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IDENTIFYING THE FACTORS THAT ENABLE / HINDER WOMEN LEADERS IN ORGANISATIONS IN INDIA

PAYAL JAIN[#]

Abstract

This study explores the individual and organisational factors that enable or hinder the progression of women organisational leaders in India. Despite global recognition of the benefits of gender diversity in leadership, Indian women continue to face significant challenges in their ascent to leadership positions. Through a narrative analysis of interviews with 15 women leaders and 3 male leaders across various industries, the study identifies key enabling factors such as parental and spousal support, self-belief, and supportive organisational environments. Conversely, hindering factors include gendered biases, discriminatory organisational cultures, and societal expectations that disproportionately burden women with domestic responsibilities. The findings highlight the importance of both individual resilience and supportive structures in facilitating women's leadership journeys. The study concludes with recommendations for policymakers and organizations to foster an environment that supports the growth of women leaders, emphasising the role of family, organisational culture, and societal change in this process.

Keywords: Leadership, India@2030, Women Leaders, Qualitative Methods, Narrative Analysis

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I. Introduction

There is a growing recognition globally that achieving gender balance is beneficial for businesses (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015). The World Bank Gender Strategy 2024-2030 includes the strategic objective of engaging women as leaders to spur their participation and emphasises that women's leadership and decision-making are crucial to ensuring sustainability, resilience, and inclusivity in all spheres, whether households, businesses, or society.

In India, female labour force participation is lower than the global average (Ministry of Labour and Employment, April 2023). Women comprised 24.8% of the total workforce in 1990, and in 2022 this proportion stood at 23.5%. The peak was in the year 2005 at 26.8% (World Bank, 2023). On a scale of 1-7, with 7 being the best, India scores 3.74 in the "advancement of women to leadership roles" indicator in the Gender Gap Index Report 2023 (World Economic Forum, 2023). In the Indian political empowerment arena, women legislators make up a mere 15 per cent of the total strength, lagging behind the other BRICS nations, surpassing only Iran at 6 per cent (World Economic Forum, 2023). The challenge is to ensure parity in wages, reduce discrimination, and empower women to balance the "competing burdens of work and family responsibilities" (Verick & Chaudhary, 2014), so that they stay the course and progress to leadership roles.

Steps are being taken towards improving women's participation, in all spheres. The Government of India has included women's participation as a key component in realizing the vision of India@2030 (Press Information Bureau, 2019). The Women's Reservation Bill, 2023 is one step forward, ensuring that 33 per cent of seats in the Parliament be assigned for only female candidates. Section 149 (1) of the Indian Companies Act, 2013, requires that every listed or public company with a paid-up share capital of at least Rs. 100 crore or a turnover of over Rs. 300 crores have at least one woman director on the board. Cognizant of the proven benefits of gender diversity, businesses launched diversity and inclusion programmes as far back as 2015 (OECD, 2020), and are consistently pushing for increased recruitment and promotion of women ensuring as-near-to-equal representation as possible on all levels of management, bringing the representation of

women in boardroom up to 18 per cent from a mere 6 per cent in 2013 (Ernst & Young India, 2022).

There is greater awareness about women's leadership and empowerment being crucial for enhancing economic productivity, and for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Having more women in leadership has a positive effect on environmental, social, and governance standards, leading to improved business performance and inclusive economic growth (Salazar & Moline, 2023). However, this issue has gained more attention from researchers in recent years, especially in light of India's economy growing exponentially on the way to a global third position by 2030. This paper employs narrative analysis and contributes to existing literature in that it identifies individual and organisational factors that may be instrumental in facilitating and/or hindering women's progression to leadership roles. The perspective of a few male leaders has also been included, for a more balanced look at the issue.

The objectives of the study are to examine the advancement of women in India to leadership positions in organisations and to:

- i) identify the individual enabling factors
- ii) identify the organisational enabling factors
- iii) identify the individual hindering factors
- iv) identify the organisational hindering factors

The study finds that women's confidence and belief in themselves; a supportive and encouraging family; cooperation of superiors and mentors; and flexible organisational culture are the biggest enablers. The systemic gender biases exacerbated by societal conditioning, and the absence of women role models at the senior management levels, are the hindering factors.

The study is organised as follows: Section 2 puts forth the theoretical framework and the literature review on enabling and limiting factors in the leadership journeys of women. Details about the data and methodology employed are provided in Section 3. Section 4 discusses the findings. Section 5 concludes with a summary, implications, and recommendations for future research.

II. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

There is a vast literature on leadership in business organisations. Research suggests that the key element in an individual achieving a goal is the inner strength or belief that they can succeed, and their experiences in the formative years develop their ‘leader’ or ‘achiever’ identity. The Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977) is the foundation of this approach. Contemporary research applying this theory presents confirmatory evidence. Therefore, in formulating the theoretical framework for the present research, the academic literature relating to the role of identity on leadership has been included. The supportive relationships that the women leaders build in their immediate familial, and the extant organisational set-up, are identified as the other important factors for women’s success in achieving leadership positions. The role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and work by many other researchers inform this discussion. Therefore, the academic literature on (a) the role of family responsibilities and support and (b) the role of organisational environment on women business leaders were included in the theoretical framework for this research.

The following three subsections present a summary of the literature reviewed in the above-mentioned areas of the theoretical framework for the present study. These were instrumental in forming the research design and framing of questions to be asked during the interviews.

Role of Identity in Leadership

Leadership demands a clear awareness of one’s self, and the beliefs about one’s capabilities and motivations that drive oneself towards effort and achievement (White, 1982). Developmental psychologists and social learning theorists emphasise the crucial role of early childhood experiences in shaping beliefs and behaviours, with parents or caregivers significantly influencing this process. According to Bandura (1977), individuals learn behaviours and norms from their environment, including their family. Positive role modelling and a supportive environment foster leadership qualities. Kegan (1994) underscores the importance of a supportive ‘holding environment’ in children’s development. A woman leader’s identity is shaped during childhood and adolescence through exposure to leadership behaviours (Le Ber, et al., 2017), and early experiences

with family, peers, and mentors are vital in building confidence and leadership skills in girls and young women (Avolio, Rotundo, and Walumbwa, 2009; Dixon et al., 2023).

Internalising the belief that one is capable of and has the ‘agency’ to mould their environment, set objectives and achieve them despite odds is referred to as a ‘resilient sense of efficacy’ by Bandura (1997). The view that one possesses self-efficacy is created through direct experience and feedback from significant others (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2002). The awareness of self that one develops in the process of socialising within their community, especially their parents (Avolio B. J., 2005), and “thinking of oneself as a leader” and the resultant contextual actions one takes are crucial (Day & Harrison, 2007, Section 5, p. 366). Various other authors (Hall, 2004; Lord & Hall, 2005; DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010), reiterate that the self-concept defines the activities of leaders and how they want others to see them. This has been substantiated in contemporary research as well. For instance, Peus, Braun and Knipfer (2015) conducted interviews with 76 women leaders across the U.S. and 3 Asian countries and uncovered achievement orientation, learning orientation, risk-taking, and role models as significant individual and interpersonal success factors in the women leaders’ professional journeys. Tiwari and Raman (2022) report social and self-awareness, are among the primary success attributes for five female leaders and 19 male leaders in the IT organisations in Mumbai, India.

Conversely, a lack of confidence or low confidence can act as a barrier in the journey toward leadership for women. For instance, Lenney (1977), Lenney, Gold & Browning (1983), Daubman, Heatherington, & Ahn (1992), and Heatherington, et al. (1993), document that women have an “internalized lack of confidence” and that women display less confidence, or talk of their achievements more ‘modestly’ because they are sensitive to harsh judgments arising from immodest self-presentations and that immodesty is deemed ‘unfeminine’. In contemporary literature, Halim and Razak (2014) identify a lack of confidence and underdeveloped skills in communicating effectively as hindrances for five Malaysian women entrepreneurs. (Kulkarni & Mishra, 2022) identify a lack of assertiveness and gender differences in leadership style as key barriers. Another factor that enables women is support from the family in managing their career growth along with domestic responsibilities.

Role of Family Responsibilities and Support

The ILO Company Survey 2015, conducted among around 1,300 private sector companies in 39 developing countries, highlights that the role conflict that women experience in the social and economic sphere ranks among the foremost barriers in their ascent to leadership. With increased participation in the paid labor force, the ‘double burden’ of managing home as well as work, or ‘unpaid domestic labor’ (Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi, 2009) also increases for women. Bearing children is perhaps the greatest challenge in a woman’s career and leadership journey. Women pay the social costs for career success disproportionately more than men (Tower & Alkadry, 2008). A study on women tenure-track professors in STEM highlights the odds that women face in deciding whether to start a family or eschew it altogether if they wish to pursue a successful career like their male counterparts (Williams, Barnett, & Sumner, 2013; Weiss, et al, 2023; Dyrbye et al., 2012; Gadjradj et al., 2020) confirm that more women than men forgo marriage and/or motherhood because of the ‘unmanageable’ work-family conflict.

The role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) addresses the compatibility of multiple roles (e.g., mother, wife, leader) and how support from family can reduce role conflict. Greenhaus & Powell (2006) suggest that resources gained from one role (e.g., supportive spouse) can improve performance in another role (e.g., leadership at work). Applying the life span perspective to 101 women college leaders surveyed in 1985, Offermann et al. (2020) find that family support positively influenced careers. They also note that taking maternity leaves affected women’s careers negatively, in that they were “less likely to reach senior leadership positions and paid a significant economic penalty in salary” (p. 1). Top-ranked Filipina women business leaders employed in male-dominated industries in the Philippines cite supportive husbands as an enabling factor and home and motherhood duties, and unsupportive husbands as challenging cultural elements in their career progression (Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). Rastogi, Baral, and Banu (2022) report family support and entrepreneurial drive as important enablers, and traditional gender role expectations as hindrances in the journey of women entrepreneurs from Tamil Nadu.

However, a “... change that is perhaps unnoticeable from year to year but that in the end is persistent enough to lead to the slow dissolution of previously existing structures” is

occurring (Sullivan, 2004, pp. 209-210). Falling in the domain of the ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987; West & Fenstermaker, 1995), several studies have proven that women’s share of unpaid domestic work is reducing and men’s share is increasing. For instance, Sullivan (2006) found that men's and women’s domestic work hours converged as men’s hours increased and women’s decreased. According to Michaelides, et al. (2023), shared parenting with husbands can ensure ‘career sustainability’ for women managers, can reduce work-family imbalance, and help manage the role conflict faced by women (Begum, Arshi, Arman, Butt, & Latheef, 2024). The role of fathers is now evolving within contemporary Indian society, especially in urban settings, and many studies explore this theme in various contexts (Singh, 2003; Sooryamoorthy, 2012; Rathi, Kansal, & Worsley, 2024). Where mothers did proportionately more of the ‘dirty work’ of housework and childcare earlier (Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi, 2009), fathers are increasingly assuming more of the caregiving roles (Motwani, 2023; Sullivan, 2021; Hunter, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2017).

Yet another factor that can enable or deter women in their ascent to leadership is the support that they receive from the organisations they work at, and the culture and environment prevalent in those workplaces.

Role of Organisational Environment

The transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, Avolio, & Atwater, 1996) emphasises that transformational leaders inspire and support their followers and that the presence of such leaders in organisations can create a nurturing environment for women leaders. As per the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), when a positive exchange relationship exists between leaders and subordinates, they share high-quality relationships, career development, and leadership opportunities where women can prosper. Bhattacharya, Mohapatra, and Bhattacharya (2018) find that informal support from the organisation is a major enabler towards women advancing to leadership positions in the information technology and information technology-enabled services (IT and ITES) sector in India. A study interviewing 26 women managers and their supervisors in Mumbai, India, working in the services, manufacturing, and education sectors,

uncovers early life and work experiences and relationships with immediate supervisors as determinants of success (Datta & Agarwal, 2017).

Negative or stereotypical environment in organisations, on the other hand, can impede leadership growth. Kanter (1977) suggested that women in male-dominated environments often face heightened visibility and performance pressure, which can lead to exclusion from informal networks and decision-making processes. Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) coined the term 'glass ceiling' to describe the invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching top leadership positions. Gendered environments and discriminatory practices reinforce these barriers. A more flexible, 'labyrinthine' path that women navigate in their leadership evolution was proposed by Eagly and Carli (2007), which identifies gender discrimination, effort to maintain work-family balance, and lack of confidence in oneself as primary challenges on the way upward. Masculine cultures underpinned by patriarchal values result in organisational cultures that do not recognise the unique contributions that women leaders can make in the workplace (Barkhuizen, Masakane, & van der Sluis, 2022). Other literature confirms these findings. Howe-Walsh and Turnbull (2014) highlight the male-dominated culture and gendered environment as the key hurdle in the progress of female academics in the United Kingdom, and for women in higher education institutions in the United States of America; Hannum, et al. (2015) note discouragement and sabotage, and different expectations for men and women as barriers. Chinese women academics cite a lack of funding, gendered career aspirations, and the shortage of role models as the primary barriers to progressing in academia (Bao & Tian, 2022). Korreck (2019) finds the unconscious gender bias, masculine corporate culture, and predominant social norms, as the key impediments to greater participation of female entrepreneurs in India. Kulkarni, Khatwani and Mishra (2023) identify organisational policies and organisational bias as the primary barriers to women becoming leaders in organisations in India.

In sum, globally, research has outlined a comprehensive list of supporting and challenging factors for women leaders. Despite the evolving social norms, and progressive organisational policies being introduced (OECD, 2020), there is a need to delve into the reasons why women leaders in India are less in number than men. The

present study attempts to uncover the enabling and hindering factors at the personal and organisational levels, for the respondents in the sample across a variety of industries and domains, and contributes to the existing literature in the following aspects. First, this paper examines enabling and hindering factors, both, at an individual as well as organisational level. Second, the study covers both public and private sector organisations across different industries, including, education, law, technology, business, government service, etc. at various locations across India. Finally, a few male leaders were also interviewed, to get a better perspective on the experiences across gender.

III. Data and Methodology

The study employs an interview-based approach to highlight the factors behind the success of women in the sample. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 women leaders, to gain insight into their personal and professional experiences. The participants were purposively identified using a snowball sampling technique (Goodman, 1961). Telephonic interviews were conducted, between November 2023 to January 2024.

At the beginning of each interview, details related to the demographics and family background of each respondent were gathered to be able to descriptively summarise the sample. Following the current literature on identity, family support, and organisational factors outlined in the previous section, the questions related to the respondents' experiences in their personal lives and professional careers could be identified as enabling or hindering. Participants shared their defining moments through their careers. Their thoughts on what should be done to ensure that more women reach and function effectively at the senior levels was the culminating question. Overall, the interviews lasted 35-60 minutes.

The author's intent was to understand the individuals' first-person experiences to extract valuable insights about the phenomenon of women's journey towards leadership using narrative analysis (Clandinin, 2007). Since the interviews were open-ended and in-depth, even a seemingly small number of 15 interviews provided sufficient data to begin the analysis of factors. Though the narratives provided sufficient content for identifying the

important factors, caution must be exercised to make any generalisations. To gain deeper insight into these factors, 3 male business leaders were included and interviewed.

The participants ranged in age from 26 to 62 and excelled in different roles and industries. In the sample, 4 women are in the 25-40 age bracket, 8 women are in the 40-60 age group, and 3 women are above 60 years old. Five of them are part of the fintech industry, 3 are in consulting, 2 in IT, and 1 each in education, law, government, pharmaceuticals, and apparel. The majority of them are located in North India, more specifically, in the national capital region (NCR) which includes New Delhi and Gurgaon. Two women each, work in Bengaluru, Kolkata, and Mumbai. One leader is presently working in Luxembourg, with prior experience in the NCR. Thirteen of them are married, with kids. Twelve respondents in the sample are post-graduates, 2 are graduates, and 1 holds a doctoral degree. Their profiles, culled from the objective questions in the interview, are presented in Table 1(a) and Table 1(b).

It may be noted that the respondents are referred to by pseudonyms and their organisations are not mentioned by name, to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality. Drawing upon the author's conversations with the respondents, a rich and interesting account of their triumphs and trials was obtained and is presented in the next section.

IV. Findings

The analysis resulted in various underlying factors that enable women's progression toward leadership positions in their chosen careers. In the personal sphere, these factors are parental support and access to education; their self-belief and confidence; and the sharing of domestic responsibilities by husbands. In the organisational sphere, the culture of the organisation and support of superiors are the enablers. Gender discrimination, whether in their personal connections or in the organisational set-up, impeded their progress.

Table 1(a): Descriptive details of women leaders surveyed

S.No.	Pseudonym	Position	Industry	Age	Place of Birth	Place of Work	Education	Years of Experience
1	AD	Director Principal	Education	62	Lucknow	Gurgaon	Post-Graduation	39
2	ML	Retired (as Additional Secretary and Financial Advisor)	Government of India	62	New Delhi	New Delhi	PhD	36
3	KA	Chief People Officer	Information Technology	61	Mumbai	Bengaluru	Post-Graduation	38
4	SP	Vice President – Executive Search	Business Consulting	50	Uttarakhand	Gurgaon	Post-Graduation	22
5	SS	Founder & CEO	Financial Technology	50	Mumbai	Mumbai	Post-Graduation	26
6	SJ	CEO and Co-Founder	Financial Technology	49	Chandigarh	Bengaluru	Post-Graduation	24
7	RB	Director – Human Resources	Technology Consulting	46	Kolkata	Kolkata	Post-Graduation	24
8	AB	Co-Founder and Head - People Practices	Financial Technology	42	New Delhi	Gurgaon	Post-Graduation	14
9	PK	Founder	Law	42	New Delhi	New Delhi	Graduation	18
10	SG	Deputy General Manager	Business Consulting	42	New Delhi	Gurgaon	Graduation	20
11	PR	CEO and Co-Founder	Financial Technology	41	Mumbai	Mumbai	Post-Graduation	21
12	NT	Manager – Talent Acquisition	Pharmaceuticals and Telecom	39	New Delhi	New Delhi	Post-Graduation	16
13	ST	Co-Founder	Apparel	38	Kanpur	Gurgaon	Post-Graduation	6
14	MN	Manager – Application Development	Information Technology	37	Ambala	Luxembourg, European Union	Post-Graduation	17
15	SW	Chief Business Officer and Co-Founder	Financial Technology	26	Kolkata	Kolkata	Post-Graduation	5

Source: Author's Research

Table 1(b): Descriptive details of women leaders surveyed

S.No.	Pseudonym	Parental Background	Siblings	Marital Status	Number of Children, if any	Childcare Arrangement	Annual Family Income (in INR)
1	AB	Father – Doctor Mother – Homemaker	Only child	Married	Two	Hired help + Mother-in-Law	50-100 Lakhs
2	AD	Father – Army Mother – Homemaker	Two	Married	Two	Hired help + Mother-in-Law	>100 Lakhs
3	KA	Father – Government Service Mother - Teacher	Two	Married	Two	Hired help, and overtime	>100 Lakhs
4	ML	Father – Engineer Mother - Homemaker	Two	Married	Two	Hired help, Mother-in-Law, Husband’s aunts	>100 Lakhs
5	MN	Both parents in service	One	Married	One	Mother-in-Law	25-50 Lakhs
6	NT	Father – Entrepreneur Mother – Service	One	Married	Two	Mother, and took sabbatical	>100 Lakhs
7	PK	Both parents in service	Two	Married	One	Hired help, and Mother-in-Law	>100 Lakhs
8	PR	Father – Entrepreneur Mother – Homemaker	One	Married	Two	Parents	>100 Lakhs
9	RB	Father – Service Mother - Homemaker	Two	Married	None	-	50-100 Lakhs
10	SG	Both parents in service	One	Married	One	Parents	<25 Lakhs
11	SJ	Father – Doctor, Entrepreneur Mother – Homemaker, Entrepreneur	Two	Married	Two	Hired help, and Mother-in-Law	>100 Lakhs
12	SP	Father – Entrepreneur Mother – Homemaker	Two	Divorced	Two	Hired help, and Mother-in-Law	50-100 Lakhs
13	SS	Father – Entrepreneur Mother – Homemaker	Only child	Married	One	Took a break, and also worked from home	>100 Lakhs

14	ST	Father – Engineer Mother – Professor	One	Married	One	Took a break	50-100 Lakhs
15	SW	Father – Railways Mother – Homemaker	Only child	Unmarried	None	-	25-50 Lakhs

Source: Author’s Research

Individual Enabling Factors

Parental Support

Parental support emerges as the biggest enabling factor in the success of almost all the respondents, along with access to education. With the encouragement of her parents, one of the women became the first person in her family to be a post-graduate (PR).

Prior education background of the family members helped in many cases:

My mom had completed here M.A. in English on her own and was very intelligent...she kept track of my studies throughout and her constant guidance helped me. (MN)

My grandfather was a vice-chancellor, and my grandmother was a lecturer. Career orientation was embedded in me. In fact, in college, it was a culture shock for me when I encountered other women in my batch who said they just wanted to get married and not work. (AB)

Unstinted backing by parents, emotional and/or financial, spurred the women on their path to success:

My father always encouraged me to become independent. When I was in class VIII or IX, he told me to go to the bank on my own. I remember, when I was in Class XII, my parents had to go to the US for two months to accompany my brother to get settled there, and they asked me to manage the factory in their absence. I would go alone to the retail stores for collections. All the stores were run by men... I learnt to differentiate between good and bad looks. Even at the factory, it was an all-male staff and I was on my own. (SJ)

My parents were very progressive and there was constant encouragement to try out things, without fear of failure. They would say ‘Just go ahead and try it, if you don't succeed, you will have learnt something’. The culture at home was such that I was not brought up to play the traditional role of a woman. (SS)

Doing an MBA was beyond our means, but my father ensured it got done. (KA)

Self-Belief and Confidence

The women leaders narrated instances from their lives which highlighted their grit and determination to succeed. PR shared:

During my college days, my father suffered losses in business and there was considerable financial stress on the family as we had to repay a sizeable debt. Being the elder daughter, I took it upon myself, to speed up my studies, worked hard, and cleared CA in my first attempt! I always believed in myself and did not think that I could not do something, e.g. I took up business development at the bank where I was working, which was a male-dominated area.

MN had always wanted to excel at whatever she did:

I was always a motivated child and always wanted to be in the top position. I was academically bright-topped in my university twice (gold medallist) and was a college topper for 7 semesters out of 8. I believe in giving my best to whatever I do, that whatever one does, one should do it well, otherwise, it is not worth it.

Most of the women have daughters, and SS shared that there is an inherent will to be a role model to her daughter:

I am driven, and I have priorities. Also, I want to set a good example for my daughter. I'm an entrepreneur, and it is not that I need the money. There are good days and there are bad days. Every entrepreneur faces this. I can easily quit. But then I think that if I give up right now, what kind of an example am I setting for my daughter? I want to convey through my actions to my daughter to never give up and to never back down from risk.

The women leaders' strong 'perceived self-efficacy' (Bandura & Adams, 1977) was a significant driver in their growth and evolution on the road to leadership.

Sharing of Domestic Responsibilities

This emerges as a common enabling factor in the respondents' stories that their husbands were equal partners in their journeys, and in many cases shared equal parenting responsibilities.

I hired live-in staff to help with child care. I used to travel quite a lot for work, so my husband also supported me by making a conscious decision to not take up roles that might mean that he would have to travel. (SJ)

I got married to someone who was in a similar field and industry and had the same background and values. He was an extremely active parent. Once,

I had to travel for work, leaving our 1.5 years old daughter with my husband and he encouraged me saying that ‘This has to be done, so go and do it’. (SS)

However late I worked, whatever decisions I made, my husband never raised an eyebrow and takes a lot of pride in my accomplishments. (KA)

My mother was the primary caregiver to my kids. My husband was very supportive and when I was thinking of setting up my business, he pushed me to excel by saying that I am too good to just work at a job all my life and nudged me to go for it! (PR)

The narratives attest to the shift in attitudes related to ‘work-family gender equality, particularly among younger cohorts (Sullivan, 2019, p. 2) and how men are assuming a greater role in child-rearing and unpaid domestic labor (Sullivan, 2021; Motwani, 2023). The supportive family structures mitigate work-family conflict, and this support is crucial for women leaders as they navigate the winding maze of career growth (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Organisational Enabling Factors

Supportive Superiors

The positive experiences with superiors and co-workers emerged as the pivotal element in the narrative of whether the organisation enabled women to rise to leadership positions or not. RB’s seniors trusted her and gave her the freedom to execute a task without micro-managing her. This was the case with SG as well who cited the ‘freedom to speak her mind’ as a huge enabler. ML’s boss recognized her strong work ethic and ‘accommodated’ and supported her by providing her with a car to commute to and from her home to care for her ailing mother-in-law. NT’s boss mentored her when she was on the verge of quitting her first job due to being homesick. SS received ‘phenomenal’ support from her mentors.

Being given opportunities to prove oneself acts as an enabler. As MN shares:

In the organisations I have worked, I was put in situations where I got the chance to prove myself. For example, I joined this firm as Associate Manager and I got promoted to Manager level in one year because I was given the opportunity to handle client visits alone. Once when the client came to our office for a discussion on a five-yearly contract renewal, I was the only woman sitting at the roundtable with the client, with 25 senior male

leaders in that discussion, and I was in charge of convincing the client from a technical standpoint that the contract should be renewed.

When AB was grappling with a personal crisis, her experience with her superior helped her deal with the double burden:

...my mother was suffering from cancer and I had begun slipping at work, my boss called me to talk. She looked beyond the surface and probed, and wanted to genuinely understand what could be done to help me. And she created a 3-days-a-week work-from-home arrangement for me, at a time when that option was not even there (prior to COVID-19)!

This is a classic example of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) where the superior displayed individualised consideration towards their ‘follower’, and an integration between task- and relationship-orientation (Bass, Avolio, & Atwater, 1996).

Financial incentives also motivate greatly, as PK shared:

My superiors showed faith in me and gave me opportunities quite early on despite lack of experience. I was made in-charge of projects which were front-facing, and I had to interact with government officials. I received appreciation from my bosses and co-workers, along with financial incentives.

The culture in the organisation, especially in the case of multinational companies (MNCs), was cited by most of the respondents as a supporting factor in their progress. For instance, SS shared that ‘we would wake up every morning and wanted to get to work’, and that ‘everybody was there for each other’.

The above narratives support the post-modern understanding of ‘organisations as social constructs’, and that leadership, which is jointly owned by the group, comprises of interactions between the members of that group, elevating followers to the role of collaborators (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006). This also aligns with the ‘distributed leadership’ model that has evolved from the studies of various scholars (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

Individual Hindering Factors

The women in the sample shared stories of negative or stereotypical attitudes of family members or society as challenges. AD’s father-in-law did not want her to work. SW’s parents wanted her to marry instead of pursuing her career but she did not yield to the

belief that the ultimate goal for women is to get married and declined. MN contended with comparisons in the marital home:

My sister-in-law was considered better than I am because she reached a managerial position early on in her career. I wanted to prove to everyone that I was equally good, so I focused on my technical strengths. I grew slowly but competently.

Events in the women's personal lives set a few of them back by several years in their careers. KA had to quit her job and move to another city to care for her ailing father-in-law, and this caused her to struggle to find a job in her chosen field. AB was an only child and took several breaks to care for her cancer-stricken mother, and later, her bedridden father, in addition to the maternity breaks for her two daughters. In conformance with the conservation of resources theory proposed by Hobfoll (1989), the women leaders employed resources that they possessed and sought to maintain their mastery and self-esteem to avoid the loss of their professional progress. The narratives illustrate how social expectations about gender roles influence behavior and can restrict women's leadership opportunities (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 1999). The negative stereotypical attitudes can create psychological barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles, and can adversely affect performance and aspirations (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

PR shared that amidst juggling the various responsibilities of raising money for the startup, caring for aging parents, and raising young kids, she experienced guilt ("the kid wants the mother") whenever she compromised on the family for her career. Walters, et al. (2021) address the social and cultural origins of guilt on account of the 'many competing roles' that working women with children play. Women bear the social costs (Tower & Alkadry, 2008), and pay a penalty (Offermann et al., 2020) on account of motherhood.

Organisational Hindering Factors

Experience of working in Indian companies, as opposed to MNCs, emerged as a discouraging factor due to the 'discriminatory' policies in these organisations. Some of the women had demotivating experiences with co-workers. SJ's co-workers would often tell her that she doesn't need to work when her husband is supporting her financially. In SG's case, a male senior manager, on her third day in the company, commented about her not wearing *sindoor* and toe-rings to indicate that she is a married woman. AB was

‘unfairly targeted’ when she went on a 3-month maternity leave and therefore she decided to quit her job and become an entrepreneur. In addition to maternity bias, pay parity in certain sectors is also an issue, as highlighted by one of them:

... there is a lack of parity in pay, and I am unwilling to negotiate about money because it feels petty to me. There is also a maternity bias i.e., women employees have to forego promotions and increments, and are even fired post-maternity leave. (PK)

The culture of the organisation leaning towards masculinity and gender biases seem to be other factors.

... I had joined an Indian company as the Lead on a project, but after a few years at the same firm, I was at the same level as I was when I had joined. Though my efforts were recognised, I feel that the manager in the company favoured the male employees. In a team of 15-20 people, only three or four women were there and whenever appraisals came up every year, all the male employees would get their appraisals as usual, and in our case, he would say that it was not in his hands. The clients would send appreciation notes for the women employees but no promotions happened for them. (MN)

The gendered environment and discrimination faced by many women in the sample are a disheartening trend, in line with the findings of Korreck (2019). The organisational culture that develops from sustained rigid organisational norms and structures might disadvantage women, who may face greater scrutiny and expectations to conform (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), and this can perpetuate gender inequalities (Kanter, 1977).

Most of the women in the sample, either explicitly, or implicitly, attributed the presence of female role models as a success factor, and the absence of one as a deterrent. As observed by Gulhati (1990); Peus, Braun, & Knipfer (2015); and Wilson & Clerkin (2017), women feel inspired, encouraged and supported by the presence of senior women leaders in the organisation who act as scaffolding for them in the form of role models, mentors, and sponsors. It may therefore be noted that “If women fail to take leadership positions, they also fail to provide role models for junior women to follow” (Latu et al., 2013, pg. 448). Greater presence of powerful female role models also leads to multiplier benefits within their communities, which was reiterated by many respondents in the sample as well. Two respondents named Ms. Chanda Kochchar, Ms. Madhabi Puri Buch, and Ms. Naina Lal Kidwai, among other women leaders of the era, as role models for them.

To ensure diversity in the perspectives, the author wanted to explore men’s experiences, as well, in the ascent to leadership, and accordingly interviewed 3 male leaders¹ in separate companies. A more nuanced examination of gender dynamics within the leadership sphere was, therefore, made possible. The basic details of the male respondents are summarized in Tables 2(a) and 2(b).

Enabling Factors

In conformance with the findings for the women leaders, parental support and the leader’s self-belief emerged as primary factors for success.

I am fortunate to have been born in a family that sponsored and supported my education. I was self-motivated also. I see myself as an asset, and I invest in myself. I constantly look to better myself and the company supports me by sponsoring me to attend training programs. (VS)

My parents’ support, especially in facilitating me to complete my schooling from a good school in Delhi, has been instrumental in making me who I am today. I am naturally curious. Always looking to know more, I read a lot. This habit has not only built my confidence, but also shaped my perspective about a lot of things. (VA)

Table 2(a): Descriptive details of the male leaders surveyed

S.No.	Pseudonym	Position	Industry	Age	Place of Birth	Place of Work	Education	Years of Experience
1	RG	Founder	Executive Coaching	52	Chennai	Pondicherry	Post-graduation	30
2	VA	Senior Manager - People Strategy	Information Technology	39	Pathankot, Punjab	Gurgaon	Graduation	18
3	VS	Senior Manager – Learning and Development	Information Technology	42	New Delhi	Gurgaon	Post-graduation	20

Source: Author’s Research

¹ The small sample prohibits any generalisations.

Table 2(b): Descriptive details of the male leaders surveyed

S.No.	Pseudonym	Parental Background	Siblings	Marital Status	Number of Children, if any	Childcare Arrangement	Annual Family Income (in INR)
1	RG	Father - Engineer Mother - Homemaker	One	Married	One	Wife	25-50 Lakhs
2	VA	Father – Army Mother – School Teacher/ Homemaker	One	Married	One	Mother-in-Law	>100 Lakhs
3	VS	Father – Service Mother - Homemaker	One	Married	One	Wife took 6-month break, paid help, and parents	25-50 Lakhs

Source: Author’s Research

One of them alluded to the role of serendipity (Crowley-Henry & Weir, 2007) in his success:

I am divinely blessed, and things worked for me by being at the right time at the right place. For example, in 1999, I met my previous boss, and he mentioned a new company which was recruiting, and I went there to give an interview and got selected! (RG)

Echoing the sentiments of the women leaders in the sample, the male leaders’ narratives attested to their formative experiences (Bandura, 1977), in their path to success.

Organisational Enabling Factors

Supportive superiors are the deciding factor here as well in the following cases:

People invested in me and pushed me to come out of my comfort zone. My first boss was a woman, and she convinced me to move away from operations into training. She told me that I am hard-working, with good communication skills and a pleasing personality. She also gave me a fail-safe – if I failed at it, I always had operations to come back to. So, basically, my first company allowed me to fail successfully. Similarly, in my second company, my boss nudged me to move into HR. (VS)

I got good leaders to work with. My first boss, who was a woman, gave me more and more responsibilities and showed trust in me. My next boss, again a woman, also trusted in me, and invested in me by enabling me to go for key certifications to grow and develop. (VA)

In these experiences of the men with women superiors, the proposition that women leaders are more other-oriented and communal than agentic (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and more transformational than transactional (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003) is confirmed. Another aspect that emerges is that creating or maintaining a work-family balance comes at a cost for the men too (Harrington, 2022). These narratives broaden the analysis in that they give a picture of common shared experiences and reinforce the notion of the ‘labyrinth’ that both genders traverse on their ascent to leadership, with the path being tougher for the women (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Individual Hindering Factors

Personal experiences at different stages of life affected the career progression for VS:

I started working at the age of 19, and could not pursue regular full-time education. A lot of it was self-study, so I missed out on exposure to professors and academic minds, and a structured and formal way of teaching. At another time, I passed on an opportunity to move out of the city for a better role in terms of pay, exposure, because of my commitments to my dependent parents, wife and young child.

RG felt he was impatient in his approach and that may have backfired for him:

My tendency to overthink and overanalyse, and impatience. For example, when I had a tough boss, I contemplated quitting the job.... I can be more logical in my thinking.

Organisational Hindering Factors

VS experienced hiccups in his progress on account of the role he was in:

There are limited growth opportunities in the Learning & Development function, since it is more niche and specialized, as compared to, e.g., sales. Growth usually happens slower than business and client-facing functions.

VS had an unpleasant experience with one of his seniors in a previous company that gave him considerable stress. A similar story was shared by VA:

One of the leaders I worked with, did not trust in me and made me feel underconfident. She was biased and had favourites in the team.

The men in the sample did not experience many hindrances at the organisational level, except for a few instances, as shared above. The males also shared personal events in their lives that may have hindered their progress, leading to stress on account of a shortfall in ‘resources’ (Hobfoll, 1989; Harrington, 2022).

V. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The study examines the enabling and/or hindering factors for women leaders in senior positions across industries in India, employing a narrative analysis approach, based on open-ended interviews.

The women leaders in the sample shared their enabling experiences. All the leaders came from a middle-class background and had access to good education. Their parents (and husbands) supported and encouraged them immensely.² In many cases, their parents facilitated their continued education or professional opportunities. All of this, coupled with their own zeal for learning and growth, and their hard work added to their success. In the organisations they worked, their co-workers’ support and the inclusive policies of the company encouraged them and made their journey towards leadership just that little bit easier. They were enabled to grow and develop and they heartily appreciated the role their workplaces played in their success. The factors that supported them were not always the formal policies or initiatives in their organisations, but the people that made up the culture of the workplace, their informal interactions, and the empathy and consideration extended to them. And they all leveraged these enablers (and even the deterrents) by applying their tenacity, capacity to work hard, and the will to succeed. The women in the present study reported the stereotypical attitude of the community, and in some cases, of the co-workers, as negatives in the organisational environment, that may have prompted them to quit their jobs and contemplate other options.

The study has implications for organisations and policy makers. In the prevalent scenario of dual-career families, organisations need to acknowledge the interrelatedness of the

² A male respondent expressed that the husband’s support is far more crucial than any workplace policy in terms of enabling women leaders.

home and the workspace, and support all individuals, regardless of gender, in managing the two effectively. Organisations can step up and offer flexible working arrangements to women after child birth and those with small children. This will boost their self-efficacy, help companies grow and succeed, and also retain good talent, not to mention happier employees (Offermann et al., 2020). Men can be roped in as allies, and male leaders can be appointed as diversity champions, and they can work towards encouraging open dialogue for experience-sharing, and conducting training programmes on gender equality and building a thriving workplace. Responsibility also rests with the women leaders themselves, in that they must come forward and share their stories of overcoming challenges, with other women.

Companies should invest in women leaders through leadership programmes such as workshops, seminars, conferences and mentorship programmes. Technology can be leveraged and courses can be conducted online as well, apart from using innovative technologies, such as gamification for learning, skilling and empowerment (India Education Diary, 2021). Such programmes will engender greater confidence in themselves with respect to their capabilities (Abrar ul Haq, Victor, & Akram, 2021). Another aspect of change can be brought about at a societal level. Families can ensure to build their daughters' resilience and self-efficacy perception to enhance their confidence. This will enable them to persevere and achieve success.

In conclusion, addressing the systemic hindrances that prevent women from realizing their full potential, and moving closer to bringing about change cannot happen without a concerted effort by everyone, including families, government, and organisations. The government can emulate the Scandinavian countries, such as Finland, and formalise the unpaid care work that women perform. The Companies Act, 2013 mandated the inclusion of at least one female director on certain categories of corporate boards, and as of 2022, women held 18% of board positions in NIFTY-500 companies, an increase from 6% in 2014 (Ernst & Young India, 2022). A lot of the positive developments taking place are encouraging signs, but the inclusion of women in leadership, and the transformation of workplace culture are ongoing pursuits.

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