

Queen bees and wannabes

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Women taking over the boardrooms may have made a mark in the corporate world. A closer look at the ground reality of Indian organisations shows that the proverbial glass ceiling has stayed strong with more women stepping into the c-suite roles. However, the ripple effect for the women employees at the lower rung is yet to show up.

Take the case of Anisha Mehta, a 30-year-old marketing executive, who was in for a rude shock when she was forced out of work due to lack of flexi-work options. And her healthcare firm boasted of three women on its Board! Long working hours and a rigid nine-hour cubicle schedule did not work for Mehta who wanted to resume work after taking a maternity leave.

Indian companies are indeed showcasing a more gender-diverse Board, with the percentage of women to the boards of listed companies rising from a mere 4% three years ago to about 15% at present. In 2015, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) issued a guideline making it mandatory for companies to have at least one woman on its Board.

In fact, a World Bank study states that women constitute just 27% of the overall workforce in India. The World Bank study points out that over 19 million women in India dropped out of the workforce between 2004-05 and 2011-12.

Research also indicates that although girls constitute 42% of graduates, they make up only 24% of entry-level professionals, with their numbers further dropping to a mere 19% at the senior management level.

It is a given that social factors such as marriage and childbirth are major reasons behind the dropping out of women from the job market. Hence HR managers have been tom-tomming about flexi-working policies such as the work-from-home option, virtual working, flexi-hours, childcare facilities within office precincts and so on.

But more women on the Board is not really the ultimate solution for achieving a more diverse workforce, say experts.

“It actually depends on who the women are and what they do once they are on the Board. Many organisations have appointed their family, friends or spouses in order to meet the requirement. So very little can be expected from this,” says Kamal Karanth A, co-founder of Xpheno, a specialist staffing firm.

Venkat Rao, senior director, Executive Access India, says the work-life balance for women has not changed sufficiently to overcome the hurdles to join, stay and rise to leadership roles. Rao says that MNCs look for diversity, “whereas the large to mid-sized Indian entities don’t insist on diversity as they feel there is a scarcity of the right talent.”

However, having a more gender-diverse Board at companies does carry a set of proven advantages. Appointing competent women can help organisations achieve broader diversity in thinking, more corporate responsibility and higher employee orientation, says Karanth.

Take the case of Indian banker and former State Bank of India (SBI) chairman Arundhati Bhattacharya. To mitigate loss of talent, she set up a two-year sabbatical system in SBI.

“It helps us keep the women force in our fold. This sabbatical can be split into various life stages depending on the urgency,” she had told DNA Money.

According to Neha Bagaria, founder, JobsForHer, women leaders are trusted, and thus women employees tend to confide in them.

“Women make for great mentors. As mentors, they don’t judge thoughts, ideas or dreams. They help other women achieve their goals,” says Bagaria, who feels that women at the top can lay emphasis on the benefits which can act as levers to retain women employees within the workforce.

Fair Partnership

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