organization will work better with diversified people.	

In contrast, we noticed a human approach by women participants, even when men and women are evenly matched in their intellectual capabilities. The issue is that they reach these similar ends through different means. Consistent with the stereotype that women are soft natured, women managers in our sample demonstrate their soft naturedness by articulating a human approach in identifying and implementing strategies. For instance,

“Most of the Indian companies maintain power distance. I arrange for team lunch to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. By doing so, we can reduce the differences among people” – Product Manager, F1.

“To handle the diversity, we hire people through reference to get the same work culture with diverse background to help the system, manage project and help the business grow. Business is first, people is next” – GM HR, M15.

FEW VERSUS MANY CHALLENGES

We explored respondent perceptions of what they found as challenging issues in the diversity domain. Although we found some similarities

between accounts, there were some differences as well. Both men and women report language and cultural differences as the biggest challenge in the manufacturing and agriculture sectors. Additionally, both men and women report instances of age discrimination on the part of older and younger employees alike. However, women tend to focus on more human issues such as being respected and valued, without being stereotyped. In these accounts, women tend to focus on issues borne seemingly out of their personal experience of being treated differently. Men on the other hand, point to differences in people across regions, gender, education levels etc., not so much from the perspective of how they have been treated, but from the perspective of how they should treat others. For instance, respondents commented about the challenges they face at workplace:

“Being a woman doing same tasks as our male counterparts. Management doubt our efficiency after pregnancy and do not provide challenging tasks. Also promotional opportunities are denied due to the discontinuance of service during labor period” – Sr. Brand Manager, F27.

“Challenging part is meeting the expectation of people who come from diverse background. Our company has some limitation in balancing the differences” – Program Manager, M18.

Embracing diversity is considered the biggest challenge for men. Men in public sector enterprises such as railways/power/infrastructure report that unconscious age discrimination exists such that older people do not cope with younger generation in working speed. Simultaneously, younger employees do not involve in work, seemingly lacking commitment. In these companies, men report that understanding people behavior is a challenge.

Men working in information technology sector face many challenges including language, culture, geographic location, work style, understanding, practical vs theoretical knowledge (hierarchical/age difference), skill differences, having women in the group and so on. As most of the IT companies have business operations both in domestic and international location, they collaborate and work with people from different countries (geographic & cultural differences) speak different languages, and workstyle differences consist of people from different backgrounds -gender, age, and hierarchy -working on different levels (skill & hierarchical). As a result, employees face different challenges at the workplace when compared to other sectors. IT is one of the industries where all kinds of diversity (age, gender, region, religion, age, hierarchical, culture, language) exist.

Consistent with our other findings, women tend to focus relatively more on gender diversity issues/challenges in earning respect and being treated well by others. As a result, what they report seems to reduce diversity challenges to a single dimension –gender. We conclude that people at the receiving end of stereotyping and discrimination perceive those issues as the most salient and therefore report these more than others.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT DIVERSITY

Although our respondents report a variety of misconceptions in thinking and addressing diversity challenges, one or two stand out. First, a majority of these accounts focus on stereotyping on the basis of gender, age, ability, regional differences, etc. Second, a significant number of people report that the multidimensional issue of diversity is reduced to a single dimension, that of gender inequality.

Preferential Treatment at the workplace is a common practice in centralized banks in order to meet certain government standards. The intention is to have a certain percentage (30%) of women at the workplace and to provide equal employment opportunity irrespective of gender. As a result, organizations sometimes hire individuals unfit for the job and hire more women than required. This happens in certain private sectors as well (e.g., telecommunication). It is the opposite in sectors such as manufacturing and financial services. The employers are biased while selecting young married women assuming that they may quit the job due to family reasons. Also, stereotypes exist about people of certain backgrounds (caste, religion, language; people with disability), assuming that they would underperform if hired. In the health care sector, organizations are reported as trying to integrate diversity in the workplace for the sake of including it, simply going through the motions, without any real commitment. In the consumer products sector, women participants noted that their male counterparts believe that women are appointed for the position based on their gender and not on skills they possess (stereotype thinking). For instance, our respondents said the following:

“It is mandate to appoint women at all levels in our organization. But more men counterparts think we get hired and promoted because of the gender and not for the skillset we possess. Getting actual respect and recognition needs to be worked on” – Sr. Brand Manager and Sr. Product Manager, F27, F32.

“Diversity is not productive as such. Lot of things depends on culture. Organization is doing it for the sake of requirement” – Cross Border Acquisition Manager, M31.

Overall, stereotyping seems to be pointed out as a common mistake in the domain of diversity. Instead of gender being the sole basis of stereotyping and discrimination, our findings suggest that other characteristics also play an important role.

DISCUSSION

Despite the importance of diversity to organizational performance and to addressing social problems (e.g., Konrad et al., 2016), very few studies have addressed diversity issues in India, which is at the cusp of an explosion in economic growth (e.g., Cooke & Saini, 2010). Although gender issues have begun to be addressed in the Indian context (e.g., Budhwar et al., 2006; Gupta, 2017), the broader set of diversity issues have yet to be addressed. We contribute to this literature by qualitatively exploring differences in perceptions of diversity among Indian managers. Based on the findings, we identified broad themes that are likely to be useful in theorizing diversity issues, which are likely to be critical for MNCs and Indian organizations alike (e.g., Cooke & Saini, 2010).

First and foremost, we found that many in India have a tendency to assert the importance of work outcomes over diversity issues, posing a serious challenge to managers interested in addressing social problems in addition to promoting the business case for diversity. Equally important is the tendency to reduce the multi-dimensional diversity challenge to the single dimension of gender. We found that a variety of cognitive and structural factors may result in men having a broader range of diverse experiences in the Indian context, some of which may favor men more than women, consistent with the research (e.g., Gupta, 2017). Additionally, whereas women focus more on the cognitive approaches used by people by defining diversity as mainly pertaining to mindsets, men have a very rational and work-outcome oriented perspective. Next, whereas women use more human approaches in developing strategies to address diversity issues, by thinking in terms of respect, valuing people, understanding people, treating people right etc., men have a very rational perspective.

We also found that the *think manager–think male* stereotype may operate among many male respondents, which has serious implications for the advancement of women workplace issues. Finally, we found stereotyping based on a number of characteristics to be a prevalent problem, which poses barriers to diversity management in India.

These thematic findings identify a set of challenges for human resource managers to implement diversity management strategies effectively. Although some of our respondents note that diversity brings a lot of opportunities, these remain part of the exception than the norm.

IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this study can provide valuable contributions for formulating strategies in organizations. First, human resource management in Indian firms needs to increase awareness of the notion that addressing diversity objectives and performance issues need not be a zero-sum game. Organizations should ensure fair and equitable treatment of diverse employees regarding developmental opportunities (e.g, promotions, and transfers, challenging tasks). These opportunities should not be restricted due to personal assumptions of some, resulting from their stereotypes. For instance, our women respondents stated that they were not considered for promotion due to discontinuity of work post-delivery. Also, challenging tasks were not given to them during pregnancy. Similarly, organizations engaging in the practice of hiring more women (surplus) thinking that they are meeting the diversity requirement should also ensure that the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the individuals hired match requirements, to not compromise performance. Very few participant organizations focus on diversity and others consider it for the sake of having it to avoid any punishments or penalties from the government. Organizations should harvest the true potential of diversity initiatives. To do this, management can provide training to all employees and timely evaluation has to be done to determine the effectiveness of diversity management. A key component of such training programs should address stereotypes that people use implicitly in decision making and challenge their use in dealing not only with women but those of different religion, caste, region etc. Finally, training programs focused on the business responsibility of addressing social problems, which may otherwise aggravate if left unaddressed, should form a core component of diversity management programs.

LIMITATIONS

Despite our contribution, this study contains some limitations and suggests future research directions. This study was conducted with one executive per company. Future research should include more employees of different age, gender, hierarchy, region, religion from the same organization to crosscheck experiences and identify variances. We included almost ten sectors in our sample and most of these are established organizations and some have businesses in other regions and in the international market as well. Future research should include small sectors as well to identify particular diversity challenges. Our findings suggest that a more systematic exploration of the *think manager–think male* stereotype is in order, in future research.

CONCLUSION

Researchers have noted the importance of diversity to competitive intensity and performance. If Indian organizations are to become world class, researchers need to examine diversity issues that may pose barriers to this accomplishment. MNCs and Indian organizations stand to benefit from more systematic examination of diversity challenges in this country, which is one of the most diverse. If a significant number of Indian employees and managers think that addressing diversity objectives comes at the cost of work performance, dealing with this mindset issue gains more prominence than other issues, especially in the context where business is becoming increasingly globalized.

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