

## Unveiling Women's Leadership: Identity and Meaning of Leadership in India

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**283**

*Unveiling Women's Leadership: Identity and Meaning of Leadership in India*, is a compilation of 15 narratives about women's leadership and self-identity in various Indian contexts such as gram panchayat[1], corporate boardroom, National Law School and law firms. The book envisions to offer a new leadership perspective, different from the Western perspective and is organized in three parts. The first part contains four chapters and is said to explore identity and emergence of women leaders in India; the second part contains three chapters and sheds light on the challenges and opportunities women face as leaders; and the final part includes eight chapters that emphasizes on the possibilities for social change in and through women leadership.

### Part I: self-identity, nature and nurture

As the editor notes, "Part I begins with the foundations: the place of the female self in creating leadership opportunities" (p. xii). In Chapter 1, Hiebert highlights the nature vs nurture argument in leadership and offers a neuro-social point of view to explain scarcity of women leaders and brain-driven steps women can adopt for success. Using neurological evidences, Hiebert, demonstrated that women are capable of achieving the leadership levels to the same extent as men, yet, women are unable to achieve those same levels due to social restrictions, stereotypical expectations and lack of resources. The three brain-driven steps for immediate success include developing cognitive clarity by observing men leaders, using focused imagination to walk through the processes and options and finding a mentor or a reference group for social and emotional support. Although, the chapter started on a promising note, it did not offer any unique perspective. The chapter in essence, mirrored the existing research that has explored the social and structural barriers that women face, in climbing to the top (e.g. Coltrane, 2004; Heilman, 2001; Lyness and Heilman, 2006; Schein, 2001). Moreover, the first step cognitive clarity, for immediate success is problematic, because it assumes that the decisions made by men are necessary for organizational success. Not surprisingly, this static understanding contributes to the reproduction of "think manager think male" phenomena (Schein and Davidson, 1993). Last but not the least, the chapter caters to women leadership using existing Western ideologies and does not touch upon any aspect that is unique to women leadership in India.

In Chapter 2, Chowdhury emphasizes on the basic leadership style of two women elected as leaders of gram panchayat, with no prior leadership experience. Chowdhury makes a case that these women leaders, who emerged from traditionally marginalized groups in a patriarchal setup, used their position to mobilize and empower underrepresented groups. Collective support from marginalized groups, in turn, gave these women the power to cement their leadership positions and to negotiate with governmental mechanism and patriarchal setup. The leadership style narrated here emphasized on participative style.



In Chapter 3, Blake-Beard provides diverse cultural lens to discuss the role of mentoring in the lives of professional Indian women using interview data. The study revealed that professional Indian woman performs a juggling act on a day-to-day basis. She is required to prove her mettle in the work front and fulfill her traditional family duties and responsibilities. In balancing both family and work, the woman needs a mentor in professional as well as in family front. The mentoring relationships, however, have boundaries – mentoring relationships with men outside the family can be seen as problematic and detrimental to a woman’s image. Most Indian professional women, therefore, use some form of a guard around men in the workplace. Woman professionals may navigate their career by seeking instrumental support from male mentors in the workplace but buffer it by having female mentors and family support.

In Chapter 4, Sebastian examines the risk taking and innovation among women entrepreneurs using survey questionnaire. The study results reveal that women entrepreneurs show risk-aversion and engage in ventures that neither require creativity nor innovation. Sebastian, in explaining the finding suggests that these women entrepreneurs are subject to pressures from the social environment and “in the absence of true decision-making ability, self-identity” (p. 45), they engage in ventures that have approval from the society. This chapter also hints to the paradox mentioned earlier in Chapter 3 – women entrepreneurs may desire to engage in non-traditional risk-taking ventures but are held back as engaging in such ventures can portray them in negative light and be detrimental to the image of “good Indian woman.”

### **Part II: the cost of leadership on the self**

Part II explores how women’s experiences can both create and restrict opportunities for women in the leadership position. In Chapter 5, Mukherjee dwells into her personal experience on sexual harassment in the workplace. The chapter rightly picks up the theme from Part I and presents a rich narrative on how the identity of a “good Indian woman” is tarnished when a professional woman decides to break away from social norms to report a harassment. The voice is either silenced or ignored, yet, in facing such injustice Mukherjee found her voice and became an advocate for gender injustice.

In Chapter 6, Hatti and Vidyasagar offers a way where women can ascribe to the “good Indian woman” identity and move into the public space to assume the leadership positions. The authors argue that a safe workplace for women is the first and foremost criteria and measures must be taken at individual, organizational and state level. Having right legal framework to address harassment and raising awareness against culture of shame are important steps in encouraging women in the leadership roles.

Verma in Chapter 7, empirically tests educational qualifications and experiences of male and female directors using North American data and the theoretical framework of status characteristics theory (SCT). Verma concludes that women have to have more evidence of ability to be successful than her male counterpart. The chapter hurriedly than tries to make the case for Indian women in the boardroom and suggests that Indian women are particularly disadvantaged because of the juggling act between work and family, lack of networking opportunities and visibility and limited talent pool. Verma used 16 pages to delve into Western perspective, yet, when she briefly made the case for Indian women, she did not even discuss the impact of SCT in Indian context rather she emphasized on the structural barriers. This chapter seems to be an outlier and does not cater to women leadership in Indian context.

### **Part III: interplay between structure and agency**

As the editor notes, this part takes a deeper look “at the interplay between social structures and women’s agency” (p. xiii). Bhatt, in Chapter 8, begins with a passionate plea that, for Indian women to come forward, they need to exercise feminine way of leadership where the focus should be “community rather than an individual” and “inclusion instead

of dominance” (p. 101). Bhatt’s appeal for leadership style may work in Indian context as evidenced by Chowdhury in Chapter 2, where the two elected leaders of gram panchayat were successful by participative leadership style.

Baquer and Ramesh, in Chapter 9, continue the theme of participatory leadership style. The authors argue that Indian women are deeply rooted in social culture and traditions, and any meaningful interventions must take into account the social factors such as family unit and community. Woman can become an active agent and assume leadership role when she has access to work that does not separate her from her family or community rather gives her a voice and support in the society she lives. Membership and work opportunities through organizations such as SEWA economically empowers women and collectively works in addressing work and non-work related issues.

In Chapter 10, Elizabeth elaborates on the role of networking and politicking in upward mobility in male-dominated field of legal education. Drawing from her own experience, Elizabeth, emphasized on the downside of shying away from networking opportunities and its impact on career success. The chapter lends support to the research on gender, networking and career success (Ibarra, 1993, 1997).

In Chapter 11, Srinivasan highlights the role of mobile applications in empowering rural women, particularly women entrepreneurs. Srinivasan posits that rural women in India are constrained due to traditions and have little access to the outside world. The enabling mobile environment have therefore made it possible for these women to remain within the boundaries of their home yet to reach previously unreachable locations and empower them in a new and unique way.

In Chapter 12, Chatwani argues that the exiting leadership models do not capture the leadership style of Indian women. For many Indian women, traditional gendered roles embedded in care and nurturance are non-negotiable and therefore a leadership model that incorporates elements such as assertiveness, decisiveness, along with care and nurturance, and participative leadership style is better suited for Indian context.

In Chapter 13, Agarwal uses ethnography to narrate the entry and success of a woman panchayat leader in Bihar. In Indian context, the emergence of leadership is rooted in personal and social causes. For example, in the present case, Shobha Devi’s, the panchayat leader, motivation to enter politics was due to her personal loss. Once into politics, she knew she cannot achieve much alone and thus mobilized women to engage in small-scale ventures. In order to be seen as a leader to all, she used participative leadership style. The leadership style followed by Shoba Devi mirrors the style earlier presented in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 14, Narasappa, using personal experience, argues that if women have the right mindset and approach, they can achieve equal status and leadership positions. Narasappa presents the case for her law firm, where most of the top management consist of women leaders. She highlights that the leadership style is qualitatively different – more empathy and care instead of aggressiveness. The subtle message in the narrative is, women do not need to let go of her feminine side to become a leader or hold a position of power rather be herself and give her best shot to what she is doing and she will be successful. A characteristic that fits well with the identity of “good Indian women.”

In Chapter 15, Thomas explores the catalytic role played by organizations that worked in the area of traditional family laws. Both the organizations are led by women lawyers, who were victims of unjust systems, and now became activists. Thomas acknowledges, these organizations can falter in the absence of future generation of women leaders who may or may not be activists and thus paying a reasonable salary can attract women lawyers.

### Final comments

The distinct concepts that emerge from these 15 chapters can be grouped under three themes: first, women leadership in India is rooted in community rather than in individual

and women leaders' influence change through inclusion rather than dominance emphasizing participative style. Second, the emergence of leadership is reactionary and embedded in personal experience. The women leaders, victim of unjust systems or tragedies, stood up against the patriarchal mindset and used agency to act in cases such as sexual harassment, inheritance and family laws, or developmental works. Third, woman's identity is shaped by family and societal norms (Haq, 2013) and thus there is a normative pressure to be viewed as "good Indian woman." This theme can be problematic to leadership because in their desire to be viewed as "good Indian women," whether as professionals, panchayat leaders or entrepreneurs, women make choices that can place them in subordinate position to male members and reinforce patriarchy.

In summary, *Unveiling Women's Leadership: Identity and Meaning of Leadership* provides academics and policy makers some understanding on how Indian women, located within various social situations and contexts, evolve as leaders. It contributes to the theory of global leadership and to its interplay with gender in non-western context (Khilji and Rowley, 2013; Steers *et al.*, 2012). Scholars and policy makers may find this a helpful resource for linking leadership to other domains including gender roles, identities, and social and patriarchal norms.

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#### Note

1. Gram panchayats are local self-government organizations in India at the village level and are headed by elected heads called sarpanch.

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