

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

IRIDESCENT

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Why did we embark on this journey ...

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”
– Simone De Beauvoir

Leadership literature has long been dominated by representations of the ideal leader as an individual who demonstrates strong agentic traits, and is, ideally, male. When the literature focuses on women leaders, it is riddled with theories that blame women for lacking confidence, not leaning in, opting out or being deficient in some way (e.g. Kay & Shipman, 2014; Sandberg, 2013).

At ODA, we believe that these male-normed, fix-the-women views on leadership don't quite address the insidiously asymmetrical gendered power relations in organizations; which can come in the way of women's career-building intentions and experience.

Our work in this area shows that women leaders face a unique set of challenges that need to be addressed at an individual and organizational level. We started this research because we wanted to create a space for multiple narratives to emerge, we wanted to look at the problem – “why do women leaders continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles”, from more than one point of view.

Executive Summary

Women have greater opportunities for forming and pursuing their own goals now, more than ever before. And yet women continue to be underrepresented in the leadership pipeline. At ODA, we felt the need to look at the issue from more than one point of view. When we undertook this study, our aim was to understand what the glass-ceiling metaphor was really all about and, where it really fell along the journey that women took in their professional lives.

To say that we come away enriched by the findings of our study is an understatement. The study helped us identify and explore spaces for the multiple narratives that emerged. In the process we realized that the impediments that led to the creation of the glass ceiling are not always explicit in their manifestation.

Even more importantly, by depicting a single, unvarying obstacle, the metaphor of the “glass ceiling” failed to incorporate the complexity and variety of challenges that women face in their leadership journeys. In truth, women are not turned away only as they reach the penultimate stage of a distinguished career, they disappear in various numbers at many points leading up to that stage.

One clue to the pressures that contemporary women experience in connection with their ambition can be found in stories that usually successful women tell about their lives. And although women are no longer denied access to capability development and opportunities for career advancement in most types of careers, they have come up against what seems to be an even more powerful barrier to their ambitions.

There is no evidence that the desires to acquire skills and to receive affirmation for accomplishments are less present in women than they are in men. So why is it then that we find such dramatic differences between men and women in their attitudes toward ambition and in how they create, reconfigure, and realize or abandon their goals?

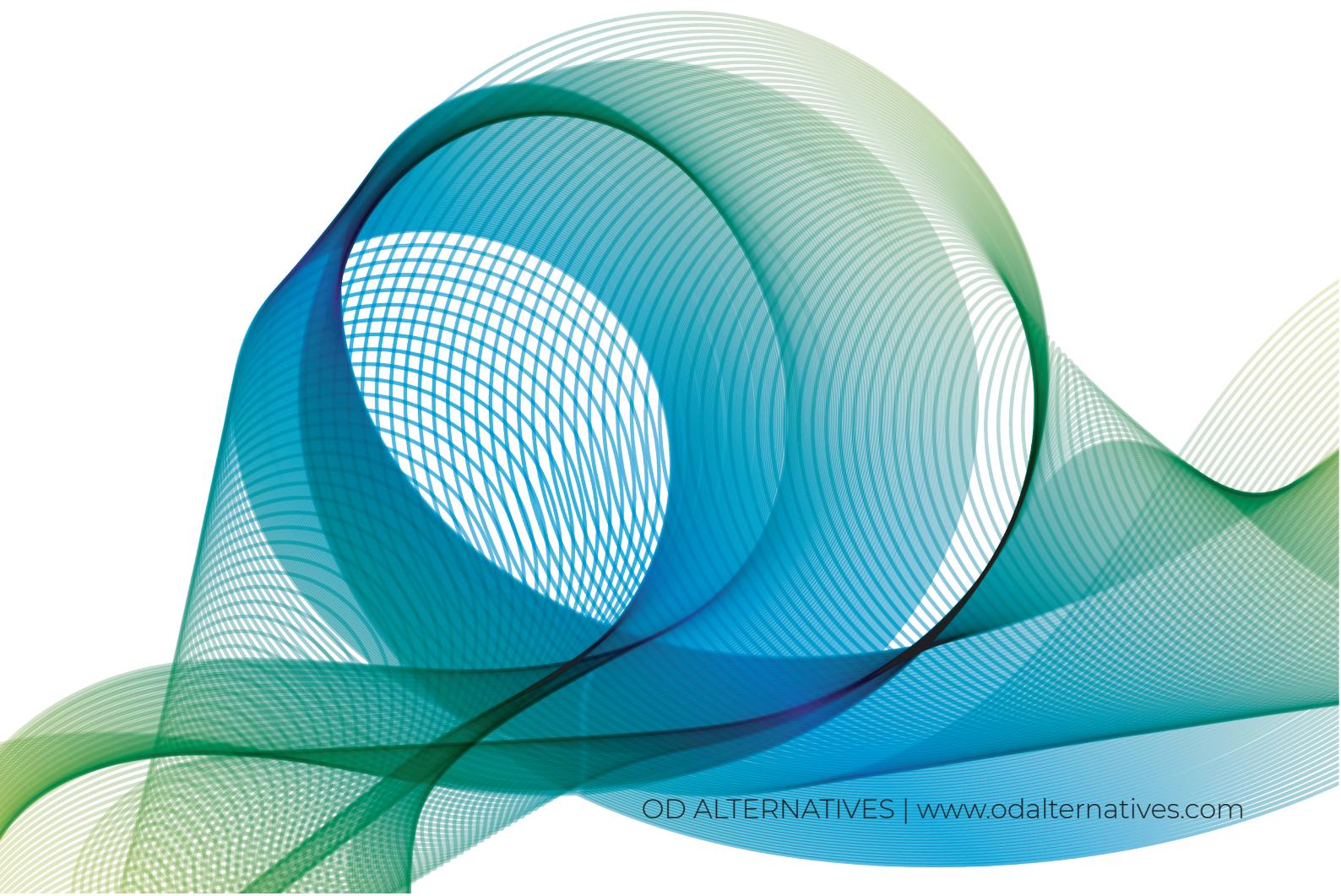
Across professional spheres women we spoke to for this study are facing the reality that in order to be seen as feminine, they must provide or relinquish resources – including recognition – to others. It is difficult for women to confront and address the unspoken mandate that they subordinate needs for recognition to those of others – particularly men. The expectation is so deeply rooted in cultural ideals of femininity that is largely embedded in the sub-conscious. Women can work, and they can professionally grow but doing so is socially condoned only if they have first satisfied the needs of all their family members: husbands, children, elderly parents, and others. If this requirement isn’t met, women’s ambition as well as their femininity is called into question.

And that is why it is critically important for organizations to look at the challenges women often face and clear the path for talented and dynamic leaders to rise to the top from a systems perspective.

It is also important to realize that differences between leadership styles are not necessarily positive or negative in building organizations, but leaders need to be aware of their style and how they come across to others in their organization and outside. This will help organizations work on their culture through efforts made in reinforcing behaviours that promote rather than undermine effectiveness of their women leaders.

We hope our study will help women leaders to build more Conviction (in their aspirations), Connections (with allies), Creation (of own script of success) and Compassion (towards self) to help them soar.

We believe that this study will inform and encourage organizational leaders to take clear and decisive steps to develop the leadership potential of their female employees—and in the process we will all be stronger for it.



METHODOLOGY

Participants

Purposive sampling was adopted that included a total of 102 participants i.e. 81 female leaders & 21 male leaders. The sampling method was selected from both understanding-oriented and action-oriented perspectives, to clarify the deeper causes behind the issue and its consequences. Participants in this study came from a variety of industries & ethnic backgrounds and represented several fields of the industry.

Measures Used

Structured, open-ended interviews were used to collect the data. The questionnaires were formulated on the basis of secondary research to gather deeper understanding of contextual & capability challenges faced by women leaders.

PROCEDURE

1

Qualitative content analysis research technique was used to analyze data obtained from participants to quantify themes. The data was collected during March & April 2019 and translated into data files that were subsequently uploaded into a qualitative research computer program, ATLAS-ti.

2

The data were sorted into themes derived by the initial interview questionnaires, a coding scheme was then devised according to terms of frequency (amount of content), direction (who the content is directed to), intensity (power of content), and space (size of content). The coding system was used to identify themes within the content, leading to manifest coding that is recognized to be highly reliable.

3

An objective method was used to count the number of times a theme occurred within the coding scheme. This resulted in 1093 code themes. Latent coding developed by the researchers was subsequently used to develop and compile 86 code families. The final analysis resulted in complex, dynamic network schemes mapping the contextual & capability challenges faced by the women leaders.

PARTICIPANT'S PROFILE

FEMALE LEADERS

Our women interviewees were in the 28 – 65 -year age bracket, spread across diverse cultural (7 countries), social and professional backgrounds. They consistently demonstrated personal attributes that have clearly enabled their success, provided them with the emotional resources to overcome obstacles, and allowed them to address the complex challenges that often came their way.

She is smart. She is ambitious. She believes in herself and her abilities. From a young age, she has had the desire to lead—to inspire, surpass expectations and pursue her purpose beyond odds.

She's a corporate leader, a business woman, an IAS officer, an entrepreneur, a doctor, an academic, social worker, a fashion model, an actor - balancing it all on the personal front in her other role of a care-giver, home-maker, mother et al.

MALE LEADERS

At ODA, we believe that we need powerful men to step in alongside the powerful women to help build inclusive workplaces, where there is a space for multiple ideas and capabilities to flourish.

It was with this understanding in mind that we made conscious efforts to incorporate the male perspective in our study.

We spoke to male leaders from across the corporate spectrum seeking their views and insights on the subject. Our male leaders are in the 30-55 years age bracket and hold senior roles in organizations across multiple sectors and industries.

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

5.1 – Voices from the Male Leaders who are willing to step up, listen, learn and lead with action

Almost 100% of our male respondents acknowledged the need to create a conscious pipeline of women leaders in organizations and they believe that most organizations recognize the value of diversity and have an intent to hire, develop and promote women into leadership roles.

Specifically, they believe that women leaders bring more humanistic leadership traits to the organization.

However, they see a few challenges that can come in the way of making space for women leaders:

- Lack of role modeling & mentoring: Not too many women leaders are there who can show the way to others looking for guidance.
- Cultural challenges: Women leaders expected to live up to too many expectations.
- Systemic challenges: Organizations still don't have inclusive infrastructure and systems.

When asked, if they would want women leaders to have any specific capabilities to overcome the challenges, this is what they said, they would like their colleagues to do more of:

- Have more confidence in their abilities
- Take more risks
- Invest in self-awareness
- Network more strategically

"The ability to take tough decisions, empathize & create win-win situations are an edge for women leaders"

"The truth of the matter is that pretty much anywhere in the world men tend to think that they that are much smarter than women. Yet arrogance and overconfidence are inversely related to leadership talent — the ability to build and maintain high-performing teams, and to inspire followers to set aside their selfish agendas in order to work for the common interest of the group. Indeed, whether in sports, politics or business, the best leaders are usually humble—and whether through nature or nurture, humility is a much more common feature in women than men."

It was heartening to note, that most of this was resonated by our women respondents. In the next few pages we have outlined the key themes in contextual challenges as well as capabilities that successful women leaders have developed to overcome these challenges.

5.2 – Contextual challenges to creating gender-inclusive workplaces

(A) Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat is a situational phenomenon that arises when people face the prospect of being viewed or evaluated in light of a negative stereotype about a group they belong to. When a woman performs in a technology setting, for instance, she may know that, if she performs poorly, other people could view her performance as confirming a negative stereotype about women and technology.

This prospect is psychologically threatening : A significant amount of research demonstrates that, under certain boundary conditions, especially when the person believes that his or her ability is being evaluated and when he or she is “identified with the domain of evaluation, stereotype threat can cause people to perform less well than they are capable of performing.

During our research, 84% of women said that they have faced stereotyping at workplace and it has been observed that many women confirm to negative stereotype which impacts their performance at workplace. This is called as “Stereotype Threat”.

“It’s an ongoing battle. You have to work a little harder to build your career. Perception Management is very tough. It is assumed that life has been easier for women. We have to work for our own gender and hence we should learn to help each other to form associations & have common platforms as well.”

–Bindu Venkatesh
(VP HR & Training, Oracle)

HOW STEREOTYPE THREAT WORKS

STEREOTYPE THREAT MODEL



In this process, women experience a cycle of negative thoughts, emotions, and appraisal processes (e.g., if I do poorly, will they think people like me can't do this; I'll show them we can do it; am I doing well enough?; let me not apply to this role as I am not ready yet; If I leave on time, will they think that I am not committed). To focus on the task at hand, women try to suppress this monitoring process and emotional response. This suppression itself, however, takes up needed working-memory resources and undermines executive functioning, which ultimately weakens performance on challenging tasks.

SOME OF THE BIASES FACED BY OUR RESPONDENTS

- Women are bad managers as they are too emotional
- They do not have what it takes to be a CEO
- Women are not fit for analytics and finance roles
- They will not be able to perform on a long-term project as they will get married and might leave the job
- Assertiveness is aggressiveness
- They try too hard

(B) Being compared to a single ideal of leadership

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her most famous TedX talks about the danger of a single story around any theme whether the books you read or talk about the problem with a single narrative of leadership.

The scope of organizational and/or institutional problems is huge, but the definition of leadership needed to solve all these problems, seems to come from a single template. Leaders are expected to be ambitious, assertive, risk-taking and bold.

Our study reveals that most organizations hold leaders up to leadership behaviours and norms which are largely agentic and masculine in nature.

This means that if women leaders come across as agentic and tough, they come across as “not woman enough” and if they are more democratic and nurturing, they are “not leader enough”.

The integration of women in leadership roles – as part of the diversity agenda - is not a matter of “fitting in” the traditional models, but “giving in” the opportunities for them to practice their own leadership styles. Since organizations have been mostly occupied by men, there is clearly a dearth of women role models to inspire budding women leaders. In the process women have had to choose successful male leaders and their styles as their role models (Appelbaum and Shapiro, 1993). Others have chosen to break the mould and start with leadership styles that openly reveal feminine traits and behaviours to carve a place in their organizations.

While women who assume conventional masculine traits at work break the glass ceiling easier, it ends up becoming a challenge for them in the long-run as they are increasingly coerced into perpetuating masculine behaviour that reinforces a culture that adversely affects them.

The question organizations should be asking is - to what extent does their norms and practices encourage women to shy away from traits that are characteristically ‘feminine’ in favour of more ‘masculine’ ones and, how does such behaviour undermine what they are trying to accomplish?

(C) Structural inequities at the workplace

Our research highlights significant systemic challenges that come in the way of advancing women in leadership roles :

Entry level barriers : Our women respondents pointed out that most job descriptions are written with wordings that are written as though they are for men only. This discouraged them from applying because it gave the message that they wouldn't belong.

Bias in performance assessment and promotions : Nearly 75% of our respondents talked about being rated below male colleagues despite same or better impact at role. A research by Stanford University's Clayman Institute for Gender Research found that managers are more likely to critique female employees for coming out too strong with their aggressive communication styles. Also, their accomplishments are more likely to be considered as the result of teamwork, rather than individual efforts, unlike male employees. Words like 'driven', 'tackle' and 'innovate' are used more frequently for men in their feedback and their evaluations are based more on the technical expertise and Key Result Areas met.

Lack of infrastructure : Women do have the dual responsibility of home and work. With no strict implementation guidelines about day care centres, and often bearing the responsibility of ailing and aged parents, women make the difficult choice of staying home and not going back to work. And in the absence of quality control in crèches or reliable childcare options, many women seek employment opportunities with flexible hours or part-time work. At least 60% of our participants reported meeting with indifference or downright hostility when they sought benefits to ease their post-maternity transition back to the workplace.

(D) Lack of sisterhood at the workplace

A new study suggests the biggest barrier to women getting ahead is the 'sisterhood ceiling'. The fact that many of us had to overcome significant hurdles as we banged our heads against the glass ceiling doesn't relieve us of the responsibility to help smooth the path for the women who come after us.

We know it's hard to be a woman who stands out. And yet when we do accomplish those gains for ourselves, we often adopt the attitude: "If I did it, why can't she?" Until we learn that the only true power is in unity, we're doomed to smash against glass ceilings forever.

Regardless how one defines this situation, there is no question that those of us who have made our way in the business world can make a big difference for all those who follow after us.

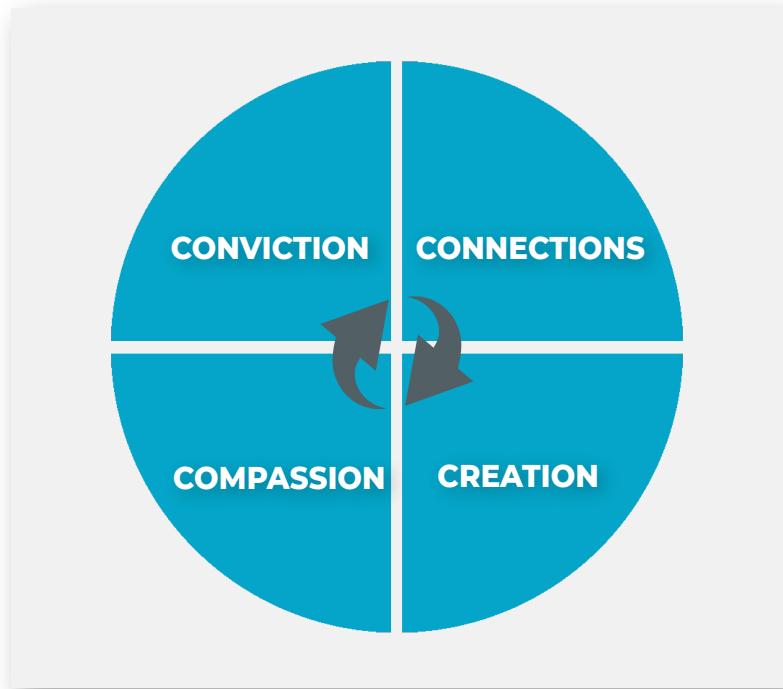
27% of our women respondents shared that they wish to have more sisterhood at workplace and help each other in their professional journeys.

Sisterhood doesn't mean we're the same. It doesn't mean that our struggles are the same. It doesn't even mean that we have to like each other. But it is about viewing our struggles as interconnected and the willingness to learn from each other's experiences and not throw each other under the bus.

"The women at the workforce are not inclusive because of the insecurity stemming out of the working relationships. There is lack of sisterhood which may be the biggest blocker in uplifting the women workforce in future".

-Akhila Babu
(HR Business Partner, Aditya Birla Fashion & Retail Ltd.)

ODA's insights on which capabilities have helped overcome the challenges



We asked all our respondents what helped them to be successful and what they learnt from their role models and we believe there are four distinct capabilities that enable women leaders to overcome the unique set of challenges they face.

CONVICTION

Demonstrating conviction is a powerful strategy used by leaders to maintain a consistent sense of direction and connection to what is most important to them, even under the most pressing situations. This strategy may be especially useful for enabling women leaders to hold on to what is most important to them amid the pressures they face to adapt to stereotypes. In our study, a whopping 70% of participants indicated that having & building self-conviction is one of the most important traits which in any circumstance has to be practiced. The key quotes “**Believe in self**”, “**Don’t give up**”, “**Speak your mind**” all seem to be echoing the sentiments of the women leaders. Conviction also provided a strong positive role modelling signal to other women who may also be facing similar barriers.

“Leaders with conviction show us that the future is certain and that we’re all headed in the right direction. Their certainty is neurologically shared by everyone”

– Anonymous (Senior Woman Leader)

CONNECTIONS

Forming alliances and instrumental connections seems to be a powerful tool for women leaders who have managed to overcome the contextual challenges. They have gained from the experiences from other leaders – male and female, who have been there and done that. From insights on how to ask for what you are worth to learning how to make impactful presentations. Across all our companies in multiple sectors and countries, we see access to networks as one of the key barriers, preventing women from advancing. Networks also provided our women leaders with role models and mentors who were able to help them.

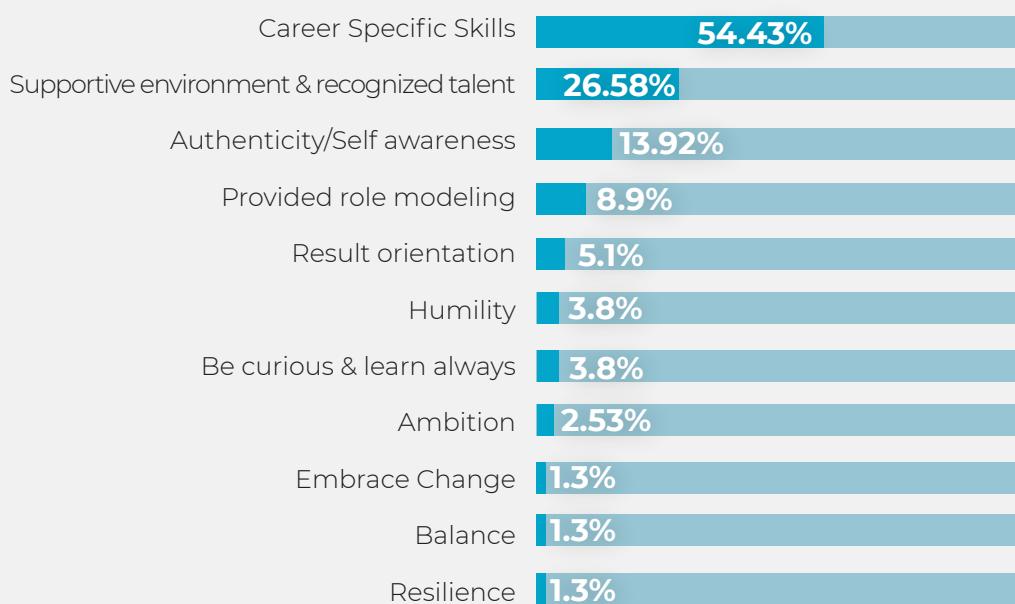
43% of our research respondents felt the need of having networks, both formal & informal.

Influence of role models



Figure 1: % of participants who indicated what they learnt from role models

What our participants learnt from their mentors



62.5% successful women leaders in our survey reported that mentoring (formal & informal) made a critical difference to their career)

Over 50% of our respondents echoed this sentiment as they spoke out the need for creating platforms for showcasing women role-models who could mentor other women besides need for other initiatives like coaching and flexibility at the workplace}

CREATION OF ONE'S OWN DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

Our research indicates that the ability to create one's own definition of success helps the women leaders to deal with the prejudices in the system while remaining true to their own aspirations.

According to Kets de Vries (1989) leaders are “transferential figures”. According to transference theory **“a person perceives and responds to someone else as if that person were a mother, father, sibling or another important figure from the past”**. Thus, leaders end up holding the collective projections, hopes and aspirations of the entire system. This concept applies even more to the case of female leaders who evoke maternal transferences as a result of their gender. No wonder then, a lot of female leaders are held to almost unrealistic standards of being very effective at work while continuing to remain “nurturing” and “caring”. Further, the behavioural prescriptions for a leader’s identity are associated with a traditionally masculine demeanour. Thus, gendered views of organizational roles, workplace structures, practices and patterns of interaction that may be inadvertently more favourable to men – May significantly hinder a woman’s capability to align her development to her aspirations. This capability is built on the capability to be able to use self-awareness and reflection to distinguish “what’s being projected from the system” vs. “what am I bringing to the system” as well as “sculpt” their own role model for what a leader looks like and behaves like.

When asked about their regrets or what advice they would like to give to those who are at early stages of their career, one theme that consistently kept coming up was – “I would not have behaved more like a male leader/ I should not have tried to copy other leaders. Instead I would have/ should have spent more time developing my own brand/ style of leadership”.

“Challenging their own internalized gender roles and social scripts. Finding a true identity for themselves, which is not a reaction to the patriarchy.”

– Anshu Chaudhary
(Assistant Professor, DU)

COMPASSION FOR SELF

In their seminal work on image strategies and identity threat for women's career transition, **Herminia Ibarra and Jennifer Petriglieri refer to the term "impossible selves". Women all over the world and especially in patriarchal cultures, face role-gender paradoxical expectations at the workplace. At the same time, they are held to impossibly high standards of behaviour in the roles played in the personal sphere – e.g. a doting mother, an efficient homemaker, a caring daughter-in-law etc.** Many of our women respondents felt that in the race to live up to all their "impossible selves", they ended up feeling exhausted, unsure of themselves and unable to focus on what they want to pursue. **A common voice that was echoed by almost all our respondents – was that women need to be able to be compassionate towards their own self.** Unless we allow ourselves time and space to grow, to make mistakes and try different things, it will be difficult to try on new identities and learn different things.

"Self - Love is so important. Because when you find yourself crying on the bathroom floor whether it's 3am or 5pm in the afternoon, who is going to be there for you? You. You have to pick yourself up and find the strength to move on. At the end of the day, you are all you've got."

- Anonymous
(Senior Woman Leader)

"I think social roles are changing now and we are moving to a society where women become stronger than men.

Combining leading roles both at work and in families will put a lot of pressure on females."

- Natalya Mashistova
(HR Director, Uniper,
Russia)

CONCLUSION

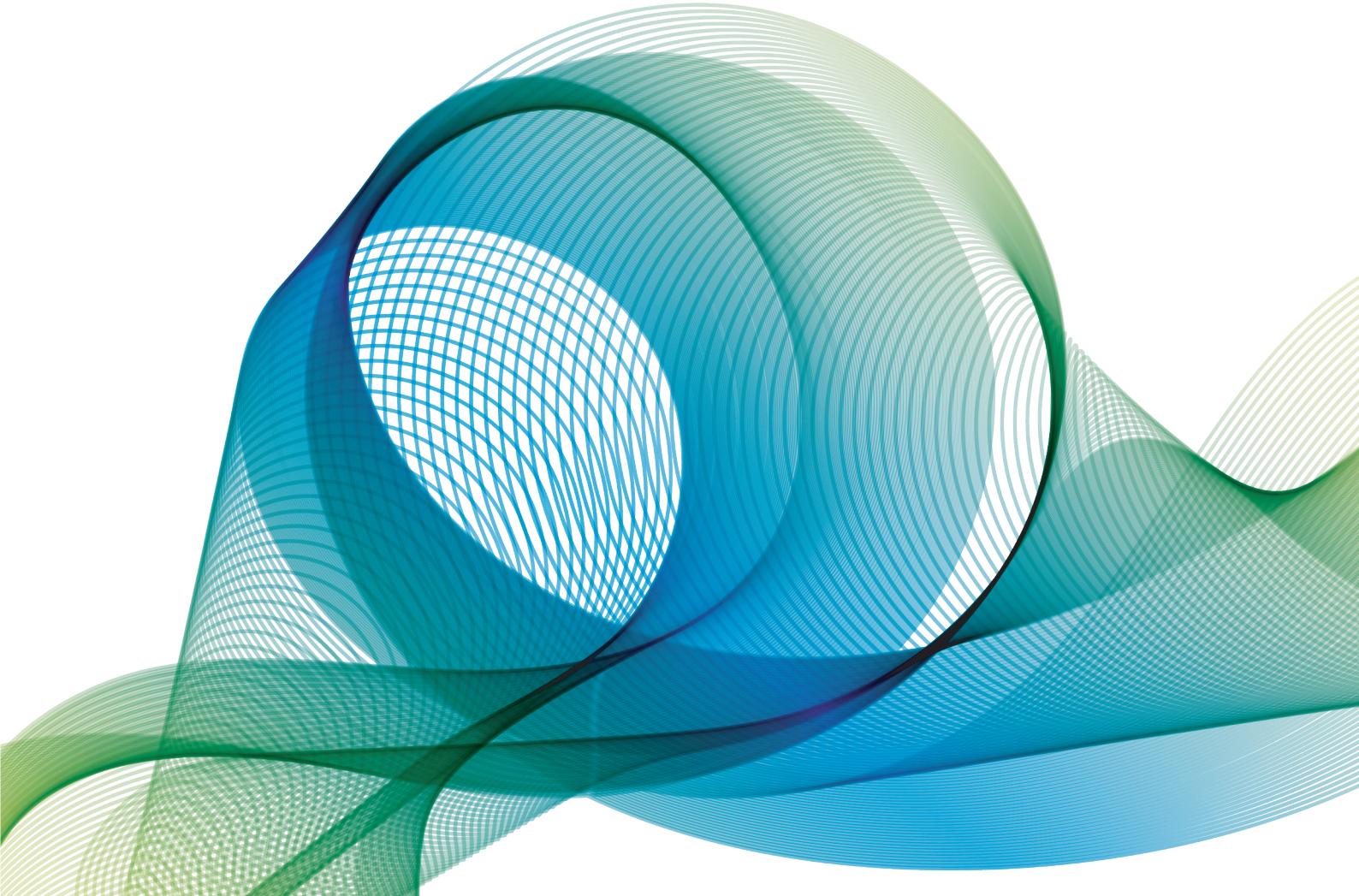
One question that haunted us before and during the research was “Do women leaders need to have a different set of capabilities than male leaders?” Our research leads us to believe that women leaders who succeeded and continued to move to more senior roles in the organizations, developed an additional set of capabilities to deal with the challenges of dealing with paradoxical expectations.

Organizations that have invested in mentoring and structured processes to enable people from all age-groups, genders, talent demographics continue to report higher ROI in terms of profitability and higher levels of engagement*.

We at ODA, believe that what we have uncovered is merely just another layer of looking at a complex problem. However, these insights will lead us a step closer to building the inclusive workplaces needed to solve business and social challenges, facing us.

Please do write in to us at
inclusion@odalternatives.com
to share your views and insights on this topic.

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NOTE : 9 respondents wanted to remain anonymous.

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ODA Profile

Incorporated in 1998, OD Alternatives is a boutique consulting firm that has partnered with more than 300 clients and has touched thousands of people in their growth and transformation journey. We help leaders build great organisations. And when you work with ODA you get our triple loop advantage, a customised solution that is relevant to your needs and facilitators who could shift your awareness and help you be “here and now”.

We address a business challenge through the lens of leadership because we believe leadership is all about creating a future that is not your default future or a mere extension of your past. We believe that leadership is everyone’s business. We are agnostic to tools and methodologies as we believe every situation is unique and we are trained and passionate about a variety of tools and methodologies. So you can trust us to choose the right methodology and concepts that are relevant to your unique needs.

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Thank you.

We help leaders build highly purposeful
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