

Managers' perception on skills and attributes of male and female Employees in Sri Lanka

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Abstract:- Researchers show that managers prefer male employees over female employees even when they have very similar resumes. But this paper tries to present that those differences in Human Resource Management (HRM) are not based on specific gender discrimination purpose. The paper has two main objectives; first one is to expose experience based perceptions of 18 Human Resources (HR) directors/managers and other line managers with regard to which gender is better at different skills and attributes required for successful business management. Second is to answer the problem 'how do that experience based perceptions prevent female managers from advancing to senior management positions in the selected organizations?' through the two group of respondents including above 18 HR directors/managers and other line managers and 30 female managers/ professionals and technical officers of selected organisations. Findings reveal that HR and other top managers preferred male employees not because they are prejudiced against them, but because they believe that male employees perform better on at task oriented skills than female employees through their experience based perceptions. Further, both responded group of the research, reveal that family responsibility is the most important preventing factor of women in advancing to senior management positions.

Keywords:- *Hard Skills, Soft Skills, Gender Differences.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, many organizations make it difficult to differentiate managers from non-managers employees due to changing nature of the work. On one hand, many organizations use flexible job descriptions than traditional job descriptions and on the other hand, names of the positions differ than the traditional names. However, management skills are very vital for any organization to succeed and achieve its goals and objectives. Management skills can be defined as certain attributes or abilities that needed to proficiently perform assigned work tasks in an organization. They include job specific knowledge or technical skills, interpersonal skills and conceptual skills (Katz, 1974) to perform their managerial roles (Mintzberg, 1973) at different levels from top to first level managers while balancing crisis situations and promptly solving problems when confronted than providing answers to those problems. Both types of skills help the managers to perform

their management functions and work tasks well, to relate with their fellow co-workers and know-how, to deal with people and to conceptualize about ambiguous, uncertain and complex situation to allow a smooth workflow in the organization.

Several studies (Schein, 1973, 1975; Balgiu, 2012) have shown that traditional stereotype of a "good" manager being masculine and male still exists. Further, researches on the perception of women as managers show that both men and women consider that successful managers (middle and top management) have characteristics and skills which pertain to men rather than to women (Burke & Collins, 2001; Balgiu, 2013). Similarly, women were seen as better than men in certain occupational categories because of their dexterity, their ability to multi task, as well as their commitment and conscientiousness (ILO, 2016, p.23). Hence, the questions to be addressed in this paper are based on two issues: Whether there are any gender differences in the type of skills demonstrated by male and female employees? If so, does it mean that gender inequality arise not due to stereotyping of female employees but in how managers perceive their skills through the experience? So, the research is proposed to analyse the experience based perceptions of managers towards female employee in Sri Lanka; to this purpose this research used sample of employees which included 18 HR managers/Directors and other line managers-who work in 18 medium and large size organizations to appraise skills and attributes of male and female employees. Further, in examining factors that prevent advancing of women to senior management positions are also measured. Additionally 30 female employees are selected from the same organizations from the occupational groups of managers, professionals, and technical staff to explore the preventive factors for advancing to senior management positions.

The paper begins with an overview of skill by highlighting soft and hard skills of the employees, followed by gender based perceptions of the managers through previous literature. Thereafter, presents the factors that keep women out of management positions in the organizations. The following section of the paper, provides a brief overview for the research method and analysis and finally, discuss the managerial implication and with the key areas for future research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Soft and Hard Skills of the Employees*

Skill is a more dynamic concept that is indicating how declarative knowledge together with work experience based procedural knowledge influence what people know, understand and practically how they are doing. Today, researchers categorize job related skills into hard and soft skill. Hard skills are job-specific skills and knowledge that are required to perform a job and those are transversal skills that mean easily can transfer those skills to one person to another person. However, these skills are not transversal from one job to another as hard skills are varied according to the content of jobs. Hard skills are those achievements that are included on a résumé, such as education, work experience, knowledge, and level of expertise (Robles, 2012). Work-related technical skills and soft skills play different roles in the access to employment and career development. Therefore, job related skills to formulate a basis for employability and adaptability in the labour market. Traditionally, technical skills defined as a level of training a job requires and it is derived from manufacturing industry using standard measures of the skills. Hard skills can learn through education, training programs, certifications, and on-the-job training. Example for the hard skills are Information Technology (IT), accounting, finance, data analysing, mathematics, legal and other quantifiable skills that are included in the requirements for a job.

Perrault (2004), defines “soft skills” as personal qualified, attributes or the level of commitment of a person that set him or her apart from other individuals who may have similar education and experience. Soft skills characterize how a person interacts in his or her relationships with others. Soft skills include interpersonal skills, tact and diplomacy, decision making and problem solving skills, communication skills, listening skills, empathy, leadership, influence and persuasion skills, teamwork and collaboration skills, professionalism skills, leadership and work ethic among others etc. These are much harder to define and evaluate because majority of the skills are tacit and difficult to quantify. Soft skills are transferable skills that can be used regardless of the content of the job at which the person is working.

Other than the above two types of skills, mental skills also needed to achieve organizational objectives. Upadhyay and Guragain (2014), explained that mental skills or cognitive abilities include attributes like perception, attention, memory (short-term or working and long-term), motor, language, visual and spatial processing, and executive functions. Employers seek employees who are having all types of skills to hire to their organizations. Therefore it is better to assume that all managers should have both soft and hard skills with the mental skills to achieve organizational objectives.

A research which is discussed the characteristics of managerial type by Balgiu (2012), both in the Western and Eastern cultures show that the “think manager–think male” phenomenon is a global one. Moreover, there are many

researches on how culture affects the perception of women in managerial positions. But Coffman, Exley and Niederle (2018) explained that employers are less willing to hire a worker from a group that performs worse on average, even when this group is instead defined by a non-stereotypical characteristic. Bordalo, Coffman, Gennaioli and Shleifer (2016), explain that stereotypes are context dependent: beliefs about a group depend on the characteristics of the reference group. However, Stoker, Velde and Lammers (2012) study suggests that managerial stereotypes could change as a result of personal experiences and changes in the organizational context. Gender based discrimination, on the other hand, is rooted in rational beliefs about average gender defences in abilities or skills (Phelps, 1972; Arrow, 1973). International Labour Organization mentions that “yet women often lack access to technical and vocational education and training. Many also lack the basic functional skills, such as literacy and numeracy, to participate meaningfully in the workforce.”

Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham and Handelsman (2012), in their study shows that masculine biasness by presenting two groups of scientists with resumes and applications with identical qualifications except one had a name traditionally associated with women and one had a name typically associated to men. When the scientists were asked to “rate” the applicant the man got significantly higher scores in “competence and hire ability” although the resumes and applications were exactly the same. Cortis and Cassar’s research (2005) indicates that there are no differences between job involvement and work-based self-esteem of male and female managers. But, both male employees and students seem to hold more stereotypical attitudes towards women in management than their female counterparts. But Park (1996) identified male gender qualities characterized as; aggressive, independent, objective, logical, rational, analytical, decisive, confident, assertive, ambitious, opportunistic and impersonal are distinguished from female gender qualities described as; emotional, sensitive, expressive, cooperative, intuitive, warm, tactful, receptive to ideas, talkative, gentle, empathetic, and submissive.

Strebler, Thompson and Heron (1997) emphasized that “men are likely to undervalue the social skills and interaction with customers and clients, which women stress as important and which may be essential requirement of service type occupations”(p.x). Balgiu (2012) found that female employees have less managerial skills and characteristics than men do. Yukl (2002) claims that women are more skilled at interpersonal relationships than men therefore women are superior managers in present society. Szymanska (2018) suggests that while male peers rate female managers’ job performance significantly lower than that of male managers, female peers do not discriminate between genders in their performance evaluations. Strebler, et al. (1997) explained that women have transformational leadership skills and men have transactional leadership skills. However, Cahoon (1991) argues that gender differences may result more from sex stereotypes than from real differences in individual performance. Findings of the

previous research may help to develop a pragmatic argument that men have different skills over female employees even then show best performance in the same managerial areas.

Gallup's data (2014), confirm individuals who work for a female manager are six percentage points more engaged, on average, than those who work for a male manager (33% to 27%, respectively). Chow (2005) provides valuable insights into the function of leadership behaviour in a Chinese community. Irrespective of the sex of the person making the direct report, perceived attributes in rating managers showed no substantial differences. Females projected a more favourable image of leaders than their male counterparts. Lindberg, Petersen and Linn, (2010) findings support the view that males and females perform similarly in mathematics skill. Williams (2012) explained that there may be a female gender advantage in modern organizations that require a "feminine" type of leadership. Research conducted by Horrell, Rubery and Burchell (1990) found that female employees are emphasizing personal and social skills than men. In that sense, some of the researchers propose that organizations could reap benefits through female employees on some skills than the male employees.

Data from workplace ratings website InHerSight (as cited in Cuthrel, 2016) showed there were three specific areas which women who quit depicted dissatisfaction such as lack of opportunities for women, poor female representation in leadership and inflexible work hours. According to Domash (2017), more than 76% of female Saudi workers leave their jobs in less than one year. One of the primary reasons for these short job tenures is low-quality matches between employers' needs and job-seekers' skills such as work ethic, interpersonal, and organizational skills. However, women are still underrepresented at senior levels of the management hierarchy. Based on the primary and secondary research findings Gunawardana (2015) concluded that although Sri Lankan economy has evolved still the glass ceiling effect prevails within many organizations preventing the career advancement of women in order to further climb the corporate ladder.

Stoker et al. (2012), explained that women are expected to engender characteristics like warmth, modesty, and sensitivity. These expectations cause disadvantages for female managers, because they are inconsistent with the stereotype that people have of leaders; leaders are supposed to be strong, result-oriented, and willing to take risks. According to role congruity theory there is incongruence between the female gender role and the manager role. General expectations from the leaders are to be ambitious, confident and driven, not caring, warm and sensitive. Therefore, men are automatically at a leadership advantage because their behaviour is consistent with perceptions (Herschovis & Weinhardt, 2018). Further they explained that if they (women) exhibit the assertive behaviours leaders are expected to possess, they are in violation of their gender-role stereotype and are perceived to be unlikable, self-interested and interpersonally hostile.

Perez et al., (2017) said that men follow a more authoritarian approach, whereas women are more social, especially when it comes to leadership style. Generally, females are advantaged in verbal fluency, perceptual speed, accuracy and fine motor skills, while males outperform females in spatial, working memory and mathematical abilities (Upadhayay and Guragain, 2014). Psychometrics team Good & Co, analysed the personalities and management styles of female managers working across a wide range of industries found that compared to men, female managers tend to have higher levels of both empathy and authority (2017). Further same research found that compared to male managers, women tend to be more creative and open-minded. However they concluded that "despite a gradual increase in the number of female managers, it is unfortunately still common for managerial traits to be associated more with men than women (even if only implicitly)." Further the same research concludes that despite all of these positive managerial characteristics, female managers are more prone to insecurity, low self-esteem, depression and anxiety than their male counterparts.

In 2014, Gallup research shows that employees are more likely to say that they would prefer a male boss (33%) to a female boss (20%) in a new job, although 46% say it doesn't make a difference to them. In 2017, the percentage of U.S. adults preferring a male boss is 23%, 10 percentage points lower than the 2014 and 43 points lower than the initial 1953 reading (Gallup, 2017). Most German workers (52%) say that their manager's gender doesn't make a difference to them, but of those who have a preference, many more would prefer a male (34%) to a female (14%) boss (Nink, 2018). Rigby and Sanchis (2006) revealed that job evaluation systems have bias in favouring the value of skills found in occupations considered masculine in contrast to jobs taken up predominantly by women.

➤ *Factors that keep women out of management positions*

According to previous researches, there are a number of difficulties for women executives to get as many opportunities to advance their careers as men do. Research article in *Experteer* magazine (2018) shows that many factors lead to 'Gender Gap' such as sex stereotyping, issues with leadership style, demands of their family life, difficulty in building social capital, and lack of mentors/sponsors. UK based research conducted by Brands and Fernandez-Mateo (2017) found that women were much less likely to apply for a job if they had been rejected for a similar job in the past than male employees. Rice (2011) pointed out that three possible explanations for the lower numbers of women at the top level of Fortune 500 companies such as women are not capable of doing the work that is required at the top, women do not have the desire to be at the top, there are structural impediments preventing women from reaching the top.

Another research by Hoobler, Lemmon, and Wayne (2011) suggests that one reason why women are not reaching the top jobs in U.S. companies is because their managers assume that their family responsibilities interfere with performance of their work roles, and they called this

phenomenon as the family-work conflict biasness. Nancy and Silva (2010) found that men and women get valuable career advice from their mentors, but it's mostly men are being more sponsored. Further they have concluded the research article by echoed that “still much to do to close the gap between men’s and women’s advancement. Some improvements—such as supportive bosses and inclusive cultures—are a lot harder to mandate than formal mentoring programs but essential if those programs are to have their intended effects.”

Caprino (2013), described 6 core reasons why women aren't advancing to the leadership ranks in corporate America; the differences between men and women are not fully understood or valued; whole-self authenticity is a must-have for many women, yet impossible still in many corporate environments; life, family and work priorities clash fiercely; extreme work demands can drum women out; marginalizing of women is more common than we want to admit and personal accountability needs to be expanded (Forbes).

III. RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

➤ *Profile of the Respondents*

Questionnaire based survey method was applied to collect required data for this study. A self-administered questionnaire was developed as the research instrument. Questions were mostly quantitative, with close-ended, multiple choice, and five-point numerical scale. The questionnaire for the top managers including HR and other senior line managers consisted seven questions to measure experiences based perception on skills/attributes according

to gender. Further same questionnaire asked which primary factors important out of seven factors that can be prevented women from advancing to senior management positions. The 20 organizations were selected using the purposive sampling technique, while including different important industry sectors in the Sri Lankan private sector, such as services, import/distribution, manufacturing, construction, processed food production, agriculture. Out of the 20 respondents, 2 questionnaires were incomplete therefore considered only 18 for the data analysing purpose. 30 female employees selected from the same 20 organizations from the occupational groups of managers, professionals, and technical staff and asked them the preventing factors for advancing to senior management positions.

➤ *Data Analysis*

Both questionnaires were distributed by email after conducting an initial telephone call to make contacts with the head of human resources and other top managers and female employees who had willingness to participate in the survey and asked them to respond to the questions based on their experience through their tenure. Table 1 below depicts the results of the experience based perceptions of human resources directors/ managers and other line managers with regard to which gender is better at 21 skills that are required for successful business management. Further, data reveals that there was a statistically significant difference in the scores among male and female managers' perceptions in terms of gender based breakdown. For example; male managers identified that business analysis is better male employees than female employees while female employees identified that skill belongs to male 100%.

Skill	Managers Perception (%)		Gender Based Perception (%)				Both
	Male (N-10)	Female (N-8)	Male		Female		
			Male	Female	Male	Female	
Business Analysis	94.4	5.6	90.9	9.1	100	-	-
Collaboration	44.4	55.6	54.5	45.5	28.6	71.4	-
Decision Making	88.8	5.6	81.8	9.1	100	-	5.6
Event Planning	5.6	94.4	9.1	90.9	-	100	-
HRM	27.8	72.2	45.5	54.5	-	100	-
General Management	72.2	22.2	90.9	9.1	42.9	42.9	5.6
Marketing	55.6	38.9	45.5	54.5	71.4	14.3	5.6
Diplomacy	66.7	22.2	72.7	18.2	57.1	28.6	-
Negotiation	61.1	38.9	81.8	18.2	28.6	71.4	-
Business Planning	61.1	33.3	72.7	18.2	42.9	57.1	-
Presentation	61.1	33.3	72.2	18.2	42.9	57.1	-
IT	81.9	11.1	81.8	18.2	100	-	-
Operational	83.3	16.7	90.9	9.1	71.4	28.6	-
Project Management	72.2	27.8	81.1	18.2	57.1	42.9	-
Training	38.9	55.5	36.4	54.5	42.9	57.1	5.6
Trainability	41.2	58.8	54.5	45.5	16.7	83.3	-
Interpersonal	58.8	35.3	72.7	18.2	33.3	66.7	5.9
Meeting Deadline	58.8	29.4	83.6	18.2	50	50	11.8
Administration	88.2	11.8	81.8	18.2	100	-	-
Team Work	47.1	52.9	54.5	45.4	33.7	66.7	-
Job Tasks	83.3	5.6	81.8	19.2	85.7	14.3	11.1

Table 1:- HR Directors/Managers and other line Managers Experience based Perceptions on Skill/Attributes according to Gender
Source: Survey Data (2019)

Above skills can be further categorized as hard and soft skills as depicted in Table 2 below. According to the experience of the HR Directors/Managers and other line managers, male employees are excelling 11 hard skills and 4 soft skills out of 21 (including both hard and soft skills) than the female employees. However analysis data shows that female employees are more excel on the 4 hard skills and 2 soft skills as depicted in the following Table 2.

	Skill Type
Skills/Attributes in which male employees are better	<p style="text-align: center;">Hard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysing (94.4%) - Administration (88.2%) - Operations (83.3%) - Task (83.3%) - IT (81.9%) - General Management (72.2%) - Project Management (72.2%) - Business Planning (61.1%) - Presentations (61.1%) - Work on Deadlines (58.8%) <p style="text-align: center;">Soft:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decision Making (88.8%) - Negotiations (61.1%) - Interpersonal (58.8%) - Marketing (55.6%) - Diplomacy (55.6%)
Skills/Attributes in which female employees are better	<p style="text-align: center;">Hard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Event Planning (94.4%) - Trainability (58.5%) - Training (55.5%) <p style="text-align: center;">Soft:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HRM (72.2%) - Teamwork (52.9%) - Collaboration (55.6%)

Table 2:- HR Directors/Managers and other line Managers Experience based Perceptions on Hard and Soft Skills/Attributes according to Gender
Source: Survey Data (2019)

Table 3 below shows gender based high favourable skills/attributes according to the experienced based perception of human resources (HR) directors/ managers and other line managers without gender biasness.

Skill	Managers Perception (%)		Gender Based Perception (%)			
			Male		Female	
	Male (N-10)	Female (N-8)	Male	Female	Male	Female
Business Analysis	94.4	5.6	90.9	-	100	-
Decision Making	88.8	5.6	81.8	-	100	-
Event Planning	5.6	94.4	-	90.9	-	100
HRM	27.8	72.2	-	54.5	-	100
Diplomacy	66.7	22.2	72.7	-	57.1	-
IT	81.9	11.1	81.8	-	100	-
Operational	83.3	16.7	90.9	-	71.4	-
Project Management	72.2	27.8	81.1	-	57.1	-
Training	38.9	55.5		54.5	-	57.1
Administration	88.2	11.8	81.8	-	100	-
Job Tasks	83.3	5.6	81.8	-	85.7	-

Table 3: HR Directors/Managers and other line Managers Experience based Perceptions on High favourable skills/attributes without Gender Biasness
Source: Survey Data (2019)

According to the above table, irrespective of gender of HR Directors/Managers and other line Managers agreed on male employees are having more hard and soft skills such as business analysis (hard), decision making (soft), diplomacy (soft), IT (hard), operational (hard), project management (hard), administrations (hard) and job tasks (hard) while female employees are having greater skills on event planning (hard), HRM (soft) and training (hard).

Further, this research asked seven factors from human resources directors/ managers and other line managers of the sample to explore which factors prevent female employees in advancing to top corporate leadership positions. Following Table 4 shows that those managers perceptions.

Rating from 1 to 5	(N=18)						
	Lack of Experience on Line/General Management (%)	Lack of career opportunities (%)	Ineffective management style (%)	Male stereotyping and preconceptions (%)	Exclusion from informal networks (%)	Inhospitable corporate culture (%)	Family responsibilities (%)
Extremely Important	11.8	11.8	11.8	23.5	5.9	11.8	35.3
Very Important	17.6	17.6	11.8	23.5	17.6	17.6	17.6
Moderately Important	23.5	41.2	5.9	11.8	11.8	11.8	23.5
Slightly Important	11.8	23.5	29.4	11.8	29.4	29.4	5.9
Not Important	35.3	5.9	41.1	29.4	35.3	39.4	17.7

Table 4: Perceptions of managers, professionals and technical staff on factors preventing women from advancing to top corporate leadership positions - Source: Survey Data (2019)

It is very important to mention that according to the Table 4, important three factors that preventing women from advancing to top corporate leadership are family responsibility, male stereotyping and preconceptions and lack of career opportunities (considering up to moderately important).

Moreover, same seven factors are used to explore which factors prevent female employees in advancing to top corporate leadership positions from the 30 female managers/ professionals and technical officers of the selected organisations. Other than the HR directors/managers and other line managers, 30 female employees selected from the same 20 organizations from the occupational groups of managers, professionals, and technical staff and asked them the mark most important three preventing factors for advancing to senior management positions to them. Table 5 presents the perception of the employees.

Rating	(N=30)						
	Lack of Experience on Line/General Management (%)	Lack of career opportunities (%)	Ineffective management style (%)	Male stereotyping and preconceptions (%)	Exclusion from informal networks (%)	Inhospitable corporate culture (%)	Family responsibilities (%)
Extremely Important	26.6	33.4	33.4	56.6	46.7	36.6	66.7

Table 5: Perceptions of Female Managers/ Professionals and Technical Officers on factors Preventing Women from Advancing to Top Corporate Leadership Positions
Source: Survey Data (2019)

According to the above Table 5, the extremely important three factors by female managers/ professionals and technical officers of the selected organisations that prevent women from advancing to senior management positions are family responsibilities (66.7%), male stereotyping and preconceptions (56.6%) and exclusion from informal networks (46.7%). It is very important to mention that most important common two factors as preventing female employees from advancing to senior management positions in Sri Lanka are;

1. Family responsibilities and,
2. Male stereotyping and preconceptions

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