

Been there, done that... but not equal

By Anjana Vaswani, Mumbai Mirror | May 27, 2014, 01:48 AM IST

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Women CEOs, CFOs and entrepreneurs of a group of Maharashtra club last week to discuss an online community that will help women progress professionally (above) Kavita Bagga, VP, SABMiller India agrees that the liquor industry she is part of is male-centric. (R) Zarina Screwvala, who spent over 25 years in the TV industry, says less pay for equal work is a fact

Female bosses in India earn a staggering 38.59 per cent less than men. A few women calling the shots describe what it takes to survive in the male-dominated workforce.

The real issue at hand here is empowering the women of this country," Rahul Gandhi repeated on television in January, no matter what question the anchor put to him. It left viewers smirking but, data on the power women yield in the Indian workforce is somewhat less amusing. According to a 2013 report based on a survey conducted by Paycheck India, researchers at IIM-Ahmedabad said women in top positions earn 38.59 per cent less than men.

It's not a solace, but we have company elsewhere in the world.

This month, Jill Abramson, the first woman to serve as executive editor of the The New York Times in its 160-year history, was abruptly given the boot. The publisher put it down to "arbitrary decision-making", but it's widely believed that the firing was fuelled by her aggressive negotiations

with top management over receiving significantly lower compensation than her male predecessor.

We like men-on-top

"Less pay for equal work is a fact in India and globally," says Zarina Screwvala, who co-founded UTV and was its chief creative officer for 27 years. "The TV industry pays female stars well since they are the main leads, but not women executives." Screwvala's view is supported by the IIM-A report which points out, "Women employed in Accommodation and Food Service earned 4.19 per cent less than men whereas those employed in Arts, Entertainment and the Recreation industry earned 41.17 per cent less than men."

Often, it's not just about pay but meagre representation in top positions, **like in the liquor industry.** Ronesh Puri of talent search firm Executive Access, says, "In the manufacturing industry, women stick to functional areas like marketing. Real estate, energy and infrastructure employ fewer women since these industries aren't really professionalised."

Kavita Bagga, 41, VP of SABMiller India, the country's second largest beer company, is a woman boss in a male-dominated industry, admits, "We are making a conscious effort to employ women in retail sales and key account functions."

The reality hit 32 year-old Bandra resident Mitali Bajaj when after six years in the banking industry in NYC, she returned to join the family's real estate development business. "Brokers wouldn't take me seriously when I was hunting for land," she recalls. "I was often asked to get 'someone' from the

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company to call them." Sexism manifests differently in the art consultancy and interiors sector she is now a part of. Recalling a recent meeting, she refers to a client's change in attitude when her project head, a senior gentleman, joined the discussion. "Negotiations begin at a higher figure when there's a man present," she says.

A report from Catalyst WRC, an organisation committed to creating inclusive workplaces, draws attention to the pay gap in the technology sector in particular. Sharing findings of a report titled, High Potentials Under High Pressure, Shachi Irde, its executive director says, "High-potential women begin their careers on an equal footing with men when it comes to designation, pay and aspirations. But, in say, 12 years, they make approx. Rs 3,80,000 less than men, receive fewer developmental opportunities that might have led to advancement, and bear more responsibility at home. All of this contributes to the lack of female talent in critical positions in India's technology sector."

Ask and you shall be...

Last week, award-winning entrepreneur and author of *Heels of Steel: Surviving and Thriving in the Corporate World*, Vanessa Vallely networked over drinks with a group of women CFOs, CEOs and entrepreneurs at a Mahalaxmi club. Celebrating the launch of *Wearethecity.com*, an online community to help women progress professionally, Vallely offered a possible reason for discrepancy in salaries. "I can imagine that I might have been paid less at certain jobs, because, as women, we tend to just say, 'thank you', rather than negotiate for a higher pay," said Vallely, who joined the technology industry at 16, following it up with 25 years in finance.

This hesitation, says VU Technologies' 32-year-old founder, Devita Saraf, makes several women lose out on higher salaries and promotions. "They are shy when asking for a raise; many seem to think they can be easily replaced."

That fewer women make it to the top position (unless their daddies own the company) is true of India just as it is of America. Most female talent that makes it to the inner coterie is usually in support positions (HR or communications). This gives them less of a chance to be next in line. And considering most firms pick their top boss internally, if insider female talent isn't going to be groomed, they'll always have a meeker shot at being boss.

Interestingly, women are also more likely to be forced out of their roles than men. Screwvalla explains, "A strong, confident woman is still seen as a threat, and boards in India are, shockingly, continue to be male bastions." Kris Lakshmikanth, founder, Head Hunters India, agrees. "In white collar jobs, women only hold 7.5% to 8.5% of top positions, which is very low, and it's about the same in the boardroom."

A researcher with Delhi School of Economics, Shantanu Khanna puts it down to simple stereotyping. "Women are almost always expected to drop out of the workforce to get married or raise children, so discrimination could kick in early in their careers with employers hesitant to promote them. But, when they stick on and prove they are committed to their careers, the discrimination slowly disappear. That's when employers start investing in them," says Khanna, who has examined wage-discrimination among 36,000 employees across Indian industries.

With the odds stacked up against women bosses, they must be their own ambassadors. That they tend to share the credit for success with their teammates works against them. "Modesty is not a virtue of the workplace," says Saraf. "Your employer is not going to hack into your computer to see how you've contributed to a project."

Neela Kishore, director at Advaya Humanistic Systems, suggests women zero in on the aspect of negotiation they are uncomfortable with and discuss it with a friend, partner or mentor before they demonstrate their contribution to the boss, and demand a raise backed by market research. "It's important that this is a dialogue, not confrontation," she warns.

Raising a red flag, leadership coach Anshu Khanna prescribes introspection. Ask yourself if there's a genuine gender bias at your office. "Perhaps there's a perceived commitment bias. I have come across instances where men work later hours than women. Would that impact perception and perhaps earn them raises before their female colleagues? Yes. But that's fair, isn't it?"

WOMEN RULE

Russia has the highest proportion of women in senior mgmt (46%) followed by Botswana, Philippines and Thailand (39%, each).

Japan has only 5%, India, 14%, and the United Arab Emirates 15% women seniors.

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