

A Study of Perception of Women in Leadership Roles: Challenges & Covid 19 Impact

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Abstract: *While the world is adding feathers to its cap of advancement, women face challenges when it comes to undertaking and harnessing leadership roles in the corporate world. Our research is based on an empirical study using the statistical tools of variance, tests of hypothesis to scrutinise the views taken from a few known women leaders and these are contrasted with those actually assumed by women who themselves are not working outside their homes. This has been done with the motive of establishing a lucid image of the actual challenges faced by women leaders and how the onset of pandemic even worsened it. The research will reaffirm the need to revolutionise the way people discern women in defined leadership roles and bring about the dawn of cooperation and systemic changes to facilitate women in leadership roles especially after the lessons learnt from the pandemic which led to the burdening of women in leadership roles and otherwise.*

Keywords: *Covid 19, workplace gender discrimination, gender stereotypes, women in leadership roles*

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I. Introduction

Women today have multiple roles to play and though their participation in the workforce has increased and is an indicator of the wave of social change taking over our society, still there is lot of bias and discrimination they face in the society. Various assumptions come to the forefront when a woman is in a leadership role such as tagging them as aggressive, risk-averse, more prone to emotional decisions, pushy and deceitful, whereas ambition in men is a valued leadership trait. There are a number of barriers which have impacted the advancement of women in leadership positions which is perhaps owing to certain perceptions and beliefs held by men and women. Women face unfathomable hardships in addressing these differing perceptions and overcoming these barriers which may be overt or covert. To add to this the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted women especially working women becoming overburdened with work and care responsibilities.

Commenting on the experience of the pandemic's impact on women leaders in higher education Mavin and Yusupova (2020) have stated, "COVID-19 may personify the misfit of woman and leader. The resilience required to lead as a woman in extreme contexts can be debilitating and sometimes fatal...Our personal reflections of our gendered experiences during COVID-19 have surfaced responsibility, ambiguity, resilience, emotion work, vulnerability, abjection, anxiety, guilt, precarity and have provoked reflexivity. In some ways it does feel like our societal clock just sped backwards."

A number of studies have investigated the nature of the influences which inhibit women from reaching their potential as leaders and a large amount of research has sought to understand the ways and means to enhance supportive environments for women leaders to realize their potential.

Christina M. Surawicz (2016) in a study of women in medical school and in medical training espoused two themes of 'glass ceiling' which is an invisible barrier in their career advancement and 'the leaky pipeline' which refers to the loss of female faculty along the path to advancement. She advocated the need to address these issues through enhanced work-life integration initiatives from the organizations and also by providing for leadership development through training.

Lahti, E. (2013) examined the possibilities of women to advance as leaders as there are fewer female leaders compared to male leaders in Finland where the study was conducted and globally too. The study reflected that there are a number of direct and indirect factors influencing women's lower representation in leadership positions. Three levels of influential factors were defined as societal, organizational, and individual factors. Traditionally imposed gender roles, the culture of the organization and women's individual perceptions play a role in women's leadership development

Wilkinson and Male (2023) highlighted the personal cost which women leaders endured during the Covid-19 pandemic while leading from the front and also navigating challenges at the home too with participants reporting increased anxiety, reduced confidence, lower resilience and experiencing exhaustion. In Spite of this, many were positive and saw the crisis as a harbinger for change and social evolution.

Marczak (2021) studied the ways how women who are in their mid-career and are looking for leadership positions were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found higher levels of distributed leadership compared to pre-pandemic levels owing to gendered differences in approaches to leadership

Kaur and Sharma (2020) in a study on women working from home amid Covid-19 Pandemic have brought to light that factors such as family size, working hours to be put in, age of children and support from society and family have had significant impact on working women.

A study by Barwa (2003) on women leaders, showed that women face additional handicaps due to the prevailing social and cultural gender-based inequalities and biases.

II. Rationale for the Study

Women constitute almost 50 percent of the population of the country forming a major chunk of the population but their contributions to economic activity, and general growth are marginal and do not use their latent potential. Since ages women have been relegated to household chores and their exposure to the world of work was limited. But things are changing and women are increasingly getting enhanced visibility on the economic front and emerging on top echelons of the corporate ladders. The major problems faced by women in employment roles are lack of support, lack of education or financial resources along with male domination which is one of the most prominent issues. Also, COVID-19 resulted in vast disruption of industries and jobs across the world and workplaces being redesigned. For women, breaks in employment make it hard for them to return, giving them flexibility is resented and not much support is offered by the workplace itself and family too. Even when family members do share household responsibilities, more work does not always translate to equal word. To seek answers to these issues research has been conducted through a self-developed questionnaire based on non-probability purposive sampling technique to carry out the study to portray probable differences in opinions among working women and non-working women. The results of this research aspire to unveil the obstacles to the growth of women leaders and highlight the probable impediments in women becoming part of the workforce and discovering varied perceptions.

III. Research Methodology

The study is descriptive in nature and an attempt has been made to highlight the way working and nonworking women perceive the challenges faced by women in leadership roles and to understand the plethora of barriers posed by COVID-19 particularly for women. Two samples of women leaders and non-working women were selected. The responses were based on a non-probability purposive sampling method and were collected by administering a self-developed questionnaire. The responses were collected through a mail questionnaire containing certain statements which was sent by using email, social media profiles and by circulating the messages among social groups and cold calling. SPSS (Version 19) was used for the purpose of analysing the data. Frequency tabulations for responses obtained were analysed. It was hypothesised that perceptions of the women leaders and the non-working women respondents coincide. Chi Square test was used to determine association between responses for working and non-working women.

IV. Results and Analysis

4.1 Findings and Discussions

Statement A: “The recruitment and promotion processes for women candidates suffers from gender biases.”

Observation: The survey conducted amongst the women leaders showed that almost 60% of them agreed to the above raised issue while amongst the **non-working women** respondents did not agree to the issue.

Finding: The working women feel that selection criteria and further promotional avenues of women are biased against women and women do get discriminated against by their male counterparts but non-working women did not have any such perceptions.

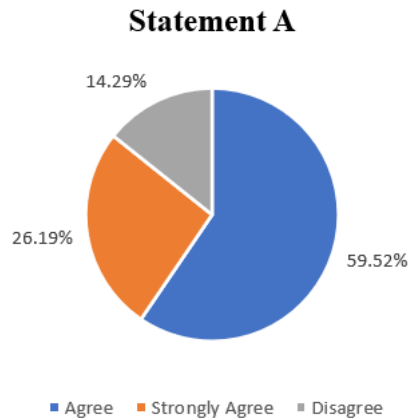


Figure 1: Showing the majority of women leaders who agree to statement A.

Statement B: “There is a perception of biased working hours for women employees and their suggestions in the discussions, deliberations and decision-making process go uncredited as well as unrecognised.”

Observation: Approximately 53% of the women leaders surveyed consented to the issue, while 42% of the **non-working women respondents** did not recognise this as an issue and believed that this was conventional thought and does not exist nowadays.

Finding: There is a belief among working women that the working hours of women are considered to be less than that of men, and their suggestions are not given much importance whereas a number of non-working women did not think so.

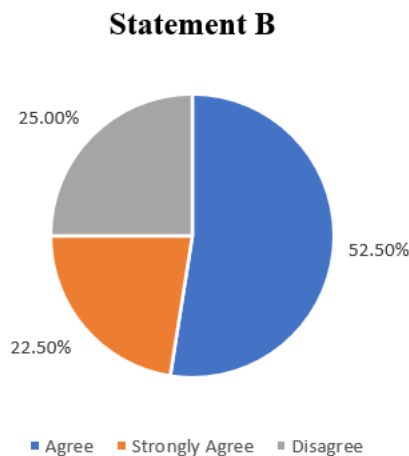


Figure 2: Showing the majority of women leaders who agree to statement B.

Statement C: “Sexual harassment adversely affects women's decision of joining the workforce and is a threat even to the currently employed ones.”

Observation: As per the research, as high as 80% of the women leaders agreed to the fact that the fear of sexual harassment at work does have an adverse effect on their decision to join the workforce or remain in it compared to the **non-working women respondents**.

Finding: Sexual harassment is a pertinent obstacle hindering women’s progress and participation in the workforce and even at present it is a concern which must be dealt with properly.

Statement C

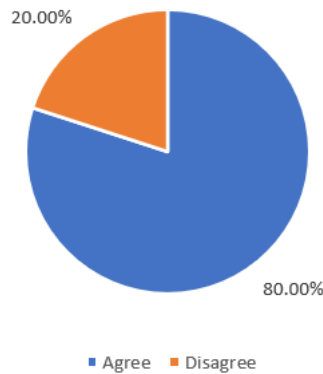


Figure 3: Showing the majority of women leaders who agree to statement C

Statement D: “Feeling of exclusion amidst the male employees, facing discrimination on the grounds of race, and ethnicity, and demeaning, demotivating comments and behaviour take a toll on women's mental health leading to depression, anxiety.”

Observation: As high as 63% and approximately 24% of the women leaders agree and strongly agree respectively to the argument while amongst the non-working women respondents the figures were 60% and 27% respectively, where many of them also claimed to have systematically withdrawn from employment as they were compelled by their circumstances or physical condition to cater to only one domain of their lives.

Finding: It has been identified that demeaning comments, lack of motivational push, dearth of suitable roles, the constant urge to perform better and juggling between the family and professional life have gradually dilapidated women’s physical, emotional, and mental well-being inflicting depression, anxiety and reducing their capacity to perform well in both domains

Statement D

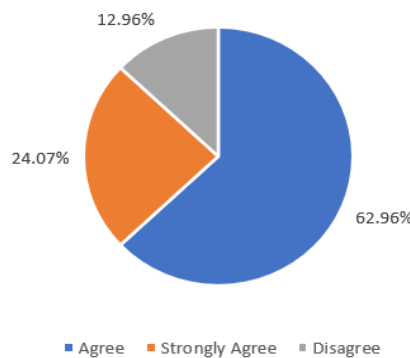


Figure 4: Showing the majority of women leaders who agree to statement D.

Statement E: “Gender pay-gap is a pertinent issue demotivating women participation in the workforce.”

Observation: 64% and 27% of the women leaders accepted the fact that this discriminating practice of gender pay gap is demotivating for women leaders and general participation of women in the workforce.

Finding: Gender pay-gap is also one of the most significant deterrents preventing women entering from the workforce and there is agreement amongst the two sample groups regarding the same.

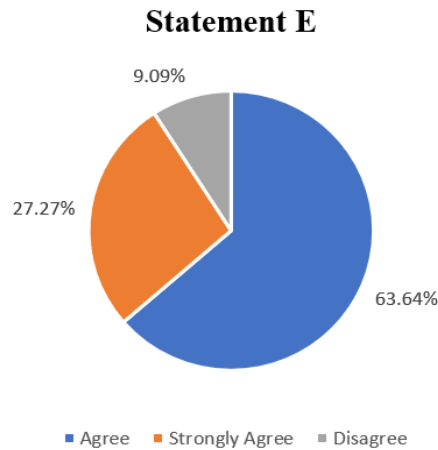


Figure 5: Showing the majority of women leaders who agree to statement E

Statement F: “Women's professional life and her commitment towards the work was compromised under the onus of Covid-19.”

Observation: 55% and 30% of the women leaders agree and strongly agree to the imbalance caused in their lives due to the pandemic while the **non-working women respondents** remained unaware of their problem and only 10% of them agreed to this idea.

Finding: Covid-19 hit women hard, destabilizing their official position due to the undefined work timings, their primary obligation to cater to the family staying at home, and most importantly drafting a work structure that suits everyone’s needs. The condition of women who were trying to balance both work and home was indeed compromised because of their being overburdened with home, care and work responsibilities. Non-working women somehow did not agree to the notion.

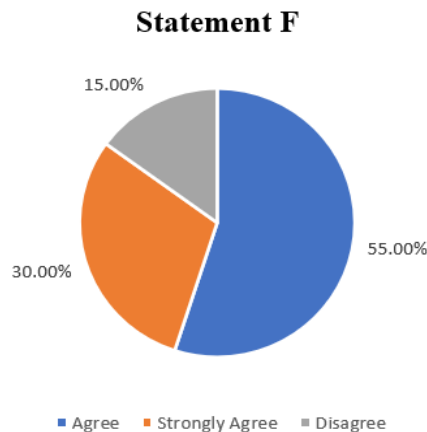


Figure 6: Showing the majority of women leaders who agree to statement F.

Statement G: “Women's character is more often subject to scrutiny by the male counterparts and she is subject to the patriarchal chauvinist thinking.”

Observation: A very high proportion of women leaders, nearly 81% have to bear remarks made by their male colleagues which are chauvinistic and they feel subject to more scrutiny compared to their male counterparts.

Finding: The women leaders were of the view that they were plagued by the orthodox ideology of the male counterparts of not accepting women as their leader because of patriarchal considerations while most of the non-working women respondents did not agree to this statement.

Statement G

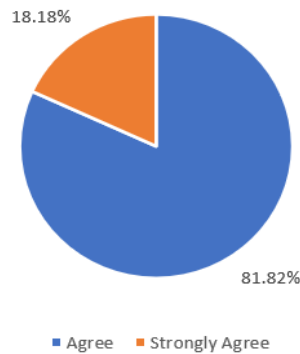


Figure 7: Showing the majority of women leaders who agree to statement G

Statement H: “Women suffer from social stigma in various situations e.g, while working overnight; or if they rejoin the workforce after maternity leave and when they interact with male colleagues.”

Observation: In the survey, 71% of the women leaders uphold that these kinds of social stigma are faced by them. But amongst the non-working women only 15% respondents agreed to the fact.

Finding: Women who work beyond working hours come under the scanner of suspicion by the society while in contrast if a man returns home after working for the night, then he is considered to be more hardworking and committed. The same is the case in maternity leave where women rejoining the workforce are unjustly regarded to be more biased towards their family responsibilities by colleagues or towards their official work by the family.

Statement H

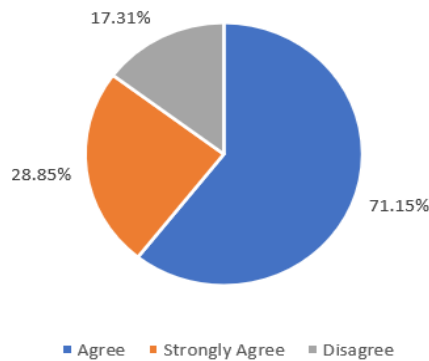


Figure 8: Showing the majority of women leaders who agree to statement H.

Statement I: “The society needs self-realisation of the orthodox approach and bondages that curb women’s freedom and need to undergo transformation.”

Finding: Both the surveys of women leaders and non-working women accept the notion that the society needs to undergo a drastic transformation rendering respect, acceptability and understanding towards the needs of women and their inherent desire to succeed.

Statement I

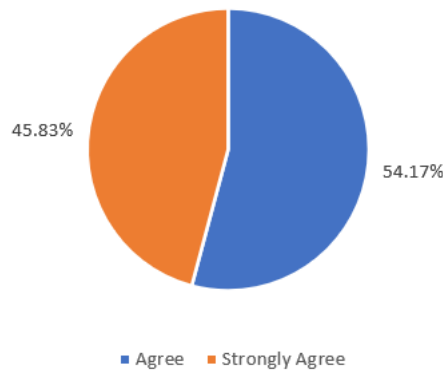


Figure 9: Showing the majority of women leaders who agree to statement I.

4.2 Chi-Square Analysis

Chi Square Test of Contingency (Test of Independence) has been used to analyse the qualitative data and to conclude whether the perceptions of the women in the non-working world (have any association with) those with the women leaders of the corporate world.

Table No.1: Observed Contingency Table

Statements	Majority opinion of women leaders		Majority opinion of the general women respondents		Total
	AGREE	DISAGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	
(A)	59.52	14.29	16.67	76.67	167.15
(B)	52.50	25.00	34.39	42.81	154.7
(C)	80.00	20.00	0.00	27.27	127.27
(D)	62.96	12.96	59.18	14.29	149.39
(E)	63.64	9.09	64.52	12.90	150.15
(F)	55.00	15.00	9.99	85.00	164.99
(G)	81.82	0.00	0.00	80.43	162.25
(H)	71.15	17.31	15.00	80.00	183.46
(I)	54.17	0.00	57.14	2.38	113.69
Total	580.76	113.65	256.89	421.75	1373.05

Table No. 1 depicts the percentage of the actual values that we obtained through our survey from both populations of women, working and non-working and Table No. 2 shows the expected values calculated on the basis of the data itself that we collected.

Table No. 2: Expected Contingency Table

Statements	Majority opinion of women leaders		Majority opinion of the general women respondents		Total
	AGREE	DISAGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	
(A)	70.70	13.84	31.27	51.34	167.15
(B)	65.43	12.80	28.94	47.52	154.70
(C)	53.83	10.53	23.81	39.09	127.27
(D)	63.19	12.37	27.95	45.89	149.39
(E)	63.51	12.43	28.09	46.12	150.15
(F)	69.79	13.66	30.87	50.68	164.99
(G)	68.63	13.43	30.36	49.84	162.25
(H)	77.60	15.19	34.32	56.35	183.46

(I)	48.09	9.41	21.27	34.92	113.69
Total	580.76	113.65	256.89	421.75	1373.05

In our case, the formulated hypothesis is construed as below:

Ho hypothesis: There is no association between the perceptions of women leaders and non-working women respondents.

H1 hypothesis: There is a statistically significant association between the perceptions of women leaders and non-working women respondents.

Table No. 3: Chi-Square Analysis Table

Statements	Parameter of Discretion	View (Agree/Disagree)	O _i (Observed Count)	E _i (Expected Count)	(O _i -E _i) ² /E _i
(A)	Majority opinion of women leaders	AGREE	60.00	32.69	22.81
		DISAGREE	14.00	46.00	22.26
	Majority opinion of the general women respondents	AGREE	16.67	21.50	1.08
		DISAGREE	76.67	35.29	48.51
(B)	Majority opinion of women leaders	AGREE	53.00	27.10	24.77
		DISAGREE	25.00	38.10	4.50
	Majority opinion of the general women respondents	AGREE	34.39	17.82	15.42
		DISAGREE	42.81	29.25	6.28
(C)	Majority opinion of women leaders	AGREE	80.00	98.20	3.37
		DISAGREE	20.00	13.80	2.79
	Majority opinion of the general women respondents	AGREE	0.00	64.60	64.60
		DISAGREE	27.27	10.61	26.19
(D)	Majority opinion of women leaders	AGREE	62.96	51.91	2.35
		DISAGREE	12.96	73.00	49.38
	Majority opinion of the general women respondents	AGREE	59.18	34.14	18.37
		DISAGREE	14.29	56.04	31.11
(E)	Majority opinion of women leaders	AGREE	63.64	52.17	2.52
		DISAGREE	9.09	73.40	56.35
	Majority opinion of the general women respondents	AGREE	64.52	34.31	26.60
		DISAGREE	12.90	56.33	33.48
(F)	Majority opinion of women leaders	AGREE	55.00	57.33	0.09
		DISAGREE	15.00	80.60	53.39
	Majority opinion of the general women respondents	AGREE	9.99	37.70	20.37
		DISAGREE	85.00	61.89	8.63
(G)		AGREE	81.82	56.38	11.48

	Majority opinion of women leaders	DISAGREE	0.00	79.30	79.30
	Majority opinion of the general women respondents	AGREE	0.00	37.07	37.07
		DISAGREE	80.43	60.87	6.29
(H)	Majority opinion of women leaders	AGREE	71.15	63.75	0.86
		DISAGREE	17.31	89.70	58.42
	Majority opinion of the general women respondents	AGREE	15.00	41.92	17.29
		DISAGREE	80.00	68.82	1.82
(I)	Majority opinion of women leaders	AGREE	54.17	39.51	5.44
		DISAGREE	0.00	55.60	55.60
	Majority opinion of the general women respondents	AGREE	57.14	25.98	37.38
		DISAGREE	23.80	42.65	8.33
TOTAL				1765.32	864.51

Table No.4 Inference Table

Chi Calculated	864.51
Chi Tabulated	15.51
Chi Calculated > Chi Tabulated	

Table no. 4 shows that the **Chi-square calculated value is greater than Chi-square tabulated/Critical Value**. Therefore, we reject the Null hypothesis, **H₀** and accept the **Alternate Hypothesis**. There is a significant association between the perceptions of women leaders and non-working women respondents. (They are not independent)

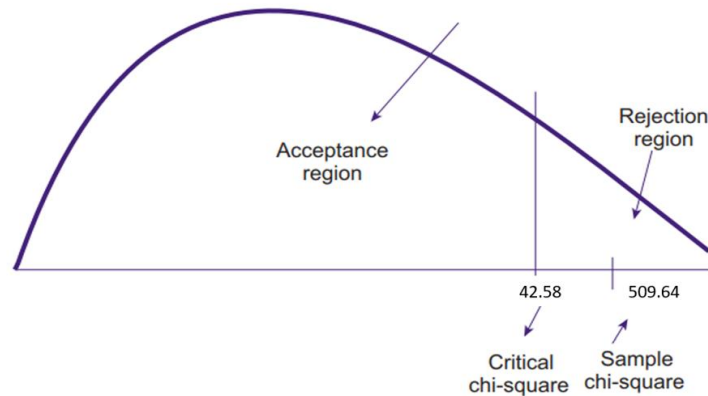


Figure 11: Depicting the Graphical Representation of the Chi-Square Analysis in correspondence with the confidence level assumed for the analysis

The critical value of the Chi-square at 5 percent level of significance with 8 degrees of freedom (k-1) is given by 15.51. The sample value of the Chi-square falls in the rejection region as shown in the figure presented above. Therefore, the Null hypothesis, **H₀** is rejected and we can conclude that perceptions of the women leaders and the non-working women respondents are statistically significantly associated with each other.

V. Conclusion

This research, on the basis of the survey conducted amongst the women leaders and general women respondents has come out with some stark results that deserve attention and action. The research shows that the majority of the women leaders agreed that the recruitment and promotion processes for women candidates suffer

from gender biases whereas among the non-working women a very high percentage of people did not agree with the issue. It seems that nonworking women are not aware of the reality of the status of working women. More than half of the women leaders agreed that the suggestions of women in the discussions, deliberations and decision-making process go uncredited whereas almost 42% of the non-working women respondents did not recognise this as an issue.

Majority of the women leaders as well as non-working women agreed that sexual harassment adversely affects women's decision of joining the workforce and also is a threat to those currently working. For the statement that "a feeling of exclusion amidst the male employees, facing discrimination on the grounds of race, and ethnicity, and demeaning, demotivating comments and behaviour take a toll on women's mental health leading to depression, anxiety", majority of the women leaders as well as non-working women were in agreement.

Demeaning comments, lack of motivational push, dearth of job enrichment activities, feeling of elimination amongst the male colleagues, the constant urge to perform better, juggling between the family and professional life dilapidated women's physical, emotional and mental well-being inflicting depression, migraine, severe aches and affect their capacity to perform well in both domains. This was agreed upon by both women leaders as well as non-working women.

Eagly and Carli (2007) in their study have written, "In truth, women are not turned away only as they reach the penultimate stage of a distinguished career. They disappear in various numbers at many points leading up to that stage..... A better metaphor for what confronts women in their professional endeavours is the labyrinth. It is an image with a long and varied history in ancient Greece, India, Nepal, native North and South America, medieval Europe, and elsewhere..... For women who aspire to top leadership, routes exist but are full of twists and turns, both unexpected and expected."

Women leaders as well as non-working women both accepted the fact that gender pay gap demotivates women from participation in the workforce. Majority of the women leaders agreed that an imbalance was caused in their lives due to the Covid 19 pandemic while the non-working women respondents mostly remained oblivious to the problem. Majority of the women leaders felt that their male counterparts were not willing to accept women as their leader while the non-working female respondents did not agree with the statement. Working women feel that women who work more than the normal working hours come under the scanner of suspicion by the society, or those returning from maternity are regarded to be negligent towards their family responsibilities by their families or less committed to work by their peers. Sharma and Dhir (2019) pointed in their study that, "Working mothers are often caught in the dual guilt cycle of not being good mothers or employees; organizational pressure as culture and practices that cause the individual anxiety, restlessness and irritation....". They suggested interventions to address these concerns faced by working women. Both, women leaders, and non-working women feel that the society needs to change their disavowing, negative attitude, and work towards empowering women at workplaces. The Chi Square results show that women leaders and non-working women differ in their perceptions of the role and challenges faced by women in leadership roles.

VI. Recommendations

It has been established that an unprecedented transformation is required to sensitise managers and create a mechanism to ensure that prospective women leaders are given the position they deserve based on their performance and potential and not on the basis of gender or physical orientation. The managers should negate stereotypes and cliched thinking with regard to gender roles. Vacancies only for the leadership positions under the garb of umbrella term 'Jobs for her' should be discarded and all prospective leadership roles should be unbarred for inclusion irrespective of the gender. The non-working women need greater sensitization towards the challenges faced by working women and their empathy towards hardships faced by working women can be enhanced and rights of women in general strengthened by having more women join the workforce or at least understand the demands of work and home faced by working women. Kumari (2014) also found that women especially those working suffer from mental and physical stress and lack work-life balance and face workplace discrimination, stereotyped thought patterns, security issues, ego problems with colleagues, and also face the problem of glass ceiling. She suggested solutions like safety measures by organizations, supporting partners at home and grievance redressal mechanisms for at the workplace.

The conscious partisanship towards women candidates should be discarded particularly on the basis of gender, physical orientation, and patriarchal complexes. Undue weight upon the breaks in career in hiring of women candidates should be avoided as they do it mostly to fulfil their family obligations. Equal opportunities must be provided to advance the operations of the team, cutting the corners of unfair treatment under the preconceived assumption that women shall not be able to discharge diligent duties. It should not be assumed that women's leadership traits keep dwindling and hence they are not suitable for senior or leadership roles.

Equality of the learning environment should not be hampered by the cliched views and women should be accorded the opportunities of honing their skills, abilities, and knowledge with respect to handling leadership roles in future. Steps like governmental legislation, corporate diversity policies and individual action can go a long way. As more women hold a grip on their career, we may expect its ripple effect in the form of surging gender representation in the leadership roles in the coming years. Eagly and Carli (2007) have stated in their study that because of the increasing demands women are unable to move up the corporate ladder. move up. and proposed remedies like altering the long hours culture and also using interventions to prepare women for senior management positions. The findings have shown that most of the women who are occupying leadership roles suffer from bias and discrimination at their work place in different forms. Efficiency of a working woman is always under the red scanner and questioned by most people, especially their male counterparts. In the upper-class cadres, it is generally seen that all qualifications remaining similar, men are usually preferred. Authorities and the management staff gravely doubt the capability of women to handle male subordinates, take independent decisions, cope with crises, and manage their duties properly. Also, owing to the pandemic and subsequent lockdown severe restrictions on travel and business disproportionately impacted women during crises. Reid (2013) in his study identified that women are quite vulnerable in times of crisis and they encounter even more challenges while recovering from a crisis. Most of these women-led corporations are concentrated in sectors like tourism, education, and beauty, which were most affected by the physical distancing measures. Working from home did lead to the burdening of women leaders and many even faced loss of jobs. But the findings at the same time have also shown a differing perception of the problems faced by women in leadership roles by women who do not work. There is a need for increased empathy from society to understand the problems working women face. A changed mindset and role understanding is crucial to allow greater entry of the women in the workforce and also their smooth progression in leadership positions.

VII. Directions for Future Research

The impact of a crisis can be experienced at two levels, first is during a crisis like covid-19 itself and second concerns the response of organisations to the crisis in the form of policies (Cook and Grimshaw, 2021; Van Barneveld et al., 2020). “Specifically, it has been found that the effects of actions taken during COVID-19 (both at the individual and firm level) are maintained and even multiplied later, mainly harming women”. (Abraham et al., 2022; Gallacher and Hossain, 2020; Kristal and Yaish, 2020). Hence, the results of our study throw light on only the initial effect of the crisis and not the recovery post initial crisis. Studies could be conducted further to consider data from the period after covid-19 to understand the considerable effects on employment and economy.

Regulatory interventions like gender quotas, imposed by certain countries show that representation of women on boards is higher, such interventions provide opportunities to women to assume leadership positions (Wang and Kelan, 2013). Future researchers should try to ascertain the impact of regulatory interventions on women in different roles, positions, and hierarchies. This would provide a wider and detailed understanding of the effect of covid-19 on gender diversity in leadership positions in the corporate world. Moreover, attributes and traits of women directors could be studied. According to Pillay (2020) Positive affect and mindfulness also enhance resilience of the women leaders and these variables can be further explored.

Another area of future research could relate to examination of the women who are experiencing mid-career, finding out how their further career advancement to leadership roles has been impacted post covid-19. Researchers should focus on aspects like how organisations have paved the way to workplace leadership, how the organisational systems favour men. Covid-19 has had financial implications, researchers could also study female and male CEOs in organisations, this is another aspect that could be contrasted and compared.

It is anticipated that women would act as the face of leadership tasks in future, for they enhance performance greatly. Owing to their distinct leadership behaviour, they influence corporate performance positively. We know that organisational success is not just dependent on the performance of employees but also how well organisational behaviour is complemented by people of different genders or diversity. Organisations with gender diversity in leadership positions have a competitive advantage to them, they are better equipped to take on challenges. Firms must take advantage of this fact to reinforce performance by expanding the range of leadership behaviours.

Also, it would be advisable to undertake the present study in different countries, different cultures and gender stereotypes, with bigger samples with the aim to determine if the stereotyped behaviour is more prevalent in conditions of varied gender equality levels or in situations where gender quotas prevail on boards as a legislative framework. Finally, the results of the present study could be improved by analysing attributes apart from gender,

for e.g. age, background, level of education, to name a few. By bringing awareness to these issues and educating others on them, we can continue to pave the way for future generations and create safe spaces for women to excel in.

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