

Expert Speak

## Laying the Foundation for Leadership Parity

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*COVID-19 has disrupted organisations worldwide by creating chaos that has tested the mettle of leadership all around. Among the many questions that have surfaced surrounding leadership qualities and a leader's strength in crisis, so has this: given that women have increasingly proven to be compassionate, effective leaders, why are there still so few women in leadership roles? Shraddhanjali Rao, Vice President, Human Resources of SAP in India, elaborates on the myriad challenges women face while transitioning to senior roles, why the gap between men and women in such roles exists, and how organisations can work on remedying them.*

The world around us is in constant flux, and if it has taught us anything, it is that we need to keep moving forward and evolving. For organisations, this evolution may have several facets. Perhaps, the most important one is that of leadership as the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, raised a new set of expectations where leadership is concerned. It widened the scope of leadership from who is leading, and how they are leading to how effective and adaptable they are as leaders in crisis. It has also set the expectation on how these leadership styles continue once the crisis is averted.

As leaders and leadership styles came under the lens, it also brought to the fore a discussion on women in leadership roles or the lack of it. Despite having decades worth of focus and the plentiful research proving the importance of gender equity, there is, clearly, still a vast gap between men and women in these roles. In 2021, India ranked third globally with regards to the percentage of women in senior leadership roles, making up 39% of senior leadership when compared to the global average of 31%.<sup>1</sup> While this reflects well on the number of women advancing within their organisations and taking up more challenging roles, here is a question we need to ponder: Is this enough? The devil lies in the details on whether these are truly representative of women in leadership. According to Fortune India 500's 2020 list of companies, only 29 companies had women in senior executive roles, with the top 10 having no women in their senior leadership.<sup>2</sup> Although we have significantly moved the needle, there still remains a need to double down our efforts to bring more women into leadership roles and provide them the supportive environment to achieve their full potential. The most obvious questions we may ask—how do we bridge this gap and where do we begin? While there is no silver bullet, I believe that it requires us to take a holistic approach to address this concern more tactfully.

## **Tackling the Issue at Ground Zero**

Imagine you have a project to grow the most beautiful garden. You invest in having the best soil, fertilisers, tools, equipment, and ample water, all in a location with optimal weather conditions, only to miss out on the most essential thing—the

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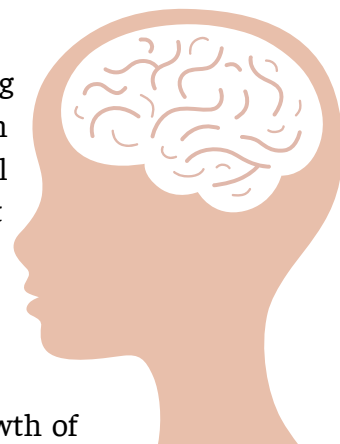
<sup>1</sup>PTI, 2021. India ahead of world average on women in senior management: Report. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/india-ahead-of-world-average-on-women-in-senior-management-report/articleshow/81318172.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>2</sup>Thakur, A., 2020. Fortune India 500: Why are there so few women leaders? Retrieved from <https://www.fortuneindia.com/people/fortune-india-500-why-are-there-so-few-women-leaders/103961>

seeds. India ranks 151 for Economic Participation and Opportunity in the Global Gender Gap Index 2021 with only 22.3% of women in the workforce.<sup>3</sup> It takes the effort from all of us to bridge this gap, not just as organisations but society at large. It is quite unfortunate that still in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most girls are not encouraged to aspire for long-term careers. Building awareness among women that having a career is not secondary, but a necessity, is key to this journey. In my personal experience, I have seen promising young women join the workplace, straight out of college and then put their careers on the back burner to take on household responsibilities. While I do not discredit the importance of being there for the family and do realise the associated challenges in trying to break out of societal/familial pressures, I do firmly believe that women should explore opportunities beyond the household responsibilities to choose what's best for them. It is more than just supporting an organisational agenda—owning their careers builds self-esteem and confidence among women, while providing them with financial independence. It is fundamentally important to first ignite the passion among women to own their careers before building them up to take on leadership roles. For example, we have had a behavioural scientist visit us to conduct a series of workshops for women in early career roles to understand their intrinsic needs and desires for their careers. The results of the workshops were very useful and helped us create custom programmes that help chart out their career journeys. Fuelling purpose to this change has immense power to influence a more progressive stance within our societies, thereby paving the way for equal opportunity for the generations to come.

## Understanding Gender Fatigue

Most organisations have worked towards achieving gender equality for decades, and have heavily invested in the development of women's careers, including several awareness trainings. However, there still remains that wide gap between awareness and action. Gender fatigue surfaces when gender bias or gender discrimination is simultaneously acknowledged while denying that it exists in one's immediate work environment. This inadvertently plays a major role in hindering the growth of



<sup>3</sup>World Economic Forum, 2021. Global Gender Gap Report 2021. Retrieved from [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)

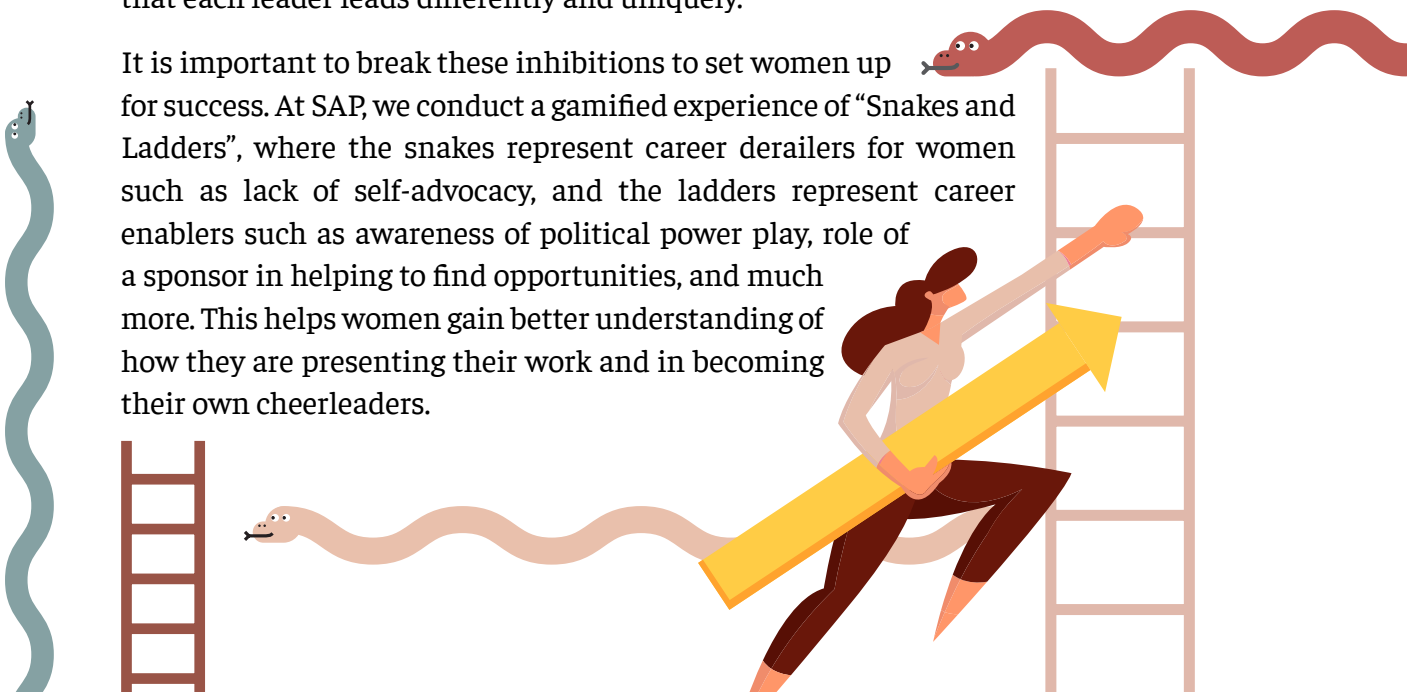
women leaders within organisations. Some of these challenges reflect in less opportunities for women. For example, the purpose of official dinner events is to promote bonding and networking but making it to these after-hours events is often difficult for many women who have familial responsibilities.

I believe that the long-term solution to eradicate gender fatigue is through awareness and sensitisation among all employees and not just leaders. The recognition of this inequality needs to be perceived as a learning opportunity, rather than a cause for blame. A good way to tackle this head-on is to write down instances and circumstances to reflect and correct gender bias in the systemic behaviours.

## **The Imposter Syndrome: Why Women Feel They Do Not Belong**

Women often have to struggle with the imposter syndrome—a deeply internalised fear of being inadequate. Despite having worked hard, women often end up feeling as if they do not belong there and have not adequately earned their success. This feeling only grows when they are transitioning into larger roles, including leadership. Often, they are indirectly and even inadvertently compared to their predecessors, often men, who might have had a very different style of leadership. What is happening here essentially is, we are placing women in these leadership roles and are expecting them to own these roles while still measuring their leadership based off the benchmark set by their predecessors, overlooking the fact that each leader leads differently and uniquely.

It is important to break these inhibitions to set women up for success. At SAP, we conduct a gamified experience of “Snakes and Ladders”, where the snakes represent career derailers for women such as lack of self-advocacy, and the ladders represent career enablers such as awareness of political power play, role of a sponsor in helping to find opportunities, and much more. This helps women gain better understanding of how they are presenting their work and in becoming their own cheerleaders.



## Dismantling Gendered Leadership

For the longest time, leadership as it was perceived, was very gendered, oriented towards men as leaders. I say this because if one looks at leadership of the past, traits people associated with the role were more masculine—authoritarian, somewhat dictatorial, or even highly vocal. We need to acknowledge that progressive changes across the board have led to more acceptance of women in leadership positions. More importantly, the characteristics of leadership have evolved from authoritarian to more people-centric traits. Our time has advanced to where qualified and competent women take increasingly important leadership positions and drive businesses, without any gender distinctions or personal biases. Apart from research<sup>4</sup> indicating that feminine leadership is compassionate, democratic and sensitive, and is increasingly effective in the organisational setting, the pandemic has set a great example that these traits are vital in effective leadership. A best practice we have with our leaders at SAP is, while we acknowledge the differences men and women bring into their leadership styles, we try to bridge the gap by not only embracing these differences, but also create platforms where they learn from one another.

## Paving the Way for Women Leaders

Rarely does any progress happen where women are the only ones expected to change. Investment in securing equity in leadership roles needs to be holistic. The high level of inclusivity at an organisational level is met when men are allies to this journey, where they work alongside women, to support women. The relationship of support between men and women is a two-way street, and this support must be mutual, given as much as it is accepted, and taken as much as it is offered. To identify and nurture future women leaders, an understanding of their career aspirations, from their points of view, is crucial for everyone to gain. What we have at the moment is a rather templatised version of what we think a woman's career journey should look like. So, let us look at some ways organisations can support their women leaders:



- Organisations need to tailor-make opportunities for women: give them exposure but let them take small steps as opposed to big leaps that may disrupt their work-life balance, freedom to move at their own pace so that the risk of burning out is minimal, introduce them to short-term leadership projects so that they gain maximum learnings in shorter periods of time.
- Ensure that women get as much hands-on learning opportunity as they can, in the form of immersive project experiences.
- Provide opportunities including access to, and encouragement to take part in dedicated learning programmes on critical elements such as impactful communication, technical upskilling, personal branding, strategic awareness, and most importantly, authentic leadership that lets them stay true to themselves.
- Create policies, people processes, and frameworks, promoting equal opportunity all the way.
- Adopt technology that helps track bias and monitor progress on initiatives.

“The more an organisation creates these opportunities, the stronger their culture grows—a culture where women feel comfortable to take on new, senior roles, and increasingly feel included as valuable assets to their organisations.”

## Achieving Inclusivity: The Way Forward

It may not be truly viable to capture and measure the precise extent of inclusion achieved. A true measure of its success is when we no longer have to talk about diversity and inclusion as separate subjects. Research shows that women may be over-represented in support roles such as administration, whereas more men can be seen in research and development, operations, and similar roles that would give them the kind of experience needed for senior management, CEO, and board positions.<sup>5</sup> While hiring more women in support roles does not necessarily

<sup>4</sup>Faizan, R., Sreekumaran N, S., Haque, A., 2018. The effectiveness of Feminine and Masculine Leadership styles in relation to contrasting gender's performances, Polish Journal of Management Studies, Vol 17, No.1: pp. 78-92. Retrieved from <https://mp.ra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/87716/>

<sup>5</sup>Catalyst, 2020. Women in Management (Quick Take). Retrieved from <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-management/>



guarantee inclusion, it is a start to this journey. The more women there are, the louder their collective voice will be, and the more these women speak up, the greater the understanding of what they need, and how organisations can support their growth. The ultimate aim is not that of filling the room with a 50-50 ratio of men and women, but that of 50-50 at the decision-making roles. A woman's experience of inclusivity, of her own space in the organisation—be it in leadership, management, or any other role—that's the organisation's key to gaining true value in the long run. The more cognisant we are about the gaps and how we can fill them, the more we can say that we are a step closer to achieving a higher level of inclusivity—everyone has a part to play in achieving greater equality. As we say at SAP, we build breakthroughs together.



**Shraddhanjali Rao** heads HR at SAP, India, and is responsible for designing and executing the people strategy for the organisation, focussing on leadership, talent, and culture. Passionate about the future of work, leadership, and inclusion, she has been recognised as one among the 'Top 50 HR Thought leaders of 2022' by ETHR World and the 'Top HR innovators' by Asia Pacific HRM. She has also been awarded the Women Leadership Award by Observe Now in 2020. Keen on nurturing startups, she commits her time as a Board Member of the SAP Startup Studio, an accelerator programme of SAP Labs India. She has also co-authored the book 'Why Blend In When You Can Stand Out?'