



Readers' Forum



Modern Civilisation

Polished manners,
Smart looks,
Immaculately dressed –
We call ourselves 'Civilised'
We shed tears for 'Adivasis'
Educate the masses,
Set up foundations
To help the needy,
Devise techniques
To promote materialism.
Perhaps we are too involved
In making new structures,
Sculptures and monuments,
Scores of instant paintings –
No consideration for existing art!
We train archeologists,
Conduct excavations,
Stimulating sensations,
Creating controversy –
A golden opportunity
For press and scholars,
And win laurels for new discoveries.
No wonder,
In the 21st century
The modern-day mentor
The saviour of democracy
Decides to attack an ancient
civilisation,
Destroying the proof of its age-old
wealth
By bombs and looting –
Shaking its very foundations
To start afresh.
Iraqis subdued
The age-old relics destroyed,
The undeclared mission is over;
While the declared 'target'
Saddam Hussein
leaves us all guessing,
What next!

Shiela Gujral, New Delhi

Women in Management

The term "glass ceiling" describes an invisible, artificial barrier that prevents qualified employed women who seek advancement within their organisations from reaching their full potential. This ceiling is a real barrier that is difficult to break and sometimes so subtle that it is often hard to detect. In India, less than three per cent of women in the workforce hold senior managerial positions.

Traditionally, employers stereotyped women for positions requiring zeal, sympathy and intuition. As a result, Indian women were confined to "compassion traps", that is, professions like teaching, nursing and work in social areas. Presently, nearly fifty per cent of women employees in the organised sector are employed in community, social and personal services.

Sometimes women who are compelled to act like men in order to excel and advance through the ranks are then punished for not satisfying stereotyped organisational expectations that they should display a type of nurturing femininity that rules out competitiveness. By contrast, the expectation is that a successful senior manager will be a highly competitive man.

Because women are traditionally assigned to lower levels in organisations, they often lack the resources, status and influence to gain power. Male-dominated hierarchical bureaucracies are detrimental to women seeking managerial promotions to the top; they either exclude them altogether from all but

the lowest levels of the organisational structure or attempt to co-opt a few token women to conform to stereotypes of what masculine behaviour is supposed to include. Khare, in her article "Women Managers – Twice the Work, Half the Reward" states that, despite being a good candidate for a promotion to a managerial job, a woman has to work twice as hard as a man to prove her worth. She notes that, frequently, the few women who beat men to the top are the subject of indiscriminate remarks questioning how they earned their promotion.

A classic example of double standards is that men's weaknesses can be interpreted as strengths or can be overlooked, while supposed female weaknesses are highlighted and used to exclude them. The list given below compares attitudes to men and women.

He's ambitious;

She's pushy.

He's having lunch with the boss;

She's having lunch with the boss.

He must be doing well;

They must be having an affair.

He gets on well with people at work;

She's always gossiping.

He's moving on – he must be a good worker;

She's moving on – women are so unreliable.

At the lower management levels women are typically placed in non-strategic sectors and in personnel and similar administrative positions, rather than in professional and management positions leading to the top. Women at the lower management

level and in non-line positions have to depend on their supervisors to implement their recommendations and ideas. The suggestions, contributions and ideas of women subordinates are often hidden from upper management scrutiny by the male managers within the organisation.

Due to lack of opportunities to obtain appropriate mentoring, women's upward mobility is blocked. Despite alternative ways that women have developed to network with each other, they report limited results, since men continue to hold most of the decision-making power in the business world. Golf outings, for example, at country clubs that do not allow women members, business lunches at all-male clubs, and deals

made through an "old boys network" often explicitly exclude women.

For women with family responsibilities, their upward movement may be hampered as they juggle time between career and family. These women carry a double load as employees and housewives. They are trying to be "supermoms" and reconcile tradition and modernity. The parenting role has always been a constraint for women trying to break the glass-ceiling. It is a well-known fact that family responsibilities fall inappropriately on women and few organisations provide senior managers flexi-hours to enable them to deal with such responsibilities. Even in the rare instances when these family-friendly policies are offered by companies,

women who make use of them are treated differently and are perceived to be less committed to the company and their own career development.

Organisations should be alarmed at the prospect of losing women's role in management; the negligence of women employees will cause the organisation to lose invaluable talents, skills, intelligence, experience and commitment. In Kanter's words, "*The equality of women is a competitive necessity.*" If organisations that discriminate against women employees don't change, these skilled, creative professionals will be snapped up by competitors who will perform far better than more traditional companies.

R. Sujatha, Chennai □

Girl Interrupted – You Too, America?

Economists Gordon B. Dahl and Enrico Moretti, while studying the persistent wage gap between men and women, looked at patterns in the US census that could indicate whether parents favoured boy children over girls. The results were shocking. In every decade since the 1940s, couples with girls divorced more often than those with boys. The unmistakable difference happened in every region of the country and more often among whites than blacks and among people with high school diplomas than those with college degrees. Over the last sixty years, families who only had girls had 6, 8, 10 and 13 per cent higher divorce rates if they had respectively one, two, three or four girls, as against families with only boys in similar numbers.

Whatever the cause, the effects are as obvious as they are pernicious. Children from divorced families are twice as likely to drop out of school, become unmarried parents or be jobless as adults as against children from two-parent families. The new research shows that girls are bearing more than their share of these costs. Says Shelly Lundberg of the University of Washington, Seattle, "How families operate and how husbands and wives make decisions has important economic implications."

Taken together, this research strongly suggests that the age-old favouring of boys is not confined to the past or to developing countries like China and India. It is subtle and less widespread than it once was in the United States but it still gives boys an important leg-up. Apart from differences in financial terms, parents, especially fathers, seem to spend more time on the upbringing of boys, leading to stronger family bonds. With increasingly refined sex-selection techniques, a population may emerge that is disproportionately weighted in favour of males, with deep-ranging social and ethical consequences.

Summarised from "It's a Girl! Will the Economy Suffer?" by David Leonhardt,

The New York Times, October 26, 2003.