



MADHUVIZHI  
JEYAKUMARAN

# Fostering a Gender Diverse Workplace and Boosting the Gender Ratio

Despite the strong business case for gender diversity, it has become a pertinent issue in many organizations across the world including India, with fewer women reaching the top of the corporate ladder. Gender diversity is not merely a numbers game; it goes beyond the proportion of men and women in a firm

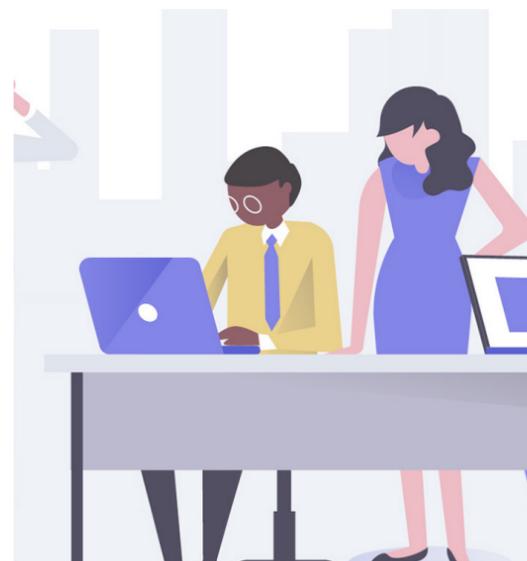
Many organizations are grappling with the issue of not having enough women at the workplace, especially at senior levels. While there is increased awareness around the business case for gender diversity and related benefits, there seems to be lack of a focused approach towards achieving the desired gender balance.

The statistics around gender diversity are startling despite this getting enough attention from large organizations and their leadership. As per published reports on gender representation at various levels, there is marginal difference between men and women graduating and entering the workforce. While the trend continues up to the level of managers, there is a sudden dip in the representation of women managers becoming Senior executives and CEOs. As per 2018 Fortune 500 statistics, only 5% of the Fortune 500 companies have women CEOs!

While there is enough research and insights on statistics and major areas of concern, this article aims at providing effective strategies to resolve them.

## Organizations Need To Get The Basics Of Gender Inclusion Right:

It is important to establish a strong gender inclusive culture and mindset in the first place before carrying out specific interventions to increase women representation. Some organizations carry out irregular interventions/ events, such as organizing special gifts or training events for women on World Women's day, with an intent to show support to gender inclusion. Such sporadic events can make



This topic is especially relevant for India where women's participation in the labour market is declining at an alarming rate. Over the last decade, India's female labour force participation rate, which stood at 37% in 2005, fell by 10 percentage points. By 2016, only about one in four Indian women were working or looking for work.

male staff to disconnect, show resistance and worse be biased against women. To begin with, it is important that the leadership is clear on the 'Why' and is committed to the diversity agenda. In addition to having equal opportunity policies, it is important to communicate the organization's intolerance to discrimination basis gender across all levels. While spreading awareness, specifically focus on what is accepted, what is not and the consequences of indulging in discriminatory behaviour. If this is established strongly, the organization is in a great position to invest in diversity initiatives and get assured benefits out of them.

## Let The Men Be The Champions Of Gender Diversity:

Given that senior management is male-heavy it is but obvious that men have a greater role in championing diversity by identifying women talent, actively opening up their networks and mentor women at mid-managerial level to give them a fair chance to grow vertically. Both genders need to be educated on unconscious bias and how to counter them to create an equal opportunity workplace. Men can play very important roles as Managers, Mentors, Sponsors and Diversity champions. Also, without involving managers at all levels, it is impossible to create the required staff experience and inclusiveness.

If there is one thing an organization wishes to invest in towards gender inclusion, the smart choice would be to get all managers on board. After all, even in the absence of fancy benefits an invested and supportive manager

will ensure his women staff are treated fairly, get equal pay and therefore thrive and grow!

## Create Enabling Structures And Prudently Remove Barriers:

The reality of gender mix is similar in most organizations and as evidenced by statistics, becomes narrower with level of seniority. It is not that women lack the ambition to grow, but the traditionally paternalistic organizational structure & practices is restricting rather than enabling to the life stage requirements of women. 'Flexible working' as a concept emerged to break the traditional workplace culture, but in most organizations still exists just as mere policy. While remote working is still experimented in some organizations, part-time/ compressed work/ time-agnostic work schedules, job sharing, paid/unpaid family leave etc are options which need to be implemented to break away from the current concept of working. Also, it is important to put in firm efforts in making flexible working real by removing barriers such as 'negative perception' around flexible-working or lack of role modelling by senior leadership and managers.

Another extremely crucial element to address is the life stage of motherhood. Sadly, in many organizations the 6-month maternity leave, works as a double-edged sword and managers perceive women employees on maternity leave as being 'absent' for half the year. In addition to facing personal life-changing circumstances (physical transition, change in identity, guilt of resuming work etc), new mothers face professional discrimination and adversity. As



a result, they become disengaged and leave the workplace sooner or later. It is therefore important to build a strong support system alongside maternity leave. New-mother return to work programs are becoming increasingly important where organizations offer a) fully paid reduced work hours (temporary part-time) for first few months, b) letting new mothers choose non-client facing or less travel intensive roles post return, c) childcare benefits and d) new mother coaching/counselling services etc.

**The companies need to align their policies, work culture and ethics towards diminishing the gender divide, giving equal opportunities to ones who deserve and encouraging more women entering or re-entering the workforce.**

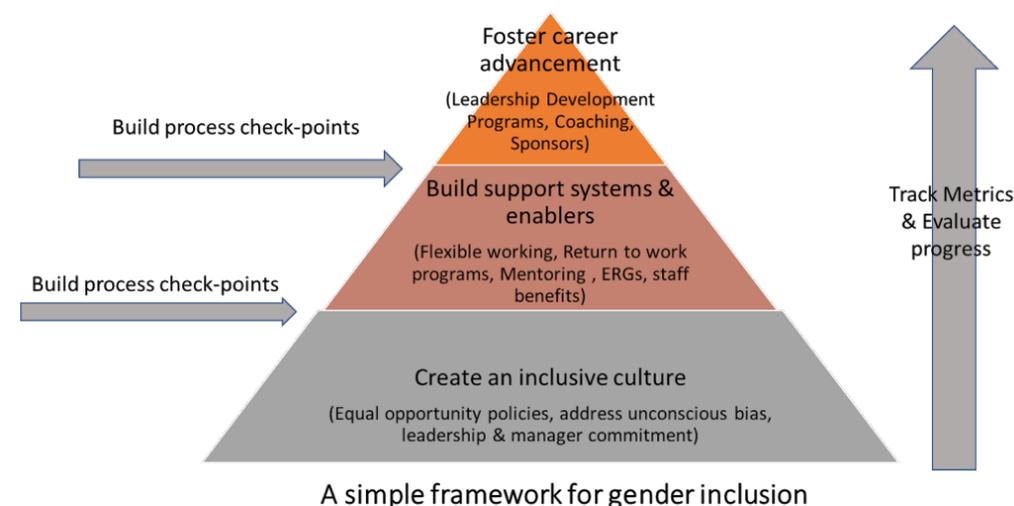
The key is to include such benefits as part of their official maternity package, rather than having to negotiate for the arrangement separately or secure a manager's approval, so that this is seen as an accepted norm than an exception. Managing the experience of the staff (through managers and HR business partners) both during pregnancy and post return-to-work is as important as having leading policies and benefit packages. A more effective but radical approach would be to equal the benefits given to both genders (including parental benefits). In fact, flexible working is

an effective engagement strategy across all employee groups .

### **Build Checks And Balances To Ensure The Culture Really Promotes Equal Opportunity:**

Interestingly, even in organizations which seemingly have 'best practice' gender inclusive practices, the ground reality is very different. Often women are not hired into particular roles where successful candidates are stereotyped to be 'go-getter' and 'aggressive' (read sales & related leadership profiles)! Similarly, during the time-period a woman goes into and resumes from their maternity leave, her performance ratings get downgraded and bonus becomes zero or insignificant.

Another interesting trend that can be observed is talented women facing stagnation in the same role without career progression and often classified as 'not being ready' (owing to unconscious bias). Men on the other hand have strong informal networks and are more 'obvious' as picks for senior management roles. Though equal opportunity & benefits exist in the form of policies, few organizations have the courage to actually look into their compensation structures including variable pay to evaluate gaps and actively seek to bridge them. It is important to build necessary process check points and controls (recruitment, performance management & reward allocation, promotions etc ) across the employee life cycle to change the gender imbalance outcomes we observe today.



A simple framework for gender inclusion

### **Focus On Leadership Development And Career Advancement:**

The only reliable way of boosting the gender ratio at the top is to monitor and focus on career advancement of women at all levels. The idea is to give every opportunity to talented women to break the glass ceiling. Female leadership development programs should be specifically designed for senior and emerging leaders (mid - junior levels) so that both groups are engaged with relevant learning areas, networks and idea-sharing. It is important to focus on the leadership journey by taking a program-approach (rather than event approach) where there is continuous follow-up and traction. It is crucial to build opportunities for the women to network with top leadership and gain access to sponsors. Another powerful enabler is to invest in coaching (1-1 or group coaching) to help women grow out of their limiting beliefs and break out of non-resourceful thinking / behavioural patterns arising out of cultural factors.

### **Periodically Evaluate Progress And Generate Continued Momentum:**

In Lean In, Sheryl Sandberg speaks about how she never realized the need for reserved parking for pregnant women until she experienced the difficulties of not having one when she was pregnant. Many employers have identified the need to have day-care attached to the office premises and where not possible, offering day-care allowance for new mothers to retain them during this critical life stage. Reserved parking for pregnant employees and day-care support are examples of such needs which can only be identified through the voice of women actually going through the struggle. Hence it is important to create forums through employee circles or Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to enable women & men to come together to discuss genuine concerns and needs. Such forums are very helpful in gathering feedback to evaluate effectiveness of interventions, discussing ground level challenges and directing efforts & resources in the right areas. Research also suggests that sometimes, organizations shy away from measuring direct outcomes of diversity initiatives and therefore have a false sense of progress. The only way to avoid this



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pitfall is to define effectiveness metrics (gender ratio across levels, gender mix in recruitment, promotions, exits, outcome of leadership development programs etc) and measure progress regularly. Establishing a 'Diversity committee' comprising of top leadership as members is a great way to build accountability, strategize initiatives and evaluate progress against metrics thereby generating continued momentum.

These suggested strategies, however, will only be effective if they are laid out thoughtfully keeping the context and culture of the organization in mind, have the commitment and participation of decision-makers at every level and receive ongoing evaluation & renewal.

#### **About the Author:**

Madhuvizhii Jeyakumar is the Director of ThinkStride coaching & consulting solutions. She founded ThinkStride, with a vision to help women step up, shine and show the world the way, through distinctive coaching and leadership development programs. Prior to this, she has over 8 years of corporate experience working in large multi-national organizations where she held multiple roles across Human Resources. She is a post graduate in Human Resource Management from Tata Institute of Social Sciences and a Transformational Coach. In addition to running ThinkStride, she is also an author in making and looks forward to creating a positive impact on the career & life of women through her upcoming book.