

An Occasion to Celebrate, Reflect & Evolve...

Mar 08, 2023

Hillary Clinton once said, *"Women are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world."*

It's time that we reflect on women's journey in the professional arena that has conventionally been male dominated and ponder upon the reforms that are still in the offing. On the occasion of the International Women's Day, Taxsutra reached out to distinguished women professionals in the field of taxation. They share their life experiences, success mantra, how the professional ecosystem has evolved over the years and advise for young women professionals!



Renu Narvekar

Managing Director Tax, India & South Asia Markets, Standard Chartered Bank

Gender equality in professional life - reality or myth:

Equality is not a gender issue; it's a social and economic imperative. For us to define gender equality is one thing, to ensure that women are really empowered is another. I would like to think that we have come a long way in empowering women and creating equal opportunities at the workplace; however, for gender equality to genuinely become accomplished, a lot has still to change for example, our society's outlook towards gender and our age-old beliefs needs to be reformed.

For example, it is believed that "Women are less ambitious about career goals. Women lack confidence because they are afraid of failure." But the truth is there is no "confidence issue" among professional women. It is the way people perceive women's behaviours that hinder their success at the workplace. People often jump into assumptions of "normal" based on the common male traits and fail to recognize that women and men are inherently different. We should be celebrating men and women's differences, not judging them. Focus more on the results and less on the style.

The myths we hear, and talk are false. Women are ready for challenges, and we do not need to be fixed. By changing the narrative, we think differently about women and not hold them back anymore. Let's ensure that every individual can be their genuine selves and exploit their full potential. This is the only way we can create a workplace with equal voice and equal representation for women and men - where everyone sees equal.

When we achieve gender parity, it's not only women who win but men, businesses, economy, and the next generations to come.

Please share your journey on how you went about breaking the glass ceiling in your organisation/ profession

To break the glass ceiling, you first must identify it. The way to tackle it is, learn more about it, raise your concerns, and take responsibility for your own development.

Some of the steps I went through, which could resonate with many are:

- Volunteer for opportunities in leadership roles: volunteering to take extra job responsibilities or work on projects, lead a team, chair meetings, represent the organisation in events, etc. It shows that you're prepared to handle more prominent roles and provides all-around experience and insight crucial for leadership positions.
- Establish yourself as an expert: As a professional, you can break the glass ceiling by establishing yourself as an expert and sharing your values and experiences with others. You can write a blog, create a website, or use professional online accounts to write about your ideas, industry knowledge and engage with other professionals. Speaking during events and meetings, attending conferences and mentoring others, reflects leadership. You can become a respected leader in your area of expertise by positioning yourself well and expanding your audience.
- Maintain a positive attitude: A positive attitude is a key to success, as challenges often accompany opportunities in every aspect of life. It's essential to maintain a positive attitude and help others, even when faced with difficulties. Use the definition of the glass ceiling to understand and combat instances of the glass ceiling within your organisation, stay motivated and motivate others and work well with colleagues and stakeholders. Good leaders support their teams.
- Be patient, but assertive. Dismantling a glass ceiling will take time but check in regularly with your manager to see what progress is being made. Don't allow those at the top to "park" or forget the issue.
- Take responsibility for your own development. If you're not being given the opportunities that you feel you deserve in your current situation, it might be time to seek them elsewhere.

Is the world more accepting/ ready for ambitious women?

Today there is more acceptance than ever before that women bring different experiences, perspectives and skills to the table, and make irreplaceable contributions to decisions, policies and laws that work better for all.

Women have a lot to celebrate as the glass ceiling is breaking globally. Whether it is Kamala Harris becoming the first female Vice President of the USA; Diana Trujillo Pomerantz, leading NASA aerospace engineer who is responsible for the robotic arm of the Perseverance rover on Mars, Nirmala Seetharaman, the Finance Minister of India, or even the many women who are now on the Board of Companies, CEO's as well as the women who have started their own businesses, obviously exhibiting enough confidence to succeed on their own.

Your advice to young womenfolk

My advice to young womenfolk would be:

Don't let a lack of the "right" credentials hold you back: Believe in yourself and trust your own judgement, don't be swayed by others' opinions. You can do or be anything you want to do or be if you believe it strongly enough.

Don't be afraid to dream big: Set your goals from day one super high. Write them down. Have confidence in your convictions always

Be brave: There are amazing opportunities for women today, and it's for us to take them.

Define success your way: Don't take yourself seriously and don't try to be a perfectionist or be a Superwoman. Don't try living up to someone else's ideals/ expectations, instead of your own. Success will be defined differently at different points in your career, and it's okay. What's good for you, may not be good for someone else, but all that really matters is your happiness.



Vandana Sagar

Principal Commissioner of Income -tax

Gender equality in professional life - reality or myth?

Reality (my experience)

Please share your journey on how did you go about breaking the glass ceiling in your organization/ profession?

I NEVER fretted over gender issues; always treated myself as a “person” rather than as a “women”- inside and outside the office. From the earliest time I can recall, I was treated like an equal by my parents. It got ingrained in me to treat others equally. Gender never became a bias-factor and I never measured myself with other’s opinions rather measured myself by my own internal sense of accomplishment. In the same way I always felt others treated me like any other male colleague. That made the journey smooth, just competence-based.

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Its moving in that direction. I have more opportunities than my mother did and my daughters have many more opportunities than I have had. Times are changing.

The reaction of the world to the recent diplomatic mishap called “sofagate” is a pointer to that. When the first female head of the European Commission was sidelined by her male teammate in the seating arrangement while meeting with the Turkey President, it drew adverse reactions from all corners.

Your advice to young womenfolk:

Don’t let gender issues rankle your mind (or at least not so much as to swerve your focus away). The world will treat you as you treat yourself. When you have a male child, don’t treat him with a bias. Sensitise him to the other gender which will help him to pitch in to create a culture of respect for women. They (women) do not look for a favorable treatment; just don’t discriminate adversely. If you have daughters, don’t wire them to have self doubt all the time. Don’t look for a female role model who is doing a man’s job well. A homemaker can very well be one.



Anuprita Mehta

Head-Taxation, ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel India Ltd.

Gender equality in professional life - reality or myth?

No doubt that there is much more awareness about gender equality now than ever before, and it’s a reality that a lot more is being done in terms of recruitment of women in the corporate world, but it is also true that a lot more needs to be done towards creating a conducive environment for them to not just stay the course but also grow.

To promote gender equity and not just equality, the corporates need to help women balance work and home, by offering flexible working hours or work from home options, when their personal situation warrants it, without, of course, compromising on quality of work or deadlines.

Cases of women returning to work after a sabbatical or break are far and few to be considered a reality. Women in leadership roles are also fewer than what might be considered a good balance, and therefore a

reality.

To bring in gender equality, there needs to be a mindset change to shed gender biases and break stereotypes and discrimination. There is a need to 'EmbraceEquity' in line with the theme of International Women's Day 2023.

Please share your journey on how did you go about breaking the glass ceiling in your organization/ profession.

While I was fortunate to receive professional education from my loving parents, like most women, I juggled a hectic work schedule and household responsibilities. Statutory paid maternity leave was only 3 months unlike 6 months today. I was advised bed rest during my last month of pregnancy and was left with maternity leave of only 2 months post-delivery. Without an extension, and due to financial compulsion, I was left with no choice but to leave my 2 month old baby under my mother's care and resume office. There was no VPN access or 'work from home' then. I fondly remember those days at PwC, which was like an extended family for me, when I used to take my son to office on Saturdays during busy season; he played by himself but was just happy to see me around.

As a tax professional, life in consulting or industry demands long hours to keep pace with the high-performance work culture of the organization and gearing up to the changes in the tax world. Continuous education is an important element of professional development. I ensured I made it a priority to get additional certifications such as CPA and Enrolled Agent with the U.S. IRS. I also had the privilege to be accepted to Harvard Business School's Senior Executive Leadership Program.

Fortunately, my supportive parents (especially, my mother, who relentlessly took care of my son while I was away), career mentors and my trusted domestic helpers, gave me the strength and confidence to stay on course and excel professionally.

I cannot forget my professional colleagues and managers who helped me grow. Most of them were men! They were also very supportive in me fulfilling my role as a mother - attending to my son's milestone events, medical needs, studies and exams. In turn, I used technology to my advantage to conscientiously manage work while commuting or late in the night.

My approach is not to ask for a reservation or a special treatment as a woman but equal respect for my talent and achievement. While I faced many challenges in my personal life, I learnt to compartmentalize professional and personal life and not let one get in the way of the other. This required inner engineering of my body, mind and soul!

Is the world more accepting/ready for ambitious women?

Women constitute 50% of the population globally, but they generate just 37% of the GDP. Women are hugely influential when it comes to making purchasing decisions. Globally, women control over USD 40 trillion in consumer spending. That's a lot of buying power to connect with.

According to McKinsey, the most gender-diverse companies are 21% more likely to experience above-average profitability. Excellence does not discriminate between genders. Instead, it promotes gender equality.

The economic participation of women will come through when the broader societal aspects of gender inequality are addressed. Indeed, the two go hand in hand. Governments and businesses must therefore consider how to safeguard girls' education, tackle violence against women, and protect maternal health.

Inherent differences between men and women makes a fabulous combination at the workplace. Having both women and men in your teams will bring in multiplicity of perspectives, can spark creativity and [innovation](#), and help organizations spot and seize new opportunities.

We are seeing conscious efforts of organizations to accept women in the work place across all levels. Mandatory requirement to have a woman as an Independent Director on the Board of the Companies is also a means to bring diverse and balanced viewpoints in the management of the company. However, we

have a long way to go to reach the desired outcome on gender equality.

Your advice to young womenfolk

India is growing exponentially and there is tremendous emphasis on Diversity and Inclusion. There is ample opportunity for us women to make our mark and be financially independent. It is up to us to grab those opportunities and rise high, navigating through all life challenges. Convert your challenges into opportunities, don't hesitate to ask for help. Look at the bigger picture and move on. Pat yourself and cheer up! At the end of the day, you will certainly feel proud of your achievements and realize that all the struggles were absolutely worth it!!!



Sumita Thomas

Tax Head at Intel Technology India Pvt. Ltd.

Gender equality in professional life - reality or myth

I think the phrase 'gender equality' has evolved over time. It means different things to different people. Further, women are no longer seeking gender equality, but rather equity, because every individual needs different measures to grow and sustain. What works for one, may not work for the other, and so, it's equity and not equality that is needed by women and men professionals alike. Organizations are increasingly appreciating this and coming up with ways to make everyone feel welcomed and bring their true self to work.

So, I believe it's not a myth, however, it's not reality enough for everyone everywhere, and much more needs to be done in this area.

Please share your journey on how did you go about breaking the glass ceiling in your organization/profession

I started out as a young, chartered accountant that was passionate about working in the tax function. I was fortunate to have come across opportunities that allowed me to do just that. Passion, patience, and perseverance helped me to overcome many obstacles along the way. I also had great role models to look up to as well as mentors in both my professional and private life.

Is the world more accepting/ready for ambitious women

Absolutely, I believe the world has always been ready, and has never stood in the way of any ambitious person. I say this is especially true in our own country than anywhere else. India has so much diversity and women have a lot more voice and opportunity here in India than anywhere outside.

Advice to young womenfolk

Follow your dreams, create your own path, and grab every opportunity that comes your way. Speak up for yourself and for your teams, invest in building a professional network, seek out mentors and sponsors, and always consider feedback as a gift that helps you improve and become better.



Priya Kannan

Vice President, Global Tax at Sutherland Global Services Pvt. Ltd.

The percent of women in the corporate workforce has increased exponentially in the past few years. While there is a good gender ratio in the start of the line, the number of women thin out as the ranks become more senior. Only some women can break not only the glass ceilings at work but also manage the support that is required from a personal standpoint, to grow consistently in their careers. Glass ceilings are many, and only the women can see and feel them. Some examples I can think of – peers / bosses who do not value the level of efficiency that women bring in, to complete work on time, as they need to rush home to start work there; generalizations about women being aggressive or pushy when any woman is firm; snide glances and chuckles when women are promoted; complaints of being uncomfortable being brushed away in lieu of being a “team player”; being the only woman in a group of 20+ people in a Board room/ conference. And then there are the steel meshes that we women put up for ourselves, trying to be superwomen balancing life and work, get it right 100% of the time, taking failings very personally, lack of support for maternity and childcare/ parent care. Between all the ceilings and meshes, it is no wonder that women in the corporate workforce start to drop off as the levels go higher. But here, I must also say that Corporate India has seen a better gender ratio in some sectors, especially service sectors, and with stronger harassment laws in place and DEI policies being adopted, one should hope that every woman would be able to have the choice in go far in her chosen career path. My only wish for all the bright-eyed ladies stepping out into the sun is that they stay strong and ignore the multitude of voices (in their heads and outside) when they want to raise a point, when they want to shine and soar high! Happy Women’s Day to all, and more strength to all the women out there, making every day count!