

Making way through the ‘glass ceiling’: Leadership through gender lens

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Abstract

The workplace we encounter today reflects an almost prismatic medley of individuals in terms of gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, physical abilities, age, socio-economic status and sexual orientation. The present study investigated if the gender of the subordinates impacts the supervisor's evaluation of their leadership effectiveness. A

sample of 82 subordinates (45 males and 37 females) working in managerial capacity and their 32 supervisors (22 males and 10 females) participated in the study. The supervisors rated their subordinates on their effectiveness as a leader at the workplace using Leadership Effectiveness Scale by Ng et al. (2008). Data was analysed using t-tests for independent samples. Results indicated no significant difference between male and female

employees on leadership effectiveness ($t=0.27$, $p>0.05$) or any of its dimensions. This implies that gender roles at the workplace are becoming less rigid, pointing towards a silver lining in the perceived glass ceiling.

Keywords

Leadership, Leadership effectiveness, gender differences, stereotypes, diversity

1. Introduction

The recent World Economic Outlook Update has predicted that the Indian economy is set to grow by 7.4% in the current year and by 7.9% in 2019 becoming the fastest growing economy in the world (PTI, 2018). From the potential employee viewpoint, this leads to an expectation of rise in employment opportunities but from a HR practitioner's perspective, this gives rise to certain issues and challenges that require careful consideration and resolution (Malik &

Kaur, 2017). Some of the developments that need to be addressed include-increased global competition (Sharma, 2014), data driven policies and decision making (Maxwell et al., 2016), new technological advances, firm restructuring, outsourcing, new HR practices, responsible leadership (Shi & Ye, 2017), work life balance, employee well-being and most importantly diversity management (Rao & Bagali, 2014). The workplace we encounter today reflects an almost prismatic medley of individuals from various backgrounds (Patrick & Kumar, 2012). The unprecedented diversity has been contributed in terms of gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, physical abilities, age, socio-economic status and sexual orientation (Shore et al., 2009). The organizational professionals and researchers stand firm to embrace, respect and celebrate this diversity. The

present study also looks at one such aspect of workplace- gender.

1.1 Gender at work place

Gender is a social concept which influences our beliefs, opinions, ideas, expectations and behaviour, no matter which culture we are a part of (Chartschlaa, 2004). Gender impacts working life of both men and women, albeit in different ways. Research suggests antecedents of gender diversity include how people relate to diversity, task gender orientation, organization's commitment and statements about diversity and group efficacy (Shore et al., 2009). It is an inescapable fact that despite the progress we have made, women still face certain issues like unequal remuneration (Kirton & Greene, 2009), juggling work-life balance, sexual harassment at the work

place etc., which need to be worked out. Various theories like radical feminism, post structuralism, Marxist, dual systems perspective and human capital approach give different understanding of gender differences.

There are gender stereotypes that operate at workplace. For instance, certain jobs are believed to be better suited for men and some for women. Doering and Thebaud (2017) suggest that such job gender stereotyping may lead to their authority being questioned and their work being devalued. Another stereotype is that when women adopt assertive and no-nonsense attitude they are seen as abrasive or "too manly" (Brown, 1979). The differential treatment of women is often explained by gender role stereotyping perspective, that is, the socialization of women shape their behaviour in such a way that is in direct incongruence with the requirements of a successful managerial

position (Mihail, 2006). Another important concern is benevolent sexism at workplace which may be responsible for women's being exposed to less challenging developmental work experiences, in turn contributing to their underrepresentation at higher positions. Since women have been traditionally associated with less power, this may translate to lesser respect or unequal power dynamics at work (Benschop & Dooreward, 1998), for instance, some male subordinates may resist the supervision of female superiors. The issue of gender triggers is salient to the workplace. These can be defined as situational factors that make gender relevant to behavior or expectations for instance, in negotiation of salary (Riley & McGinn, 2002).

In terms of inclusion of women in workforce, the World Economic Forum recently revealed that if women's participation in the Indian workforce

increases by 10%, it would translate into 700 billion dollars being added to India's GDP by 2025. Even though the share of women acquiring higher education has risen in the past few years, their participation in the workforce is about only 28% as compared to men's 82% (Catalyst, 2017). As per the Economic Survey of India 2017, the female labour force participation has actually reduced to 24% in 2015-2016 from 36% in 2005-2006. This may be because of personal variables like ambition, work goals, family variables or organizational variables like industry, occupation, social networks etc. or social norms and mobility constraints. Despite this, the pay gap has reduced in India, to women now earning about 62% of their male colleagues earning in India. This is in no way ideal but it is a step forward.

As Vogel et al. (2003) have also pointed out that whenever men and women show gender differences, these displays

often fit the stereotypical expectations as understood by others. Many stereotypes operating at the workplace can be attributed to the stereotypical assumptions regarding men and women that echo and reinforce their traditional social roles with women as the central caregivers and men as the main breadwinners in a family (Eagly & Wood, 2012; 1999). These stereotypes are developed and changed “by repeatedly observing members of different social groups in role linked activities” (Miller et al., 2015). We also need to keep in mind the other side of gender difference. In line with this, the gender similarities hypothesis suggests that stereotypes often lead to inflation of differences between the two genders even though they mostly behave or think similarly on most psychological variables (Hyde, 2014).

The recent “Me Too” movement, increased awareness, active presence of media, determination to raise one’s voice

for one’s rights, transition in the mentality of the millennials about equality, presence of equal opportunity cells and availability of day care centres represent some ways in which women may be integrated in organizations.

1.2 Gender from supervisor’s perspective

One aspect of the supervisory duties includes evaluation of subordinates by supervisors. This is pivotal because it leads to decisions regarding pay, transfer, promotion, training and development (Baruch, 1996). Performance of the employees can be evaluated using various techniques like rating scales, MBO, graphic scales, BARS, written narratives etc.

Researchers believe that use of such subjective methods in appraisal may lead to bias such as halo error, leniency

and severity errors, similar-to-me error etc. in evaluations. Bol (2011) found that employee performance, supervisor's characteristics, difference between organizational level of supervisor and subordinate, and duration of their relationship might determine the bias. The quality of the relationship between the supervisors and subordinates may be influenced by gender. Hindes & Andrews (2011) found that supervisors use different strategies with men and women supervisee; and that male supervisors tend to rate hypothetical female supervisees more negatively than male supervisee. Similar pro-male bias has been reported by other researchers (Davison & Burke, 2000; Maurer & Taylor, 1994). This bias is often explained in terms of gender stereotypes. Supervisors with such stereotypes are more likely to be affected by gender bias and perhaps rate women negatively (Bauer & Baltes, 2002). Thus, previous research

suggests that supervisors should be vigilant while taking decisions and arriving at conclusions.

1.3 Gender and leadership effectiveness

Notar et al. (2008) conceptualized nine tenets of effective leader- they think and act strategically, understand as well as demonstrate elements of team work, master small group decision making, clearly define roles and relationship, abide by leader-subordinate partnership, implement systematic evaluation of policy, allocate time and energy, set clear rules for meetings, learn and develop continuously as leader. Effectiveness has been found to be influenced by professional, personal, strategic, social and intercultural competencies of a leader (Seiler & Pfister, 2009). The presence of female leadership in the corporate world has always been a

subject of debate. Cohen and Huffman (2007) suggested two analogies for women in positions of authority. First, as change agents bringing change in their subordinates; and the other as cogs in the wheel. Though we see women engaged in different jobs in various industries yet they are not represented equally at the top tiers. The presence of 'invisible barriers' which inhibit the advancement or progress of minorities and women to higher leadership position is called the glass ceiling effect (Weyer, 2007). This is in part resultant of the gender stereotype that women are somehow less competent than men to hold such positions.

Gender stereotypes related with leadership purport that women usually have democratic leadership style and men have task based style (Powel & Graves, 2003). Women have been associated with communal leadership style as compared to men who have been associated with

agentive leadership style (Eagly et al., 1992). Some researchers have pointed out that men use different leadership styles than women (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Statham, 1987; Winther & Green, 1987). Van der Boon (2003) suggested that women tend to be more effective in dealing with relationships, emotions and empathy. On the other hand, some researchers have found that men and women leaders do not differ either in their use of task and interpersonal aspects of leadership style or in their effectiveness (Eagly et al., 1995). Both have been found to be equally effective, with women highlighting their group membership in their communication and men being more firm in their message delivery (Timko, 2017). So the research on leadership effectiveness is also mixed (Chakraborty & Serra, 2017).

As is evident by now, research on gender and leadership is divided in its

findings. Considering the mixed results and paucity of comparative researches in the Indian setting, the present study seeks to investigate the effect of gender on leadership effectiveness. The following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on leadership effectiveness based on supervisors' ratings.

H2: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on 'planning ability'.

H3: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on 'setting directions'.

H4: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on 'delegating and assigning tasks'.

H5: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on 'coordinating tasks'.

H6: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on 'ability to communicate'.

H7: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on 'leading by example'.

H8: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on 'creating team spirit'.

H9: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on 'using rewards and punishment'.

H10: There will be significant difference between male and female subordinates on 'overall leadership effectiveness'.

2. Method

2.1 Measurement tools

Leadership effectiveness of participants was assessed using the LES scale developed by Ng et al. (2008). It comprises of 9 items measuring task, conceptual and interpersonal skills of leaders, for instance, ability to communicate, setting direction, delegating tasks etc. It is a seven point Likert scale which requires the supervisors to respond to these items on 7-points anchored from 1 (Very poor relative to his peers) and 7 (Very good relative to his peers). A robust Cronbach's alpha was reported (0.94).

2.2 Participants

The sample in the present study constituted of 32 supervisors and 82 employees both males and females currently working in different managerial

capacities, mostly as first time managers or middle managers in the service sector from three multinational corporations in the Delhi-NCR region. The sample specifications are as follows:

Table 1: Demographic specification

Groups	Gender	
Subordinates (N=82)	Males	45
	Females	37
Supervisors (N=32)	Males	22
	Females	10

2.3 Procedure

Three medium to large MNCs operating in Delhi-NCR were contacted for participation in the study. Both the supervisor and subordinate participants voluntarily participated after building a rapport and ensuring confidentiality. The informed consent form was filled and basic demographic information was taken like age, tenure etc. The supervisors were

asked to rate their subordinates on leadership effectiveness using the aforementioned instrument on seven point Likert scale. The data was collected in one-on-one setting as per the convenience and time of the participants. Any questions or queries from the participants were answered after the conduction.

Data was analyzed using SPSS version 16.0. *t*-test for independent samples was used to determine the significance of difference between males and females on leadership effectiveness, as assessed by their supervisors.

3. Results

Table 2 presents the results of *t* tests done to see if men and women subordinates differed in supervisor's ratings of their leadership effectiveness. The participants were given a slightly higher than average ratings (means= 4.80 and 4.86 for men and women respectively) for their leadership effectiveness. As table 2 clearly indicates, no significant difference was found between the leadership effectiveness of the male and female participants in the sample ($t=0.27$, $p>0.05$) leading us to reject the first hypothesis. This implies that both genders are equally effective as leaders in their respective jobs.

Table 2: Comparison between males and females on leadership effectiveness

Competency	Males (N=45)		Females (N=37)		t-value	p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
LES	4.80	1.03	4.86	0.87	0.27	0.78

Planning ability	4.84	1.17	5.08	1.90	0.94	0.35
Setting directions	4.58	1.78	4.49	0.96	0.38	0.70
Delegating tasks	4.69	1.36	4.89	1.25	0.73	0.47
Coordinating tasks	4.91	1.31	5.27	1.02	1.36	0.18
Ability to communicate	4.93	1.19	5.41	1.04	1.89	0.06
Leading by example	4.87	1.27	4.62	1.23	0.88	0.38
Creating team spirit	5.04	1.26	4.76	1.21	1.04	0.30
Using Reward & Punishment	4.53	1.04	4.49	1.15	0.19	0.85
Overall leadership effectiveness	4.78	1.15	4.70	1.05	0.31	0.76

t-tests were also done to see if there were any significant differences between men and women in the various competencies that make up leadership effectiveness. As clearly seen from Table 1, none of these differences have emerged out to be significant, leading us to reject all the remaining hypotheses as well. Firstly, as can be seen from Table 2 and Figure 1, no significant difference was found between the ratings given to male and

female subordinates on their ‘planning ability’ as leaders ($t= 0.94$, $p>0.05$). No significant difference was found in their ability for ‘setting directions’ too ($t=0.38$, $p>0.05$). The t-test done to see whether there was difference in men and women’s ability to ‘delegate and assign tasks’ also resulted in no significant statistical difference ($t=0.73$, $p>0.05$) suggesting they are equally competent in this area. Despite women given higher ratings for ‘coordinating tasks’, the t-test was found to be not significant ($t=1.36$, $p>0.05$)

indicating that men and women subordinates do not differ in their ability to coordinate tasks. Similarly, the mean score for women was greater than the men but there was no significant difference ($t=1.89$, $p>0.05$) between the two groups in terms of their 'ability to communicate'. A non significant t value of 0.88 ($p>0.05$) indicates that men and women subordinates were capable of leading others by setting an example to a similar extent. Interestingly, the men participants scored a higher mean than women participants on the competency of 'creating team spirit' but this difference was statistically not significant ($t=1.04$, $p>0.05$). For both competencies

represented by 'using rewards and punishment' ($t=0.19$, $p>0.05$) and 'overall leadership effectiveness' ($t=0.31$, $p>0.05$), the mean scores for men was marginally higher than women but the t -tests conducted found no significant difference between the two gender in terms of either rewarding and punishing other or their effectiveness as leaders. Thus, the results indicate that both men and women participants were perceived as equally effective leaders on task, conceptual, and interpersonal aspects of leadership by their supervisors. Thus, gender had no significant effect on leadership effectiveness.

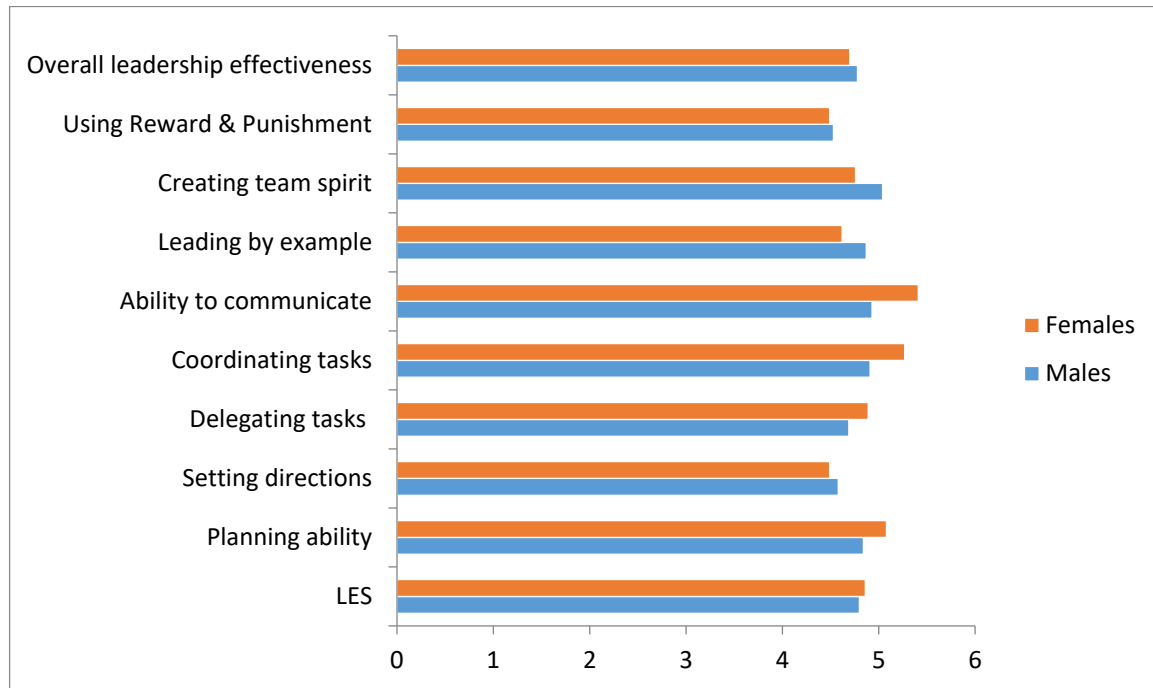


Figure 1. Differences between males and females on leadership effectiveness and its various competencies

4. Discussion

The current study was designed to understand whether men and women differ in leadership effectiveness from the ratings given by their supervisors. The present study showed that men and women were similar in their leadership effectiveness and equally good. These results are in line with that of Bohnet et al. (2012), Timko (2017) and Paustian-Underdahl et al.

(2014). Shahmandi et al. (2012) also reported no significant difference between the two genders on dimensions of leadership effectiveness like “organizational strategy”, “resource management”, “communication”, “collaboration” and “professionalism” that overlap to some extent to the dimensions of leadership effectiveness in the present study. The similarities of mean score between men and women and the lack of a significant difference can be explained

through gender similarities hypothesis. Hyde (2005) has suggested taking a realistic view of gender differences rather than overrate or exaggerated them. She has cautioned researchers to take into account the context while we are looking at them. She postulated the gender similarities hypothesis after conducting a thorough meta-analysis which holds that men are similar to women on most psychological variables, as she found almost zero to small effect size regarding differences between men and women. Perhaps leadership effectiveness is one such psychological variable where men and women are more similar than different. Both genders were found to be equally effective on major competencies like planning, delegating, leadership by example, coordinating etc. It is also possible that changing HR policies in Indian organizations, adherence to affirmative action, changing attitudes

about sharing financial responsibilities, etc. (Haines et al., 2016) may provide similar opportunities to both men and women. Zell et al (2015) also found a very small gender difference on cognitive variables, well being, social personality variables across cultures, concluding that “distribution of males and females on most variables overlap by about 84%”.

Another explanation that sheds light on the present results comes from the social role congruent theory. The central tenet of social role theory suggests that it is the socialization experiences of men and women and the formation of gender role that support the division of labour (Eagly & Wood, 2016). These cultural and social expectations are also called gender stereotypes leading to the belief that there are male and female specific careers. It is possible that perhaps there is a real change in the roles of men and women at homes, schools, sports and higher educational

institutions in our society. Perhaps over time the social roles associated with men and women have become less traditional and rigid.

Haines et al. (2016) compared the prevalence of gender stereotypes from 1980s to 2014 and found that men and women are equally seen as active, standing up under pressure, making decisions easily and not giving up easily. Maurer and Taylor (1994) argued that the sex of the subordinates may not matter, thus negating the pro-male bias in evaluation but suggested that perceived masculinity and femininity of subordinates with respect to the jobs may play a role in gender bias. Since recent research shows that leadership roles are not so clearly segregated on the basis of gender, with men and women using similar leadership styles to similar degrees (Kent et al., 2010; Zell et al., 2015), it is likely that the effect of perceived masculinity and femininity

associated with such roles has mellowed down as compared to what it was earlier. Hence, it can be argued that the supervisors in the present sample focused more on what constitutes effective performance as an effective leader rather than the perceived masculinity and femininity.

With the focus on good leadership with ethical conduct gaining momentum in recent times, it is possible that leadership effectiveness has indeed become androgynous (Park, 1996; Koenig et al., 2011). Also, as Maurer and Taylor (1994) also suggest that if females are perceived to have necessary characteristics to be successful in a male typed job and males in a female typed job, then the supervisor may not rate them negatively and this may work in their favour, but the supervisor's attitude may moderate the ratings in that case.

Since there is a lot of attention on training and development of an effective

workforce, it is possible that the supervisors in the current sample could have been aware of the biases involved in evaluation process may have taken into account their shortcomings, before, during and after the process resulting in similar ratings for men and women subordinates.

It is also equally probable that leadership effectiveness as a psychological construct working in the organizational space did not have many differentiated “gender triggers” (Riley & McGinn, 2002), thereby, making gender less salient as compared to actual performance (Bohnet et al. 2012) in the supervisor’s evaluation of the male and female participants’ leadership effectiveness. Various legislations have been drafted to make organizations equal opportunity providers seeing specifically gender participation (Wu & Cheng, 2016). Some of the measures of this policy have been found to lead to positive changes towards

reducing gender inequality in terms of participation, pay and promotions. Recent thrust in this area may also be another factor that cognizance about gender issues has developed and could have resulted in similar ratings of men and women on leadership effectiveness.

Since no difference was found in the supervisors’ evaluation of male and female subordinates’ leadership effectiveness, it is perhaps prudent to say that in the coming times women may have a better chance of being seen as effective leaders, on par with their male counterparts, considered equal in taking important leadership positions. This perhaps bespeaks of a silver lining in the perceived glass ceiling (Jolls, 2002) in the organizations.

5. Scope and limitations

The results have significant implications for researchers and professionals. It cautions the researchers to

be extra careful while looking at the gender differences in psychological variables, not to inflate them but at the same time not negate them. Since the present research found similarities in leadership effectiveness between men and women, one may argue about the changing understanding of glass ceiling effect in organizations. The sample was small and therefore the generalizability of the findings may be questioned. Also, since it was a purely quantitative study no qualitative information was taken. For future research, the effect of the rater's gender may be studied in a larger sample in different industries along with qualitative data.

6. Conclusion

Effective leaders are the need of the hour for development of both

organizations and societies. The gender of the subordinates was not found to impact the leadership effectiveness scores given by the supervisors indicating that both men and women employees were seen to equally effective as leaders, thus providing hope that the workplace would become more egalitarian in future.

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