

THE OTHER HALF

The road to the top

Kalpna Sharma

THEY adorn the covers of magazines, the front pages of newspapers. The Teen Deviyan Sheila Dikshit, Vasundhara Raje and Uma Bharati, the three new women chief ministers are being heralded as the symbol of a new day for women in India. Following their election, we now have five women chief ministers in India. So sisters, we should celebrate. But should we?

Increasing the number of women chief ministers by over 100 per cent is a bit like having more women on the boards of major corporations. The latter usually get there because they are members of families that own the companies, the former because politics has become a family business. At least two of the five women chief ministers fall into the latter category.

As a result, they represent nothing more or less than the fact that dynastic politics and keeping business within the family are still established norms in this country. Certainly in terms of assessing an increase in opportunities for women in politics or in business such statistics represent very little, in fact nothing.

Even as there is much talk about "women power" in politics and the "women's vote," it is useful to consider what happens to women who enter business, not just family business. An interesting study by Ujvala Rajadhyaksha, a former Indian Institute of Management (Ahmedabad) graduate, on three corporations in India and the career paths of their women managers throws up some important issues.

Rajadhyaksha studied one financial company and two fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies, both subsidiaries of multinationals. She looked not just at the number of women in top management but conducted qualitative research by speaking to the women who worked within these organisations to see how they perceived the work atmosphere and whether they felt they had a chance of moving ahead in their careers.

The results provide us with interesting insights into the complexities of women's progress, something that is not achieved by having a few symbolic women at the top. What we really need are systemic changes. In the long run, such changes benefit everyone, not just women.

A survey done by Catalyst, a non-profit research organisation committed to the advancement of women in business, reveals that of the Fortune 500 companies worldwide, women constituted only 13.6 per cent of directors. But this was an improvement on 1995, when the percentage was 9.5 per cent. Only one Indian company appears on the Fortune 500 list. Even without equivalent data for

the top 500 companies in India, one can safely conclude that the percentage of women at the very top would be insubstantial.

Predictably, the media projects the few women who do make it to the top, making us believe that there is a sustainable change in the gender equations within corporations and businesses.

The real story is somewhat different. It begins at business school where the percentage of women students remains in the region of 10 per cent. So compared to the number of men entering the market each year, women remain a very small minority.

Then, as Rajadhyaksha found in her study, some companies continue to function in ways that are specifically unhelpful to women. One of the FMCG companies she studied, for instance, had an in-house training programme that made no concessions to the specific difficulties that women might face. For women managers to survive the initiation, they had to set aside all personal choices, such as marriage and children, and essentially become one of the guys. If they got through this early period, they might be noticed for a higher position. But once again, the nature of the company, its orientation towards marketing and sales, meant that women had to be prepared to be transferred and to work in smaller towns. This necessitated separation from families.

For younger women, often recently married with small children, such transfers forced them to resign. The company did not try and work out alternatives for women caught in this bind. As a result, this company had no women in the senior most strata of managers and certainly no women on its board of directors.

By way of contrast, the financial company that Rajadhyaksha studied accommodated the particular needs of women without making it a specific company policy. The nature of work allowed women with very young children to do some of the work from their homes. The company allowed for a zigzag rather than a linear route to the top. In other words, there was not just one way to get to the top. You could take a break, even a change and still make it to the top.

Such flexibility encouraged women to stick it out. As a result the company has been noted as being "woman-friendly."

What does it mean to have a "woman-friendly" policy? According to the women working in this particular company, this meant that women were not made self-conscious about being women, they were not discriminated against for developmental opportunities,

there were no compulsory transfers, there were multiple growth opportunities and there were flexible routes to get to the top.

As a result, 23 per cent of the senior managers in this company were women. On the other hand, in the FMCG company, only eight per cent of all managers were women, only 10 per cent of junior managers, and only one per cent of middle-level managers. There were no women on the board.

The larger lessons of this study suggest that there have to be systemic changes if companies are serious about bringing in greater diversity in their management and encouraging competent women to overcome the hurdles that society places in their career paths.

By the same criteria, more women in politics will be the result of an honest belief that politics must be representative of the electorate. Thus political parties have to introspect and think what it is in their culture that works against women's participation and progress. Can women not come up on their own merit within politics? Must they always have a godfather, or a godmother or a family member to underwrite their journey to the top?

So, even as we say shabaash to Sheila, Vasundhara and Uma, unfortunately their victory does not herald a new dawn for millions of women in India. ■

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