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Why Mentoring is Essential in Creating Support Systems for Women

By Julie Sunil¹

Abstract

This article focuses on exploring whether mentoring programs for women can speed the process of bridging the gender gap. Several measures have been taken in the past to ensure that gender equality in the workplace and society is practiced at the grass-roots level. However, the problems encountered during such an exercise may be compounded by the women's own attitudes towards their place in the social hierarchy and their potential as well as their assessment of other women. This paper, based on a literature review, explores the prevailing attitude of women towards other women and their right to employment. When few women finally climb up to leadership positions, they face the problem of a double bind, a struggle between ambition and gender stereotypes. Research from India addressing women's attitude towards work, and the grass-root issues that prevent growth opportunities for them have been gathered and analysed to understand if mentoring is required as an intervention. This paper explores if mentoring might be a necessary intervention to narrow the gender gap, and whether attitude-building among women is key to ensuring equal representation of women in the workplace.

Keywords: Mentoring, Employment, Leadership, Gender Gap

Introduction

The appointment of Leena Nair as the Global CEO of Luxury Fashion Company, Chanel was celebrated largely because it communicated a message about women in leadership roles. The appointment was not a surprise given that Leena Nair had joined Unilever as a trainee and in 2016 was appointed as the first female and youngest-ever Chief Human Resources Officer of Unilever. She had an engineering degree and an MBA from Xavier School of Management (XLRI) in Jamshedpur. The value of her new role became more remarkable when it became known that Indra Nooyi, Former PepsiCo chairman and chief executive officer (CEO), had mentored and guided Leena Nair in facing her many fears and misgivings.

Contrast this appointment with the finding from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) done across 14 Indian states, where more than 75% of the respondents from four states said, "yes" to the question "In your opinion, is a husband justified in hitting or beating his wife?" The world of these women is different from the one occupied by Indra Nooyi and Leena Nair. The questions of this study are: What can a supportive network accomplish for women's emancipation? Can mentoring of women by other accomplished women be an essential component to create such a system? The objectives of this article are:

1. To study the literacy, employability, and employment conditions of women
2. To understand why the burden of unpaid care is a serious threat to employment of women

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3. To explore why the “double-bind” is slowing the rise of women to leadership roles
4. To explore how mentoring from accomplished women can benefit a greater number of women thereby speeding up the process of bridging the gender divide

Methodology

This article is based on published research findings and media reports on the factors that affect the growth and development of women. The research insights from eight states, in which the attitude of women is counterproductive to their development, will help in comparing the development factors such as level of literacy, Internet usage, employability and employment. Reports on labour workforce participation of men and women during the pandemic were gathered to provide insights into how women weigh their options and make choices when jobs are scarce.

The Attitude Bind

Women are victims of a double bind, caught between their ambition and gender expectations. Therefore, they need more support to reach leadership positions. Mentor and mentee relationships among women can help to create networks of encouragement and support from women of all sections of society and help accelerate women’s development. There are several factors that may contribute to improving the lot of women, factors such as the immorality of suppressing women, technological and economic progress of nations, the value of intelligence over physical strength, and the political, literary, and academic drives that have opened the world for women since the 1970s. But women in India have a lot more hurdles to cross and one of these is their own lack of empathy towards other women, often stemming from their attitudes regarding gendered roles and expectations. The relatively slow change in the social attitudes required to create a support system for women is a serious concern. Despite common agreement on the need to support the female workforce, the ground realities are not what they should be. Mentoring from women exercising their agency can provide the much-needed impetus towards establishing a more equitable workplace.

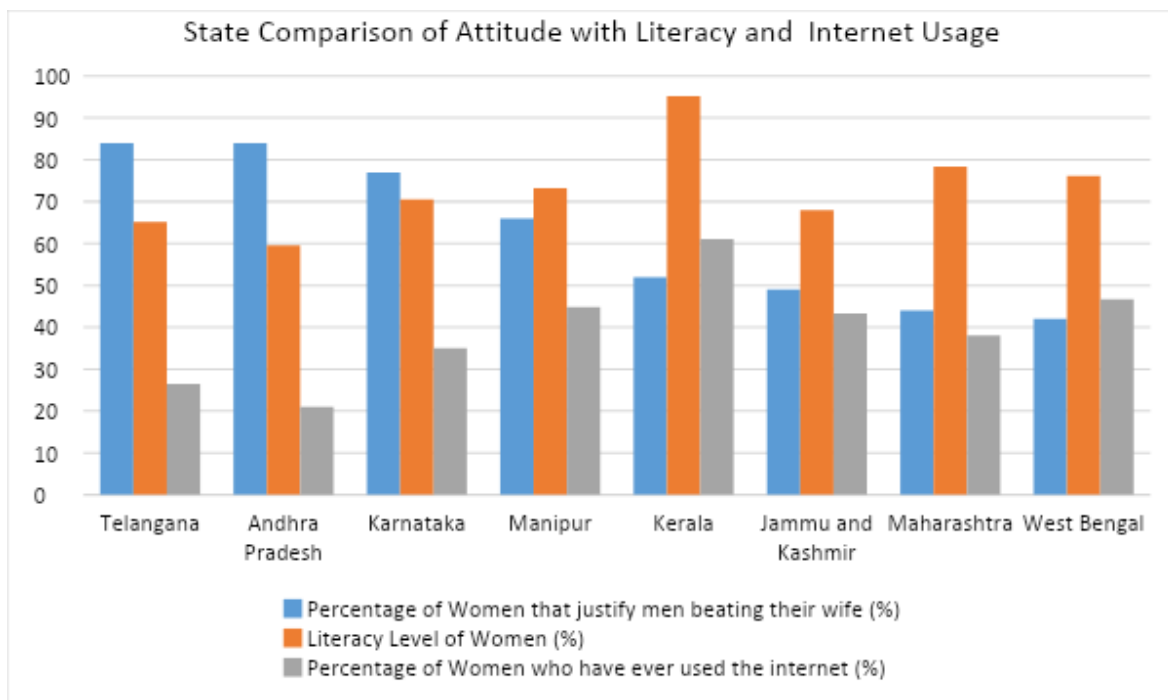
To understand if women’s education level may be a reason for their reluctance to support other women, I have extracted the literacy level of women across the eight states where women endorsed men beating their wife. According to the data from NFHS 2019-21, the average literacy rate among women and men in the age group of 15-49 years is 71.5% and 87.4% respectively.

Internet access fosters connection and exchange among women, yet according to the survey by National Family Health Survey of the 15-49 age group, the number of women who have used the Internet at least once is less than 40 per cent. Combined data on the 8 states under study (Fig. 1) shows that education may not have significant influence on women developing a positive attitude toward other women. Access to the Internet may prove to be useful in creating a narrative of empathy and support among women. Moreover, digital adoption can speed up the time taken in seeking support from other women. The states with poor attitudes toward women are also riddled with the limitation of low Internet usage.

A break in career is a setback, but women do this quite willingly thereby foregoing growth opportunities. A higher percentage of women are in service industries such as schools, health care, childcare, retail outlets, beauty parlours, and textile and leather manufacturing industries. In a survey on whether a man or woman should claim an available job if the number of jobs is scarce, 79 percent of respondents in India felt men should have more rights to the job (Statista, 2021a). Employment rates in urban areas reflected these attitudes, where during the height of the pandemic, between May and August 2021, labour force participation of men rose from 64.3 percent to 64.4 percent while it fell from 7.8 percent to 7 percent for women. According to the International Labour Office (ILO) report, the unemployment rate, too, for

men improved from 11.7 per cent to 8.4 percent while for women it deteriorated from 21.9 percent to 22.6 percent (Statista, 2021b). According to an analysis done by the International Labour Organisation on the impact of COVID-19 on employment, women were most impacted with employment losses of 47.6 per cent (International Labour Organization, 2021). This disproportionate impact on women can be partly attributed to their attitude towards male employment priority. Any recovery measure will have to address the unequal distribution of impact on younger age groups and the female workforce.

Figure 1: Percentage of Women Who Approved Wife-beating; Literacy Rate of Women; Percentage of Women Who Have Used the Internet



Source: Hindustan Times (*Survey Shows 30% Women across 14 States, UTs Justify Men Beating Their Wives*, 2021); (Find Easy, 2021); (Harshita Chari et al, 2020).

Unpaid Work and the Gender Gap

India is ranked 140 out of 156 nations by World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report, and it has slipped 28 places (BS, 2021). In a study to understand why the time taken to close the gender gap was slow, it was found that time spent by men and women in unpaid care was disproportionately wide; across the world, men on average spent only 83 minutes a day while women spent 265 minutes. India had a more dismal ratio: men spent 31 minutes while women spent 297 minutes a day on unpaid work.

Most women and girls are part of unpaid care and since this work is key to building a robust society and a thriving economy, there is a need to attach an economic value to care given by a housewife. Assigning a monetary value to the work done at home by women will help them understand the dignity of their labour and feel they are not dependent on the men in the family. Women should be made capable of pursuing any career option and this should be a choice rather than a compulsion.

Women may do home-related unpaid work of their own free-will or as part of social expectations, but when it becomes oppressive and hinders realisation of their aspirations, the

matter needs attention and policy support. For more than five decades, judges in India have compensated the dependents of women engaged in unpaid work and who died in a road accident. The compensation is based on the age of the deceased (whether she had children or not), the opportunity cost (the remunerative work given up doing household work), educational qualifications of the deceased, and the minimum wages for skilled and unskilled work. The notional income for a deceased housewife in the age group of 34-59 is valued at Rs 9000, and a lower amount for the age group 62-72 as their contribution to household work will be less because their children would have grown up (“How India Calculates the Value of Women’s Housework,” 2021).

The option of paying women a salary for household work would be more meaningful than paying compensation after they die. That line of reasoning opens up a new world of issues to investigate, issues such as who will pay and the deeper cultural debate where women consider household work as part of their noble duty and divine honour or are forced to accept a secondary role in the household with one primary goal—to provide care for a husband, children, and in-laws.

The participation in paid work for men in India stood at 67 percent in 2022, an increase from the previous year's participation rate. A fluctuating trend emerged in the participation rate of this segment of India's workforce since 2016. Meanwhile, the participation in paid work for women in the country dipped from around 36 percent in 2021 to a little over 33 percent in 2022 (Statista, 2021b).

Male bastions for employment were transport (83.7%), manufacturing (76.9%), construction (76.4), and trade (75.6%), while for women it was education (43.9%) and the health sector (39.9%). The pattern of employment indicates that women seek jobs commensurate with their education (“Most Women in Managerial Posts in Northeast, AP & Punjab,” 2021). The highest job loss during the pandemic happened in the professions practiced by women.

According to the report, “Working or Not: What Determines Women’s Labour Force Participation in India?” (IWWAGE, 2021), only 10.3 percent of women participate in the labour force and nearly 90 per cent of women aged above 15 years in the urban cities in India are employed or wish to be employed. The employment terms for working women were unfair with 71 percent in the urban and 58 percent in the rural market having no legal contracts and nearly half of them not entitled to paid leave and other benefits. Women form only 16.1 percent of the workforce in India. It is the most qualified women who do not seek employment. The reasons are 1) that they do not find a job that fits their qualification, in which case they would rather not work, and 2) that the burden of care-giving falls on the woman, and 3) the attitude of the family is that if the man is earning enough then the woman should not look for work outside the home. These factors widen the already gaping chasm in the employment ratio of men and women and among women from urban and rural areas.

Double Bind for Women

Women are forced to contend with gender stereotypes where they must be soft-spoken, meek, humble, and willing to provide care for all at home. These expectations clash with women’s desires for independence and individuality. A working woman faces the double bind which means she must navigate the impasse between expectations and stereotypes.

The common perception among both genders is that women leaders are effective at caregiver behaviours which include the ability to support and reward subordinates, while men take charge and thereby solve problems. This perception has been proved false by research. Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman (2021) found that women were rated better than men on leadership competencies and that during the pandemic women performed better than men. Men

were rated higher in categories like “develops strategic perspective” and “technical or professional expertise.”

According to the report, women are rated better than men on 13 of the 19 competencies which were used to assess effective leadership capabilities that are important to excel in leadership roles (Fig. 2). Even though women scored high on leadership abilities and did especially well during the pandemic, they gave themselves low scores in self-assessment questions. In the age group of 25-year-olds, the confidence level among women is considerably lower compared to men. At 40 they seem to converge, after which the confidence level of men and women improve almost in tandem, and after the age of 60, male confidence level begins to decline (Zenger & Folkman, 2019).

Figure 2: Research – Women are Better Leaders during a Crisis

Capability	Women’s percentile	Men’s Percentile
Takes initiative	55.6	48.3
Resilience	54.7	49.3
Practices Self-Development	54.8	49.6
Drives for results	53.9	48.8
Displays high integrity and honesty	54.0	49.1
Develops others	54.1	49.8
Inspires and motivates others	53.9	49.7
Collaboration and teamwork	52.6	50.2
Connects to the outside world	51.6	50.3
Communicated powerfully and prolifically	51.8	50.7
Solves problems and analyses issues	51.5	50.4
Leadership speed	51.5	50.5
Innovates	51.4	51
<i>Technical and professional expertise</i>	50.1	51.1
<i>Develops strategic perspective</i>	50.1	51.4

Source: Zenger & Folkman, 2021

Employability of Women

Women pay critical attention to job descriptions and therefore turn away from words in the job description that appear to be representing masculinity with words such as “competitive” and “forceful” and are more likely to apply to jobs that represent feminine stereotypes with words such as “supportive” and “understanding.” This gender orientation of jobs because of semantics prevents women from getting into roles and jobs for which they are the perfect fit. Moreover, because women commonly worry about their self-worth and abilities, they may pass up the jobs that come with qualifiers such as “excellent networking skills,” words that amplify a required skill.

Women are likely to respond better to organisations where other women are seen taking important decisions and are also involved in the recruitment process. The image of an organisation where women are treated as equal will attract more women (Ammerman & Groyberg, 2021).

Mentoring

Mentoring benefits both the mentor and the mentee. When a woman in a leadership role is given the responsibility of nurturing and preparing more women to reach her level, such

collaboration will enable a partnership. When a woman in a senior position shares her challenges with her mentee and gives examples on how she handled objections from home and family or how she dealt with stereotypes and abuse, the mentee will be able to gather the courage to withstand adversity and persist till the required changes are achieved within an organisation that is trying to tap into the potential of women.

Continuous posting of videos and pictures where the mentor and mentee have together overcome new challenges and attained new records can serve to not just inspire the pair to persist but also ensure the emergence of new support systems from all sections and departments of the organisation.

Mentoring is critical to ensure that women do not drop out from employment. A strong and stable support system will help women to cope with challenges that are common to most working women, and rapport is the key to sustain the drive. Women working from home during the pandemic had to handle unpaid work at home as well as the professional work, often forcing them to quit their jobs.

Women rate having a mentor as a very important factor for entering senior positions, yet they rarely have a mentor or seek out one. Women already in leadership roles, who reached the top without the guidance from a mentor, realise the value a mentorship could have had on their own growth trajectories. They are willing to lend a hand to other women groping their way up the ladder, but they never receive a request or receive it too rarely. On the other hand, men are more likely to seek and offer mentoring. The reason women cited for not seeking out mentors was the fear of rejection. This needs to be addressed because in a global study in businesswomen and mentoring, nearly seventy-one percent of the women accepted the request for mentoring (Neal et al, 2013).

Many reports mention the Queen Bee syndrome where women who manage to reach the top feel threatened by other women and therefore try to prevent them from replicating their own success. In a study done to understand if the syndrome was true, the researcher asked the high-status men and women to split a reward with their lower status same-sex colleagues. The finding showed that men were more willing to split the reward than high-status women. The reason is often traced to evolutionary demands where the necessity to survive made many women see other women as threats to their men or children or the resources that were scarce (BBC, 2018). But there is evidence that when a woman is appointed in a senior role there is a higher chance for another woman to be appointed to the senior position while men are more likely to promote other men. Also, most male senior managers would rather mentor another male than a female, thus leaving the women to fend for themselves because most senior positions are occupied by men.

Mentoring ensures greater retention and productivity for the organisation. In a study conducted by Gartner Research (2006) to understand the financial impact of mentoring, it was found that both mentor and mentees made improvements in performance and were more valued by the firm. The experiment was done with a test and control group to isolate the effect of mentoring. The mentoring program ensured that 25 percent mentees and 28 percent of the mentors in the test group had a salary grade change compared to five percent in the control group. The program was also useful in identifying the effect of the program on promotion (mentors were promoted six times and mentees five times more) and the retention rate for mentees was 72 percent and 69 percent for mentors (Knowledge at Wharton Staff, 2007).

Conclusion

Success of the mentee is a positive reflection on the abilities of the mentor, and they can both share information and resources for mutual growth. An eager mentee can draw the most out of the mentor. It is important that the choice of those in the mentor-mentee roles is not forced but comes from each finding something valuable in the other. Women do not seek

out mentors and organisations will have to create a system where women in junior roles consider it normal to get help from women in senior roles. A shift in attitude is necessary to help women to receive and give help willingly. Organizations will benefit from the high performance of women if mentoring is offered to women by women in senior positions, either from within the same organisation or from outside. If a concerted effort is made to help women overcome the double bind, they can take on leadership roles with greater frequency.

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