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Indian Women in Leadership in an Asian Context

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Breaking through the glass ceiling by navigating successfully through the leadership labyrinth, Asian women are gradually climbing the ladder in all spheres, ranging from business to politics. The journey has been challenging but phenomenal, given the jarring backdrop. While research on women leaders is burgeoning in western contexts, not much has been discussed about women leaders in Indian or Asian contexts. However, in the past few years, researchers who have taken a keen interest in women leaders from an Asian perspective have reported that women talents are underutilized due to gender bias and social, cultural, and organizational practices. These are critical issues that hinder

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national competitiveness and economic and social advancement of women in Asian countries (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat et al., 2015; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2004). Though Asian women are increasingly found in higher education and lower level staff and managerial positions in business, there are only a handful of women holding top leadership positions in organizations in Asian countries. According to Süssmuth-Dyckerhoff, Wang, and Chen (2012), women have 6% to 8% of the leadership roles in Asia compared to 14% to 15% in the west. These numbers paint a dismal picture at both local and global levels. This is particularly true for Indian women who are still oppressed by the patriarchy that still dominates Indian society and where discrimination against women leaders continues (Mukherjee, 2016).

Based on the significant social and cultural variability with respect to women's leadership and familiarity, the Asian countries we have included for comparison purposes are China, South Korea (Korea hereafter), Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. While Indian, Chinese, and Korean women have 3.3%, 3.2%, and 3.5% chance of rising to top leadership (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2014), the ratio is marginally higher for Sri Lankan and Malaysian women leaders at 5.1% and 5.6% (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat et al., 2015). This is a clear indication that Asian women leaders still face severe barriers in reaching their full potential in highly male-dominant social, cultural, and organizational environments. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the barriers and success drivers of women leaders in organizational settings in India and how they compare against the women leaders in other Asian countries. In this pursuit, we identify the differences and similarities of challenges and opportunities experienced by women leaders in India and four Asian countries based on gender stereotypes, culture, organizational practices, family commitment, and emphasis on women's education. This research will add to the growing pool of cross-cultural leadership, especially from an Asian woman's leadership perspective. We also believe that this chapter is one of the first to preview the macro-environmental factors impacting women's leadership from a multi-country perspective in an Asian context.

A Comparison of Barriers to Advancement of Women in India and Asian Countries

Gender inequality continues to be pervasive not only in Asia but across the world in multiple domains, including retention, recruitment, and career development (Tatli, Vassilopoulou, & Özbilgin, 2013). Women employees have suffered from such inequalities; thus, their potential has remained largely untapped. In the following section, we review key themes that have stifled women's career progression in Asia and compare them with those found in India.

Gender Development Index and Gender Stereotypes

Before embarking on a discussion of gender stereotyping, we explore ranks on the gender development index (GDI) of each country. GDI is the human development index (HDI) that measures gender equality and exposes gender gap issues. HDI measures three areas: life expectancy, education, and standard of living. With the same areas in the HDI, the GDI is the ratio of HDIs calculated separately for women and men. In other words, the GDI is a direct measure of gender gap showing women's HDI as a percentage of men's HDI (or a ratio of women's HDI to men's HDI) (UNDP, 2016). The GDI shows how much women are lagging behind their male counterparts and how much women need to catch up on human development (UNDP, 2016). Therefore, a higher GDI value conveys less of a gender gap between women and men in human development.

Korean women fare much better in HDI compared to their Asian counterparts, standing at 18th of 188 countries, followed by Malaysia at 59th, and Sri Lanka at 73rd (UNDP, 2016). The two most populous countries in the world are lagging behind at 90th for China and 131st for India. In terms of GDI, however, China showed the highest value (0.954), followed by Sri Lanka (0.934), Korea (0.929), and India (0.819). Thus, the GDI group rank of China is the highest (Group 2), which comprises countries with medium to high equality in HDI achievements between women and men (absolute deviation from gender parity in HDI values of 2.5%–5%) among other countries. Table 14.1 summarizes the HDI and GDI of the five countries (UNDP, 2016).

Table 14.1 Comparison of gender development indexes

HDI rank	Country	Gender development index		Human development index (HDI)		Life expectancy at birth		Expected years of schooling		Mean years of schooling		Estimate gross national income per capita	
		Value	Group	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
18	Korea	0.929	3	0.863	0.929	85.2	78.8	15.8	17.3	11.5	12.9	21,308	47,934
59	Malaysia	NA	NA	NA	NA	77.3	72.6	NA	NA	10.0	10.8	17,170	32,208
73	Sri Lanka	0.934	3	0.734	0.785	78.4	71.7	14.3	13.6	10.3	11.4	6067	15,869
90	China	0.954	2	0.718	0.753	77.5	74.5	13.7	13.4	7.2	7.9	10,705	15,830
131	India	0.819	5	0.549	0.671	69.9	66.9	11.9	11.3	4.8	8.2	2184	8897

In India and China, religion or rigid schools of thought have played a pivotal role in women's status. *Rigveda*, one of the ancient Indian sacred texts of Hinduism, viewed women as shakti (epitome of power and potent), devi (goddess), or the supreme Goddess, without whom men remain powerless (Tewari & Tewari, 2017). However, sadly, the godly status of women took a reverse turn in the Medieval era that witnessed many Muslim invaders who carried their own culture to Indian soil. Their marginalized thinking in regards to women's place in society affected the Indian mindset. Furthermore, as Indian men wanted to protect their women from the Muslim invaders, they restricted Indian women to the confinement of homes and under veils to cover them from head to toe (Tewari & Tewari, 2017). As a consequence, the overall status of Indian women started deteriorating, and they were restricted to childrearing and domestic chores (Budhwar, Saini, & Bhatnagar, 2005; Tewari & Tewari, 2017). Likewise, in China, traditional culture negatively affects women. Based on Confucianism, men and women have adopted stereotypical roles to be socially accepted. Men are more likely to engage in behaviors that emphasize the masculine aspects of being in-charge, such as dominance, aggression, and achievement. In contrast, women are more likely to display feminine behaviors that emphasize affiliation, nurturing, deference, and abasement, traits traditionally associated with supporter or follower roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Furst & Reeves, 2008).

Unlike India and China, Korea has a higher GDI rank in spite of the influence of Confucianism and a male-dominant society. The higher GDI rank can be explained, in part, because of the rapid industrialization in Korea compared to its Asian neighbors. Despite its higher GDI, women still remain longer in lower ranks in organizations than men, even though they have the same level of education (Gress & Paek, 2014; Kim & Rowley, 2009). This reflects a discriminant norm for gender in Korea. Defiance and resistance are regarded as manly attitudes that are less allowable for women. Recently, Korean women leaders represent diverse roles in organizations, overcoming gender stereotypes to some degree.

It is encouraging to see better GDIs for Sri Lanka and Malaysia, as well. Both countries have witnessed powerful women leaders who helped their countries rise to prominence by steering past gender stereotypes. However, there is certainly more than that, as India also had the privilege

of having women as Prime Minister and President, but India's GDI is not as promising as in these two countries. Why this is so is not entirely clear. There have been massive social changes and cultural reforms in Sri Lanka and Malaysia (Stivens, 2003). Social transformation in both countries has led to embracing a modern outlook and extensive involvement of women in work, which possibly explains their higher GDIs (Stivens, 2003). However, Indian society is still burdened by stereotypical gendered roles where access to education is considered men's right, and women's education is often considered a waste of resources, as women will ultimately get married and move into a different household, and engage in domestic chores and childcare. Educating her is still perceived to have little relevance to her future roles (Duflo, 2012).

Cultural Context

Each country's culture has played a significant role in influencing leadership behaviors, practices, and styles (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001). The impact is more obvious in Asian society where roles are clearly gendered because of adherence to deeply entrenched cultural beliefs. Literature reveals that countries with strong Confucianism orientation (China and Korea) or Islamic ideology (Malaysia) emphasize men over women and do not wholeheartedly embrace the notion of women holding jobs that would give them more economic independence and power and prestige over men (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat et al., 2015). Similarly, Hinduism, which largely manifests itself as a male-dominant religion (in spite of its many women goddesses), too, has fueled a sense of powerlessness and dependence in the minds of Indian women. Interestingly, the difference is more pronounced in case of lower caste women and women from not-so-affluent families. Likewise, in Sri Lanka, Islamic and Buddhist religious ideologies keep women as subordinates to men, and women are perceived to be home keepers rather than leaders in society (Fernando & Cohen, 2011).

Literature provides many examples from these five countries that reflect the ideology of their staunch masculine cultures and their impact on women. In India, leadership roles requiring critical decision-making and challenging assignments are still reserved for male employees under

the pretext that Indian women are too soft to take up such responsibilities (Kulkarni & Bakhare, 2011). In a similar vein, jobs with long hours and late night work are seen as unsuitable for young women in Sri Lanka (Fernando, 2012). Continuing with this theme, Chinese women are subservient to the family patriarch and play a secondary role in the public sphere with low status in society (Peng, Ngo, Shi, & Wong, 2009). In Malaysia, cultural norms and religious ideologies still prevent women from engaging in top leadership positions (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat et al., 2015). Korean women leaders are trying to navigate through the leadership labyrinth by following the rules of men, meeting expectations of organizations by over-performing, participating in long work hours, and joining in drinking and eating with their colleagues after work. But they had to develop their own leadership styles to survive in the male-dominant organizations (Oh & Park, 2012; Park, 2011). However, this ordeal has left them psychologically and emotionally confused and frustrated, which makes their roles more complex (Kang & Rowley, 2005; Lee & Kim, 2007).

Family Commitment

Asia is known for its collectivistic culture (Du & Jonas, 2015). Embedded in such cultures are profound commitment to family ties and family values, the onus of which mostly falls upon women. It was intriguing to observe a common thread that Asian women are tasked with taking care of their families and children, maintenance of their houses, and the upbringing (especially education) of their children, on top of maintaining their own career at work (Peus, Braun, & Knipfer, 2015).

Women in India have been subjected to multitasking and the double-blind of domestically being the epitome of sacrifice, as daughter, sister, mother, or wife; while professionally being expected to be as committed to their work as their male counterparts. Tandon, Kohli, and Bhalla (2007) conducted a survey of 1063 women leaders in dental colleges in India; 64% reported that family commitments are a hindrance for them to move up their career ladder. Similarly, Chinese women, much like Indian women, are socialized to embrace family priorities over personal aspirations and are expected to sacrifice their careers to propel their husbands'

careers (Cooke & Xiao, 2014). Sri Lankan women, due to prevailing social and cultural values, prefer to resign early in their careers to care for family matters and children's upbringing (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat et al., 2015). Malaysia, too, despite being a progressive economy, does not paint an optimistic picture. Due to their higher level of family commitments, despite equal talent and educational qualifications, Malaysian women choose not to apply for senior management positions as they believe that it is too difficult to balance work and family (Azwan & Kamaruzaman, 2009).

Much like India and China, Korean women's underrepresentation in leadership positions is partially due to the dual roles undertaken by working women: one in the workplace and the other in managing the household (Low, Roberts, & Whiting, 2015). In fact, in Korea, women are blamed if their children's academic performance drops (Rowley, Kang, & Lim, 2016).

Organization Practices

The ideology of Schein's (1973) *think manager; think male* spans across almost all organizations in the Asian countries under review, and this paradigm is widely reflected in their organizational practices that are not conducive to the benefit of women employees. In India, there are considerable barriers in many professions in which women are being discriminated and are not being promoted because of discriminatory promotion criteria. The discriminatory practices continue even after a women leader has been promoted to a higher level as the compensation is often lower than their male counterparts in a similar role (Jain & Mukherji, 2010). In a similar vein, legislation that protects women's rights has been weakly enforced in Chinese organizations (Cooke, 2011), resulting in gender discrimination whereby women are being assigned less-challenging careers compared to men (Peng et al., 2009). This has resulted in reduced organizational commitment for working women forcing them to return home, take on traditional gender roles, and leave the public sphere to men (Currier, 2007).

While unfair organizational practices are one of the deterrents for women to enter leadership roles in India and China, managerial stereotypes have become major constraints for women to rise in top managerial positions in Sri Lanka and Malaysia (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat et al., 2015; Powell

et al., 2002). In Sri Lanka, leadership in organizations has been perceived as a masculine concept (Binns, 2010). Women who display masculine natures have a better chance to be promoted as managers (Fernando, 2012). In Korea, the proportion of women in the workforce is much higher in lower ranked positions, decreasing as women go up through the organizational hierarchy (Heidrick & Struggles, 2013). Korean women are coaxed or, in some cases, forced to resign if they marry or become pregnant (Cooke, 2010). Additionally, most of these Asian organizations lack women-friendly work systems and facilities, such as daycare centers, flexible work hours, and leadership training centers, hindering women who wish to advance in their careers (Azwan & Kamaruzaman, 2009).

Drivers Contributing to Women's Leadership in Asian Countries

Despite these barriers, it appears that consensus on the participation of Asian women in leadership is on the rise. Many Asian organizations are designing women-friendly work environments to encourage women participation in workplaces. In the education sector, many policies are being proposed that promote more women receiving higher education. The subsequent section highlights the changing landscape of Asian workplaces and cultural and mental shifts in the mindset of Asians in general.

Progressive Practices and Trends

Increasing awareness of creating more women leaders in Asia and in Asian organizations is making slow but steady progress in addressing barriers related to the glass ceiling. One such factor is the increasing number of women-friendly workplaces. Increased access to organization-sponsored childcare facilities, flexi hours, job redesign, quota systems, more gender-neutral organizational practices in promotion, and the opening up of service sectors, such as call centers, have resulted in entry and retention of more women employees, thus feeding the pipeline for more women in supervisory and management positions. We suggest examples of specific practices from each country.

The burgeoning of information technology (IT) and financial sectors has opened up a whole gamut of opportunities for Indian women. A few organizations are offering job redesign and stretching their boundaries between work and home by offering 60-hour work weeks in which dual earner couples can share 60 hours of work in one week (Hill, Yang, Hawkins, & Ferris, 2004; Munn & Chaudhuri, 2015). Of course, this assumes that the couple has similar qualifications in education, career, and expertise. While Indian organizations are providing work-friendly policies to promote women leaders, China has a network of childcare provision that can be sourced from (state) employers, local communities, family networks, or private paid assistance (Zhao, Hämäläinen, & Chen, 2017). Korean women leaders have taken the onus of raising next generation women leaders by being the role models and mentors so that they can share their unique experiences in grooming future women leaders (Cho, Kim, et al., 2015). Based on the study of very successful 18 women leaders in Korea, Cho and colleagues (2015) reported that grandparents, live-in nannies, and relatives are playing a pivotal role in taking care of the kids during week days so that women leaders can work long hours and excel in what they are doing.

At the national level, to promote women's leadership, the Indian government has adopted a quota system whereby one-third of the seats at every level of the local government, lower house of the parliament, and all state legislative assemblies are reserved for women leaders to voice their opinions and concerns. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) mandates that all major listed companies have at least one woman director (Pathak & Purkayastha, 2016). Initiatives like these have not only helped in changing the general mindset of the Indian masses that women can lead, but also resulted in significant policy changes and increased women's participation at the regional and national level (Pande & Ford, 2011). On the contrary, women in Sri Lanka and Malaysia have displayed tremendous potential as societal leaders, but representation of women is limited at the parliament and national level as both countries have failed to adopt a quota system (Yusoff, Sarjoon, & Othman, 2016). In Sri Lanka, though, women's participation in less common vocations and decision-making positions is slightly increasing (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015). In Malaysia, a national policy is in place

that promotes women's status and garners international support to foster the advancement of women (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat et al., 2015), However, limited political representation remains a concern for both of these countries as equitable participation of men and women is a cornerstone in building a sustainable democracy (Yusoff et al., 2016).

While organizational practices among the five Asian countries have differences to some extent, changes and trends in the workplace provide the fundamentals to support and develop women in leadership. In our review, Asian organizations have created women-friendly workplaces as the proportion of women employees and leaders has increased. As women have more equal work and economic opportunities and easier access to male-dominant fields than in the past, women can possess higher status, have more opportunities to develop their potential and talent, provide a broader future leadership pool, and create stronger leader groups than before. In this sense, understanding the change and trends of current workplaces in the Asian countries would help us to be aware of social and cultural consensus on the importance and role of female workforce and leaders at work.

Emphasis on Women's Education

The educational scenario for women has been optimistic for all five countries, helping to provide women with improved qualifications for leadership. In India, an increase of adult literacy programs has resulted in significantly decreasing gender gaps (Bhat, 2015). The National Literacy Mission was established in 1988 to provide extension education to women by equipping them with job-related knowledge, introducing mass functional literacy, and promoting widespread community involvement in educating women through graduation from high school (Kumar & Sangeeta, 2013). Similarly, Chinese women's education level has been rising with increases at the tertiary education level being more dramatic than at the primary and secondary education levels (Cooke, 2011). In 2014, 55% and 46% of new students in bachelor's and master's degree programs, respectively, were women (OECD, 2016). However, it will take time for the educational attainment level of the female workforce to

catch up with that of the male workforce because of the more significant gaps between the two among the older employees.

Increasing women's participation in education has been a remarkable achievement in the Sri Lankan, Malaysian, and Korean education systems. In Sri Lanka, women are entering non-traditional fields and vocations, such as technology, science, and engineering fields (Fernando, 2012). A higher number of Malaysian women are entering higher education. In undergraduate programs, Malaysian women students' enrolment increased from 50% in 1995 to 65% in 2012 (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2012). Korea provides enough educational opportunities regardless of gender. For instance, Korea has demonstrated one of the highest educational attainments across Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2016). In 2015, 45% of Korean adults attaining tertiary education were women (OECD, 2016).

Blurring of Gender Roles

Many Asian organizations are introducing gender-neutral roles. There have been multifaceted efforts from all spheres including organizations, laws, policies, society, media, and the protagonist, *today's women*, which will eventually reduce the gender gap in organizations. For instance, Indian women have started entering professions that were once considered to be exclusively for men (Kumar, 2016; Rath, Mohanty, & Pradhan, 2015). Many fields have opened up opportunities for women professionals, including banking, marketing, IT, health care, advertising, civil services, communications, and the armed forces. One particular influence has been the role of the Indian film industry in blurring gender roles, especially in the past few years. The Indian film industry, often called Bollywood, is the largest film making industry in the world and plays a crucial role in modernizing the mindset of Indian audiences (Agarwal, 2014). Of late, there have been films on women empowerment, changing roles of women, working moms, and stay-at-home dads, definitely sensitizing the Indian mindset.

Chinese and Korean women leaders also have actively confronted prejudice in gender-role stereotyping (Cooke, 2005; Kang & Rowley, 2005;

Kim, 2007; Kim, Lee, Kim, Kim, & Kang, 2005; Liu, 2013; Peus et al., 2015). Chinese women leaders have advanced their career by working harder and smarter; gaining credibility and legitimacy through their professionalism and performance; and through taking advantage of continuous professional development opportunities (Liu, 2013). Korean women leaders are breaking the glass ceiling in many global corporations, which provide evidence that the perception that Korean women are inferior to men in leadership is prejudiced and primarily derived from traditional gender stereotypes (Kim, 2007; Kim & Chang, 2002).

While politics has played a dominant role in blurring gender roles in Sri Lanka, favorable legislative policies have helped to advance the cause in Malaysia. In recent times, Sri Lankan women are increasingly entering politics, producing the world's first woman prime minister and the first woman president. Evidence shows that women are increasingly entering legal, economic, and social leadership positions with their demonstrated leadership capabilities. Sri Lankan women are becoming global business owners and leading entrepreneurs (Hewapathirana, 2010). Thus, societal attitudes are slowly changing to accept women as equal partners in many aspects of society, economic, and political spheres. Malaysia is showing remarkable growth of women entering science and technology education and complex technology-related vocations due to its legislative support for women (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat et al., 2015).

Discussion and Implications

Reviewing the barriers and the successes of women leaders in the five Asian countries showed that there are more similarities than differences. The similarities arise from their collectivist orientation, patriarchal culture, and social norms that have worked against women's empowerment. Gender-biased roles and practices in organizations pose an enormous challenge to break through the typical stereotypes of women in leadership roles. However, emphasis on women's education and opportunities in diverse sectors in the countries is promising and will steadily but surely help in making a dent on the glass ceiling.

The active role of governments in securing gender equality, progressive social movements, and favorable organizational policies are a source of differences for these five countries. The lessons learned from each country will be an opportunity for other countries to follow examples and institutionalize changes in their systems after scrutiny and improvisation to suit country-specific demographics and culture, assuming that the governments have the will to do what is necessary to improve the lot of women in seeking leadership positions throughout society.

The education sector in each country can play a pivotal role in further encouraging women's active participation in non-traditional vocational education, such as science, engineering, IT, and management fields that may support a paradigm shift in viewing women's position in cultural and social contexts. In the five Asian countries briefly explored, organizations are steadily adopting women-friendly and inclusive practices. However, such adoption does not directly lead to a proportional increase in women leaders.

Women leaders can impact society in two important ways. First, women in government positions could pass and implement policies that make the path easier for other women professionals to follow. And second, they can set examples by walking the talk and by becoming role models. The need is for them to form strong social networks using social media platforms whereby women could help and draw from each other as they aim for coveted leadership roles. Our review has shown that only a handful of women have been able to reach managerial positions due to innumerable obstacles. The majority of women are unemployed or underemployed in lower paid unskilled work or lower positions. This underutilization of women's labor is a waste of valuable resources that leads to women's limited contributions to the economy, business, and society. There is an urgent need for empowering women through training and development initiatives to prepare them to be top leaders in Asia. As a progressive talent management strategy, organizations could introduce gender quotas not only to attract women employees, but also to promote their untapped talent (Tatli et al., 2013).

Simultaneously, there is a need for a change in societal attitudes toward women as weaker members. Indian cinema has played a pivotal role by portraying women characters in strong gender-neutral roles. This has tre-

mendously helped break the ice with gender stereotyping and in boosting the image of Indian women. Other Asian countries are discovering the power of the cinema, as illustrated by the overwhelming acceptance of Korean soap operas across Asia. Other countries may follow these examples. However, before replicating policies and programs across nations, there must be a recognition of local and national cultures.

Recommendations for Further Research

Considering that these five countries have more similarities than dissimilarities, there is a need for empirical studies that would scrutinize existing gender-neutral practices from each country. Future research should not be limited to gender diversity and organizational effectiveness, but it should focus on gaining deeper understanding of women's potential contributions to economic, political, and social spheres of life, as well as all types of domestic and global organizations. More in-depth research with emic and etic analyses are needed to uncover strategies that can improve gender diversity in leadership positions to improve the dynamism of government, arts, sports, social services, healthcare, media, entertainment, IT, and all types of industries. Research that aims to develop new strategies and create environments that are essential for women to achieve their potential in each county would be useful. Thus, creating an interest in new research agenda and sharing those practices among nations by way of collective forums at national, regional, and global levels would generate momentum for enhancing women's leadership.

Conclusion

Having analyzed the historical and current practices, social-cultural and gender stereotypical social norms, beliefs, and attitudes that hinder Asian women from reaching the top leadership, it is time to take women's empowerment beyond the level of rhetoric. Empowering women not only benefits the women, but also the society in general, and it is especially true for developing countries (Phan, 2016). Given the evidence

that we have presented from five Asian countries, it is time for responsible governments, educational institutions, and other authorities at all levels, and especially women to walk the talk more seriously than ever. Creating a strong research agenda, initiating momentum by creating awareness of potential contributions of women, highlighting role models and evidence-based strategic actions to create a conducive environment to increase women's participation in top leadership, introducing more women-friendly policies in organizations, and a pro-women government legislation that cumulatively paints a harbinger of rising women power are a few suggestions.

Asian organizations should continue to create opportunities for women to demonstrate their talents to gain economic and social stability, thus aiming to reduce gender disparity and unequal treatment. Organizations should be transparent in accessing the human resource talent pool cutting across gender differences; they must provide equal opportunity to the best talent to rise to top management and corporate board without gender biases for the benefit of the individual, the organization, and the economy.

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