SEEDING OF WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN INDIA: INVESTIGATING THE EXPERIENCES OF THE TRAILBLAZERS

Vipin Gupta

California State University San Bernardino, USA

Abira Saran

EMPI Business School, India

The purpose of this research is to investigate the experiences that seeded the leadership of women in India –whose formative years were in a social and historical context of visible gender stereotypes and few women leadership role models, and who we refer to as 'trailblazers'. We identify several categories of lifecourse events and themes that aided leadership development and identity formation of women in a context of substantial barriers to women's leadership. The study is based on the thematic analysis of sixty interviews with different levels of women leaders, all born before 1970, in India. The findings demonstrate that women can be empowered and trained to become a constructive architect of their leadership journey, by recognizing, naming, and reframing the meaning of their various lifecourse experiences.

Keywords: India, Women, Leadership, Identity, Lifecourse.

Introduction

Women in India still face huge cultural barriers in scaling up the corporate leadership ladder, and feel obligated to put their careers in back seat to caring for husband, children, and elderly parents (Srivastava, 2010). Only about a third of women in India participate in workforce, as opposed to 85 percent of men. Women make up 42 percent of college graduates in India, yet only 23 percent of organizational employees (Bagati & Carter, 2010). The percentage of women in senior management leadership roles in India is just 9 percent, as compared to 16 percent in the G-7 nations (Grant Thornton, 2011). Out of the 134 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index that measures the magnitude and scope of gender-based disparities in a nation, India ranks a low 112th (World Economic Forum, 2010).

Familial and social expectations regarding women's roles, pervasive male stereotypes and male egos in the 'inflexible' organizations make it very challenging for women to remain in the workforce, and to move into the senior leadership roles. More than 95 percent of men and women in management roles report aspiring for jobs with higher responsibility, but over 70 percent of women had to downsize their aspirations during their career thus far, as compared to only about 55 percent of men (Bagati & Carter, 2010).

In this paper, we review the issues related to the study of women leadership development. We identify six categories of themes – parents, marriage, motherhood, death, professional vision, and personal mission. We present findings from an interview study of a sample of sixty women

in various levels of leadership positions in India, who were born before the year 1970 and who were in their twenties at the advent of economic liberalization in India in 1991. Our research approach draws from two streams of research. First, recent organizational research suggests that leadership identity construction is an important factor for successful leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Second, research in social sciences indicates that how individuals connect with their lifecourse events has critical influence on their leadership identity construction (Schneider et al, 1999). Accordingly, our study focused on the lifecourse event(s) that seeded these women's attempt to begin, persist, and accomplish a successful journey of leadership. The study has implications for understanding the distinctive issues of women leadership seeding in India, but has relevance in other contexts also.

Literature Review

Recent research underlines the importance of identity work in leadership emergence – underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles may contribute to leadership being identified with men, and obstruct the ability of woman to see herself and be seen by others in leadership roles, and therefore her striving and bidding to take up leadership roles (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011). Studies suggest that the process of leadership identity construction involves accumulation of social and relational experiences that recursively inform the sense of a person as a leader, and of others endorsing the person's fitness for the leader role (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Positive validation aids to move leadership identity from being a provisional and peripheral to a more central and enduring aspect of a person's self; while a negative validation impedes taking up of new challenges that seed leadership (Lord & Hall, 2005).

In order to understand the development of women leadership, therefore, one needs to examine the developmental processes that seed women's leadership identity (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). The life history or lifecourse approach suggests early events in a person's life, within a historical and socio-cultural and structural context, shape future behaviors (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe, 2003; Giele & Elder, 1998; Schneider et al, 1999; Mayer, 2009). Studies of managers of AT&T and other organizations in the 1950s and 1960s affirmed that early lifecourse events are predictive of later leadership (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974; Schneider et al, 1999).

Studies also point to the influence of the lifecourse events during one's organizational working life. Bennis and Thomas (2003: 40) found the significant role of "a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or an altered sense of identity." Similarly, George & Sims (2007) found life stories, the people, and the experiences as having direct impact on 125 authentic leaders known for their success, effectiveness, and integrity.

Leadership Identity of Women in India

Traditionally, for women in India, social expectations have been to live by the will of the father in her childhood, of the husband in her adulthood, and of the children in her old age (Moore et al, 2008). Few women of the generation educated before the 1990s period of liberalization of Indian economy worked in the corporate sector. Still some women of this era emerged to shine as leaders. We refer these pioneers as 'trailblazers'. They had mostly a middle class upbringing. As shown in Table 1, in our sample, fathers of more than half were in government service, while the mothers were mostly housewives with only 8.57% working.

Table 1. Parental Occupation of Women Trailblazers in India.

Father's Occupation	
Government Service	55.00%
Private Service	20.00%
Self Employed (Entreprenuer/Business)	10.00%
Self Employed (Professional)	15.00%
Mother's Occupation	
Housewife	91.43%
Service (Private & Government Sector)	8.57%
Self Employed (Entrepreneur/Business & Professional)	0.00%
Working (Total)	8.57%

India's small but growing middle class in the post-independence era lived by the Gandhi-Nehru legacy 'to play a role in nation building' (Das, 2000: 36). Gandhi's values of 'simple living and high thinking' offered a sense of pride, and Nehru's vision of a modern, progressive India with a scientific outlook offered a sense of hope. However, these ideals were muted by the dominance of public sector and monopoly-oriented private sector, and the resulting scarcities and the "legitimization of corruption" (Varma, 1998). Women bore the brunt of limited opportunities, and had to play a role subservient to men in families, society, and the organizations.

The films of this 'era of limits' aptly captured social expectations about women. Most films glorified women who upheld role towards her husband and family. Rarely were women shown in professional roles; notable exceptions being a teacher in Dillagi, a doctor in Kala Pathar, and a corporate president in Trishul. Two movies stood out for women outshining their better halves – as a professional singer in Abhimaan, and as a powerful political leader, inspired by the life of Indira Gandhi, in Aandhi. Only in the 1980s, a few films portrayed women as having a voice to flight for justice as cops or lawyers, and taking law in their hands when justice was denied as in Insaaf ka Tarazu and Chaalbaaz.

Similarly, matrimonial advertisements of the era focused on the physical attributes of a woman including beauty, height, complexion, and weight, and a high bias towards educated than professionally qualified women (Sethi, 2000). In general professions such as teaching and clerical or secretarial jobs were most popular career choices for women.

Yet women trailblazers in our sample proclaimed not having ever experienced gender bias in their families, some were even brought up like the sons of the house. Their parents were ambitious for the future of their daughters, and got their daughters best education they could. As one noted, "The fact that they took out such a high part of their salary and invested in my school clearly showed that they wanted us to get somewhere in life."

Women trailblazers stood out for their love for knowledge. As children and as adults, they all enjoyed studying, were highly self-motivated, and never had to be told to study. As one interviewee noted, "Knowledge for me is an addiction". Besides reading about business, even if they had no formal business degrees, they also followed the works of the greatest saints and philosophers of India. They used these as the guiding principles for their life, such as how to

perform one's duties, control one's mind, and take the path that will bring stability and happiness.

On an essentially male driven terrain, women trailblazers moved against the tide to stand up to and listen to her inner voice. More than 40% considered a kinship member to be their hero. Half of the trailblazers identified Mahatama Gandhi as their hero. Gandhi symbolized the transformation of a diffident boy from a humble background and without any extraordinary leadership quality as a child, to one of the greatest world leaders of all times. Gandhi symbolized unleashing of 'power of the powerless' by reinforcing the self and glorified the attributes considered weak and feminine such as patience, non-violence, resilience, endurance, and sacrifice. A few also identified Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, as their hero, for becoming India's prime minister. With few notable business role models, only 15% considered a business/ corporate leader as their hero.

Findings

In the interview narratives, we identified six categories of lifecourse events that seeded leadership in women trailblazers: (1) parents, (2) marriage, (3) motherhood, (4) death, (5) professional vision, and (6) personal mission. While prior research identified education as an additional category, in our sample, educational influence was part of the larger influence of parents. As women constituted much smaller percentage at all levels of education than men, parents were a key figure inspiring and prodding their young daughters to get education and to excel in that.

As shown in Table 2, for each category, three themes emerged around the seeds of leadership.

Table 2. Lifecourse events, themes and meaning forming the leadership of women trailblazers.

Category	Themes	Attributed leadership meaning
1. Parents	a) Focus on excellence/ education	a) Gained confidence nothing is off limits for her
	b) Focus on seeing through one's choices	b) Learnt to be deliberate in what you choose to do, but then see through what you choose
	c) Preparing self to chase her dreams	c) Resolve to be treated with dignity
2. Marriage	a) Supportive expectations from husband/parents/parents-in-law	a) Found emotional and physical confidence to chase her dreams
	b) Resistive expectations from parents/ parents-in-law	b) Found confidence from successfully resisting traditional views
	c) Abusive expectations from husband	c) Found hope for dealing with any crisis, and making a new beginning
3. Motherhood	a) Recognizing her role as a developmental pillar for children	a) Experienced a sense of accountability to support others and to create systems that will sustain the organization
	b) Recognizing potential to be a role model and a source of pride for her children	b) Gain confidence for taking on larger balancing challenges in life and career
	c) Recognizing the need to give space to discover to her children, and to find a new space for herself	c) Learnt there is always a time to let go and be involved in something new
4. Death	a) Recognizing vulnerability of widowhood	a) Resolve to be self independent
	b) Encountering a near-death experience	b) Resolve to make best out of the gift of her life
	c) Encountering death of a male family member	c) Pushed to stand up and take responsibility of others in the family

5. Professional vision	a) Visualizing doing challenging and less explored things	a) Boosted confidence in bringing value to the organization
	b) Visualizing a leader who embodies success with humility	b) Shaped a vision that leadership is humane
	c) Visualizing self as not deficient in the face of a personal disability	c) Surprising others instilled optimism, can't be brushed aside for lack of knowledge
6. Personal mission	a) Being jolted to reality about a social-cultural issue	a) Excitement to be part of a larger change initiative
	b) Seeing failure as a systemic change opportunity	b) Take failures gracefully and pursue larger goals
	c) Putting gender stereotypes to rest	c) Drive to succeed by showing success

For some women, one of their lifecourse event stood out clearly as the formative influence, while for others it was more than one event, or for a few, a cumulative combination of many events each with their small influence.

Parents

Parental expectations from their daughter were a huge formative influence, and this occurred through three major themes.

Focus on excellence and education

Parents of most trailblazers expected excellence from them, in some cases, not only in academics, but also in sports and other extra-curricular activities. The taste of success and achievement became deeply embedded in their psyche as self-esteem. One trailblazer stated her family was very conservative, and had limited means, yet her father sent her to the best college in the State and let her stay in a hostel. Despite being from a small town Hindi medium educational background, she stood first in her English-medium college. Such fruits of excellence filled trailblazers with a sense of certainty about their own capabilities.

Focus on seeing through one's choices

Parents of many trailblazers taught them to see through their choices, and for some this became a major turning point. One day, student unions of many colleges in the Delhi University decided to declare a strike, that SS's sister – President of her College Union – refused to join. That night somebody made several phone calls past midnight and threatened her. Her father told the scared sister either she should not have become a President, or if she chose to be one, she must learn to face the challenges. Next morning, he arranged for a plain-clothe police protection. Her college remained opened, while others were on strike. SS says, "It was great lesson for us that whatever you do consider it, but once you have got into something then see it through. Don't hedge and whimper as it doesn't help."

Preparing self to chase her dreams

Most trailblazers saw their mothers performing traditional gender roles, yet teaching her to value her potential and dream. Trailblazer UN's mother was a housewife and had not studied too far. When in class five, UN was forced to drop out of the school for two years because of typhoid and its aftereffects. Thereafter, UN refused to go to school and to join a class lower than that of

her friends. However, her mother told her one day – "with half tears in her eyes" – to not enter the kitchen to help her, but instead to study so hard that she would always have the last word. Her mother's pain made her realize how her mother's dreams were connected with her, and triggered her towards her path of leadership.

Marriage

Nature of expectations and of the circle of support for her role after marriage, particularly from husband, played an immense role in initiating and/or sustaining trailblazers' leadership development. As indicated in the following themes, unlike their peers, most women trailblazers enjoyed positive expectations and a circle of support for their professional role. A few did experience active resistance, but found strength from successful counter-resistance.

Supportive expectations

Most women trailblazers considered themselves very fortunate in finding positive expectations for their professional role, and a large circle of support from their husbands, parent-in-laws, maids, and even bosses. The maids and parents-in-law offered physical support in taking care of the household work and children. While most husbands did not share physical responsibilities, they offered immense emotional support and guidance. Trailblazer AT's husband urged her to follow her dreams in the job she was doing, and not follow up to the Gulf where he went to take his job, saying "Don't think you are not good, you are damn good."

Resistive expectations

A few of women trailblazers faced resistance from their parents or parent-in-laws who expected them to somehow fit the prevailing norms for women's roles focused on family. Trailblazer AA's father was against her graduate studies, least of all in management – as men of Sindhi families were supposed to join the family businesses, while women took care of the house. Not ready to cave in, AA registered for the coaching classes for the MBA entrance exam, using her carefully saved pocket money. The more her father resisted, the greater her resolve became. AA finally won over the support of her father with the help of her elder sister who was settled after marriage in the UK.

Abusive expectations

The women of the 'era of limits' suffered numerous instances of marital abuse, as social structures discouraged divorce or separation. But the trailblazers would have none of that. Trailblazer SS went to the best of schools and colleges, and always dreamed of her life as a refined homemaker. But she ended up in an abusive marriage, and during the divorce proceedings, her spouse mocked her that she would not be able to sustain her way of life and her two daughters. She heard an echo inside her: ENOUGH! THIS AND NO MORE. Though she had no professional degree, she looked for something that built on her interior design credentials – an entry level job in Berger Paints. She worked incessantly, read a lot, asked a lot of help, and taught herself the intricacies of how to invest, make money, follow stock market, and make sense of balance sheets. As a result, she steadily kept rising up the corporate ladder. She confesses,

"My career started only after my separation. I became a different woman after my divorce and unlike many for whom a divorce is like a sunset, in my case it was sunrise."

Motherhood

Motherhood inspired a new sense of identity, and generated a new meaning about her role for many women trailblazers. In particular, as the following themes affirm, it encouraged many women trailblazers to see her leadership in a different perspective – as a developmental pillar, as a source of pride for her children, and as even offering space to her children when they needed that.

Being a developmental pillar

Some women trailblazers discovered a new meaning from their motherhood. Trailblazer AK found motherhood as whetting her ability to be a source of emotional and physical strength for people in the organization. And, later, in her business development role, motherhood reinforced a sense of duty to generate enough business so that so many people dependent on her would not have to be sacked. There was a sense of accountability and connectedness arising out of this humbling experience, which cultivated firmness and discipline. It also encouraged her to put a focus on building systems and structures, which will help sustain the organization. Similarly, trailblazer AT2 learnt to bring her organizing skills to family, "I think the kind of job that I am in allows me to be far more precise and sharper in organizing things at home because as soon as something finishes at home I have a little list where I jot down what I need to buy next time out to the super market." Concurrently, she also learnt to bring compassionate care to the workplace, "I try and not leave for home as long as my teams are at work, which is something I have always instilled right from my early days of working. If I have teams I would work along with them, even if that means that I am just fetching cups of coffee for them which sometimes embarrasses them."

Being a source of pride

Some women trailblazers were driven by how their leadership is a potential source of pride for their children. Trailblazer AT2, once felt guilty every time she went for business travel, leaving her child behind. After meeting a child psychologist, she made it a point to begin bringing a list of things that her son wrote for her whenever she traveled, and to take him out for a holiday once a year to the places that she had been in to just give him a feel of where all his mother had been. She was able to establish a sense of pride in her son's mind, and raise her own and her child's aspirations. She says, "I know he saves up all the articles that come in magazines and newspapers and the little clips he has seen about me on the TV. And then very often once in a while, he will say so when do you think you will become the CEO and I keep telling him I don't want to be. And he would kind of hit me but why wouldn't you like to be. I would love you to be one."

Giving space to discover

Trailblazer HK began thinking what would happen to her after her boys grow up and go away. She remarks, "I felt that it was important for me to get out of their lives and give them the space

to discover things for themselves." She loved literature, and decided to do a distance learning master's in literature. She then took up freelance projects conducting market surveys, where she had an opportunity to talk to senior folks in different companies. HK had travelled to places like United Kingdom, United States, and Singapore with her husband, and was acclimatized to an international environment. In time, she got a job from Mafoi – a knowledge-based company full of employees in their twenties. Because of her maturity in dealing with senior folks in different companies, she was roped in to establish its United Kingdom office.

Death

Death can be a painful event and turn one's life upside down. As demonstrated in the following themes, some women trailblazers rediscovered and re-invented their life after the death of somebody they knew, or of a breadwinner in their family, and in some cases, after a personal near-death experience.

Discovering vulnerability of widowhood

Trailblazer HK's brother-in-law, who had always been very healthy, collapsed at a conference in Delhi, and died of heart attack at the age of 37. Her sister-in-law was stranded alone without a job, and two sons to support. HK reflects, "That incident somehow left a very deep impact on me…. and that's what really pushed me into a job".

Discovering her life as a gift

A few of the women trailblazers went through a near-debilitating or near-death experience, with a huge formative influence. Trailblazer AK, once mistakenly told by a doctor that a swelling in her throat might be a cancer, was transformed thence. She says, "I had a tendency of actually wanting to get things always done my way." The event reinforced in her the value of succession planning so as to keep her efforts alive and let things move even in her absence. She also became interested in spiritual readings and yoga, which helped her become a more balanced person and a more effective leader.

Being pushed into responsibility

Some trailblazers took on responsibility, after their father or spouse was unexpectedly diseased, and surprised all with their success. Trailblazer AA2 lost her 60-year old husband and 25-year old son in a span of about a year. Everybody questioned the future of her family's flourishing business, which had made her very wealthy. Pushed into a leadership role to protect her family business as an institution, AA2 made a commitment to professional management. Within two years, she secured the future and handed over all executive responsibilities to a non-family executive, instead of her daughter or son-in-law, who also worked at the company.

Professional vision

Many women trailblazers held a professional vision that guided them through their leadership development pathway. For some, it was an aspiration to be engaged in something challenging and unique. For some others, it was an ardent desire not to be deficient in the face of a personal

disability. And, for yet others, it was the possibility of a face of leadership that is compatible with the value of 'normal' living.

Pursuing something unique

A few women trailblazers pursued unique endeavors, such as those at the nascent stages of technology. Doing so, they were able to grow, discover a new meaning for their life as adding value to the organization and to the humanity, and gain respect. Trailblazer AK chose to join the field of information technology for her first job in 1980, at a time when not many people opted for it, because 'it seemed fun' and the tricky stuff was 'intellectually appetizing'. Gradually she realized that she was able to do things, which many people were not able to. She says, "So suddenly it occurred to me that what I am doing is more than what is expected and that I can actually keep on doing it… But by and large I think it has been by volunteering or stepping into responsibilities that I would say that I have been able to grow." As she established her professional credibility and responded to increased expectations on the professional front, all the family and extended family members started giving her the respect that was traditionally the mantle of only the male members of the family.

Similarly, in 1994, trailblazer RK joined Anand Group, one of the largest auto component makers in India, as the head of their after-market logistics and marketing, and as a senior person for corporate technology. The group had seventeen companies and twenty-four plants spread across India. That was the time when many new technology initiatives were being planned, including adoption of the email systems and ERPs. She traveled around to understand how various plants operated and how they implemented things. She also set up the operations, put up the physical infrastructure, recruited staff, evaluated technologies, made presentations to the international partners, and interacted with senior people from her organization and in the industry in various domains. After about seven years, she joined Care, world's one of the largest relief and development organization, with a vision to bring technology-based initiatives to the humanity. Within four days of her new position, a devastating earthquake occurred in January 2001 in Gujarat that shut down the region's communication network. She mobilized all her contacts and resources and put the network up in 76 hours.

Disability is no deficiency

Trailblazer AG has polio, but does not see herself any differently from others. After her Ph.D., she became a name to reckon in her first job with Tata Group. In 1994, she was roped in by Fujitsu to join their Pune office to manage their healthcare computerization projects. For the first one and a half years, she managed their projects across Singapore, New Zealand and Australia. Then, she says, "I really got fed up because of the distance and I told them you better open an office in Delhi." In the male-dominated Delhi culture, when searching for the office space, she was asked to relax and send her husband to finalize the deal. Unfazed, she dived into studying the laws and got all the required government approvals. She then trained a batch of fresh thirty engineers to run the operations. She observed, "I think others started thinking of me differently in a professional life path, after I opened the Fujitsu office". She earned the name of being such a thorough professional that sometimes even the competitors walk over to seek her help.

Leader can live a 'normal' life

When she was 8-year old, trailblazer AT heard a story from her father, about an American friend he met at the Stanford University while studying law. This American friend was a modest man who wore torn jeans, T-shirt, battered slippers, and drove an old car to the university. After the first semester exams, the friend invited AT's father to his office. The next day, he was very surprised to see the friend drive up to his house in a big dazzling car. At the office, he took the elevator straight to the top floor. It was then that AT's father realized he was a partner of Pricewaterhouse. The story left a huge mark on little AT: "He was obviously at the top of his career…but when he was a student one could never make out what his background was." She ruminates, "It is the value that struck me". She went on to take up accounting as a career, joined Pricewaterhouse and eventually became a Partner at the firm. She says, "If you met me on the street you would probably take me as being any other middle class woman. You would not take me as being someone who has the ability and at times the power to make a difference in the financial world."

Personal mission

For many women trailblazers, formation of a personal mission was a turning point. For some it was a desire to be part of a larger social development and change story. For others, it was learning to see failure as a systemic change opportunity. For still others, it was an experience with gender stereotypes, strengthening the conviction to demonstrate her excellence.

Be part of a larger social change story

Desire to do something to bring about social change was a turning point for some trailblazers. While auditing the PL480 project – the food aid program of the US government – in the South India in scorching summer heat at rural beneficiary locations, trailblazer AT saw abuse such as food with worms. One major distributor "arranged sacks of food in a warehouse to make it appear that the warehouse was full. But when auditors… climbed on top of the bags, they found that he had constructed walls of bags with a hollow center and that a large amount of food was missing, apparently sold for cash on the open market." She says, "We ended up on the first page of the Washington Post". She later wrote that it was the 'summer of innocence lost': "I learnt not to accept refreshments at auditee locations, not to believe messages left with the front desk – without rechecking." She says, "This aspect of my work has significantly impacted who I am today, ……that made my work CHALLENGING, EXHAUSTING and at the end of the day totally SATISFYING"!!

Seeing failure as systemic change opportunity

Many trailblazers experienced major failures in their professional lives, which became turning points. Trailblazer VS started at a public sector aluminum company in Kolkata as one of the few women. She excelled and eventually, on the nomination of the Canadian partner, she was even elevated to the Board, as the first woman. After 12 years, the company was sold, because of sub-par performance. VS says, "I somehow blamed myself and said I was in the top management of the company why didn't I do something to stop it?" VS then joined India's leading mobile firm, where she found herself in the company of eight men who did not want to listen to her. She

reminisces, "I said I can't afford this, I just can't afford another failure. And then I said 'no'….
and that is when I decided to speak out." She went to the chairman, and got a committee formed
to induct more women in a sector like telecom. Initially there were mixed reactions, but slowly
things changed and the company became known for its women-friendly policies.

Putting gender stereotypes to rest

Many of the women trailblazers had a personal experience of credibility challenges because of
gender stereotypes. During an early phase of her apprenticeship, trailblazer CS's team was once
finalizing an audit. At 6 pm, the partner-in-charge told her to go home, "I don't want you to be
traveling late by bus". She told the partner, "you can't decide that this is unsafe for me and
therefore you don't want me here, otherwise how will I learn". She followed up by writing a few
articles on whether companies really value gender equality. She asserts, "the fact that somebody
else was making a decision for me was what bothered me….In the minds of most people the way
that you be nice to women is to keep them safe, keep them protected and not to empower them
and not to fix the things that keep them trapped." The event taught her to question the larger
issues and go for systemic correction.

    Similarly, AA3 took her first job after her MBA at Parry in marketing. However, on her first
day at job, her boss, a woman, told her that she wanted a male in her place who could take up
extensive travel oriented market research. AA3 was upset and made a resolve, "I am going to
prove this wrong and actually land up being a resource which would be depended on". By the
time her probation period ended eighteen months later, the same boss came around to
recommend a double promotion for her. She then made another mark by getting the company to
change its policy and not discriminate between the new hires from the elite and other b-schools.

Discussion

Our research offers several findings on the factors shaping the seeding of women's leadership
identity, role, and effectiveness.

    Prior research identifies parental influence in terms of parental characteristics – such as
being warm, conscientious, nurturing, and developmental, and offering freedom and
responsibility (Gardner, 1995; Bass & Bass, 2008). While these factors were important, women
trailblazers identified parental influence more in terms of the parental ambitions for their
daughter and what they taught her about the way of living one's life, i.e. focus on excellence and
education, seeing through one's choices, and preparing self to chase one's dreams. They wished
for their daughter to have a choice, to be able to make her own informed choice, and to live a life
of dignity. Past literature corroborates that educational attainments are related with self-efficacy
and positive career outcomes (Ng & Feldman, 2009). Self-efficacy motivates individuals to
pursue the role of leadership, especially under stressful and challenging situations (Chan &
Drasgow, 2001). Specific lifecourse events made daughters aware of the authenticity of these
wishes, and their success by following through on these wishes built their positive self-concept
and self-image as a confident, courageous, diligent, intelligent, and optimistic person.

    In the prior literature, marriage and motherhood have been generally identified as a major
obstacle in the development of women leadership, including in India where women are culturally
oriented to put priority on their family – spouse and children. Family and job roles have been
found to be the largest single source of conflict for women leaders. Historically, in the US, career

women executives were more likely to be divorced or never married (Carroll, 1987). Surprisingly, in our study, marriage and motherhood actually helped women trailblazers discover new sources of strength and power, and identify new traits and competencies, that furthered their leadership identity and success.

Marriage became an inspirational factor for many, whether their relationship was supportive, resistive or even abusive. In supportive relationships, spouse and parents-in-law offered physical support and freedom from guilt, for taking care of the household and the children, as did the availability of maids. In addition, spouse also played a role of the advisor and the friend, and offered insights that helped women trailblazers to identify more strongly with their organization and its success. In resistive relationships, women trailblazers had to fight the stereotypes about the role of women after marriage and win over the confidence of their parents and others, and doing so successfully transformed their perspectives about their competence and meaning of their life. In abusive relationships, women trailblazers learnt to stand up on their feet in the times of crisis, and to start a fresh, bringing the same spirit of emotional maturity and conviction to their professional leadership journey.

Similarly, motherhood helped women trailblazers become more confident of their leadership aspiration and identity. Many saw their motherhood as credentialing them with the developmental competencies. That inspired them to understand the significance of their role for the others in the organization who depended on them, and of developing robust systems that will help sustain organizational excellence. Others found motherhood as an opportunity to be a role model and a source of pride for their children. This required women to find creative ways to fulfill their work and family demands, not necessarily by sacrificing some of the needs or by balancing through focus on the highest priority needs. Instead, they found courage to seek help from their higher-ups, thereby facilitating a soft change in the organizational structures and beliefs. The organizations offered adjustments in order to retain them and that signaled the value they bring to the organization. Gains included boost in confidence, enhanced feedback, transformation of bosses into mentors, and willingness to seek help. And, success in work-family integration boosted the confidence of women trailblazers, and of their bosses, for their assuming higher responsibilities and multi-tasking. A few others recognized when time came for them to grow from a more hands-on role in the lives of the children, and that gave them an inspiration to re-double their efforts to find their own identity.

The theme of death has been studied in the prior literature primarily in the context of family business practice. A key concern of the family businesses is with the succession issues, and women frequently assume leadership roles of the family businesses in the absence of a competent family male heir – sometimes in planned and other times in unplanned manner. For the women trailblazers, the painful theme of death had a much broader significance. Some began deep introspection about the despondent life of a homemaker widow and the future of her children, after witnessing death of a young male member in their circle. They learnt that career deserves as much importance as family for them to avoid similar situation in their life. Some experienced first-hand death of one or more male family members, and had to assume leadership of their family's business and set all apprehensions about sustaining the family's legacy to rest. In the process, they often brought fresh perspectives that helped reshape the family's business and positioned them as exemplary leaders. And, some underwent near-death experiences because of an accident or a health concern, and learnt to value their life as a gift that they must live for serving a broader mission and purpose.

Similarly, the themes of professional vision and personal mission have been highlighted mostly in the practitioner literature. Covey (1994) notes the successful leaders are more likely to

have clarity on the values and principles that guide their life's philosophy, which helps them in "connecting with your own unique purpose and the profound satisfaction that comes from fulfilling it" (Covey, 1994: 194). When individuals are connected to and connect others to an elevated sense of purpose, they are more likely to seek larger challenges, focus on what is possible, and be action oriented and inspire a sense of urgency among others, even in the face of obstacles (Quinn, 2004). Women trailblazers show a highly personal concept of professional vision. For some, it is about doing unusual things and working through the intricacies of nascent fields, including technology. For some, it is about not identifying one's disability in terms of ability, and showing the unusual courage in doing the things with same competence as the normally abled. For others, vision is of a role model that makes it possible to seamlessly blend professional success with normal personal and social life. While personal in nature, in each case, the professional vision is also associated with a larger purpose of making a meaningful difference, and makes them so distinctive.

Personal mission of the women trailblazers has more action-oriented underpinnings. It is about creating awareness and being a part of the larger social change story that will improve the situation for the distressed. It is about being jolted to reality after a significant failure, growing in the recognition of one's role and responsibility, and then moving on full speed to lead the correction of systematic barriers in the organizations that precipitate such failure in the first place. And, the last but not the least, it is about diligent and committed work that puts all beliefs derived from gender stereotypes to rest; demonstrating that nothing succeeds like success, and winning over the confidence of one and all.

In summary, the experience of their identified lifecourse events seeded a deep, formative influence on the women trailblazers, and inspired them to start, sustain, and further their leadership journey. Women trailblazers attributed four major types of skill formation, and thus leadership identity construction, to these lifecourse experiences: (1) seeking meaning in her life, and seeking to make her life meaningful for her family, the organization, and the society, (2) surprising herself and others with her capability, (3) visualizing leadership not with self-centered ego, but with humbling conscientiousness, and (4) recognizing her transformative capacity, by venturing on paths where few have gone before. These skills in turn resulted in her growth, and gave her a voice that she could articulate with passion and conviction, and with integrity and adaptivity, for bringing about change and challenge deep-rooted injustice in family, social, and organizational structures and belief systems. One trailblazer, RP, summed this up, "Physical, emotional and financial freedom are all so important to me. They give me the power to live by my convictions, be fearless in my vision, cross set boundaries, to shout from the rooftops for the causes I support, be a voice for the women who are afraid to speak, dance to gay abandon with people I love, travel to the extremities of the Earth with my children, cry without being weak, and most importantly give without asking….Freedom is living without a lie" (Amarnath & Ghosh, 2005, p. 133).

Conclusions

Despite growing awareness about the business case for women in leadership roles, advancement of women beyond junior and middle level managerial positions to senior and c-suite roles remains limited, both in India and worldwide. Many of the deep stereotypes of power and competence impede the advancement of not only women but also men to leadership roles, such as by excluding them from key decision-making networks. Existing leaders, mentors, task forces, women and employee associations, consultants, and researchers all have an important role to

play, as has the government policy and legislation in many situations. In addition, by recognizing, naming, and reframing the meaning of their various lifecourse events, women can seed and enrich their leadership identities and be a critical architect of their leadership journey.

Our research presents the stories of select women who have successfully developed leadership competencies, performed leadership-oriented roles, secured leadership positions, and made a difference to their and to others' lives in their family, their organization, and their society. These trailblazers had few role models in the corporate world, but discovered their heroes either in their own lives (often their fathers or uncles), or from the national fabric (India's father Gandhi or Nehru, also referred to as India's *chacha* or paternal uncle). They grew up, lived and worked in an environment of limits, but found and made choices for themselves, and then worked diligently, faithfully and confidently to ensure that these choices proved right for themselves and for others, and if not, took steps to correct systemic issues that hindered the fruits of these choices. Thus, they became architects of transforming the era in which they lived and worked from an era of limits to an era of options, and offered a new sense of reality to their children and to the entire nation's next generation.

A major limitation of this study is its focus on women leaders in India whose formative experiences were in the pre-1991 liberalization era of limits. The next generation of women leaders lived in an era where blatant gender stereotypes are less evident. Women and men employees as well as leaders in this new era tend to believe that their organizations are free of all gender stereotypes, and are committed to merit-based systems of equal opportunity. While that makes it more challenging to seek correction of deep-rooted gender-stereotypes, many more issues such as environmental justice have gained importance for the present generation of leaders and could offer new sets of meanings. In a sister study, we complement the findings of this study using interviews of the next generation of women leaders born in or after the year 1970.

In the present global times of economic recession and slowdown, it has become even more imperative to mobilize and leverage all resources. Women in India, and around the world, constitute valuable asset that remain woefully underutilized. Our research offers a sense of hope and optimism for women to finding meaning and leadership identity from their lifecourse events, to discover empowerment from the seeming obstacles such as marriage and motherhood, and to confidently and assuredly move on the path of leadership.

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