
WOMEN AS AN AGENCY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract: The world has come a long way since women were confined to households and children for biological reasons. This paper takes a historical review of changes in the mentalities of men and women through time. Finally, but not completely, the fact is established that men and women are equal. In fact, the feminine aspects that rendered men look down upon women have proved to be the strengths that mark women an edge above men in all professions that they follow. The strong fights put up by women in different parts of the world have opened portals for them and there is no field today from which women are exempted. Glories of the fair sex are emphasized in this article, looking forward optimistically to a brighter future for them.

Key words: feminism, Great Man theory, male chauvinism.

Introduction: There was a time when gender discrimination was a topic of discussion and concern. The concern led to feminist movements in the 18th century. Through the organized movement, women fought for an equal status with men in all spheres of life. Women were suppressed in patriarchal society in almost all parts of the world. Since the patriarchal system was deeply rooted in society for generations, it was difficult for women to raise their voice collectively and gain justice. It could not have been possible without organized effort. Feminism began in the West and gradually spread to the East. Male domination imposed itself in communities irrespective of culture. The change in the attitude of men towards women was observed, yet the time taken for the transformation differed from culture to culture. For example, in India, male domination runs through the veins of the social system. As a result, even in the 21st century we come across instances of torture and oppression of women. However, feminism has come to stay and men have become wary. Some have changed to the extent of treating women genuinely as their equals.

A Historical perspective: The very fact that a topic like "Women in Leadership Roles" is brought up for discussion implies the vast change in society and the role of women through the last three centuries. Hence, before discussing about women and their leadership, it is necessary to go back into the past and trace the path from gender discrimination to women and leadership.

In the patriarchal system, men were the bread-winners while women stayed at home, cooked food and looked after the children. Their chief role was to manage domestic work. There was no question of any profession. The men were engaged in various professions and they acted as the heads of their families. Protecting the family members was also part of their responsibility. Naturally, the family could not survive if the men did not provide basic needs like food and shelter. The family depended on the men. This lent the men a superior position. They enjoyed their respectable position and would not let go of it

easily. To maintain their position, they had to suppress women, which is not surprising considering human nature. Nobody took cognizance when women helped the men to plough the fields. If the potter turned the wheel, his wife would mix the clay for him. It was the women who wove baskets and ropes, spun cloth, tended cattle and did an endless number of odd jobs to assist men. Besides, women knitted and embroidered, sewed and brewed and were skilled craftsmen. But these womanly ventures had no value and were conveniently neglected.

The attitude of considering women as inferior has biological reasons. Women bear children. They are physically weaker than men. Child rearing and bearing are their priorities. Allowing them to enter the professional scenario could affect men a great deal. After the Industrial Revolution, people started cherishing material values. Money gained importance and continues to do so. Competition increased and women could not afford to sit idle at home. There is intense debate even among feminists as to how much importance should be attached to biology, subordination, sex-based division of labor, to social concepts of masculinity, feminism and sexuality. Sooner or later, women were bound to escape from these shackles and sigh for freedom. Feminism struck at the very roots of the social structure. It altered the patterns and raised concerns about the role of women. Thus came up notions like male-dominated professions and women's professions.

Women and professions: The most contested issue in this regard is whether women approach their professional role from a different perspective. Carol Gilligan, a representative of feminism argues that women are 'more attentive to values of care, connections and contexts,' (Gilligan, 1982). Some values like love, compassion, sympathy and filial bonds are traditionally associated with women. The professional consequences of these values in a workplace take the shape of collaborative effort, humane treatment and interactive leadership style. It is on account of the traditionally associated values that certain professions like nursing, teaching, air-

hostess, matron etc. are considered to be 'women's' professions. Unskilled women extended domestic help.

Gender difference has been celebrated throughout history and it makes high claims. But recent research in Psychology and surveys find 'few attributes on which the sexes consistently vary.' (Eagly, 1987). They claim that 'gender typically accounts for only about five percent of the variance.' We understand that modern research has pointed out the important fact that the similarities between men and women are far greater than the differences. If the differences are minor, they can be ruled out. Theoretically, women can be at par with men professionally. Taking this statement as a starting point and taking for granted that women do possess some distinctive qualities, it would be worthwhile to examine what women bring with them when they step into a profession.

Fundamental traits of running a family translate into a workplace system. For generations, women had been managing households and events, children and husbands while men went out to earn money. Throughout centuries, they practiced and honed their managerial skills and trained their daughters with added lessons learned from their experience. Any kind of negligence or irresponsible actions regarding children or home can have disastrous consequences. Thus, the mass woman community all over the world developed as excellent managers. They had developed habits of neatness, regularity, punctuality. Women like to have everything in perfect place and order. They are also prompt and spirited. We can add a list of other qualities like honesty, sympathy and a sharper sense of responsibility. Patience, tolerance and hard work are always associated with women. We find that women enter any profession bearing a courteous manner and a smile on their face. No wonder they make good nurses and air-hostesses!

In spite of these outstanding qualities, women were offered low profile jobs in factories and offices in the beginning. "Women, it is posited, are located in lower organizational echelons because – 1. They are more passive, dependent and amenable to authority than men. 2. The female role conflict between family and career obligations often vitiates the latter," (Neuse S., 1978). Unskilled women were given jobs like sorting, packing assembling etc. In the seventeenth century women wage earners were mostly domestic servants. Educated women preferred clerical jobs, typing, telephone operator etc. The most desired position was that of a personal assistant or secretary. One rarely hears of a man who works as a personal assistant. Women can satisfactorily manage mail, files, messages, flights, meetings and presentations meticulously. Sometimes they are required to look after meals, coffee, medicines and even personal shopping of the boss. It is difficult to

imagine a man who can do all this patiently! Study shows that 'women rank higher on measures of professionalism and are less committed to hierarchical authority than men.' (Neuse, 1978)

Neuse Stevens concludes in the article that 'continued sexual stereotyping can only lead to higher levels of frustration among female employees.' (1978).

Challenges: Initially, educational opportunities were denied to women. The chief factor responsible for shaping the professional roles of women is education. With inherent positive qualities required for various professions, the addition of education enhanced the skills of women and made them competent. We can take the example of doctors. Women are more caring compared to men. They are confident and deft with fingers, a skill gained through stitching and knitting. There is a greater probability of women being better as surgeons or dentists. Since all gynaec patients are women, women doctors can better understand their problems and labor pains, and thus give better service than men. Slightly aged women can make best school heads, matrons or canteen supervisors.

Today, there is no profession from which women are exempted. They work in the police force, army, navy, air force, politics, industry, scientific field, sports and have even travel in space. There are women pilots, engine drivers and even gangsters. Examples include a woman governor, women who have served in the state legislature, business leaders, educators and entrepreneurs, (Embry J., 2006). They have learnt to balance their family life and professions. A loving, caring mother at home can quickly switch over to the role of a strict principal of a college. A woman can shed the laces and graces she wears in a party and step on to the sports grounds in shorts and tees. Women judges can stand up and fight on behalf of men. They do not show any kind of bias when they have to deal with women's issues or sentence women to severe punishment. Wherever women enter, the gender composition in existing structures changes. This changes the entire atmosphere of the set-up and men have to accept and adjust with the changes. Feminine attributes are expressed in the workplace. Currently, women pervade in all professions. The attitude of men has certainly changed and they do not experience pangs of male ego if a woman is appointed as their boss. Appointment of women at all levels from top to bottom is taken for granted, just as it is in case of men.

In this sense, it can be argued that women, and not men, changed the world. Thomas Carlyle stated that 'The History of the world is but a history of great men.' (Carlyle, 1894) According to the Great Man Theory, history can be largely explained by the impact of 'great men'. (Carlyle, 1894) The word 'Man' is used in the theory because women did not count.

Carlyle named great men like Shakespeare, Luther, Muhammad, Rousseau and Napoleon. If great men made history according to Carlyle, is it not true that ordinary women made history? The pervasion of women in all fields of life and professions brought about a fundamental change in the very texture of society. It takes 'great' men to bring about historical changes, which implies that there are men who are not great. But every woman is great enough to effect changes in her surroundings; every woman who asserts herself contributes towards change. If we can name great men, we can make a longer list of great women. Indira Gandhi, Kalpana Chawla, Lata Mangeshkar, the succession of Queens of England, Mother Teresa, St. Joan of Arc, Florence Nightingale...the list is endless.

Once women started entering professions which were considered to be typically 'men's' professions, it did not take long for them to establish themselves firmly. They gradually realized that just as they could work in all professions, nothing could stop them from working in ALL positions. Why should they slog with the typewriter or accounts the whole day, when they had the necessary managerial skills to work in top positions? The scene was set and the atmosphere conducive for them to lead organizations. Thus came up the issue of women in leadership roles.

Herbert Spencer, a critic of Carlyle's Great Man Theory believed that 'great men were merely products of their social environment'. (Spencer, 1961). Spencer stated that 'before he (man) can remake society, his society must make him'. These words can be applied to women leaders. It was the transformed societal structure that afforded women opportunities to assume leadership. William James also underlined in his lecture 'Great men and their Environment' that 'environment and individuals shape each other reciprocally'. (James, 1992) In the midst of existing circumstances, women were motivated to strive for power and authority. David McClelland brought to the notice of the world that the motivation of employees can be better assessed through motivational models rather than through traditional I.Q. and Personality Tests.

McClelland (McClelland, 1961) came up with the need based motivational model which applies to men as well as women. According to him, those who are achievement motivated seek advancement in the job and challenging goals. Authority motivated individuals seek power and authority while affiliation motivated individuals experience a need for friendly relationships. Men are largely authority motivated while women, by nature belong to the category of affiliation motivated. As per McClelland's theory, women in various organizations made the best of their talents coupled with their motivation and soon

climbed the ladder of success towards the top. In this sense, they started off as situational leaders.

Women do not conform to the Great Man theory. They do possess certain distinctive traits as females. These traits are their assets and can be used as advantages. They are also beneficial to the organizations. The typical traits of women made them leaders. Behavioral theories better explain the leadership role of women. According to the behaviorist theory, great men are made and not born. Women have become leaders as a result of observation, experience and practice. Women were not born leaders. They were motivated by achievement of authority, they took advantage of the situation or they were trained to be leaders. Management theories of motivation account for the supervisory role that women play in an organization. Women transfer the abilities of monitoring the growth of their children, punishing or rewarding them and taking disciplinary actions to the workplace. Relationship theories of leadership focus on the ability of women to form and maintain connections between people. They have high ethical and moral standards.

It must be borne in mind that becoming a leader involves much more than being appointed and assigned the role of a leader. It involves a fundamental identity shift. In case of women, this shift is two-fold. First they have to establish their identity as women who are equal with men. Then they have to get used to the idea that they are leaders. As leaders, they need to change their outlook. They must know that those whom they lead have expectations from them. They need to possess certain special skills which their new role demands. Nowadays, training programs are conducted for women in leadership roles. "American women are entering professional training in increasing numbers" says Parrish B. (Parrish, 1974).

Conclusion: We can conclude that women, by virtue of their sex, face some biological inhibitions which make it difficult for them to remain consistently committed and devoted to their professions. It is necessary for them to give time and attention to their families and children. Yet, they succeed in managing the two roles which are vastly different from each other, and do justice to both. Confinement during pregnancy and maternity are the chief concerns. The law has taken cognizance of these genuine concerns. Every woman is entitled to maternity leave. This kind of support enables women to play their professional roles successfully. When a woman becomes a mother, a man also becomes a father. A child is a responsibility of both the parents. The realization of this issue has led to the concept of paternity leave in some countries. Previously, child rearing was considered to be the sole responsibility of women.

Changing attitudes of men has made the world a more secure and comfortable place for women. They are liberated from the shackles of domestic chores. Women have their own ambitions, desires and aspirations. The society must give them an opportunity to fulfill their ambitions and blossom. Their sex is not their fault. It is not something to be regretted. On the contrary, men must never forget that they were brought into this world by a woman. A woman must feel proud of being a woman, who plays the key role of perpetuating the human race.

A woman has every right to pursue the profession of her choice and rise as high as she can. Organizations must recognize the positive qualities in women and foster them, treasure them and exploit them for the benefit of the organization. They must encourage women to learn and take training so that they can contribute to the organizations.

Suppressing, dominating and torturing women are not advisable. It implies killing the spirit of worthy members of the society. If women are not given scope to develop, their unique qualities will remain unexploited. The society will be the loser and not women. The great strength of the fair and delicate sex must be recognized. Women must be valued for their talents.

Carol Gilligan supported Cultural feminism. He emphasized the inherent kind and gentle nature of women, (Gilligan, 1982). Hence, Cultural feminists believe that if women ruled the world, there would be no wars and it would be a better place. It would not be a bad idea to hand over the strings of authority to women. Perhaps, women will be able to establish peace and unity in the world and lead the human race!

Mankind is polluting Mother Earth. Eco-Feminists believe that men's desire to tame and conquer destroy both, women and the earth. (Warren & Wells, 1984). Women are closer to Nature and play an important role in preserving it. Terms like Mother Nature and Mother Earth indicate the strange connection between women and nature. If women lead the earth, they will preserve the planet.

Women do have different leadership styles from men. As Bodyshop founder Anita Roddick says: 'I run my company according to feminine principles – principles of caring, making intuitive decisions, not getting hung up on hierarchy, having a sense of work as being part of your life, not separate from it; putting your labor where your love is, being responsible to the world in how you use your profits; recognizing the bottom line should stay at the bottom'. (Minow, 2009)

The trend is changing. More women are being elected for leadership roles. However, much more needs to be done. The struggle has not ended. A new struggle has begun. The old struggle of fighting for equality is

replaced by the new struggle for recognition and positions. There are some qualities which women have developed recently through experience in various professions. Women are not fully appreciated for the unique qualities they bring to the workplace. Women can sense danger and manage crises. Women are multi-taskers and adventurous. They have the courage to take risk. They have the daring to question and competency to answer. Modern women are highly educated. Women are good decision makers and practice healthy competition. They exceed performance expectations. Yet, they seek recognition, appreciation and respect and value for their work. In this regard, they remain dissatisfied. This may lead to frustration and loss of interest or initiative. Women are creative, innovative and resourceful. They are accommodating and flexible.

While women leaders have their productivity secrets, everyone knows where they come from: the leadership traits that women leaders naturally possess are undervalued. Women leaders are optimistic. They see opportunity in every situation. They do not shirk adverse circumstances but learn from them. Successful women leaders know how to play the game. They can predict and calculate. They are prepared for the future. They can anticipate the unexpected. They make careful moves and play safe. Women have the great quality of peeling the onion and going to the root cause of any matter.

Women are team-builders. They have a unique way of tackling disappointments. They also possess problem-solving skills. Their success lies in their way to bring people together, to tap their potentials and motivate them.

Women were viewed by men as emotional, owing to their maternal instincts. But women are mentally stronger than men. Women are known to face and survive circumstances in which men easily collapse. It would be appropriate to say that women are passionate and not emotional. Their passions urge them to be pioneers and entrepreneurs. According to a report by the Centre for Women's Business Research, U.S. Hispanic and African American women entrepreneurs grew at rates of 133.3% and 191.4% respectively from 1997 to 2007.

Women leaders are more assertive and persuasive. Women leaders are stronger in interpersonal skills than their male counterparts. All these qualities combine to create a new leadership style which is open, inclusive and collaborative. Hence, women leaders have set a new standard of leadership which men may not be able to follow. A time may come when women leaders will surpass men in performance. They are advancing at an astounding pace in long strides. Initially, women tried to copy men leaders and their ways. In the future perhaps,

men will have many things to learn from successful women leaders. That day is not far off!

If we look at the current status, equality with men is established. Women are paid for their qualities. They are paid what they deserve. While making appointments, employers do not see whether the candidate is a man or a woman. They check the testimonials, qualifications and degrees. In fact, some give preference to women candidates because they know that they will not have to regret. Women are more sincere, reliable and honest compared to men. Gender is just one demographic and not a very important one.

Of course, biological differences cannot be overcome. There are some professions in which wise men should not venture. Men consider some professions as below their dignity, like teaching profession. Although this attitude of men is wrong, it is true that women are better suited as school teachers, especially in elementary and pre-primary schools. Wisdom lies in assessing individual situations, candidates and circumstances. There are two choices available and only two choices. Employers must use their discretion to select suitable candidates, men or women.

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