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'He for She': Championing Womanpower in the Corporate Workforce

White Paper

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Abstract:

The 'HeForShe' panel discussion leveraged the experience, expertise and opinions of veterans across industries to derive insightful observations and posit:

- The role (and in some situations, the plight) of women aspiring for leadership roles in the corporate workplace.
- The deterrents in various forms – industry-specific challenges, mindsets, safety concerns and undeniable biases to name a few
- The unique prowess of the He-and-She theme, both at home and at work, to forge the path towards a truly equal footing.
- The success factors, as ratified by first-hand experience of speakers.

The event tried to distil the experience of both genders, across a spectrum of age groups and industries to propose a holistic frame of reference for women leadership in the workplace.

It dissects tangible and intangible; extrinsic and intrinsic; personal and professional perspectives to guide every woman effectively in her journey towards becoming a corporate leader.

It was a unique event where men were present alongside women to champion the cause of women leadership in the corporate world.

Introduction:

The Corporate Workplace Council, West Bengal Chapter, under the aegis of Women's Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (WICCI), organized an online panel discussion to analyse the challenges, trends, socio-economic factors and mindsets that impact the role of women in cross-industry corporate workplaces, especially those in senior leadership.

A crucial aspect of the analysis was the role of the male counterparts at work (and at home) for women in corporate leadership. The focus was on how the 'He' impacts the journey of the 'She'. This paper summarizes the thoughts and viewpoints covered in the panel discussion and analyses the following:

- The existing challenges, trends and potential improvement areas
- The recommended routes to move from the current to a desired future state.

A wide spectrum of industries, gender representatives and leadership positions were covered for ensuring a holistic representation of the corporate workplace. The panel speakers represented the following industries:

- Defense
- Consultation and Software Services
- Healthcare
- Manufacturing (Heavy Industries)
- Marketing and Customer Services
- HR

What holds her back?

The discussion held a magnifying glass to the challenges encountered by women in their journey towards corporate leadership roles across industries. It also asked what needs to change in the belief systems of genders, thinkers, and policymakers alike.

The key emerging trends in specific industries, associated societal mindsets and their implications can potentially form the bedrock for framing a truly emancipated future for women leaders in the workplace. This combined perspective can possibly answer the million-dollar question – “What holds her back?”

The impediments that women face in the road to leadership positions are multifarious – some extrinsic and some intrinsic.

The evolutionary trend is noteworthy in a typically male dominated sector, defense. The role of women in the Indian National Army of pre-independence India was significant.

However, in free India, the Army, Air Force and Navy began onboarding women as short-service commission (SSC) officers only in 1992, outside the medical stream.

A more emphatic reinforcement of credibility in women's skills was the Indian Air Force decision to onboard women into the fighter stream in 2015, as cited in drishtiias.com.ⁱ

In the manufacturing sector, particularly that of the heavy industries, we see a scarcity of women right from enrolment to academic courses for these industries, up to the actual workforce, as covered by The Hindustan Times.ⁱⁱ

Although a prominent Indian public sector giant, Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), boasts of a woman chairperson, it has seldom seen a woman CEO managing any of its steel plants. Yet, plant floors are often flocked by contracted women labor.

In healthcare, too, women's representation seems to be restricted to specific services and specialization areas, with a marked gap in the demanding and sometimes, daunting emergency services, as cited in theglobalhues.com.ⁱⁱⁱ

What exactly hinders women's foothold in these sectors? While safety concerns are real, don't the angles of female vulnerability and sensitivity spring from a bunch of preset notions?

Other corporate service sectors like software, marketing and customer services, and HR witness more widespread presence of women. They can boast of unbiased policies, including remuneration and opportunities. However, statistics show a steady decline in women workforce up the hierarchical ladder, with very little representation at the CXO level, as highlighted in hr.economicstimes.indiatimes.com.^{iv}

The panel speakers and guests enlisted the possible causes to be a woman's role as the primary caregiver in the family, and the implicit prejudices both at the personal and professional fronts. Some commonly observed patterns were discussed across industries, which are hardly acknowledged and hence, not adequately addressed.

Resistance to comply with female leadership is one such undercurrent in male-dominated industries. The tendency to focus on the personal issues of a female employee, rather than her skills and acumen, is yet another tacit norm.

This is often manifested in lop-sided decisions during recruitment and/or assignment to critical projects, career progression opportunities and incentives.

In the household too, the ring master's role is placed on a woman's shoulders, often without much thought. She is expected to juggle both the batons and even be blamed for supposedly neglecting one at the behest of the other.

Instead of making the home and work environments conducive to her productivity and well-being, prejudiced mindsets often impede the poise she needs to climb the professional ladder.

[Where lies the empowerment?](#)

While the extrinsic issues can be addressed in time through deliberations, what probably needs deeper attention is a gender-neutral mindset in both males and females. Governments, enterprises, thinkers, activists and policy makers have been facilitating women leadership and will continue to do so; and yet, the question lurks "Where lies the empowerment?"

As all the esteemed panel speakers agreed, women are good leaders, they have empathy, planning and resource management skills. They can learn any business skill based on their interests and merit. Women can connect emotionally with others, are often more articulate, and better team players who want to grow along with their teams.

They are task-oriented, transformational leaders who prefer to empower others in the professional journey towards greater success.

To leverage these qualities effectively, both male and female leaders need to consciously build a gender-neutral mindset to view business decisions from practical, functional, and strategic perspectives, obviating the question of gender biases.

To break stereotypical perceptions, the male counterparts at home, at work, on the street and elsewhere need to start considering a woman's worth purely on her merit and skills.

We were moved to witness this in execution in a young couple amongst our speakers – the founder of a startup that promotes healthcare partnerships between India and the UK; and his wife, a Customer Success Manager at a software services firm.

They have managed to achieve professional laurels due to a balanced understanding amongst themselves and the larger family. As the 'He' emphasized the professional responsibilities of the 'She', the family respected her aspirations and supported them.

She also mentioned both the ridicule and the support extended by colleagues due to a gynecological health issue she had faced, and how she overcame it with will, positivity and the cooperation of her family.

The positive role of the family and the male counterparts at home was also mirrored in the experiences shared by both male and female veterans across industries.

The understanding and support of the larger family and all the crucial 'He-roles' in life continue to remain a pillar of strength for the 'she'.

On the other end of the spectrum, as a young and highly successful female speaker rightly pointed out, women aspiring for professional achievements and a stable personal life, need to cultivate:

- A solution-oriented mindset (decisively distinct from the problem-focused one)
- The will and skill to align with the business objectives of one's organization.
- A dedicated window to pursue one's passion and find solace while juggling the batons of life.

The way ahead:

Education will play a vital role in instilling a cooperative and sensitive mindset in young males, and the confidence required in young females to face the corporate world with dignified poise and emerge victorious backed by her capabilities and hard work. Education should also consciously foster the culture of mutual respect across genders right from the formative years.

Organizations, governments and the most important unit of the society, the family, should focus less on empowering women with external aides, and more on making every girl realize that her real empowerment lies within – in her own psyche.

She should and can feel self-sufficient, fulfilled and in complete harmony with not only the other gender but all the variety of challenges and opportunities that the workplace has to offer.

References:

Please note that the council does not take responsibility for the accuracy of the data in the referenced sites. These are for reference purposes only.

i [Women in Military \(drishtiias.com\)](http://drishtiias.com)

ii [Only 3% to 12% women work in India's manufacturing sector, says survey | Mumbai news - Hindustan Times](#)

iii [Women's Participation In The Medical Industry \(theglobalhues.com\)](http://theglobalhues.com)

iv [Women Leadership in the Indian Corporate Sector - A Vedic insight, HR News, ETHRWorld \(indiatimes.com\)](#)

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