CHAPTER 3

Current State of Women Leaders in India: Challenges and Opportunities

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While India has made enormous economic strides in the past few decades with the most recent growth of 7.4% in its gross domestic product in the third quarter of 2016 (Nayak & Sahu, 2016), the condition of women has not improved significantly. Even though India is called a rising economic powerhouse in the global market (Budhwar & Varma, 2011; Rao & Varghese, 2009), women experience myriad challenges in pursuing leadership opportunities and performing in leadership positions.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index ranks India at 108 among 145 countries (World Economic Forum, 2015). Only about 36% of women are in the Indian workforce, of which only 3% to 6% occupy senior official positions (Catalyst, 2013). Most importantly, India has the "worst leaking pipeline for junior- to middle-level positions for women: 28.71% of those at the junior level, 14.9% at the middle level and 32% at

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the senior level at the workplaces" (Chawla, Chawla, Sharma, & Sharma, 2016, p. 184). Due to this leaking pipeline, 26% of women compared to only 9% of men in India report a lack of role models who can inspire them to achieve and excel in leadership positions (Bagati & Carter, 2010). Such statistics are reflective of the challenges facing women leaders in India.

Women's appointment to high-ranking leadership roles in India is challenging because traditional cultural values (e.g., patriarchy) dictate the inferior status of women, especially in family structures and interactions (Haq, 2013). Their persistence over several decades following India's independence in 1947 and economic liberalization in 1991 indicates how deep-rooted these gender-role perceptions are in Indian society. Given that such cultural values are at the core of gender bias and discrimination in Indian workplaces and society, there is an urgent need to consider cultural influences more significantly when researching women in leadership in India.

The objective of this chapter is to review literature that discusses the roots of cultural stereotypes about gender roles and the evolution of these stereotypes in the context of political and economic changes in India. We explain how gender stereotypes influence the implementation of policies and legislation, impact the education to workforce pipeline, and bias workplace practices. We discuss how the persisting cultural stereotypes expect Indian women to uphold the values of both tradition and modernity, thereby posing significant challenges for women who aspire to overcome the socio-cultural barriers and carve out their own independent identities as leaders. We add examples of some exceptional Indian women who are navigating challenges posed by gender stereotypes to emerge successful as leaders in different sectors in India.

Tracing the Roots of Gender Roles in Indian Society

Gender inequality is often called a structural phenomenon where the cultural institutions such as a rigid caste structure and cultural norms dictate the allocation of resources and opportunities between men and women (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Pande & Astone, 2007). As Hinduism is the major religion in India, it is helpful to discuss briefly how the organizing principles of the caste structure instituted by Hinduism created the need for women's subordination. The fundamental principle of the caste structure was to preserve resources, such as land, wealth, and opportunities, within a closed structure, making them accessible to the upper castes (e.g., Brahmanas) who were believed to be

superior than those belonging to the lower castes (e.g., Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, Dalits) (Chakravarti, 1993).

With this idea of superiority of the upper castes came the need to preserve the purity of castes. As women were the points of entrance into a certain caste, free movement of upper caste women was institutionally constrained to avoid mixing of the upper and lower castes. Subordination of women was necessary for the survival of the social and moral order of the Hindu society, and this was secured by means such as "ideology, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges and veneration bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and finally the use of force" (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 580). Ideological control through the *pativrata* concept (i.e., wifely fidelity as a significant expression of self) was the most impactful as this ideology naturalized women's subordination in society. Through the promotion of this patriarchal ideology, women were indoctrinated not only to accept the state of subordination as their condition, but also embrace their subordinate status to their husbands (and, in turn, to men) as a mark of distinction (Chakravarti, 1993). The virtues of loyalty and devotion were propagated through rituals that women were socialized to practice (i.e., women fasting for their husband's health or performing ceremonies to offer respect to their male family members) and through righteous women characters in Indian mythology, such as Sita and Savitri, who epitomized wifely fidelity through sacrificing personal desires and freedom. The sacrifice of personal desires was manifested through restricting free movement of women in public and encouraging devotion to the private sphere of family life. This restriction led to status-appropriate work in which women of upper castes were subjugated to work within strict boundaries to protect their family's status. So, "the more secluded the woman, the higher her household's status or prestige" (Chen, 1995, p. 46).

Interestingly, this association of women's honor with the private sphere was further fueled by the nationalist struggle of India in the nineteenth century. While the nationalists acknowledged the superiority of western civilization in the material sphere, they claimed that the east was far superior to the west in regard to the spiritual sphere. This superiority of the spiritual sphere became significant for women with "the material/spiritual... dichotomy... between the outer and the inner" (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 624). The material (outer) was superficial, and one was forced to accept it. As men were the breadwinners

and responsible for supporting families, their dress, religious, and food habits (e.g., drinking, smoking, lack of religious devotion) due to exposure to the outer realm were considered a necessary evil. However, women compensated for this loss by their natural association with the private/inner sphere as the custodians of spiritual purity. Similar to the ideological control of the *pativrata*, women were socialized not only to accept, but also feel proud of their status as the defenders of India's spiritual distinctiveness. As home was considered to be the primary site for spirituality (a mark of national culture), women were given the responsibility of nurturing their homes through selflessly serving their husbands and children. This outer/inner distinction helped to organize norms for appropriate conduct of women and led to the creation of social roles for the genders.

Impact of Gender Roles on Developing Women Leadership in India

This section briefly describes how gender stereotypes continue to influence aspects that are critical to developing and sustaining women leaders in India: policies and legislation for protecting women's rights, education for women, tradition–modernity dualism for the emerging Indian woman, and the gendered nature of workplace practices impacting Indian working women.

Policies and Legislation for Protecting Women's Rights

Policies and legislation are critical to creating a safe and conducive work environment for women to pursue and excel in leadership roles in community, government, non-profits, and corporate organizations. India adopted its comprehensive Constitution in 1950. Early, notable legislation included the Maternity Benefits Act of 1961, the Factories Act of 1948, and the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976. Other laws aimed at improving women's condition were the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986; the Commission of Sati (the ritual of burning widows on husbands' funeral pyre) Prevention Act, 1987; the National Commission for Women Act, 1990; the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, 1993, ensuring reservation of one-third of elected seats in panchayats (village governance structures) for

women from lower castes; the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; and the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013. Further, the Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (Swashakti) and passed the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women with the goal of bringing about the advancement, development, and empowerment of women (Ahamad, Sinha, & Shastri, 2016). While passing these legislative acts gives the impression that the Indian government is committed to fighting discrimination against women, thereby paving the path for women leaders, a better understanding shows how some of these laws are subject to age-old prejudices and gender stereotypes prevalent in Indian society.

For instance, although there are laws to prevent violence against women,

> in every incident of violence against women, the attempt is made to underplay the crime itself by focusing on the identity/position of the perpetrator, as well as the victim, in order to mobilise support on the basis of defined parameters of polarisation in the specific context. These can be caste, community, regional or even politico-ideological. (Agnihotri & Mazumdar, 1995, p. 1872)

Thus, even if the laws exist on paper, the implementation of these laws are subject to societal bigotry that considers certain groups of women (e.g., lower castes, women in rural regions or women in politically contested regions, such as Kashmir or Nagaland) as less worthy of the benefits accruing from these laws.

Similarly, constitutional privileges of gender equality have not been realized because, initially, the five-year plans rolled out by the planning commission of the Indian government fell short by not including women as a direct target group. Given Indian society's inclination to think of women's identity as primarily community bound, women's issues were mostly mentioned indirectly through a thrust on family or household concerns until women's organizations issued a joint statement demanding

> explicit mention of women as a target group, since the invisibility of women to planners and administrators was rooted in the tendency to view women only through the screen of families and households and not as individuals in

> their own right. (All India Women Conference, 1980 as cited in Khullar, 2005, p. 69)

This resulted in the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–85) including a chapter on Women and Development:

> Acknowledging the government's own failure to achieve gender equality, the Plan stated explicitly that without economic independence, equal access to education, skill-training, and family planning services, the constitutional guarantee of equality will remain a myth. (Sixth Five-Year Plan 1980–85, Chapter 27) (Agnihotri & Mazumdar, 1995, p. 1874)

This further led to a direct focus on women in the subsequent five-year plans that allocated funds to women-focused programs and focused on inclusive growth of women through provision of special benefits and job quotas. The current 12th Five-Year Plan (2012–17) notes gender inequality as a key issue and specifically refers to the need for inclusion of all *backward* groups (e.g., lower castes) (Government of India Planning Commission, 2012; Twelfth Five-Year Plan, 2012). This is remarkable progress given how integral the caste structure in Indian society is in understanding gender issues.

Although this marked shift in the approach to women's issues is commendable, there are myriad challenges when it comes to the implementation of these plans, policies, and legislation. Gender stereotypes and prejudices are pervasive, especially in rural India, and it would take a concerted and systematic effort to uproot them and empower women to become leaders from the grassroots level. In doing so, attention needs to be given to the plight of women working in the informal or unorganized sector that includes all "operating units whose activities are not regulated under any Statutory Act or legal provision and/or those which do not maintain any regular accounts" (Kulshreshtha, 2011, p. 125). Given that the unorganized sector is beyond the reach of legislation, and 94% of the women workforce in India is in the unorganized sector (Jose, 2007), the government needs to think creatively to address the barriers facing women and women leaders working in unregistered enterprises in both urban and rural India.

Women's organizations at the grassroots level, such as the Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA), can help the Indian government attend to the needs of women working in unorganized sectors.

SEWA is a great example of women's leadership in India. Founded in 1972 by Dr. Ella Bhatt, SEWA is a trade union of women who are engaged in physical labor or small business work and do not receive regular salaries or welfare benefits. Women in the unorganized sector have achieved this tremendous feat by organizing together to form cooperative structures, such as the SEWA cooperative bank and the SEWA Academy that has helped them access credit and acquire education and skills. At the helm of this initiative is Dr. Bhatt's daughter-in-law, Reema Nanavati, who has taken SEWA to new heights. On being elected the General Secretary in 1999, she enlarged SEWA's network by forming self-help groups and cooperatives across the state, bridging the gap between skills and accessibility to raw materials and markets. Dealing with both market and government forces, Reema has tried to influence markets in ways that also benefit women at the bottom of the growing economy (R. Nanavati, Personal communication, 08-14-2016).

Education for Women

Women's education should be directly associated with workforce participation and, hence, women's ascent to leadership positions in workplaces. However, studies examining women's education and employment trends in India indicate that employment rates for educated women tend to be low in affluent economic strata (Das & Desai, 2003; Jose, 2007). Economically well-off families adopt patriarchal values about gender roles, and "when economic condition of the household rises, there is a tendency for women to withdraw from the workforce and practice seclusion" (Jose, 2007, p. 12). This has created a Catch 22 (a situation from which there is no escape). Women from economically affluent families who have the resources to be educated may not take advantage of their education to gain employment and develop their leadership skills due to social constraints. And women who lack resources needed to get a good education have no choice but to engage in low-paid jobs that lack regulation and do not empower them to take on leadership roles. This devaluing of education raises questions about the perceived goal of education for women in India. Why, then, are women being educated? For what purpose?

As noted by Thapan (2001), education for women in India is not necessarily for their individual empowerment but for "the purposes of having educated and aware mothers and wives who are harbingers of social

and cultural development" (p. 360). Moreover, education is perceived to be a tool for instilling discipline and control over India's daughters and for preparing them to serve their families (Rew, Gangoli, & Gill, 2013; Vijaykumar, 2013). Women's education is also considered to be a safety net that provides a contingency plan in case of a daughter's failed marriage or widowhood and a form of capital for women that helps them attract educated grooms who can earn high salaries (Das & Desai, 2003; Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Klasen & Peiters, 2015). Thus, education is largely perceived as a tool to perpetuate social norms that govern gender roles and confine women to effective housekeeping instead of preparing them to enter the workforce and aspire for leadership positions at work.

However, the intensity of the social norms dictating gender roles varies across regions in India (Agarwal, 1994; Dyson & Moore, 1983), and, with changing times, the purpose of education for women is being reframed for independence and empowerment (Nandi & Joshi, 2015).

> In the past two decades, women's participation in primary, middle and secondary level has increased considerably. The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) of the Central Government has reduced dropout rates to less than 10 percent and reduced gender gaps to less than 5 percent. (Kumar & Sangeeta, 2013, p. 167)

Plans to expand the Women's Vocational Training Programme are underway to help women develop skills for seeking employment or building their self-employment potential (Ahamad et al., 2016). Moreover, lately, women political leaders have taken an active interest in advocating for education as an essential tool for women's economic independence and intellectual enlightenment (Beaman, Daflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2012), thus leading the way as role models for inspiring women leaders.

One example of such a leader is the youth icon, Kavita Joshi Sarpanch (i.e., political leader) of Shobhagpura Panchayat in Rajasthan, India. Disturbed by corruption, Kavita courageously stood up and fought against established leaders when there was an opportunity created through a reserved seat in the general category for women (K. Joshi, Personal communication, 09-03-2016). Kavita has forged partnerships with the Mohan Lal Sukhadia University in Rajasthan to improve sewage and sanitary conditions in her village. Her next primary focus is making school education compulsory for girls. She also plans to work on tribal area women empowerment through providing education that is lagging behind due to

the reluctance of villagers to send girls to school. She plans to change mindsets through camps and individual conversations with each tribal woman.

Tradition–Modernity Dualism for the Changing Indian Woman

Although working women are inhabiting the public sphere and even taking on leadership roles, they often continue to subscribe to traditional notions of gender roles (Lau, 2006; Munn & Chaudhuri, 2015). This creates an interesting dilemma for Indian women. On one hand, they aspire to good education and utilize their skills to make a difference through their leadership roles, while, on the other hand, most Indian women want to uphold their traditional identities of being the primary caregiver as a wife or mother. This constant balancing of tradition and modernity can be exhausting, but emerging Indian women have embraced this dualism as a mark of honor and distinction. This is an eerie reminder of how ideological control of tradition over Indian women has morphed over the years but continues to have a steady grip. As articulated by Thapan (2001),

> In much the same way as Indian womanhood has been characterized as an ambivalent state, wherein women are both revered and oppressed, worshipped and molested, free to express themselves in different domains and yet voiceless, the educationally advantaged young woman also finds herself in an ambivalent state. She is simultaneously a part of tradition, ritual, and customary practices, and yet she experiences the more contemporary world. (p. 361)

This tradition–modernity dualism is well reflected in the experience of Nisha Sharma who became famous in 2003 by speaking out against the practice of dowry (i.e., bride's family being obliged to pay the groom's family a lump sum for marriage) (Radhakrishnan, 2009). Her courage and conviction indicate the potential that educated Indian women have for leading in the fight against age-old traditions that are against women. Nisha's announcement about her plan to continue her studies further underscored the value of education for such progressive change in Indian society. However, this reflection of modernity was quickly balanced by Nisha's subsequent choice of agreeing to an arranged marriage (i.e., marriage to a groom chosen by parents)

and life as a homemaker. By choosing marriage over higher education and an independent career, Nisha paid her dues to the traditional values that condition women to prioritize family, and yet she exhibited modern values in protesting against the regressive social practice of dowry.

This dualism is also seen in political women leaders (such as Uma Bharathi) who symbolize the notion of a liberated woman capable of running for political office and, at the same time, upholding the belief of honorable women aware of the boundaries of sacred femininity prescribed by her religion and nation (Basu, 1995) or in the young women working in business-process outsourcing (BPO) centers in India who draw from both the individualistic ideology of self-improvement in India's liberalized information technology (IT) industry and the traditional virtues of domesticity and dedication to family well-being (Vijaykumar, 2013). Another notable example of this dualism can be seen among the beauty queens who have led the path proudly to represent India in international beauty contests following liberalization of India's economy. On one hand, these women (e.g., Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai winning the Miss Universe and Miss World accolades in 1994, among others) excelled in displaying the corporeality of the western notion of physical beauty in swimsuits and, on the other hand, embodied the Indian ethos and virtues of spirituality and love for family (Parameswaran, 2004). Following their victories, Indian media outlets proudly reported their generosity in committing to helping their families with the award money.

What's noteworthy here is the constant push to uphold family as of central importance. While this premium value attributed to the family might appear to be innocent, a closer look indicates that privileging women's association with family resulted in family being critical symbolic capital for women's respectability in all contexts (Mankekar, 1999; Radhakrishnan, 2009). In other words, Indian women not subscribing to the traditional expectation of having close ties with family (especially unmarried women) are likely to be regarded as social outcasts and rebel against Indian society.

This premium value placed on family has huge implications for aspiring women leaders, as this need for respectable Indian women to have a familial identity (i.e., someone's wife, mother, daughter, sister) places tremendous pressure on them to sustain a domestic life alongside attending to the pressures of a leadership role in professional work contexts. Although there is nothing amiss in valuing family, regarding it to be

indispensable for women to earn respect is objectionable. Doing so not only forces women to maintain a familial identity at all costs (i.e., even though they might experience abuse by family members) but also discriminates against working women who might not have strong family ties. Unfortunately, even if times are changing with more women aspiring to careers as leaders, this tension of tradition–modernity dualism continues to create a contested space for women. In these changing times, "women consistently choose to be career oriented, but rarely at the expense of a family life, which is almost always privileged over the stimulation or even the salary a woman may receive in her job" (RadhaKrishnan, 2009, p. 202). Furthermore, for those women who aspire to have equally significant presence in both family and workplace, the tradition–modernity dualism creates high stress as they bear a dual burden of working double shifts at work and at home (Gupta & Sharma, 2003; Kalliath, Kalliath, & Singh, 2011; Munn & Chaudhuri, 2015).

Gendered Nature of Workplace Practices

Workplace practices and policies are not created in a vacuum. These practices reflect gender norms in society, and, hence, the premium value attributed to women's association with family has influenced workplace cultures and practices. For instance, IT organizations, that are increasingly employing women in India, subscribe to the notion of respectable Indian femininity that forces women to balance tradition and modernity. "The value placed upon respectable femininity in the IT workplace may serve to neutralize, justify, and even valorize 'not so ambitious' women by diverting attention away from the glass ceiling" (Radhakrishnan, 2009, p. 208).

Most notably, marriage and family ties are favored by organizations as markers of reliability. In the words of one human resource manager, "Women are much more reliable. If they come back after marriage or after having a kid, they will be the most loyal employees you can ever have. You can count on them" (Radhakrishnan, 2009, p. 208). In other words, if a woman is married and bears children, family-friendly policies can help the woman take the time needed to care for her growing family and, in turn, ensure her long-term commitment to the organization. Given the highly competitive and lucrative market where recruitment and retention of talent is a challenge, married women are a safe choice for organizations that want to build a loyal workforce. So, "management practices, especially in Indian corporations, seem to offer systematic 'concessions' for

women, which vary according to their marital status and familial restriction" (Radhakrishnan, 2009, p. 208).

For example, Procter & Gamble, India, has created a maternity tool kit, a nine-month program that teaches managers to oversee the careers of new mothers once they return to work, and Infosys offers its women employees sabbaticals, extended maternity leaves, and enhanced training when they come back to the office. It also tracks women after they return to ensure that they have not been back-benched (Agarwal, Narayanan, & Agarwal, 2012). The irony is that, even though these policies are commendable for supporting working Indian women who want to balance work and family and also aspire to leadership positions, the non-availability of similar concessions for work–life balance of unmarried women who have potential to seek leadership positions is a stark reminder that Indian society and, in turn, Indian organizations privilege women with families. This bias toward women with families is well articulated in the words of Malini, an IT professional interviewed by Radhakrishnan (2009), who believed that her organization's culture valued the notion of respectable Indian femininity:

> They don't like it when a woman is in their face. They expect you to be a little womanly . . . if they notice that you have a husband or a family. . . . it gets well with the south Indian middle class ethos . . . I've never seen anyone [in this firm] who does not fit that. (Radhakrishnan, 2009, p. 209)

To understand the treatment of women employees in India better, it would help to refer to the approaches articulated by Mehra (2002). One approach expects women to adopt a masculine working style to fit into the male-dominated workplace; another approach expects women to be capable of doing the same work as their male counterparts but to have different needs, thus requiring workplaces to accommodate those needs; still another expects organizations to recognize the unique leadership and work strengths that women bring to the workplace. Workplace policies and practices in India are mostly influenced by the approach that recognizes that women are equally capable but have different needs because of family obligations (Budhwar, Saini, & Bhatnagar, 2005). Hence, family-friendly practices, such as flexible working schedules, maternity leaves, daycare centers, and telecommuting, are increasingly being offered by organizations.

While supporting women's family-related needs is absolutely necessary in a society where women's familial identity is given priority, a simultaneous emphasis on recognizing women's unique leadership strengths, that is, the third approach noted by Mehra (2002), can go a long way in developing women leaders in Indian organizations through provision of training on leadership, decision making, and confidence building, which seems to be currently lacking (Kaushik, Sharma, & Kaushik, 2014). Moreover, current workplace practices discourage women from taking on challenging assignments due to paternalistic attitudes that perpetuate gender stereotypes of women being fragile and lacking strength (Chawla et al., 2016; Kaushik et al., 2014). This has resulted in high levels of gender segregation with women primarily occupying subordinate positions with fewer women in traditional male-dominated industries, such as manufacturing and engineering (Chawla et al., 2016). For instance, among the 11% of Indian companies led by women, half are in the financial sector (EMA Partners International, 2011). While the ascent of Indian women to the apex of service sector companies, such as banking (e.g., Arundhati Bhattacharya, the first women chairperson of India's largest bank, State Bank of India), is encouraging and reflects the progressive trend of workplace practices that challenge gender inequality in some sectors, similar trends need to be fostered in other sectors to support a well-rounded strategy of developing women leaders.

Implications and Conclusion

Franklin D. Roosevelt rightly said that we have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon. We can see through the literature and studies that there have been many social, cultural, political, and economic reasons to keep alive the hope of a slow but steady transformation in the emancipation of women in India. While the government is showing its commitment to the cause by bringing structural changes through legislation, there is equal commitment shown by non-government organizations and many women leaders to rise to the cause with more zeal and enthusiasm. A circular dated 17th April 2014, from the Securities and Exchange Board of India, made it mandatory for all listed companies to appoint at least one woman director to their board of directors by 31 March 2015, in alignment with the requirement of Section 149 of the Companies Act, 2013. This has paved the way for the participation of women leaders constructively in

corporations as never before. Schemes announced by the prime minister, such as the Mudra Yojana (a bank loan scheme for non-corporate small and micro businesses) on 14 March 2015 and Start-up India (to support new ventures by Indian youth) declared on 16 January 2016, have created hope equally in men and women to lead the way in creating jobs as entrepreneurs. As an example, young women leaders like Pavithra, at the age of 22, decided to start a new venture, Vindhya, a BPO unit that is India's first and only for-profit organization whose workforce comprises people with disabilities, socially disadvantaged women from the poorest strata of society, and those diagnosed with autism.

As the number of girl children increases in the list of merit holders in public and competitive examinations, we can envision future research and practices in India on the following topics: workforce diversity and gender sensitivity, pre- and post-maternity career prospects for women, social acceptance of career women irrespective of their familial ties, career aspiration vis-à-vis changing social paradigms (i.e., no marriage, live in relationships, divorce, no motherhood and changing childrearing practices with professionally qualified working women, and changing family structures), inclusivity and women-centric HR policies, work engagement studies based on gender and roles, pro-women government schemes and their impact on women empowerment, and women's presence in unconventional leadership roles in male-dominated industries. Perhaps the time is not long off when we will see the development of women leaders in sectors that are forging ahead to break age-old cultural barriers and the glass ceiling.

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