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Dissecting Gender Disparity

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In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of gender diversity in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). However, despite progress, significant gender parities persist, particularly in leadership positions within sectors like healthcare and biotechnology. We shall delve deeper into this unfortunate scenario and explore whether there's light at the end of the tunnel.



Women in the Indian healthcare industry are mainly concentrated in low-paying frontline positions. In India, 29 per cent of medical doctors, 80 per cent of nursing staff (including midwives), and nearly 100 per cent of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) are women. Despite this, women hold only 18 per cent of healthcare leadership positions and continue to earn 34 per cent less than their male counterparts.

These are the outcomes of the study titled ‘An Unbalanced Scale - Exploring the Female Leadership Gap in India's Healthcare Sector’ from Dasra, a non-profit organisation. The study revealed that the Indian healthcare sector, one of the country's largest employers, has experienced substantial growth. It takes a closer look at women's representation in healthcare and the leadership opportunities available to them.

Inspiring leaders

"What is concerning is the gap between the proportion of women in healthcare and those who occupy leadership positions. At entry levels, women's representation in sales, marketing, and operations ranges from 40-50 per cent. However, this significantly drops to 15-20 per cent in senior roles," says **Shailja Mehta, Director at Dasra**.

What is behind this gender gap in leadership positions? Societal norms, cultural expectations and implicit biases against women are some of the main factors that have contributed to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. “It is a complex issue. The lack of female role models and mentors perpetuates this gender gap," says Shailja.

Some believe that one of the primary reasons for the skewed gender ratio in STEM is the stereotyping that begins early in life. Societal expectations often push girls towards more traditionally feminine roles, diverting them away from technical and scientific fields. As a result, fewer women choose STEM education and careers. While others argue that the current gap is a reflection of what was happening 20 years ago, when fewer women entered science careers.

“Today’s leaders represent those who entered the field 15-20 years back. Now that the number of women entering these fields has significantly increased in recent years, we will see a lot of women leaders in the coming years. In fact, a major proportion of startups are led by women. They have the capability to do it,” **Dr Raman Gangakhedkar, former director, National AIDS Research Institute (NARI) Pune**, says, "The situation is definitely improving. For more women to take leadership roles, changes are required at the family, community and industry level."

Dr Pragya Yadav, senior scientist at the National Institute of Virology, Pune, who played an instrumental role in the development of Covaxin, agrees. "The situation has certainly improved, but school-going girls should have access to reputable colleges and safe residential facilities for pursuing science as a subject for the real change to occur. Besides, they need support in equal measure, from their families and the industry when raising their children. If they lose that time, catching up becomes difficult,” she says.

"Furthermore, this support should not be seen as an extra favour to women, but rather as their right. Children are the future and the environment they experience while growing up is crucial to their growth and development. It is the duty of both families and society, not just mothers alone, to provide a safe and suitable environment for them," she added.

Manya Jha, a young entrepreneur and founder of Morphedo Technologies, a deep tech startup in aerospace and defence, medical device engineering, IoT and embedded systems, faced the challenge of balancing child care and her career after the birth of her daughter. To tackle this challenge, she established a small child care centre at her office.

"Starting just 20 days after my daughter was born, I brought her to my workplace every day. I made space in my cabin where she could stay with me. Until she was 7 months old, my husband and I took care of her in the shared cabin (during COVID-19 period). At the time of her birth, my startup was also at a crucial stage," she says. "Both my daughter and my company required my personal attention. There were instances when I had to attend important meetings with senior scientists while holding my one-month-old daughter. I believe it's all about the confidence with which you pursue your career."

Today, Manya's company has around 40 employees and the child care centre is now available to all new mothers, offering support in looking after their children while at work.

So, despite the challenges, there has been a noticeable shift in the narrative over the past decade, with the number of women leaders emerging in STEM careers increasing slowly but steadily. And these women are not only excelling in their respective fields but also helping dismantling barriers that hinder the progress of other aspiring women.

Several prominent women leaders are setting an example for others. Dr N Kalaiselvi, Director General of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, Dr Priya Abraham, Director of the National Institute of Virology, biotech stalwart Kiran Majumdar-Shaw, and entrepreneurs like Dr Kavita Iyer Rodrigues and Vasanthi Ramachandran represent some of the most sought after leaders in the industry.

"Women are leading more than 30 per cent of the startups incubated at our centre. In many others, they are co-founders or hold significant positions," says **Dr Manisha Premnath, COO of Venture Center**, an incubation centre in Pune that helps startups grow.

Breaking the glass ceiling

While there is a rise of women leaders in the health and biotech sector, it is important to acknowledge the challenges they continue to face. Stereotypes, biases, and a lack of institutional support still exist. The 'glass ceiling' phenomenon persists, making it difficult for women to reach the highest levels of leadership. A male-centric workplace culture, coupled with a lack of flexibility and understanding regarding work-life balance, discourage women from pursuing or sustaining leadership roles.

"The biggest challenge that women face is breaking these stereotypes and breaking free from the vicious cycle of work and life. They need to step out of their comfort zones, or rather, their safe zones, and then there will be no stopping them. Fortunately, nowadays there are several schemes and funds available to support women," says **Dr Deeksha Bhartiya, Founder of Genomiki**.

Coming from a very traditional, yet ambitious family, Dr Deeksha got married at a young age and encountered challenges in maintaining a balance between her personal and professional life. However, she didn't allow these challenges to deter her from pursuing her doctoral studies and career. "There were many senior male scientists who advised me to take up a permanent job instead of embarking on my entrepreneurial journey. I was told that women should prioritise stability over adventure. However, I am fortunate to have a very supportive family who always push me to exceed my limits and support me in all my decisions."

Exiting the vicious circle

The foundation for achieving gender parity in STEM careers is laid during the crucial years of education. Schools and educational institutions play an important role in challenging these stereotypes and encouraging girls to explore their interests in science and technology. STEM-focused educational programmes, workshops, and extracurricular activities can help break down gender-based barriers from a young age. Scholarships and mentorship programmes can encourage girls to pursue science education.

To encourage more women to pursue careers in STEM and foster an inclusive and diverse workforce, it is important to adopt unbiased recruitment practices, create a supportive environment for their progress, and implement flexible work

arrangements.

There is a growing emphasis on incorporating diverse perspectives in STEM curricula. Highlighting the contributions of women scientists and engineers in textbooks and classroom discussions can inspire both girls and boys, challenging preconceived notions about gender roles in these fields. There should be more networking events, conferences and platforms that specifically focus on women in STEM to provide valuable opportunities for collaboration and knowledge-sharing. These spaces not only celebrate the achievements of women in the field but also facilitate the exchange of ideas and strategies to overcome common challenges.

Emphasising the pivotal role women play in shaping a sustainable future through scientific leadership, **Melody Lopez, Director and Chief of Staff Crayon Software Experts India** says “Fostering women's leadership in science is not just about gender equality but also a catalyst for achieving sustainable development goals. The theme reflects a call to action, urging communities, governments, and organisations to provide equal opportunities for women and girls in science, ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes.” She further says “As we champion women and girls in science leadership, let us embrace this new era, where their voices, ideas, and leadership propel us toward a brighter, more sustainable future for all.”

The journey towards gender parity in STEM careers in India could be challenging, but the momentum for change is growing.

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