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The Tyranny of Invisible Barriers

Do women executives harbor fears of holding positions of power and authority? I was provoked to contemplate this theme by one of the participants of a program on “Women in Leadership.” The echoes of what she said were heard time and again in a wide-ranging series of interviews with women executives and freewheeling discussions during women’s conventions. On the one hand, women agree that there is a need for them to take on stretch roles and assignments that will help them get noticed. On the other hand, women will over-analyze the challenge and shrink away from the work for fear of failure or the extra strain it will put on their home life; whereas men will put their hands up and be prepared to “learn by doing.” Unless challenging opportunities are not sought to prove one’s competence, how can you be entrusted with important clients and high-level roles?

This dichotomy made me wonder whether women managers—at least some of them—really want to succeed, as they often complain they cannot due to various organizational factors. Or do they, in fact, harbor the fear of holding power and authority deep within them, simply because it will challenge the current power structures in organizations. Some competent young women fear success because they believe it will cost them socially. Others claim that actually the major force holding women back from success and achievement is their wish to be taken care of.

While I was grappling with this strange observation, I happened to come across an article in *Fortune* (2003) that featured the 50 most powerful women in business. The writer of the article also wondered whether women really want power. “Many fast-track women are surprisingly ambivalent about what’s next. Dozens of powerful women we interviewed tell us that they don’t want to be Carly Fiorina... many don’t want to run a huge company” [1].

I do not know whether this dilemma prompts them to choose “prevention” strategies—avoiding failure—rather than “promotion” strategies—actively driving success. “Prevention strategies derive from an internalized self of what one ought to do and focus on responsibilities, safety and security while promotion strategies derive from what one would ideally like to do and focus on aspirations, advancement and accomplishments” [2].

A need for power, which is associated with leadership, is equally strong in men and women. Research shows that men and women have different perceptions of power. Men think about power as more competitive and hierarchical, while women think of it as more cooperative and interdependent [3]. No wonder, women get placed in people-handling staff functions such as personnel where their emotional fine-tuning, according to the prevailing stereotype, is more appropriate than in decision-making functions. They also get excluded from the centers of power in management for the same reason. Powerlessness can also come from not being in the know or in the functions that are close to the problem-solving, change-creating actions that the organization is currently engaged in. However, women’s perception of power as an instrument of public purpose rather than as a tool for personal ambition could produce radical changes in organizations that currently support a hierarchical notion of power over others.

New research suggests that women are not in leadership positions, among other things, because they do not want the jobs as much as men do. Shocking as it may seem, the paper published in the proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences incorporates nine studies conducted on various high-achieving groups. Combined, the

research indicates and explains the phenomenon of women valuing power less than men. In one of the studies conducted on 650 recent MBA graduates, researchers had participants rank their current position in the industry, their ideal position, and the highest position they could realistically attain. Women had no doubt that they could realistically attain the same level of success as men, but they ranked their ideal position lower. Another study explains that finding by suggesting that women have more negative associations with power than men do. According to Alison Wood Brooks, a co-author of the paper and assistant professor of business administration at Harvard, this is because women expect more stress, burdens, conflicts, and difficult trade-offs to go with high-level positions. Powerful positions stress women out because they have less time in which to attain a greater number of goals. In another of the nine studies, researchers asked about 800 working adults to rank their goals “defined as things that occupy your thoughts on a routine basis or things that motivate your behavior and decisions.” The women participants of the study not only listed more number of goals but a smaller proportion of goals was related to achieving power. Clearly, women have more goals in life because they are balancing career and family simultaneously [4].

By and large, women in management fall into three categories. A small proportion of women are extremely career-focused. They are willing to make all adjustments to do well in their careers. At the other end of the spectrum, there is another small group of women that is family focused. But the vast majority that lies in between would like to combine career and family. It is this group which is ambivalent towards their career. It is this group that would like to have answers to their frequently asked questions, such as:

- Is it possible to be a woman and a manager without falling into a male stereotype?
- Is it possible to be competitive and ambitious without compromising with a woman’s identity and self-image?
- Is it possible to move out of the female stereotype and be seen in a new light?

It becomes possible to risk such questioning during management development programs for women executives. These programs also provide the participants a chance to step aside from their day-to-day preoccupation and consider what they are doing from a different, perhaps more objective, position.

In fact, over the years, my experience has been that women-only programs, if well designed and executed, can provide many benefits. They may play a key role in building leadership skills and provide opportunities to learn from the experience of others who are qualified to provide support and validation. Just as women can benefit from single-identity programs [5] in the initial years of their career, they need to seek opportunities to be with their male counterparts in later years. Both are equally valuable for leadership development.

To that end, I always felt a need to present a balanced program, which avoids igniting a gender war. A program for women managers can potentially attract participants who have axes to grind. Unless handled carefully, the program can be utilized as an opportunity to further polarizing attitudes and risk antagonism towards men. For example, the assertiveness training could be interpreted as “how to assert yourself over men,” and the session on networking could develop into “how to develop your anti-male wing.” This is a scenario with little merit.

During one such program, I became aware that the internal barriers to women’s equality and success are more inhibiting than the external ones.

In terms of career progression, women often talk about encountering “locked doors” or “the glass ceilings.” But these locked doors exist as much inside oneself as outside. The external locked doors or the external barriers often get talked about and discussed, because, in this scenario, the responsibility rests with the other: the system or the social structure. In contrast, the internal barriers, the self-imposed barriers in terms of low self-esteem, erroneous assumptions, stereotypes about men and women, lack of confidence, realistic self-appraisal and assertiveness are more difficult to recognize and, therefore, more difficult to tackle. To make matters worse,

many women also internalize these stereotypes and reinforce them, which creates a psychological (self-imposed) glass ceiling; this was true not only for women in lower positions with basic education but also for privileged, highly educated, and supposedly powerful women. Many a times, I have met competent and intelligent women managers who, unfortunately, do not *think* they are competent and intelligent. It is one of the oldest barriers in that it starts very early in life. It was as if the female potential was discounted, neglected, and restricted for so long that it stayed that way, even when the barriers were gone. Even cross-cultural studies have shown that no evidence of sex differences was found in achievement motivation, risk-taking, task-persistence, or other related skills. Then why do women managers find it difficult to value their own experience?

This viewpoint has been gradually crystallizing after my discussions with the participants of a number of programs I conducted on “Women in Leadership” over the past few years. I have been struck by what I found in these programs in response to the exercises I conducted. Many exercises examine stereotypes and assumptions about role-taking behavior.

For instance, given the opportunity to complete a sentence like “When Anita found out that she was selected as the head of the department, she...,” a high proportion of women conclude with self-doubt, uncertainty about achievement, fear of isolation, rejection from peers, and negative endings of career interruptions. Few express surprise over success and being chosen as a head. “Will I be able to meet the expectations of my superiors?” is also an often-raised question. But underneath the surprise, there are self-doubts, confusion, and unarticulated tension. In one group, however, one young woman endorsed goals such as becoming an authority in one’s field, obtaining recognition from colleagues, having administrative responsibilities, and being better off financially. Her response was met with raised eyebrows and rolling of eyes because she was departing from her stereotype.

During the group discussion that followed this exercise, one participant who was the head of the finance department of her company, addressed the problems of women combining career

and family, yet never suggested that men could also play an equally important role at home. Indeed, she implied that she had been able to have a successful career because she *did not* have any children.

Another self-styled manager spelt out her recipe for success. She pointed out that, since there is this great heritage of male superiority and male dominance in industry and business, it would pay to keep the male bosses pleased in order to exist peacefully in that system. Because women are in a minority in senior management positions, particularly in large corporations, they need to lead in much the same way as their male counterparts. I was surprised to note how at the root of this unproductive thinking is the stereotypical mindset that man is superior in a corporate set up while a woman is his subordinate/inferior. God forbid if this becomes a corporate culture; then the organization can witness a high turnover of women, as was seen in case of a telecommunications company.

Will She Fit in? Challenges of Fitting in the Organizational Culture

Three years ago, I was invited to meet a woman director of the telecommunications company. She expressed deep concern over the high attrition of women in the company. She told me that, being one of the only senior women on the board, she was entrusted with the task of finding a solution. She was not interested in exploring the issue from all angles and did not seem interested in any kind of a dialogue. Throughout the meeting she kept interrupting me. I thought that perhaps she was hard-pressed for time that day. An exploratory meeting was fixed with all the women employees the following week. The director had instructed a junior team member to coordinate the time and logistics, etc., with me.

Lo and behold! The junior team member exhibited the same kind of behavior as her boss—impatience, poor listening, and a closed mindset—telling me what to do, rather than asking what I would like to do. I wondered whether these women were exhibiting the control-command style of the company culture. The junior

woman had perhaps learnt it from her female boss and the senior woman had learnt it from her male boss—the CEO—to whom she reported. My hunch was adequately tested in the large group meeting the following week. Two or three senior women dominated most of the meeting. Younger women were extremely hesitant to participate and speak. When I drew them out and they finally began to share their experiences, they were rudely interrupted by the senior women before they could even identify the problem. I could clearly see that the younger women were very uncomfortable. Exclusion, of course, can take many forms. It can also come from accepting boundaries without question.

Then, the seniormost woman said, “The HR is obviously not managing it well. The exit interviews show that women are leaving for personal or family reasons. The high rate of attrition can always be addressed by recruiting large number of women.” That was her solution. So it was not the company or its the culture, it was the *women*. I was witnessing the traditional command-and-control model of leadership. The director did not get the complexity of the issue and had no time for exploration or explanation. No wonder, with this kind of a closed mindset, the women who worked for this company were either teetering on the edge (thinking about quitting, looking for a new job, trying to figure out whether there is less bias elsewhere) or actually exercising the only option they had: to leave.

It was then that I decided to confront her directly.

Even if you recruit women in large numbers, the exodus may still continue if we do not look deep into the problem. What about the losses the company would incur in losing talented women? It would never get return on the investment made in recruiting and training women. Further, the invaluable company experience that developing executives acquire at every level as they move up through management ranks will be lost. It also takes an emotional toll on those who are left behind. The problem lies elsewhere and we must be open enough to look at it squarely.

That was the turning point.

It was also the beginning of understanding how women can sometimes be their own enemies without realizing it. In their efforts to fit into the prevailing culture, they were leading the younger women “to deny their authenticity.” Women who work in highly macho “alpha male” environments lead by emulating the behaviors and values of their male colleagues in order to fit into the existing organizational culture and norms. But, in the process, they could do a disservice to their women colleagues by becoming more like men, by tuning off their empathy and interpersonal skills. Having said that, it is beyond doubt that women do face challenges when they initially break into male-dominated roles. They are in the minority, so they are forced into stereotypical categories defined by the dominant group, i.e., men. But, when successful, they can create a fair, level playing field for the women who follow in their footsteps. But before that they need to treat their career as progression and not as an accident.

Career by Chance

The socialization and conditioning of our society still demands that, from early childhood, boys are brought up to be independent and expect to support themselves and their families. A girl is brought up with a hope that, in due course, someone will support her and look after her. She is, therefore, more likely to drift into a job and only become career-minded when at the age of 30–35 she realizes that she may have to work for the rest of her life. As a result of the attitude instilled in her by her traditional upbringing at home, school or university, a career is treated as “accidental” or even attributed to coincidence or luck. She sees her job as evolving step by step rather than as a career with a finite ultimate goal, whereas men visualize career as progression, a path leading upward to advancement, recognition, and reward. Consequently, women often don’t make the grade. Although they are capable enough, they frequently lack self-confidence and drive. It would be a good idea, therefore, to set one’s priorities right before any woman embarks on a career. She may find

the going hard, harder than her male colleagues. She may well have to fight on several fronts: lack of self-confidence, male prejudice, and a highly competitive working environment. Unless she can face these and fight her way through, she will have little chance of success and each failure will only reinforce the stereotype.

There is a generational issue at play. The first generation of women who went to work did not have ‘careers’. The last generation does. We now have a new cohort of women who need to be encouraged to talk more openly about their careers and use the toolkit of measures that are needed to cope with the work–life balance more effectively.

Career as a series of stepping stones, *not* a linear trajectory

There’s an implicit view that careers are still linear. Women wait until they are unhappy, look around for opportunities that seem better than their current job, apply for a few, cross their fingers, and take the best option that they can get. Then, they toil away until they are unhappy again, and the cycle is repeated. Most people end up with a career path of somewhat arbitrary events that, at best, is a gradually improving wandering path, and, at worst, just a series of unfulfilling jobs.

The solution to this dismal cycle? Let go of the idea that careers are linear. These days, they are much more like a field of stepping stones that extends in all directions. Each stone is a job or project that is available to you, and you can move in any direction that you like. The trick is simply to move to stones that take you closer and closer to what is meaningful to you. There is no single path, but, rather, an infinite number of options that lead to the sweet spot of fulfillment.

There has been a gradual transformation in this mindset in recent years. Many men have daughters and wives with talent and ambition who win their fathers’ or husbands’ support furthering their career aspirations. However, these shifts are being witnessed much more in the context of younger, educated urban women. However, as the social structure begins to change due to the increasing impact of economy, ecology, and technology, there will be changes in the roles of men and women which, in turn, will bring about changes in their psychology.

Lack of proactive career management

Women—even high-performing women—still have miles to go in becoming intentional and specific in their efforts to manage their careers. They lack the critical experiences or skills required to take the next step, such as an international assignment, high-risk project, or major P&L responsibility. While many complex factors contribute to women hitting the glass ceiling, more proactive career management would help them identify and use the right tools to break through. Because women won't be handed the experience they need, they must speak up. Many women feel uncomfortable with the self-promotion of "asking for a job." Some find it easier to think of such conversations as expressing interest in or speaking up about new ways to be helpful. Regardless of the approach, women need to speak up. You don't want management to pass you over because they thought your silence meant satisfaction with the status quo. In a dual-career family, things become even more challenging, because marriage and parenthood place different demands on women than men. Considering that most women are caught up in day-to-day management of their lives due to dual responsibilities, they do not think about where they would be in five, 10, or 20 years. Of course, one has to answer more immediate questions about what one wants in the current job or the next, but perhaps it would be useful to do so in the context of longer, larger career goals.

However, there is hope that, as changes in the economy and post-industrial societies continue to erode traditional family roles, a new equilibrium may gradually emerge in which men and women will be very similar to one another in their approach and commitment to family and career.

For that to happen, women need to review and change old performance scripts and begin writing new ones. It is hard and time-consuming when a lifetime is devoted to performing a role based on a script written by someone else. I wonder whether it has anything to do with the process of socialization and conditioning women are subjected to in their childhood that almost trains them to deny issues of self-esteem and self-worth. Expectations

based on gender also influence how women leaders think about themselves.

In one study, 98 percent of female executives chose from a long list of leadership qualities, the terms collaborative, flexible, inclusive, and participative to describe themselves. In contrast, only smaller percentages of these women also described themselves as assertive, decisive, and strong [6]. Why are women leaders expected to be collaborative and participative all the time? Because women carry the burden of negotiating two roles: a woman and a leader. So women leaders have to manage the delicate balance of retaining warmth and friendliness with the agentic qualities that people think leaders need to demonstrate in order to succeed. Most women carry a mental script written by early psychological conditioning that reads something like this:

As a girl you must not be too ambitious, you must work hard and not make any waves (translated, it means “Do not take any risk.”). You must not ask anything for yourself and fulfill others’ expectations and cater to their needs. You must quickly come to terms with reality and adjust to it as soon as possible.

This brings us to the next question.

Is “Ambition” a Bad Word?

Do women lack ambition? Does their socialization allow them to nurse and nurture ambition? Why is it that men are born with a fire in the belly (or so it seems), while women need something to get their lights lit? For men, ambition is considered a desirable part of grown-up life. In case of women, however, ambition is associated with egotism, self-promotion, manipulation or plain aggression. What are its implications for role-taking behavior? Is it socially sanctioned or condoned? Clearly, unless and until the needs of all the family members—husband, children, elderly parents, and others—are satisfied, the very right to have aspirations or ambitions would be questioned. Women still tend to shoulder the majority of domestic

pressure. They run up against the reality of “the second shift” identified by Arlie Russell Hochschild [7]. When this is combined with the need to be able to travel, to work in different time zones, and to do what it takes to become successful, then women start to consider just what price they have to pay for their ambitions. Is it worth the effort?

No wonder, men and women express ambition differently. Women start out ambitious. Most young women, like young men, want to make it big. Those who reach senior levels retain that ambition [8]. But there are also those who turn down advancement opportunities for various reasons: reluctance to ask for positions that demand new skills or desire to continue with those that provide personal meaning. In fact, mothers with children desire more stability and a greater need to stay put.

I decided to take a two-year sabbatical after the birth of my son as I was unwilling to leave him with a nanny. At the same time, I could not see myself only dedicated to child-caring and -rearing, so I registered for the doctoral program and planned to catch up on my reading. Back in the office, it was interpreted that, despite excellent prospects and a chance of career progression, I was not ready to strive and was sidelining my work to raise a kid. To become a full-time mom for two whole years? What happened to her ambition, wondered my seniors and peers. But, being out in the world and doing well at work became less important to me at that point of time. Earlier, I used to worry about this assignment or that and whether it will succeed in leaving an impact on the organization. But, now I wanted to succeed at managing my family, raising and launching my children, helping my husband, and concentrating on my research. I was still ambitious but for the most enduring goals of my life, for which I was willing to put aside my near-term goals to ensure the long-term success of my lineage.

Are the roots of ambition in family, culture, gender or genes? Two of the biggest influences on your level of ambition are the family that produced you and the culture that produced your family. Men and women, therefore, differ in their appetite for competition.

But behavioral experts say that women are more selective about what they want, and at what cost. They are certainly not willing to engage in competition at any cost. If they do, they're competing for the most enduring stakes of all.

Look at the socialization that begins early for all the girls. It is no secret that girls receive less attention, less encouragement, and, therefore, less approval and recognition for their achievements than boys do, in families as well as at school. But, multiple areas of research have demonstrated that recognition is one of the motivational engines that drives the development of almost any type of skill. Mastery of any special skill and recognition by an appreciative audience go together. It is one of the most fundamental requirements for human growth and development. So girls crave recognition, yet shy away from it when given, so as not to ruffle any feathers. This double-bind can be confusing, stressful, and painful for most.

A rare longitudinal study by the renowned psychologist, Jerome Kagan, looked specifically at the relationship between mastery of skill and recognition, through acquisition of specific goals or behavior [9]. According to Kagan and Moss, "it may be impossible to measure the 'desire to improve a skill' independent of the individual's desire for recognition." Clearly then, ambitions are both the product of *and* the source of recognition. Ambition is an expensive impulse, one that requires an enormous investment of emotional capital. Like any investment, it can pay off in countless ways. The trick, as any good speculator will tell you, is recognizing the riches when they come your way.

There is no evidence that the desires to acquire skills or to receive affirmation for accomplishments are less present in women than men. Then, why is it that we find such dramatic differences between men and women in their attitudes toward ambition and how they realize it?

Women's innate modesty, this fear of success and achievement, and the early training in subordinating their needs to those of others—particularly men—is associated with societal ideals of femininity. It is so deeply rooted that it is largely unconscious and

becomes tenacious part of the self. Research concludes that recognition, mastery, and ambition are interdependent, and are each critical to women's leadership development. So, women do not lack ambition, but rather, lack the resources necessary for success.

In this context, what can they expect from the social rewards? By and large, they are less frequent, more ambiguous, perhaps subtly discouraging and even less predictable! It gets worse. Often, the news of achievements is met with a response that is invariably designed to make them feel guilty. "All this achievement is very well. But what did you do with your six-year-old son when you were busy with that project or travelling?" These questions are never asked about men with families. This externally imposed guilt or self-doubt is detrimental to achieving a long-term goal. In order to master a skill, complete a course or finish a doctoral degree that requires prolonged effort, you must believe that you can succeed. However, because of the constant expectations of society to conform to the gender role and the routine underestimation of their own abilities by themselves, women tend to abandon their early ambitions. Even if they persist, they pursue them half-heartedly and often wonder whether the efforts justify the rewards. The corporate sector would do well to provide alternative ways for men and women to achieve and fulfill their ambitions.

Living up to expectations

After floating along in an employment situation for several years, more for retaining the job than actively investing into a career, when women are about to reach a career goal which requires negotiation, trade-off, and redefining the scope of work, they hit another barrier.

The tacit expectation is that women in the workplace are not supposed to demand what they want and negotiate for what they deserve. Research has shown that both conscious and subconscious biases contribute to this problem. But this is also compounded by the fact that women often don't get what they want (the right kind of compensation, promotions, perks) because they don't ask for it

or, rather, don't know how to ask for it. It seems the whole process of negotiation itself is endangered. Negotiation is especially tricky for women because some behaviors that work for men, like self-promotion and assertiveness, may backfire on women [10].

At every level of academic achievement, women's median earnings are less than men's median earnings. In some cases, the gender pay gap is larger at higher levels of education [11]. Even though a pay gap exists in nearly every occupational field, jobs traditionally associated with men tend to pay better than traditionally female-dominated jobs that require the same level of skill [12, 13].

This is because most women simply accept the employer's initial salary offer. Women do not realize that lack of willingness to negotiate, or the lack of ability to negotiate, can have a telling impact on the gender pay gap. In addition, the kinds of jobs pursued early in a career set the stage for an entire career of earnings. Since benefits and subsequent raises are generally based on initial wages, a lower starting salary could mean a lifetime of lower compensation and smaller retirement benefits. Observing this unequal treatment, women get disillusioned with their employers and languish or quit when a better offer comes along. They do not realize that this offer, in fact, can be used as a negotiating tool as men would do in the same organization.

Two of the biggest influences on one's level of competition or the ability to negotiate are the family environment and the larger cultural environment to which the family belongs. There are no hard and fast rules for the kinds of families that turn out to be the highest negotiators. Whether because of heredity or environment, there seems to be a dislike for hard bargaining or negotiation among women and a marked preference among men. Traditionally, it has been socially expected (and, therefore, accepted) for men to negotiate for raises, because negotiating conforms to the stereotype of men as assertive.

Similarly, the situations for which women would like to negotiate could be different from men in certain phases of their lives. It is entirely possible that mothers who appear to be unwilling to strive and are willing to quit the workplace altogether, may want to succeed in managing their family and in successfully launching their children

into the world. They are ambitious all right, they might even want to negotiate hard, but perhaps in a different aspect of their lives.

It is, therefore, important that, as equal-opportunity employers, we confront this problem properly. At the individual level, seniors can instill confidence, encourage some risk-taking, be accepting of failure, and expand the areas in which they are likely to succeed. They can mentor the women they supervise, and advise them on the necessity of asking for resources they would need to do their jobs effectively and fulfill their professional goals. Seniors also need to ensure that young women understand how many aspects of their working lives can be negotiated. This can adequately compensate for women's limited access to many of the professional and social networks in which men learn these lessons.

There is an inherent difference between the way men and women ask for advantages and opportunities. For instance, men often ask for special assignments or openly talk about what they want to do. An equally qualified woman may be just as interested or motivated but may not openly ask for it. A good manager would want to pay attention to these personality differences.

Similarly, when a man asks for a raise and a woman doing a comparable job does not, a good senior should consider giving it to both or neither of them. That way he will prevent the woman from becoming disillusioned if she later discovers a pay difference. It is important to recognize that many women have a less assertive style than men—as assertiveness in women might be considered overbearing or pushy—and, therefore, they should not be left out because of it. By creating a workplace in which different responses are examined openly, sensitive seniors can open eyes to hidden barriers that block men and women from asking and receiving equally.

Similarly, women as young girls are never encouraged to inspect, scrutinize, question, and test external reality as it affects them; because this questioning or testing of reality stems from personal authority in which no investment is made in case of a girl child. On the other hand, testing reality, as Miller [14] points out, is the language of creativity. It is a more dangerous activity, but it is only in being agentic and creative that the individual—man or woman—discovers

the self, or what can be called the “human identity” that goes beyond the bio-social confines of gender.

The same old story

In the final analysis, therefore, the manifest issues of role stress, role conflict, exercising of authority actually hide the real issues of self-esteem and self-empowerment. Thus, the emergence of workshops on assertiveness training indicates how women could be resocialized to compete on an equal basis with men, than merely focus on women as victims.

While conducting one exercise called “Mentoring Sunil” and “Mentoring Sujata,” that makes subtle, negative stereotypes and unproductive expectations apparent to the participants, the class is divided into two small work groups, and given the following scenario:

Sujata, a 24-year-old college graduate and a person possessing a specific set of attributes, joins the company. One group is asked to describe how they would mentor her! The other group is given a similar story but the new entrant is Sunil. They are asked how they would mentor him.

After the discussion, the groups compare notes. Much to everybody’s surprise, mentoring Sujata is different from mentoring Sunil.

The assumption is that Sunil is going to go further. He is told to go to the best business schools when possible, invest in his career in good time, and seek opportunities to get good, high-impact assignments. In the process, he is expected to speak assertively, compete for attention, initiate new activity, and influence others. Sujata may go into a staff position rather than a line-management position. She is expected not to draw attention to herself, support others, solve interpersonal problems, and try not to take credit for her accomplishments. Sujata is told: “Be prepared for a long marathon. It is going to be very demanding. Make sure you are well prepared. What about kids? Have you thought about them?” Sunil is advised to take risks, given postings where he is *visible*, while Sujata is asked to work

hard and make efforts to adjust quickly to the work routine and the system in general. Sunil is asked to learn to play golf or whichever game is popular with the top management as a corporate game and to get to know the bosses well. Sujata is asked to fulfill superiors' expectations and learn not to be emotional while dealing with crisis at work. She is told that she would be watched all the time, as a result, even small mistakes would not be ignored. She will have to work hard to receive recognition for any individual achievement. To avoid these pressures, she might just want to become *invisible*. There are variations to these themes, but they are few and far between. While this mentoring may be helpful to certain women, it continues to place the responsibility for adaptation, change, and improvement on women alone, without questioning the values and cultural issues inherent in organizations.

It is interesting to note that, on the one hand, women managers complain about their lop-sided socialization and, on the other, they continue to socialize their juniors in the very same fashion, without even realizing what they are doing. Is it not astonishing? I have seen this happening in group after group at home, abroad, in groups from SAARC countries and in groups from developed nations with an international mix. Contrary to popular belief, lack of career planning and job discriminations in case of women are equally prevalent in Western countries despite the industrial progress.

There may be some culture-specific differences, but they are minor and peripheral. The similarities are striking and often disturbing. Women managers seem to be going around in a circle where the beginning and the end is one and the same. The point is, we need a break in the pattern and a new beginning or maybe several breaks followed by several new beginnings.

It is, therefore, important to recognize the implications of stereotypes to overcome them. The effects of below-the-surface, unconscious activation of gender stereotypes are far more difficult to deal with. Activation of gender stereotypes can be self-fulfilling by diminishing women's interest in leadership roles and even undermining their performance as competent managers.

The Tightrope Circus

Having overcome *invisible* barriers with sheer grit and determination when women actually get down to starting a family and also scaling corporate ladders, they also hit *visible* institutional barriers. Why has the age-old business of having children become so difficult for high-achieving business women today?

This can only change if young men are taught to ask the same question young women do: “How can I combine career and family?” The backlash of feminism has been that we have convinced ourselves and others that “women can do what men can do. Give them a chance.” Now, we have to once again convince ourselves and others that men can do what women can do. If we don’t, then the double burden of working inside and outside the home—always a reality for poor, rural women and now for working middle class women too—will continue to be a problem shared by most women worldwide. This will have a long-term impact. Future generations would grow up seeing nurturing men and women as well as achieving women and men, and would no longer feel the need to describe human qualities as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’.

Until then, the conventional benefit packages that the corporate sector offers need to be overhauled. By and large, they prove to be ridiculously insufficient. Women need reduced hour jobs, parenting leave, and career breaks, none of which is readily available yet. And, more than anything, they need to be able to avail of such benefits without suffering long-term damage to their careers. The corporate world has failed to develop holistic policies that would support working women. In addition to “benefits” questions, employers are now confronted with new questions of worker mobility. A working wife is less free to move in accordance with her husband’s job needs; moreover she also needs to move to further her own career. Employers have so far not paid much attention to a spouse’s relocation problem, and only recently have companies begun to offer married women promotion when changes in location are required. The

prevailing assumption has been that women with families would not move. Yet, a woman's advance to a top corporate job often necessitates her moving which may conflict with her husband's career goals. As a result, too many career women either put their private lives on the back burner or too many qualified women decide to forego meaningful employment. However, as a large body of research demonstrates, the majority women are happier when they have both career and family. Therefore, it is unfair to expect a professional woman to sacrifice motherhood just as it is unfair to expect a professionally qualified woman not to start a family. Women are entitled to both career and family. Women, when they are old enough to have done with the business of being a woman, can feel very powerful.

It is, therefore, remarkable when a CEO recognizes this predicament and says sympathetically that

There is always a time when people are prepared to go away from home and a time when they need to stay at home... Sometimes great people suddenly have marital problems, sometimes the only way to see their children is to stay in the country. They cannot be moved: if you try to pressure them to move, you can create a real crisis. You have to be flexible and pragmatic. [15]

Such CEOs are few and far between and they will go down in history.

Young women, therefore, seriously need to consider how they would expand their life choices. Despite the fact that young women are told that a serious person needs to commit to her career at least for the first 10 years of her job, they need to become highly intentional and focused if they want children. Often, by the time they contemplate having children, they are on the wrong side of 35, when infertility could become an issue. They also seriously need to choose a career that will give them the gift of time and, if possible, choose a company that helps them achieve work-life balance. Tough? Yes, of course. But worth the effort.

How Can Dreams Be Realized?

After discussing internal barriers in the workshop, often the participant want to know how they can break them in order to realize their dreams. I throw the question back at them and ask, “If you were your own coach, what would you suggest?”

A good starting point for the analysis of realizing one’s dreams and aspirations is the basic recognition that one can, in fact, have the freedom of making several choices. The common themes that have emerged over time are given below:

Define personal goals

First and foremost, establish your personal goals and sort out your personal priorities and values. It is important that you see what is possible, ask questions, and avoid making assumptions about what you can and cannot do. Distinguish between short- and long-term goals and what is required to be done by you and what support you need from the organization in order to succeed.

If you must, take advice from those you respect, but don’t let anyone decide on your behalf—whether father, brother, spouse or anyone else.

It is important that women carve out a life for themselves based on the values and priorities they believe in, with adequate satisfaction and meaning. It is equally important that women fulfill their own dreams. When women do not feel fulfilled in their lives it may be difficult for them to watch others fulfill theirs—whether spouse, children or colleagues. My assumption is that, when women feel fulfilled, purposeful, and aligned with their identity with integrity, they can balance the demands that multiple roles make on them with grace and dignity.

Develop understanding of gender bias

Recognize gender biases and stereotypes and understand how they can act as barriers to success. Respond to stereotypes effectively when you see their behavioral impact on others and learn to

effectively adapt to and interpret differences in gender styles and behavior. Invest in developing your own personal awareness and organizational awareness of gender differences and biases.

If gender stereotypes are pervasive, how can they be changed? Following are a few of the ways to challenge and change gender stereotypes:

Make gender stereotypes visible. Often stereotypes are unconscious and we are not aware of them. However, on a conscious level, we find them irrelevant. If we spell out gender stereotypes, this brings stereotypes to the conscious level. For instance, research has shown that women are quoted higher prices when negotiating for cars, even when they use the same bargaining strategies as men. Here, the stereotype that women are less effective in negotiations is served. If the stereotype is voiced, it becomes obvious and women react to it. This may happen because women want to make the extra effort to counteract the stereotype [16].

Question assumptions. Many of the assumptions we make do not hold up under scrutiny. For example, there is an assumption of gender difference regarding risk taking; some assume that women are less capable of managing risk-taking challenges. However, regular exposure to such assignments and relevant training and practice decreases the gender difference in risk-taking ability. Rather than focusing on elements in relation to gender we cannot change, it makes more sense to focus on assumptions we can actually change.

Discard the ideal of a perfect homemaker and a professional

Given that women juggle roles, tasks, budgets, they need to keep track of children, adults and what they need. Women need to consciously plan and organize for household help as well as childcare help when required, which will set them free to discharge outside responsibilities.

More important is engaging everyone—spouse and children, parents or dependents—in running it. It is also important to recognize

that there is no point adding to the stress by attempting to do everything by yourself. One can always hire domestic help, buy modern gadgets and equipment that can save time and labor, or appropriately outsource whatever service is available such as excellent childcare centers. Organizing reliable childcare option is key. Families need to feel secure that their children are in good hands.

Never too late to fulfill a dream

It is expected that by the time we reach adulthood our goals are formed, our energies are channeled, and we are self-motivated. However, to a great extent, instances of recognition further reshape our ambitions and determine the efforts we need to make in realizing them. To sustain ambitions, women need to create avenues of recognition that are based on talent, skill, and competency or work assignments, rather than on subservience or mere appearance. This means identifying, critically evaluating, and purposefully developing those “domains,” “disciplines,” or hobbies that can provide recognition, appreciation, and endorsement. They need to make peace with the trade-offs they may have to make in life.

Different phases in life throw up different needs for connecting with mentors, opportunities for learning new skills, institutional recognition and changing cultural trends. It is never too late to get ambitious about something you really want to achieve, and certainly never too late to realize it. Seek and make effective use of coaches and mentors, and take help from someone who sees the bigger picture. There are times in the life of every working woman, when things can get too much to handle. It is during this time that you need to take help from someone who has a perspective. Some women find it harder to own up to needing help. It is not a sign of weakness. Reach out to people who can help you and seek continuous renewal.

Each of us has an inner compass, as Gloria Steinem [17] indicates, that helps us know what to do and where to go. Its signals are interest, excitement of being in a new territory, and perhaps a sense of growth. Listening to these internal signals and following them is itself the

first step, the beginning of the journey. It remains to be seen whether women can find ways of bringing their whole selves into organizations, not only from the perspectives of women's identity, but from the organizational perspective as well. The result may be liberating for women and humanizing for organizations. Human resources are a synergy between men and women. Optimum utilization and development of the human potential will be fully realized when the female gender is seen as the untapped part of the total workforce.

In other words, there is no turning back from the fact that women are joining men in full partnership over issues at the forefront of the global agenda. As this partnership develops and strengthens, not only will women be empowered and strengthened, but men too will be released from the old polarities of gender that force them into limited and limiting roles. On the one hand, it is exciting to see the extent of human potential and, on the other it is disturbing to discover that so little of it is utilized. It is only by functioning together with unity and mutuality that men and women can actualize their maximum potential and learn to discover their inner resource, complementarity, and creativity.

One of the ways to discover one's potential is also through joining and participating in networks. I discovered this accidentally. Networks can provide emotional support, advice on work-related problems, and information about a wide range of employment related issues. Let's explore that in the next chapter.

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