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## **Making Organisations<sup>1</sup> Gender Equal—A Long Journey: Experience from a non-profit in India**

By Dibyendu Chaudhuri<sup>2</sup> and Parijat Ghosh<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstract**

Organisational leadership plays a key role in shaping the workspace. The collectively held beliefs, assumptions, and values which constitute the culture of an organisation are mostly influenced by its leadership. Monogamous patriarchal family structures—evolved based on male ownership and women's subjugation—have led to the deep-seated idea of male supremacy. Organisations, including value-based non-profits, show the same pattern. Within organisations, patriarchal leadership exhibits sexism in order to maintain the status quo. The deep culture of gender inequality in organisations is apparently maintained as a means of maintaining male supremacy. This article demonstrates how, in two consecutive gender audits, Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), a non-profit organisation scored much lower in 'willingness of leadership to make the organisation a better place for women to work' in spite of the fact that PRADAN is among a small number that invested resources, financial and human, to bring about gender equality in the organisation. As members of the leadership group of PRADAN, the authors assert the need for a powerful Guiding Coalition, outside the normal hierarchy, to lead initiatives and to work with the leadership group, as a way forward to make the organisation a better place for women to work.

*Keywords:* Gender Audit, Gender equality, organisational culture, Leadership, Guiding Coalition, PRADAN

### **Introduction**

This article is based on the efforts of our organisation, Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), to make itself a better place for women to work. PRADAN<sup>4</sup>, a non-profit organisation in India, which mostly works in *Adivasi* (Indigenous Peoples) villages in Central Indian Plateau (CIP).

The practitioners in PRADAN come from reputed institutions across India after completing at least 16 years of formal education. PRADAN's one year of Development Apprenticeship (DAship) programme orients and trains the new entrants for working at the grassroots level—directly with downtrodden people. PRADAN works in small work units (WU) of 5-6 practitioners based in sub-district level towns. These practitioners help women, especially

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<sup>4</sup> To know more, please visit [www.pradan.net](http://www.pradan.net)

from *Adivasi* society from the surrounding villages, to get organised into small groups, deliberate on the reasons for their deprivation, and to plan and execute activities to address the issues they face. PRADAN WU also includes support staff such as accountant and MIS personnel.

Over the last seven-eight years, in many internal forums, women employees of PRADAN have been raising issues regarding the difficulties they face in the organisation. These difficulties are related to sensitivity of colleagues towards women's issues<sup>5</sup>, PRADAN's policies, the team's culture, etc. The ratio of women to men is also skewed at all levels of the organisation. In 2017, at the entry level there were 71 women per 100 men; the dropout rate of women was much higher than that of men, a number which only increased with the years of service. There were 44 women per 100 men who completed 3-5 years of the service period. Also, among staff who completed over 5 years of service, there were only approximately 25 women per 100 men. In leadership positions<sup>6</sup> there were 24 women per 100 men. This pattern indicates the presence of a patriarchal culture, structures, and policies in the organisation (Rubin 1997).

After many rounds of discussion and consultation we developed the view that such a skewed male-female ratio within the organisation and within the leadership are not acceptable. Under the title, "Making PRADAN a better place for women to work," we initiated three different but integrated initiatives<sup>7</sup>. They were as follows:

- Form and nurture a Women's Caucus to create space for internal dialogue among women employees
- Conduct a 'gender audit' at the level of work-units
- Review the design and curriculum of the DAship Programme

These three initiatives were conceived as interdependent processes in the sense that all three were necessary for the desired change may not take place.

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<sup>5</sup> PRADAN's Management Unit was assisted by two independent consultants, Ms. Nandini Narula and Mr. Gagan Sethi to conduct a study on the gendered workspace in PRADAN. Both of them are renowned feminists and organisation development consultants from India. Some of the issues which were reported by women during the study conducted by Mr. Shethi and Ms. Narula were as follows:

- Mobility on motorcycles especially during women's menstrual cycles.
- Expectations to perform the same work as men caused significant anxiety.
- The struggles to establish and sustain identity as an individual, to live up to the expectation of self and others in different role performances, thus leading to a constant need to balance between work, self, family needs and expectations; to continue to work in tough conditions irrespective of life cycle needs.
- A sense of loneliness in bringing up children and their struggles.
- Constant comparisons with male member's efforts and contributions.
- A sense of pressure to be more masculine as one rises in the hierarchy in the organization.
- The present evaluation and monitoring system is masculine.

<sup>6</sup> Practitioners in PRADAN join as Executives. After five years of service they become eligible to lead teams as Team Coordinators. After 10 years of experience, practitioners are eligible to become an Integrator who leads the operations of a Development Cluster or a Corporate Function. Practitioners with more than 15 years of experience in PRADAN are eligible to become an Executive Director (ED). A select group of Integrators constitute the Management Unit (MU) of PRADAN, its top-level management. ED and MU members change every five years.

<sup>7</sup>In the Study report Ms. Narula and Mr. Sethi made nine recommendations, three of which PRADAN's leadership began initially. They also helped to conceptualise initiatives.

### **The initiatives**

The Women's Caucus was perceived as a non-formal space exclusively for women with a mandate to prepare women leaders within the organization and to influence PRADAN in its journey to become a gender just organisation. It has continued for the last four years as of this writing. The Women's Caucus thus far has served as a platform for women to come together and connect with each other, both personally and professionally, for building more clarity, solidarity and confidence, acknowledging women's issues across different age groups as well as supporting and strengthening their negotiation power. However, over time, the meetings became less regular.

The new DAship module includes how patriarchal relations and gender-based discrimination play out in both family and workspaces. It also identifies the roles, both within the organization and society more broadly, that individuals should adopt to create gender equality. This module has been in place for the last four years. The Development Apprentices rated this training high in terms of both content and facilitation. These two initiatives were to be supported by periodic gender audits, which were supposed to help the organisation both to take stock of the status of gender equality, and also to provide feedback to improve the situation.

### **Gender Audit**

After continuing the Women's Caucus and the new DAship module for two years, a Gender Audit (GA) was initiated as a process to help the work units in PRADAN to take stock of how favourable the work units were for women employees and make plan of action around improving the situation.

The GA was considered to be a formal, routine process within the organisation. PRADAN employees who have strong positions in favour of gender equality were selected by the Human Resource Development (HRD) unit as Auditors; we were also part of this Audit team. As members of the Auditors' group, we developed the Audit design, including its tools and methods. The two-day Audit process included the following features: 1) a Focus Group Discussion (FGD), 2) a questionnaire survey, 3) Personal Interviews (PI) with selected members and the person in charge of the unit, 4) observation of the office space, and 5) scrutinising relevant documents such as team meeting minutes, travel bills, leave applications and approval, etc. The gender auditors (one male and one female for each WU) were supposed to present the audit report to the respective WU on which WU members would prepare a Plan of Action (PoA). The audit of a WU was thought to be completed after sending the Audit report and PoA to the HRD unit by the auditors.

The questionnaire and FGD topics were developed by the auditors, based on our experience in PRADAN. Following the Gender at Work framework (for more details visit <https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/>) the questions were clustered into different Quadrants (Q) viz. Q1) consciousness of staff (knowledge, skills, consciousness); Q2) noticeable changes in individuals' conditions (voice, freedom from violence, access to opportunities of growth and development); Q3) formal rules and policies; and Q4) informal norms and deep structure. There were some questions developed around the Gender Integration Framework. This is a framework developed by the Commission on the Advancement of Women (for more information, contact: InterAction - CAW, 1400 16th St, NW, Suite 201, Washington, DC 20036, Web: [www.interaction.org](http://www.interaction.org)). These questions revolved around the political will for change, the

technical capacity to carry out practical aspects of gender equality, accountability and organisational culture.

### **Audit findings**

The overall percentage score<sup>8</sup> based on the questionnaire was 69%. However, if we look at individual questions, the lowest score (54%) pertained to the effort of PRADAN's leadership to create a gender-equal workplace. This is the area in particular, which made us ponder the role of leadership in changing the workspace.

The GA findings from the questionnaire survey, FGD and PI can be clustered into five categories:

Q.1 Consciousness of staff:

- There is wide variation among different categories of staff in the WU around what is the desired picture of a gender equal place.

Q.2 Noticeable changes in individuals' conditions:

- Women colleagues do not use provisions<sup>9</sup> because they do not want to be perceived as weaker and less efficient than men.
- Colleagues do not have adequate information about the existing Policies and provisions for women employees and about the Women's Caucus.
- There is less clarity among staff about what comprises sexual harassment and provisions under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013
- Men colleagues have better and more information about important initiatives and what is happening in the organisation, through informal channels of communication.

Q.3 Formal rules and policies:

- Lack of, or no policies around terms and conditions of employing office-cleaners.
- No stated policy of leave during menstruation.
- No stated policy to support women employees during pre-natal and post-natal stages.

Q.4 Informal norms and deep structure:

- Soft spoken, explicitly caring and charming women are easily accepted in teams as compared to those who are not.
- Women members have to follow social rules related to dress code and relationships; for example, they are not supposed to go to the butcher's shop or to buy alcohol.
- There is the perception by men colleagues that extra effort (protection, care) is required to engage with women colleagues.
- Men and women are good at different subjects and in performing different roles. For example, women can connect with women and gender related issues better than men, who are much better in technical areas.
- Thematic<sup>10</sup> leaderships are apparently allocated according to interest. However, interests manifest stereotypes of gendered division of work<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Likert scale was used in the questionnaire. A low score means a movement away from gender equality.

<sup>9</sup> PRADAN's personnel system has some provisions to support women colleagues; for example: women colleagues may travel in higher classes in long duration trains, or if they are travelling with children up to five years old; they may hire four wheelers whenever needed for field visits; Parents travelling with children below eight years may travel with caregivers, etc.

Q.5 Confidence in leadership and the change process:

- Lack of faith in leaderships' efforts to ensure changes required for making the space more gender equal.
- PRADAN is not prepared to change gender inequality.
- Low confidence in the proceedings of Internal Compliance Committee (for prevention of sexual harassment).

Apart from the above, we also found that there was lack of separate toilet facilities for women, and a lack of cleanliness of office rooms. Basic medicines and sanitary pads were not kept in the first-aid boxes.

### Changes due to Audit

After GA the work units were asked to make a Plan of Action (PoA) based on the audit findings. There were very concrete plans and actions around improving basic hygiene issues such as the cleanliness of office and toilet, designating a separate toilet for women, arranging adequate toiletries, including sanitary napkins, etc. Some policies, such as the policy on maternity leave<sup>12</sup> were also changed (now there are six months of paid leave plus the option for one additional year of unpaid leave) because of recommendations from the GA and the Women's Caucus. In most of the work units, training was conducted to sensitise the staff on understanding sexual harassment in the workspace. There has also been a slight change in the male-female ratio within the organisation within one year (see the table below).

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<sup>10</sup> In PRADAN, 'themes' are different action ideas such as a Self-help Group (SHG), Agriculture, Gender or Livestock-rearing based on which programmes are designed. The WU members engage with villagers, especially women, around those programmes. The WU members who are implementing different programmes, also invest to enrich and develop the 'themes' based on their experience. One of the senior employees leads this process of 'theme' development in the WUs and in the organisation. Those persons are called thematic anchors/ leaders.

<sup>11</sup> The gendered division of labor in PRADAN exists, because mostly men but also many women, believe that working with women's SHGs, or on issues of gender require more feminine qualities including listening, relating to others, understanding, being accommodating. Further, women are considered by both men and women to be good at working with women and on gender issues, because of their own life experiences. However, issues such as agriculture and livestock rearing require engagement with the market, fulfilling target goals, etc. which are considered both by men and women to be masculine in nature; hence, these tasks are preferred by the men in the organisation. However, there are exceptions to the beliefs about these gendered roles as well as the assignment of the roles.

<sup>12</sup> There are seven days of paternity leave in PRADAN. There was no suggestion around modifying this.

**TABLE:**

<b>Male-Female Ratio in PRADAN at different Experience levels</b>		
<b>Number of years in PRADAN</b>	<b>Sep 2017</b>	<b>Sep 2018</b>
<b>0-3 years</b>	0.71	0.90
<b>3-5 years</b>	0.44	0.45
<b>5-10 years</b>	0.24	0.27
<b>&gt;10 years</b>	0.26	0.26
<b>Overall</b>	0.38	0.45

However, though the findings revealed low levels of desire for change within PRADAN's leadership, there was no plan from any WU to change the conservative mind-set of the leadership; in other words, to generate a willingness to change the workspace to make it suitable for women to work. Also, there was no plan to change the deep culture of the organisation except to hold regular meetings of staff in some WUs to discuss issues of Gender inequality, which also actually stopped within a few months.

Nevertheless, because of the positive changes it supposedly brought about PRADAN decided to continue with the GA. The second round was conducted in early 2020 despite the fact that the organisation was facing a financial crisis. The second round of GA findings are still to be consolidated; however, a rough calculation shows that the score on the willingness of leadership to make PRADAN a gender equal place is still very low, almost similar to the last GA score. As a leadership group we decided to invest financial and human resources in making PRADAN a better place for women. We continued to do so even in the years of financial crisis. Despite this fact, why did leadership receive a low score regarding its willingness to bring about gender equality? The following section reflects on this question, positioning male leadership within a history of patriarchal gender roles.

### **Leadership and deep structure**

Organisational leadership plays a key role in shaping the workspace. The collectively held beliefs, assumptions and values, which constitute the culture of an organisation (Trice M and Beyer J 1993), are mostly influenced by its leadership. By "leadership" we mean a process wherein an individual or a group, influences others in an effort to reach organizational goals (Chemers 1997).

Feminist scholars<sup>13</sup> studying the origins of patriarchies (Lerner 1986) have demonstrated that women have been idealised to operate in the domestic sphere whereas men have been viewed to dominate the public sphere (Fox 2002), which includes organisations (Mills 1988). An organisation's climate consists of members' shared perceptions of formal and informal

<sup>13</sup> There is a voluminous literature on the origins of patriarchy and the subsequent ideologies and roles that place men in dominant public positions.

organisational practices, procedures, and routines that arise from direct experiences of the organisation's culture (Ostroff 2012). The pattern of male supremacy that exists within the wider society is reflected in organisational structure. Patriarchal leadership shows either hostile or benevolent sexism (Glick 1996) towards women employees in order to maintain male supremacy. Hostile sexism sees women as incompetent, emotional, and sexually manipulating; whereas benevolent sexism considers women as weak, in need of protection, support, and adoration from men. One can argue that this form of sexism is more harmful as compared to hostile sexism as women can more easily recognise hostile sexism and protest against the associated behaviour and attitude, whereas it is difficult to identify benevolent sexism as harmful or even as sexism (Stamarski 2015). Benevolent sexism limits women's selection for leadership positions, since men perceive themselves to be supporting and protecting women; hence, they considered themselves more suitable for leadership positions. Also, women are more vulnerable to internalized, hegemonic oppression via benevolent sexism. Both these kinds of sexism have been observed during the audit process in PRADAN (see Q4. of the audit findings).

R.W. Connell has coined the term hegemonic masculinity to explain men's superior position in society shaped by the theory of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. Connell defined hegemonic masculinity as a discourse that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of the common male population and women, and other marginalized ways of being a man. However, Christensen and Jensen suggest the importance of also looking at more specific problems of power relations between men in specific contexts. The intersectionality among dominating (overt and explicit oppression of men over people who practice other masculinities), dominant (domination of other masculinities but only in the broad sense that any emphasized norm by definition tends to marginalize the non-normative) and hegemonic masculinity gives rise to different kinds of manifestations of male supremacy in different contexts (Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvotrup Jensen 2014). It is imperative to understand this intersectionality without which the deep structure of patriarchy in PRADAN may not be fully understood and challenged. The current initiatives need to be relooked from these perspectives as well.

Further, the leadership group in PRADAN is also not a homogenous group. There are caste and class dynamics going on within and without the group. PRADAN's leadership group also consists predominantly of men and people from higher castes. Male supremacy and leadership in the Indian context can't be understood devoid of the dynamics of caste. The initiatives in PRADAN lack the integration of caste-based oppression. Even while designing the GA tools caste-based oppression and its intersectionality with gender-based oppression (Khurana 2018) has been largely ignored.

The objective or goal of the initiatives was to build an organisation where men would be integrated, free, equal, and loving human beings striving towards creating a more equal society through enhanced connectedness with self (both femininity and masculinity) and others. They would practise behaviours such as caring, sharing, supporting, and collaborating. They would act against anything which is promoting inequality and injustice. At the same time, women in PRADAN would be confident, without fear and dignified; free to express and realise their potentials; they would acquire enhanced understanding of gender equality and their role in it. The goal was also to build an organization where women will stay, grow, and acquire leadership positions. But achieving these goals is the same as ending a male higher caste leadership group, and this group will not want that to happen, as those with power and status do not renounce them willingly.

### **Possible way out**

In PRADAN, we have taken the first step in identifying the needs and invested resources to work towards a gender equal organization by initiating some interventions. However, it is difficult to change the inherent deep culture of the organization within the usual management structure as it is based on a leadership process which is inherently patriarchal (Mills 1988). Creating a change facilitating group, 'a Guiding Coalition' as termed by Kotter (Kotter 1995) may be a good approach for facilitating the change process. In this model, a Guiding Coalition is formed with a group of employees with shared commitments and enough power to lead the change effort. They need to be encouraged to work as a team outside the normal hierarchy and work with the leadership to help them in the change process. "Because the Guiding Coalition includes members who are not part of senior management, it tends to operate outside of the normal hierarchy by definition. This can be awkward, but it is clearly necessary. If the existing hierarchy were working well, there would be no need for a major transformation. But since the current system is not working, reform generally demands activity outside of formal boundaries, expectations, and protocol" (Kotter 1995) This may develop a sense of reassurance and trust among the rest of the employees and facilitate a climate for change.

Also, there is a need to look at HR policies again, including those which are termed "scientific" and "gender neutral" but also based on "the persistent stereotype that associates management with male" (Rubin 1997). According to liberal political philosophy, once women and men are treated alike without interference from individual biases and prejudices, there will emerge fair competition between individuals, comparative to the 'free market'. However, this does not work in organizations as there is no such thing as an unbiased and prejudice-free organizational climate (Rubin 1997). Instead, the approach of positive discrimination in HR policies, "affirmative action", including selection for leadership positions should be supported.

The resocialization of men toward gender awareness, exposing the hegemony of patriarchy (leading to internal oppression and unexamined assumptions) is absolutely critical to bring about change in deeply entrenched structural inequalities shaped by patriarchal norms. Therefore, it is important to create a space in all the WUs for discussing personal experiences in the workspace, perceptions, and stereotypes.

There are many men in PRADAN who support women and can see a qualitatively better PRADAN by ensuring shifts in practices and culture; they are ready to make or have made personal shifts, constructing personal and professional aspects of their lives. These men champions should also conduct gender awareness and sensitisation programmes for other staff, especially men, in the organisation.

Within PRADAN, thematic leadership is allocated based on the interest of the practitioners. However, if one looks at its distribution carefully, one can see a pattern which represents the stereotypical understanding of the gendered division of work. We recommend creating a system of support, to assist one another in moving outside one's comfort zone and taking on leadership roles outside of the gender-divided different themes. The women's caucus, men champions, and the guiding coalition may all play a key role in this process.

Above all, the initiatives for gender equality in the organisation need to take into account the intersectionality of gender with other discriminations based on caste and class.

## **Conclusion**

PRADAN initiated three integrated activities for improving the workspace for women. This has resulted in some positive movement within PRADAN. Organisations across multiple sectors of society may initiate similar processes to make themselves a gender equal workplace. PRADAN's Gender Audit shows that despite the efforts of the leadership, the staff gave them a low score on their 'willingness to change the gender inequality' in two consecutive Gender Audits. This may be due to the persistence of the organisation's leadership deep-seated idea of male supremacy, and it is significant influence on the organisational culture. As a result, we recommend forming a change facilitating team, 'a Guiding Coalition', outside the normal hierarchy to lead the change processes to create a gender equal organisation. We also suggested reviewing HR policies to make them more suitable for women so that more women can be selected for leadership positions. This is a long journey and every new initiative may be seen as a small step towards a gender equal workspace. However, critically looking at those initiatives may help to transform not only the workspace but society as well.

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