

## LIFESTYLE

# Female leadership: An opportunity to create a culture of inclusivity

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No matter how many achievements women have made in all aspects of private and public life, one fact remains undeniable – women are under-represented in the labour market leading to varying levels of gender gaps globally. Various reports and studies also point out that there are fewer women in leadership positions in the corporate world. For instance, in India, the share of women in senior and managerial positions remains low at 14.6% of the total positions and there are only 8.9% of firms with top managers being women, according to a recent World Economic Forum (WEF) report.

This under-representation and the leadership gap are the two major concerns, among others, affecting the corporate world. They not only lead to gender disparity at the workplace but also pose a challenge to building diverse, inclusive, and innovative organisations. Barriers, biases (both implicit and explicit), and discriminatory practices (both overt and covert) continue to aggravate these concerns further.

As a solution, many organisations are making conscious efforts to embrace and implement Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) initiatives to address these concerns with “**merit**” as a guiding principle – a principle where people are hired, evaluated, promoted, and rewarded based on their skills and abilities without considering other characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Having a **merit-based** system and processes is fine, but it is not sufficient to increase women’s participation in the labour market or increase their representation in leadership roles.

The need of the hour is to rethink and shift our focus on establishing a more effective, **inclusive culture** that is **supported by a flexible and well-thought-out system** – a system that not only removes obstacles while integrating women into the workforce but also engages them and enables them to realise their full potential. The term “**system**” here refers to the workforce and workplace strategies, policies, and standards that organisations deploy to run their businesses. The system plays a key role in fostering women’s participation and representation. If the system is flawed, it hampers women’s career trajectory and progression significantly.

As an example, the system will be considered ill-conceived if the hiring criteria favour only those with uninterrupted careers or accept only those career gaps that are taken in pursuit of academic endeavours. This kind of hiring policy makes it difficult for women to re-enter the workforce. Again, the system is flawed if the flexible work arrangements are insufficient or don’t exist altogether. No amount of meritocracy will be helpful if the system is not well-designed with well-thought-out policies. In fact, it would be a waste of a company’s resources, time, and money if inclusivity is absent.

Building a diverse team by increasing the proportion of women at the workplace can be achieved; that’s called workforce diversity. However, getting this diverse pool of employees working together is what matters; that’s the culture of inclusivity. In other words, achieving workforce diversity is easier but building a culture of inclusivity is easier said than done. It requires will and commitment to see the system through a gender lens and take appropriate actions to remove gaps in the system.

Today, we are living in an unprecedented and challenging time. The labour market has been disrupted. The global health crisis, automation, and digitalisation have affected everyone and everything like never before. Now is the right time and the right opportunity for the leaders to step in, take several EDI initiatives, and build gender-equal systems to enable women to enter/re-enter the workforce, stay in their roles, and support them in their career progression.

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