

## Reflections of Women Management Students on Perceptions about Women in Management

Archana Subhash and Jayaraman Athrayil.  
Sadanam Institute of Commerce and Management Studies  
Pathirippala, Palakkad, Kerala India

Accepted 2 March, 2012

**Abstract-** An exploratory analysis of perceptions of women students of management (WSIM) of Kerala, India on myths and misconceptions about women in management (WIM) has been attempted with a semi-structured questionnaire. Kerala ranks high in HDI and GDI comparable to those of advanced countries. Perceptions parading as paradigms with significant citation indices are accepted as myths and anecdotal narrations are regarded as misconceptions. Ever since Ms Mary Parker Follett was denied a Ph. D by Harvard because of her gender, myths abound about WIM the most cited being the Glass Ceiling. A critical literature survey was conducted to collect significant myths and deconstructed misconceptions. A disorganized collection of misconceptions and myths was presented to management students in PGDM and MBA supply pipelines in rural and urban settings. The objective was to elicit studied responses, to differentiate uncritical responses and to sensitize them on *real politik* of business world to entry level women. The testable hypotheses were presented in verifiable and falsifiable modes with latitude for non-judgement. Responses from the subset of Student-Women in Management (SWIM) were compared and contrasted with published empirical studies. Some salient conclusions and suggestions for future studies are presented.

**Keywords:** Glass ceiling, Mom track Family responsibility discrimination Queen bee effect

### Introduction

Ms Mary Parker Follett, who made seminal contributions to the theoretical underpinnings of management is universally acknowledged as the "Prophet of Management". She was denied a doctorate in Management by Harvard University owing to her gender. Ms Lise Meitner who made the historic discovery of nuclear fission was marginalized by gender discrimination. She is cited as the most glaring example of women's scientific achievement overlooked by the Nobel committee. Ms Kamal Bhagvat was denied admission to the Institute of Science, Bangalore, by Nobel laureate C V Raman. The common denominator is implacable denial of academic access to women to top positions by men in power.

The management metaphor used to signify the obstacles in the career trajectory of WIM is glass ceiling. It describes invisible glass barriers through which women can see elite positions but cannot reach them because of the impenetrable ceiling. Cotter et al (1) described it as a characteristic gender phenomenon in 2001 but the recognition of the problem can be traced to the first use of the term by two WIM at Hewlett-Packard in 1979. The US Federal Glass Ceiling Commission confirmed that women encountered significant barriers in their careers and brought the problem into corporate centre stage. In the post industrial society, women are dominating middle management positions with a score a little over 50 per

cent in refreshing contrast to the 25 percent share of 1980. In the banking, insurance and accountancy sectors, WIM have secured about 55 percent share. A white-collar knowledge economy values robust intellectual horsepower, which men and women have in equal amounts (3). A 2011 US study reinforced these findings and suggested that women constitute the pipeline for positions at the highest grade and pay levels in management. The report was quick to add that despite these gains, women still only account for 30% of the Senior Executive Service (4). It is fairly satisfying to find that the glass ceiling has been fractured, but it is rather depressing to realize that it has not been shattered. Discrimination has diminished, but has not disappeared. Even the United Nations has not been able to give WIM their rightful place in UN cadres which abominably hovers around a single digit.

Assuming that carefully designing, painstakingly developing and skilfully implementing strategic women-friendly staffing initiatives with particular attention to mission-critical and "pipeline" occupations is necessary, the Queen Bee Syndrome (QBS) appears as another impediment. QBS describes senior WIM who treats subordinate WIM more critically. This has been documented by several studies. Scientists from the University of Toronto speculated that QBS may be the reason that women find it more stressful to work for women managers. Lord Sugar gave a bitter pill of his prescription and said women were more likely than men to discriminate against a female employee on the grounds of gender. "Women are the biggest offenders. Women know about women," he observed.

### Methodology

A comprehensive literature survey was conducted and an inventory of paradigms, misconceptions and myths concerning WIM was created. This was augmented with a welter of fallacies, beliefs, assumptions, misapprehensions, misunderstandings, stereo-types, sensitivities and insights from grapevine conversations in the campus from faculties and SWIM. Some empirical findings were stated in the contrary format. The total inventory was built up to 400. Out of that 80 were selected and configured around themes and included both synergetic and antagonistic statements. An alphabetical listing of the selected perceptions is appended. The questionnaire was unstructured with questions distanced (QD) in sequence to create intentionally blindness. The questionnaire was pretested in a group of senior SWIM and was reconfigured. Responses were obtained from SWIM in the streams PGDM, MBA Rural and Urban. Control perception responses were obtained from male students also. Responses were

secured on a scale of five and an impact factor (IF) was utilized for assessment. This is an ongoing project study and some of the initial observations are presented in this conference.

## Discussion

The perception of a Glass ceiling is generally recognized by all SWIMS except by the junior MBAs. The response to the statement that -Management profession is male dominated- is strongly negative with a combined IF of 103. PGDM had the highest score followed by urban MBAs and least from rural MBAs. The related derivative assumption -Companies are structured around male life cycle- was answered in the negative with rural MBAs having null response. Most of PGDM senior girls hold the view that management profession is not male dominated. In consonance with this acceptance, they disagreed with the statement that companies are structured around male life cycle. Some professions are more suitable for men than for women-was accepted by all groups except senior rural MBAs. Career advancement strategy is the same for the profession and is gender neutral was the awareness with IF 108. The prescription that intervention is required to manage a women talent supply chain elicited mixed response. PGDM stream was not in favour of intervention while the MBAs endorsed it. There is strong agreement that SWIM can acquire the skills to be successful managers.(IF 171). The cynical perception that gender equality will slowly emerge was introduced with a lag of 37 QD and the score was IF 79. The only group disagreeing with is PGDM Senior. A subset negated glass ceiling concept but agreed with the need for conscious intervention for gender equality. It may appear paradoxical because they are prescribing a solution whose original problem had not been recognized. They conceded that some professions are more suitable for men. WIM articulate their career goals.

Classical wisdom propounds that women are risk averse. This was found to be challenged. Bernd Figner, of Columbia Business School who studied when and how people take risks, suggests women are as likely to step outside their security zones as men. According to a study by *Hedge Fund Research*, "Hedge funds managed by women from January 2000 through May 2009 returned 9 percent gains, compared to 5.8 percent for men. Research from the University of Cologne, Germany has shown that women have a more measured investment style which results in strong performance over time. During the 2008 melt down, women lost only half the money that men lost. Studies have shown women do not avoid risk, but manage risk better than men. Financial meltdown did not affect WIM. In a large survey of C level managers, women were found to be more risk-loving than male directors. Thus, having a woman on the board need not lead to more risk-averse decision-making(6)

In the continuum of opinion regarding the emotional component of WIM on the negotiating table, senior girls tend to disagree but a significant segment opted to keep this in suspended judgement. They have voted for time sensitivity and active listening. There was assertive statement on their being organized. Thus it appears that WIM are ideal negotiators and the negation of emotionality is probably admitted as a favourable factor. Strikingly, they have steered away from taking a position on a specific query on

confrontational negotiation on price volatile commodity procurement. A smaller group specializing on Supply Chain Management significantly abstained from expressing any opinion.

The Mom Track in management is feebly accepted but significant number took null position. IF 72. A large segment in both PGDM seniors and MBA urban group took the null opinion. Family caused career drag was brought to attention shortly after that. IF 59. Null option was still highly used but it swayed the opinion of Senior PGDM considerably with an IF shift of 23. Career disruption by Pregnancy was presented with a QD of 10 and an IF of 76 was observed. The agreement was across all groups. Among urban MBAs and senior PGDM the polarization was sharp and the null option was high in the former. Three more perceptions were introduced immediately in series. Maternal wall disruption scored IF 53. Employer hostility to Maternity scored -14. The Urban MBAs and Senior PGDM rejected employer hostility. Junior PGDM took the opposite view as also urban MBAs. Perception of child-caused career retardation scored IF11 and group IFs were low with bipolarity. When the incompatibility paradigm was plainly introduced an IF of 108 was observed with uniform agreement. After a QD of 14, the singularity model was presented which was opposed with an IF of 163. Later after a QD of 3, Outsourcing childminding service drew an IF of only 6. PGDM seniors came to zero with bipolarity. When the perception of cost to company was tested the score was 101 reflecting no additional burden on company as the consensus. Flexitime and telecommuting were brought as a possible solution to Maternal wall and the response was an IF of 116.

While the invisible and insidious glass ceiling still persists, most WIM hit the 'maternal wall' long before they ever hit the glass ceiling. Joan Williams of the University of California Hastings College of the Law, explained that family responsibilities discrimination, especially against mothers, is pervasive.

Risk aversion scored an IF of only 24 with denial from first year SWIM but a variant introduced after a QD of 59 scored 101 with all groups uniformly rejecting the perception. Positive Relationship skill perception was tested and the IF score came to 61. Senior MBAs rural had the block negative view. Time-sensitivity drew a total score of 67. The block negative view came from the same group. On the scoreboard of communication skills the overall IF was 113 and all groups were consistently positive. The perception that women are more organized secured consensus with an IF of 135. Women are perfectionists and pay attention to details got an IF of 144 with uniform spread with null response from Rural MBAs. Problem solving skills gave a score of 135 and was uniform. Decision making confidence was expressed by all groups against senior PGDM who en bloc expressed diffidence. People skills scored 105 and group wise response was also uniform. Most respondents however gravitated to the view that companies do not regard people skill as executive skill. The perception that women do not climb up corporate ladder because they lack received a negative IF of 162 and was uniformly shared.

The perception that companies do not send women abroad was uniformly contested by all groups with a combined IF of 133 with junior rural MBAs dissenting. Another perception frowned upon heavily was- Women who flirt and dress provocatively get higher pay and promotions- Score was uniform and negative 118. Similarly the view that Women networking and building relationships is looked down upon as flirting was rejected by senior PGDM students while the rest appear to accept this.

Younger men are more supportive of WIM is often paraded as a newfangled perception. This is in agreement with the total and uniform score of 129. Multitasking capability drew high score of 128 with equally strong share of each group. A reflective discussion with the rural MBA group was insightful. Most of them were aware of the parallel processing process in their house by women at home but they naming and articulation brought a concept into their managerial thinking. Acceptance of criticism leading to behaviour modification scored an IF of 125 across all groups. The insight, that WIM on the way up feel the need to prove themselves secured the highest IF of 179. Karen and Madeline reported in a study in **The Journal of Applied Psychology**, that when women were promoted to upper-level management, they subsequently had higher performance ratings.

The respondents were united in their conviction that Company Board diversity is positively related to performance. A Canadian study found 72% of boards with 2 or more women conduct formal board performance evaluations, while 49% of all-male boards do. Another study by Harvard Business School found companies with women board members were more likely than companies with all-male boards to be leaders when ranked by profit. Research by Catalyst Corporation shows that Fortune 500 companies with the highest proportion of women in senior management significantly outperformed others with the lowest proportion in both return on equity and total shareholder return.

Negotiation Skills: SWIM do not like to have a leader in the Negotiation team IF 88. However, Senior PGDM group appreciated the role of a leader. Emotionality was agreed to with an IF of 46 but the urban MBAs took the contrary position. To a supply chain- specific perception that women do not like confrontational negotiation, the overall agreement came in with IF 26. However all MBA groups took contrary position with IF 47. Aggressiveness was selected with an IF of 27 mainly from the PGDM juniors while their seniors held the opposite view. Women fare badly in negotiating their salary evoked mixed response with PGDM stream in favour and MBAs against. In the bargaining for departmental budget, the perception was that SWIM are good at it. Rural MBAs took the contrary view. Value of compassion which conflicts with competitive culture was posited as a perception and it had an IF of 14. Senior PGDM students disagreed with this while senior Rural MBAs agreed with this. Women wait for their turn to talk was uniformly accepted by all groups. Perception on persuasiveness scored 77 across all groups. The widely held view that women managing supply chain would root out corruption emerged in weak agreement with an IF of only 8. Women treat all potential suppliers equally recorded an IF of 68 with all groups converging to the consensus.

Women versus Women: The suggestion that selection of WIM should be by senior women was placed for response and the IF is negative 29. Senior PGDM students at the exit of pipeline ready for entry to the job market favoured this proposal. The view that WIM set high standards for other women was taken in with a positive IF of 8. The intensity is low, because of opposite opinion held by MBAs. Women prefer to work for other women gave a negative IF of 27 signifying slender agreement. Senior PGDM students input to the composite IF was zero with Null and Contrary opinions neutralizing among them. Rural senior MBAs did not prefer to work for other women. QBS was not favoured response with a negative IF 3. PGDM students did not display any sensitivity to QBS. Bipolarity was shifted by urban MBAs existence where as Rural MBAs accepted the perception. That women will not ditch women scored an IF of 87 and was reinforced by the response at a QD of 8 that women favour WIM mentors. The general agreement of the control group of men students with SWIM was satisfactory. A notable feature was their null response (40-50 percent range) on most of women-specific perceptions.

### Conclusions and suggestions

Five problem statement areas namely Glass ceiling, Family Responsibilities Discrimination, Risk Proneness, Negotiation and Intra WIM issues have been identified for further mapping. Based on responses, the corruption depleting potential of WIM with the application of UNICITRAL Model in Supply Management has been recognized for extended studies.

### Acknowledgement:

The authors wish to thank Professor K. Ravikumar Director SICOMS for his support of and encouragement to this ongoing study project. They also thank Dr.P.S.V. Menon, Secretary General, Palakkad Management Association and Professor Geetha Nayar for their support to the project. Thanks are due to PGDM students of SICOMS for test development of the questionnaire. We also record our appreciation of the assistance of Master Sanjith Nambiar, Bombay Scottish School and Jeyachandran, SICOMS with Excel based processing.

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