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Gendered Societies and Leadership Trajectories: A Qualitative Study of Women in the Indian Civil Services

Hemlata Vivek Gaikwad, Suruchi Pandey
Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of women leaders in the Indian Civil Services. Through in-depth interviews this research aims to uncover the success code of the selected 12 women leaders. The study identified six broad themes with subthemes which acted as enablers or deterrents for these women. The findings reveal a complex interplay between personal qualities, success mantras, social and organizational facilitators, and the barriers and challenges in shaping their leadership journeys. By providing rich, narrative insights, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the unique dynamics at play for women in the Indian Civil Services and offers recommendations for fostering a more inclusive environment which can enable more women to reach top positions. The implications of this research underscore the need for targeted interventions to support and enhance the leadership capacities of women in this critical sector.

KEYWORDS

women, civil services, Indian society, intersectionality, qualitative research, leadership

Introduction

The women's underrepresentation in leadership roles is a widespread problem that affects organizations globally. Research has illustrated that increasing the proportion of women in leadership roles can lead to more diverse and inclusive leadership teams,

which in turn contributes to improved organizational performance. Various means should be applied for achieving this purpose, e.g., mentorship, training, and providing equal opportunities. By having a diverse leadership team, organizations can benefit from a wider range of perspectives, ideas, and approaches, thereby resulting in better decision-making, critique and problem-solving, and overall success. According to Zenger and Folkman (2019), when compared to men, women perform better in terms of initiative, resilience, honesty and integrity, and drive for results.

However, in corporate India, women hold only 17% of positions marking an increase of only 8.6% since 2012 (Soledad et al., 2020). The 2020 Global Board Diversity Tracker report also indicates that only 11% of them are committee chairs, with the number standing at 23% globally (Soledad et al., 2020). As far as in India, women comprise 48% of the world's population (World Bank, 2024), increasing number of women in leadership is essential for the country's future and development. However, the Indian public services in particular show an underrepresentation of women. As an example, in 2015, only 12% and 6.4% of women comprised the administrative services and the police in India, respectively (Beniwal & James, 2019). The present study aims to examine women's experiences in top leadership in these fields, thus helping to develop possible pathways for women in future. This can be a catalyst for designing leadership development programs for replicating their success. Specifically, the study will help identify the critical areas to be addressed for bringing more women into leadership roles and bridging the gap.

Articles 14, 15, 15(3), and 16 of the Constitution of India discuss gender equality, prohibiting discrimination, and equal employment opportunities (Legislative Department, n.d.). Article 39 ensures equal rights to a satisfactory livelihood and equal pay for men and women. Article 42 takes care of maintaining a humane environment for women by providing maternity relief. The 73rd, 74th, and 97th amendments in the Constitution of India ensure mandatory entry of women in various industries and government jobs by providing reservations. Moreover, the Preamble itself contains the term "gender equality." Even though there are laws, quotas, and increased access to education, the percentage of women occupying leadership positions is still lacking. According to the Global Gender Gap Report, India positions 112th in a survey of 153 countries in terms of gender equality (Crotti et al., 2019). According to this report, India observed a slip of 3% in providing equal gender opportunities. Researchers in the field state that no significant differences exist in the leadership styles concerning gender (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Oshagbemi & Gill, 2003) and the behaviors perceived in the male and female leadership (Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Manning, 2002). However, what complicates the situation is a vast disparity between the percentage of men and women occupying top positions across each sphere, such as industries, politics, academics, and government offices. In Indian government services, women's representation is only 15%, compared with the percentage of women entering at initial entry levels.

This under-representation signifies the presence of a narrow and leaky pipeline for women's advancement to leadership roles upwards. Around fifty percent of the women entering the workforce, move out of it even before reaching middle management levels because of various issues related to work or non-work. Undoubtedly, the

persistence of women in their work is subject to several barriers which impede their advancement to a stage where they prefer to opt-out. India, a predominantly patriarchal society, mandates female subordination to men, inflicting social roles on women and recognizing that their primary role is to take care of the home and family members. Despite all the challenges, few women have overcome all the barriers and proved themselves as successful leaders. When it comes to women in top leadership positions, significant improvement remains to be accomplished.

Previous studies have shown the challenges and struggles faced by female professionals and leaders in government services (Gaikwad & Pandey, 2022; Johannes et al., 2022; Kuzhabekova et al., 2018; McLaren et al., 2023). Kumari (2014) emphasizes the barriers women have to overcome in leadership positions, as well as the harassment, discrimination, and exclusion they experience. In government services, the male-to-female ratio at the entry level only is highly biased, which becomes almost negligible with rise of leadership levels. Furthermore, the hegemonic masculinity has affected the prevalent sociocultural perceptions in India considering women to be better suited to handle domestic or lower levels of administrative responsibilities. Although in some cases women leaders received equal treatment in recruitment, selection, and payment, they consistently were subjected to opposition from their male counterparts, which affected their performance (Yadav & Lata, 2018). The stereotyped notions and sociocultural perception of the Indian society about gender roles have resulted in women experiencing a higher level of scrutiny of their daily work performances compared to their male counterparts. Ramgutty-Wong (2000) shared a view similar with Yadav & Lata (2018) while discussing the case of women in the Indian/Hindu culture-dominant island nation of Mauritius.

While holding a leading position, women in India often have a wide range of responsibilities, fulfilling several different roles in the family and society, such as running the household and caring for the husband and children. Due to the lack of proper support systems in place for female employees, their work–life balance was greatly affected, leading to negative consequences for their families. Despite some instances of women defying through the glass ceiling successfully and achieving top leadership roles, there are still limited opportunities, exposure, and understanding of leadership rights by many women academicians while rising to leadership ranks (Gandhi & Sen, 2020; Sargam & Mahal, 2018; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017). Another barrier that prevents the progression and maintenance of female academics is the societal and cultural beliefs of families, management and even the female educators themselves (Sandberg, 2013). Even though many female educators in the country have equal or higher education levels compared to men, they are not seeking leadership positions due to a lack of support and mentorship. They also tend to prioritize family responsibilities over professional development and networking, which are crucial for gaining resources and access to new opportunities for career advancement (Gandhi & Sen, 2020).

There is a paucity of research on the challenges that women experience while holding leadership positions, both in terms of organizational and societal/cultural factors, and how these challenges relate to their personal identities. Previous studies,

although few, have highlighted the numerous organizational and individual challenges faced by women while trying to achieve or maintain positions of power, though have not considered the impact of women's intersecting identities on these struggles. Previous studies have only looked at women of Indian culture as a whole, without taking into account the different factors like caste, region, race, and language that shape gender perceptions and beliefs about leadership roles for both genders. As a consequence, there is a lack of knowledge and appropriate strategies, including policies, training, mentorship, and governance structures, to tackle the diverse and complex barriers that women encounter when striving for leadership positions. Hence, the present study intends to fill this gap by studying the lived experiences of women who have successfully navigated their leadership trajectories.

Methods

The research questions guiding the study are as follows: How do women navigate their leadership trajectories? What are the factors contributing to their success despite challenges?

As a complex, socially constructed, multi-level process, leadership is challenging to study (Gardner et al., 2010). Researchers argue that qualitative and quantitative methods represent two legitimate ways to research leadership. In the qualitative methods, researchers use an inductive approach by letting the data discover the meanings referred to as a "lantern," meaning shedding light in the dark corners (Shank, 2002). Leadership is a multifaceted and complex concept; merely relying on quantitative methods is insufficient for its full appreciation (Conger, 1998). Hence, a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted.

To maintain an intersectional perspective, the study involved women professionals from the urban, semi-urban, and rural areas of India across different religions, languages, and Indian caste systems. An individual's social identity plays a significant role in their leadership perceptions, contributing to the intersectional perspective of identity across various social class groups (Gangadharan et al., 2016). Besides, the literature argues that that the Indian caste system has significant implications for the emergence and performance of women as leaders (Sutar, 2007; Viswanath, 2009). Participants were identified through purposive sampling method. The criteria selected were women who had at least 15 years of work experience and had received not less than two promotions. As many as 17 women in senior leadership positions in the public services were identified and interviewed. Of these, 14 consented to participate in the study. All participants were married, belonged to the age group of 38 to 54 years, and only one of them belonged to a social minority. A total of 14 participants had educated parents and 11 of them had educated grandparents. The data collected through interviews were then analyzed using Atlasti software to identify the themes and subthemes.

The qualitative data were collected by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews as it provides the interviewer greater flexibility to pose specific questions arising from the respondent's response. Bentz & Shapiro (1998) mention that the

researcher should allow the data to emerge. Conducting phenomenological study means capturing rich, meaningful descriptions of the phenomena and their settings. None of the participants were offered any financial or material incentive to facilitate their participation. Interviews were conducted via Skype[1], telephone, or personal visits, depending upon the convenience of the participants. Each interview session, on average, lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The interview questions were "addressed to the participant's beliefs, experiences, convictions, and feelings about research questions identified" (Welman & Kruger, 2001). To initiate the narration, the participants were invited to discuss the topics of childhood trivia, like their upbringing, their siblings, school education, and the role of parents, friends, other people, and society in developing their leadership skills. The participants were encouraged to discuss the support they receive from their families, including parents and in-laws, in regards to their educational goals and leadership abilities. The conversation also covered their perceptions of what makes a successful leader, their ambition, role models, attitudes towards society and societal norms, experiences with discrimination, and emotional stability.

Finally, they talked about factors within their organizations that aid in career development and leadership success, such as the attitudes of colleagues and mentors and opportunities for growth. The interviewees could express their true opinions freely to the researcher (Groenewald, 2004). In the course of the in-depth interviews, we collected information about the difficulties and obstacles faced by participants in their leadership roles, as well as the methods they used to overcome them. As two of the total number of participants did not give their consent for the interviews to be audiotaped, notes were taken instead.

During the interviews with participants, the researcher used memos and reflective notes to record stories, thoughts, and ideas, as well as to capture non-verbal cues and observations. Qualitative notes are not easy to take in parallel with interviewing the participants (Bernard & Ryan, 2010); the researcher wrote the field notes immediately after completing the interview. This helped in reducing the data loss and minimizing the error. Moustakas (1994) recommends using epoche during qualitative data collection, which helps create a conducive atmosphere during the interview, keeping aside the personal preconceptions of the interviewer. Davidson and Cosgrove (2002) mention that to appreciate the experience in its own expressions, we must understand it in its own expressions by bracketing their own notions of causality. They further elaborate that epoche provides a clear direction free from reification, as the qualitative method is very vulnerable to naturalistic thinking without a phenomenological epoche (Morley, 2012).

Findings and Discussion

A cross-case analysis of the experiences of 12 women leaders from different universities and autonomous institutions in India revealed specific individual and organizational factors that played a critical role in their progression towards success in attaining and maintaining a leadership position. A descriptive analysis of each of these 12 cases, that aimed to determine whether they followed parallel developments,

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[1] www.skype.com

led to the identification of subthemes that were further organized into broader themes. Six broader themes emerged from the analysis: Fostering confidence since childhood, Personal qualities, Social facilitators, Organizational facilitators, Workplace and sociocultural challenges, and Success mantra. Three themes completely and two themes partially reflected 14 subthemes (12 enablers and two deterrents) reflecting individual factors. Three themes displayed seven subthemes partially (five enablers and two deterrents) associated with organizational factors. Despite having heterogeneous backgrounds, including religion, culture, geographical location, castes, languages, and socioeconomic conditions, their experiences revealed similar patterns across the identified themes and subthemes. Few exceptions in the experiences also emerged which are discussed later. The experiences of women leaders from academia and government services were analyzed separately for identifying the emerging themes and subthemes. The thematic map shows the common themes and subthemes emerged from the experiences of women leaders in Indian Civil Services (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Thematic Map of the Themes and Subthemes Generated
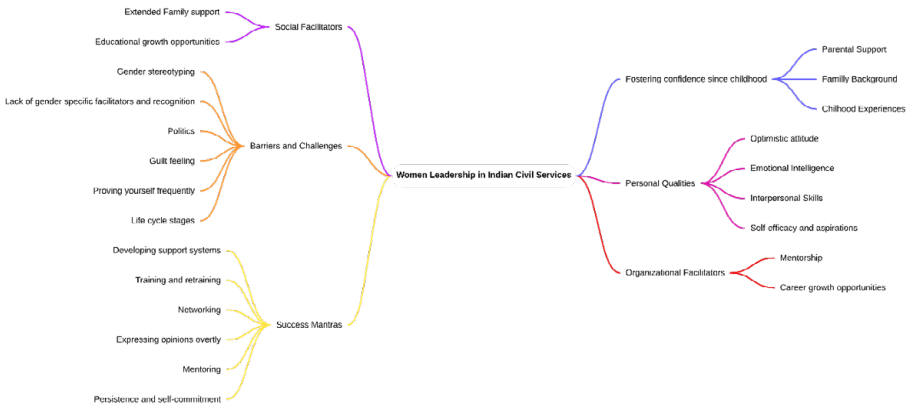
Note. Source: developed by the authors.

Theme 1: Fostering Confidence Since Childhood

Social Cognitive Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986) and Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory support that family especially parents play a pivotal role in career choices and development of an individual's capabilities. The analysis of the data collected also revealed that childhood experiences of the respondents played a very important role in developing their self-confidence and leadership qualities. All respondents unanimously agreed that their parent's support, family education, gender perception, and role models identified during childhood years. The parental support kept on emerging quite frequently in the discussions. The socialization practices of parents impact the motivational characteristics of their children (Eccles, 1987, 1994; Patridge et al., 2008). Eccles' Expectancy Value Theory at its core emphasizes the

fundamental role played by parents not only in providing achievement experiences and developing the self-confidence of their children but also helping them in interpreting the outcomes of these experiences. Thus, the children's belief systems are moulded by the combined effect of the experiences and their feedback provided to them by their parents The same was supported by all the participants. The upbringing and parent's support was reflected as a very important pillar in their leadership development.

> *Participant PG 3*: We are three sisters and my parents taught us that nothing is impossible. This attitude has helped me a long way in achieving my dreams. (Trans. by Hemlata Vivek Gaikwad & Suruchi Pandey—H. V. G. & S. P.)

> *Participant PG 8:* My parents are my first source of inspiration. My father was a primary teacher and my mother was a home maker. They have supported me at every step. Both were of the opinion that children should be free to do whatever they want to do if it is worth doing, even when it wasn't in agreement what they wanted us to do. This developed my decision-making capabilities since a very young age. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Another participant replied the following:

> *Participant PG 6*: I used to stay with my grandparents. Indigenous individuals, such as Jyotiba Phule, would frequently visit my grandfather at our home. From a very young age I used to talk to all those people to understand what they do, what challenges they face and how do they overcome them. All these discussions always kept on motivating me to do something in my life. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

The participant's views indicated a similarity of experiences during their childhood. They all enjoyed an environment free of gender bias, supportive parents, and a healthy upbringing. This helped them develop confidence since childhood and boosted their self-esteem.

Theme 2: Personal Qualities

Personal qualities emerged out strongly in the analysis of the interviews of women leaders from both fields. All of them struggled hard to work on the personal traits to reach to the position they are at present today. Some personality traits were inherited while others were learnt during the leadership development process, as taking on new responsibilities pose new job demands. These new demands and expectations required women to develop new traits to perform effectively (Tannenbaum, 2002). Researchers across globe have also emphasized the role of personality in effective leadership (Antonakis et al., 2012; Parr et al., 2016) and bringing positive outcomes. At the same time, leaders often derail on their job by not developing the required traits or living up to their full potential (Hogan et al., 2011; Kaiser & Hogan, 2011). The female participants in the study also emphasized the importance of personal characteristics and a robust personality in their success. Specific traits that were identified as crucial included having a positive outlook, emotional stability, strong interpersonal skills, self-efficacy, and a clear sense of ambition. This is evident from the following statements made by the participants during their interviews.

Participant PG 2: I work in a male-dominated bureaucratic organization, where you face challenges every day, which puts a lot of stress on you. You need to emotionally strong and stable to survive here. Like, getting work done from your subordinates, who are all male and having service experience even more than you is really a herculean task. And you know, we are transferred frequently, and the people change, bringing you back to square one. Your emotional strength is a must to handle all this. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Surprisingly, one participant came out with a very different perspective:

Participant PG 9: I was really troubled by my husband and in-laws in initial years whenever I was late at home. They expected me to work nine to five and used to question and trouble out of suspicion whenever I was late. Now they are a way much understanding, but those years haunt me even today. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Though an exception, it reflects the trouble faced by Indian women, irrespective of their being independent and educated. Indian society being patriarchal lays the domestic responsibilities on women. A working woman has to handle dual responsibilities, taking care of home and work, making her feel stressed out. To perform successfully, they should learn to be more emotionally stable, optimistic, and have positive mental attitude. The participants also confirmed the same while sharing their experiences.

Emotional stability is an asset for better performance, and helped the participants to cope with time pressures, stress, uncertainty, and issues like discouragement and internal politics. Being composed helped them communicate professionalism in their career. The positive and optimistic attitude present in these women acted as a catalyst. All the participants always maintained a positive attitude. Despite phenomenal challenges the participants remained optimistic and kept performing and rising.

Participant PG 12 agrees and says that being optimistic and having a positive attitude will take you a long way.

Participant PG 12: If you are hopeful things will start falling in line. Getting promotions and higher responsibilities is not a cake walk in our field. You have to prove yourself at every step and if you are not positive about your competencies, you cannot win. My optimism and positive attitude towards things proved important in achieving what I wanted to. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

The above quotes made apparent that being optimistic and maintaining a positive attitude proved to be a key factor in their journey upwards. Participants also reflected experiences pertaining to their interpersonal skills. Each of the participants believed that effective leadership is about effective communication and people skills. Research also shows that leaders not only need to communicate well, but that much of their success is determined by their communication skills (Stroh et al., 2002). This helps them develop networks, encourage upward and downward communication, and apply power effectively (Harris & Nelson, 2018).

According to the study by Khallad (2000), various factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, parents' occupation, educational level, and expectations can influence career aspirations. The study participants agreed that having strong aspiration for reaching leadership positions played a vital role in their success. The study's participants also noted that their belief in their own ability was a crucial factor in achieving leadership positions.

> *Participant PG 6:* My class teacher was a great source of inspiration for me. Whenever I was given an important task, she would always tell me that I was capable of leading and succeeding in my leadership role. This support and encouragement helped me gain more confidence in my leadership abilities, which has been an ongoing asset in my ongoing journey as a successful leader. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Two other participants also shared their views endorsing the self-aspiration playing a vital role in making themselves develop as a leader since childhood.

> *Participant PG 2:* Ever since my school days, I have had a desire to be a leader. I took on various leadership roles such as classroom monitor and event organizer during my school years, and continued to do so during my college years as well. I firmly believe that one does not need an official position to be a leader, and this mindset has been something that I have consistently applied in practice. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)
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> *Participant PG 3:* To be a part of the eminent and prestigious defense forces, one must pass the SSB interview, a five-day evaluation that assesses one's leadership qualities. I had this dream every day, and I have been continually working to develop my leadership skills by reading various articles on leadership development and continue to do so even now. And I was able to achieve it because I have always had the desire to become a leader. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

This indicates that women themselves must work a lot for developing the personal qualities and aspire for leadership positions. The important thing to be noticed is that the women participants were from different cultural, social, geographical, and religious backgrounds. In addition, they differed in the castes, though all of them were of the similar opinion that developing oneself is of utmost importance. The level of optimism, positive attitude, self-efficacy, and aspiration an individual possesses decides their growth upwards.

Theme 3: Social Facilitators

The theme reflects the social facilitators catalyzing the success of women leader participants. The participants described that family and social support played a very important role in making them reach this position. They shared that their education, society where they were brought up also contributed positively to their growth. Two subthemes emerged from the analysis: Extended family support and Educational growth opportunities. The participants emphatically mentioned that if their families would not have supported them, it would have been impossible for them to become

what they are. These women mentioned that their kids learnt to be more independent, while their husbands were sharing household work.

An interesting experience was shared:

Participant PG 2: Me and my spouse are in the same field and similar ranks, and it was rare that we both got the same postings, except for a few years when we were at the same station. I used to stay my posting station along with my kids" I had to manage multiple responsibilities, such as cooking, taking my children to school, helping them with their homework, taking care of them when they were sick, and fulfilling my professional obligations all at the same time. However, I was able to find balance and enjoy both my personal and professional life. Even though my husband was often away on work assignments, his support always motivated me to advance in my career. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

She added with a happy note*,*

Participant PG 2: At an early stage of my career, I realized the significance of teamwork, both in my personal and professional life. "I" must be replaced by "WE" in order to move from "Illness" to "Wellness." It is important to invest time in building a strong team, and to recognize and appreciate the contributions of each member. Teamwork should enhance individual intelligence. Additionally, having focus, maintaining balance, and effectively managing time are crucial elements in achieving this. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

With a parallel note, Participant PG 6 shared*,*

Participant PG 6: My job requires me to be on duty at any time, day or night, without warning. I am grateful to my husband and mother for taking care of my daughter while I am away. They allow me to focus on my work without worry, knowing that she is in good hands. This morning, for example, I had to leave early in the morning for an urgent incident in a nearby village. I didn't return home until 10 a.m. I quickly changed my uniform and went to my daughter's parent-teacher meeting. I am glad that I was able to do this because there was someone there to take care of her. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

All the participants stated having a supportive partner and mother-in-law, and interestingly one of the participants also emphasized the emotional support she received from her children.

Participant PG 8: I belong to a rural area and the society is not much in favor of girl's getting educated and even more they feel that if a woman works, who will take care of the household responsibilities. Because of my parents' determination, I had got the opportunity to pursue till my post-graduation before marriage only.

After my marriage, I got the opportunity to pursue advanced courses which helped me keep a competitive edge above my competitors. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Chaturvedi & Sahai (2019) in their study had found that aspirations of women from different geographical areas were varying. They said women from semi-urban areas recognize their aspirations more confidently as compared to those from rural areas. They also found that educational outcomes of tribal women are low as compared to non-tribal. However, the participants proved the exactly opposite. Irrespective of their geographical locations, all the participants demonstrated a high level of the aspirations to reach leadership positions. In support of the study findings, Valk & Srinivasan (2011) and Quesenberry et al. (2006) also revealed that an empathetic husband plays a vital role in balancing the work–life of a woman. The support of husband and parents-in-laws helped female participants and avail the educational growth opportunities to advance in their career.

Theme 4: Organizational Facilitators

The participants shared that organizational facilitator helped their career advancement. They expressed that these factors kept them inspired and motivated towards their goals. These facilitators were categorized in two subthemes, mentorship and career growth opportunities. The participants narrated positive experiences regarding their mentors and the career growth opportunities in their organizations. Mentorship is very important as mentors having advanced knowledge and experience and who are devoted to supporting the development of their mentees can create a huge difference in the career of aspiring women leaders in their organizations (Satter & Russ, 2016; Shen & Kram, 2011).

The participants always felt that it helps women in ideating what they want to become. They also mentioned that mentors were critical in developing them at both professional and personal level. Each participant in the study identified a mentor in her life who influenced and shaped their personality and even their identity as a leader as well.

Participant PG 10 said that in a job profile like theirs, it is important to have a mentor and God father. She shared,

Participant PG 10: We have to work along with people from different walks of life like politicians, government officials from different fields, social workers etc. My mentor, who was my immediate senior guided me to handle the work effectively, to understand what type of problems can crop up in the area where I was serving and how to proactively plan for the same. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

The promotions are seniority, merit, and time based. They are promoted every three–five years.

Participant PG 3: Our promotions are usually time based. We have to identify our own learning opportunities and prove our merit. Our work profile, the way we

handle situations and perform our duties are all considered for our growth. But yes, if we want to study higher or do some certifications to enhance our work, we are always supported. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Participant PG 10: When I joined the services, I was only a postgraduate. I completed doctorate when I was in service, as we are always provided with the opportunity to pursue higher education in best universities of India and abroad. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Theme 5: Barriers and Challenges

This theme reflects the barriers and challenges faced by the participants since childhood till present day. The participants often had to bear discrimination and differential treatment by the society and the organizational colleagues or management. It comprises five subthemes. The participants reported common experiences of facing gender stereotyping, a lack of gender-specific resources and recognition, and family members holding stereotypical attitudes towards women's responsibilities similar to those identified by Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023). They also shared feeling guilty for balancing work and personal responsibilities. All participants agreed that they had to put in more effort than their male colleagues to demonstrate their competence and that earning the trust and respect of their superiors and male colleagues was a constant struggle for them. This can be due to the societal and workplace bias that women are less competent, capable, and committed to their work than men. This bias can lead to women facing more barriers to prove themselves and advance in their careers. Furthermore, the lack of female role models in leadership positions can make it difficult for women to envision themselves in those roles and to gain the support and mentorship they need to succeed. During their journey to top, each of them faced some barriers and challenges which impacted their work and personal life. The transition to top was difficult due to stereotyped outlook of men towards women especially in government services. The women participant perceived a lack of women leaders in their fields at higher positions. They agreed that the man's world is full of challenges for women to earn recognition and respect for them.

As participants endorsed gender stereotyping is still creating problems in the advancement of women. For example, Participant PG 5 shared an incident where she was remarked as being emotionally unstable and weak.

Participant PG 5: During a critical incidence of violence in our area, I was preparing a team to go for the assignment and I heard a comment: "yeh nayi nayi aayi hain, aisi kar paayigi kya? Kisi aur saheb ko bhejna chahiye saath mein" [She has come new; will she be able to handle the situation? Some male officer should be sent along with her]. I was surprised to see that I am tagged as not strong and being unable to handle? (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Participant PG 7 endorsed the same saying,

Participant PG 7: During my previous posting to a terrorist active area, I had to make a presentation of a plan, when I went for the meeting, the coordinator said,

"Aapke saath presentation karne koi saheb nahin aaye kya?" [Has no male officer accompanied you for making presentation]. He couldn't imagine that I have prepared the plan and will be presenting the same. And you know, I was the only female officer there. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Due to stereotypic attitudes, the decision-making bodies compositions were also biased. The participants especially from academics mentioned prevalence of tokenism in their organizations. As generally every committee to be constituted is required to have a women nominee, there is hardly more than one woman in the committees like governing councils, academic councils, and management councils. As a result, when policies are designed, the female perspectives are missing in them bringing in lack of gender-specific (female specific to be more particular) facilitators and recognition.

Indian society is a patriarchal society where women are expected to do household chores and take care of their families. Indian women are brought up in a way that the women themselves feel that they should be good mothers, good wives, good daughters, and daughters-in-law. At the same time, they strive hard to give their best at job. The participants described similar experiences. They mentioned their juggling between family and work. The families expected them to take care of the household work. Though they said all of them were very supportive, but they were still expected to do the household work.

Participant PG 6 was interviewed just after she had returned from her daughter's parent teachers meet. She started the interview, simultaneously instructing the serving cook to give food to her daughter who was nagging for lunch. Answering the question about how a superintendent of police is able to manage her family and job, she humbly smiled and said,

Participant PG 6: I feel I must take care of my kids as my mother took care of me. May it be stereotypical, but I cook and serve the food myself. My husband is also in a similar job, and I don't mind offering water or tea to him, when we come back home together or even if I or he comes first. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

They said we used to feel guilty whenever we couldn't pay attention to children and their studies or whenever they had to stay at office longer and their kids were sick.

Participant PG 2: My daughter had won a dance competition, and the award ceremony was to be held a week later. She was continuously after me saying I must come to the ceremony. But because of some urgent assignments I kept saying, will see … And finally, I couldn't go. She was very upset. You know I also feel to be there for my daughter like other mothers, but … [The researchers could see tears in her eyes]. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

The participants strongly felt that these guilts are strong blockers for them, but agreed it proved difficult to come out of it.

The women participants also shared that their job demanded frequent transfers. After every two or three years, they were in a different place, handling different portfolio, different team, and different people. And every new place they went, they had to start generally fresh.

> *Participant PG 6*: I am in Police Services which is truly a man's world. Let go off public, the people from the department also are unable to believe that a woman can handle police job effectively. You must prove yourself to win the trust. Nevertheless, it is just the reverse for men. People trust them first, and doubt their capabilities only in case there is some issue or they are unable to handle some situation. When I was posted as Superintendent of police, my male staff even tried to avoid saluting me. One of them used to come to my cabin without uniform cap to avoid saluting me, as you should have your cap on to salute. They will think of all such short cuts, but will not accept you easily. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)
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> *Participant PG 4:* It was a big challenge being in the man's world. People used to monitor my every move. Wherever I was transferred, by luck or bad luck, I was the first woman to reach there, and each time I ended up proving myself first to earn trust. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Life cycle stages were reported as a barrier by women participants. The stages of life cycle are similar for men and women. The participants emphasized that even though both men and women may experience similar life stages such as marriage and childbirth, the impact on the career progression of women is greater. These stages have a more significant impact on women's careers, particularly in terms of taking time off for maternity leave and the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities. The societal expectation for women to prioritize family responsibilities over their career can make it more difficult for them to return to work or advance in their careers after taking time off for these life events.

Theme 6: Success Mantras

The participants shared various strategies adopted by them to overcome the barriers and challenges faced. Five subthemes were identified as the strategies for development: Building support systems, Providing training and retraining, Openly expressing opinions, Networking, mentoring, and Maintaining persistence and self-commitment. The participants echoed about some success mantras which helped them to break the barriers, overcome the challenges and step up.

The biggest challenge that women face is managing their kids, family, and career all at the same time. While men also have to balance their personal and professional lives, women typically bear the majority of the responsibilities for managing the household and caring for children. This can be overcome by seeking help from various sources such as relatives and friends, hiring paid domestic help, sharing responsibilities with their partners, or utilizing childcare facilities. It is important to note that finding ways to balance work and family is not exclusive to women and men also face similar challenges. However, societal expectations and traditional gender roles often place more burden on women to take care of the home and children.

Participant PG 6: I strongly believe that balancing both roles and handle them effectively requires good planning. The two years of arduous training as an IAS officer have sharpened my planning skills. During that training I had to wake up early, meditate and exercise for some time before beginning the regular routine for the day. This training has helped me balance all the different roles: mother, wife, daughter, and IAS officer into one. At the same time, I developed my support system, my mother, and my sister. They willingly offered to safeguard my daughter and take care of her whenever I had to go out of station. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Participant PG 9: In our field, you cannot predict when will you be required to go on emergency. Many times, you don't even have time to do arrangements. Hence, I had arranged for a full-time domestic help. And not even at home, you need a support system at organization too. I had identified some people whom I could trust to care of some emergencies, in case, I got late to attend. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

The participants also strongly felt that making a successful leadership requires building a strategic network which crosses organizational and functional boundaries.

Participant PG 7: I was always good in interpersonal skills, which helped in building effective networks. My networks are fluid, as a new project or new transfer requires deemphasizing the old ones to build new networks. But, one thing is for sure, my networks have always helped me reaching my goals. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

All the participants agreed that women should be more vocal about their feelings and opinions, and be more assertive in expressing themselves. They should learn to say no when needed, and be more proactive in seeking promotions and taking responsibility for their own careers, rather than relying on mentors or bosses to shape their careers for them.

Participant PG 4: When I was posted immediately, my first meeting consisted of 14 members, 13 males and I was the only woman (Which is still mostly) … [Laughing]. The agenda was important and while taking opinion our chairman took everyone's opinion except me. At the end of a meeting or discussion, the chairman was preparing to summarize and conclude when I politely interjected and asked to express my opposing viewpoint. He gave me an annoyed look but allowed me to speak. After hearing my perspective, they paused for a moment before agreeing to bring it up for further discussion with higher-ups. As a result, my viewpoint was eventually implemented. If I hadn't spoken up, it would have been overlooked and likely become the accepted norm. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Participant PG 1 also mentioned strongly that speaking up is very important.

Participant PG 1: During my practical training days there were a few incidents. For example, once there was dacoity in a village which was far from headquarters. As a trainee we were supposed to visit all important events and it is the responsibility

of in charge to ensure that trainee is given exposure to all types of policing work, however, I was not taken to visit the scene of crime for whatever reason. I complained about it to my superior, and he gave strict instructions to all not to leave me out of all important events. After that I was never left out of anything. So, speaking up is very important. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Participant PG 10: The profile I handle is having good and bad times for you. You have to deal with normal public, politicians, higher authorities and many more. Learning to do this requires continuous support, and identifying a right true mentor is of utmost importance. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

The same was supported by *Participant PG 4:* "You have to stick in the game, the minute you lose your commitment, and you will lose the game. Persistence is the key to tackle the challenges coming your way" (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.).

Participant PG 9: At each transfer, I always had the feeling that should try even more to prove myself. And for that the key was developing that confidence and not doubting your Indigeneity and for being a woman. It's difficult to admit that. Persistence is the solution. (Trans. by H. V. G. & S. P.)

Discussion and Conclusion

The themes and subthemes reflect that women who understand themselves and realize what they want to do in life, who persist, nurture supportive relationships professionally and personally, who can assess the impact of organizational and sociocultural factors on their ability to perform, and take the right steps to overcome barriers and challenges succeed in life, and the same is proven by the participants. The study looked at the leadership trajectory of successful women leaders from various backgrounds, including race, caste, location, and religion. The findings revealed that despite intersectional backgrounds the experiences were similar. One thing prominently stood out was only one women participant from minority community indicating possibility of them facing additional layers of prejudice rooted in caste-based stereotypes like discrimination which influences their access to education, career progression, and leadership roles.

Additionally, the participant's experiences analysis revealed the following competencies possessed by them which proved important in their career path to the top. The common competencies identified through the experiences are as follows: problem solving skills, networking, interpersonal skills, persistence, adaptability, determination, ability to learn, and communication skills. The intersectional study on women leaders across varying socioeconomic, religious, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, along with their rural or urban belongingness, developed the background of leadership development from their early years. The six broader themes, namely, Confidence fostered since childhood, Personal qualities, Social facilitators, Organizational facilitators, Workplace and sociocultural challenges, and Success mantra, reflected the development of perceived leadership definition among these women leaders through some enablers and deterrents. In their

journey to the leadership position and achieving it, the participants faced several familial, personal and professional challenges, primarily due to their gender. For instance, unsupportive spouses, mothers' guilt, internal politics based on gender-stereotyped notions, and others formed challenges for the women leaders to face and rise to the intended position.

The presence of gender-stereotyped challenges in bureaucracy, despite inclusive policy-making and implementation, implies the need for strong organizational intervention in the form of awareness among male and female professionals and their engagement in gender-equality practices, mentoring and networking, leadership development and support tools (Mousa et al., 2021). In other words, organizational change implementation and management are required to address gender discrimination, and associated challenges women leaders face just because of their gender and not their capabilities or performance. Leadership commitment and accountability in ensuring organizational intervention are critical in building a positive culture to deliver opportunities and optimize motivation for women.

Similarly, organizational process change through optimizing work–life integration; active and transparent support for gender equity in leader selection and promotion; structured opportunities for formal and informal professional development; equal access to resources; fairness in processes is considered effective in minimizing gender bias in organizations. Moreover, workforce engagement and promoting awareness of gender barriers and their impact, alongside organizational mitigation strategies, are important in advancing women in leadership. The findings revealed the juggling position of the women leaders between being the primary caregiver to their children and parents and managing professional responsibilities like ensuring "anytime, anywhere" availability at work as a norm for accelerated career progression. Such difficulty in managing both ends often leads to a mid-career break despite knowing the disadvantages associated with comebacks. Therefore, the governmental organizations, following examples from multinational organizations like Genpact, American Express, and Genesis, can open up opportunities to join back after their mid-career breaks and provide flexible timings and a choice to work from a more convenient office location for women joining after post-maternity leaves (Shrivastava & Rajesh, 2017). Besides, organizations need to clarify the strengthening of women's leadership and greater representation of both male and female professionals.

Thus, to make change happen at the workplace, the findings implied a change in mindset towards gender roles and stereotyped notions on mother/wife's duties at home through equal responsibilities and clarity on the importance of carrying out career aspirations by both the parents among children. The study provided valuable insights into the state of Indian society, where the girl child is often neglected and denied access to education. This highlights the importance of addressing this issue in order to empower women and promote gender equality. Additionally, the study highlights the challenges faced by women in leadership positions, such as lack of gender-specific facilities, inclusive environments, and gender stereotypes in job recognition endorsing the challenges highlighted by Oblova (2024). Addressing these challenges will be crucial in creating a more inclusive and supportive environment

for women in leadership positions. Organizations, educational institutions, and governments should take into account these findings in order to design policies The interpretation of women's accounts indicates that much learning central to negotiating power and gender relations remains hidden. There is, therefore, the scope for further work in identifying methodologies that enable more developed understandings of how gender and power organize and shape women's leadership learning.

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