



By Arva Shikari

a platform for  
women  
role  
models

*In conversation with  
Poonam Barua, Director,  
PAMASIA Global  
Corporate Advisory and  
Founder Convener, "Forum  
for Women in Leadership".*

**W**omen in leadership roles is a vital topic for most MDs, CEOs, HR executives and women themselves. Some have reached the board level and others aspire to make it there. To mentor and identify women for top-management and board positions WILL has created a Forum for Women in Leadership bringing together senior women executives across corporate India through its various innovative initiatives to encourage, acknowledge and enhance women executives. Poonam Barua, Director, PAMASIA Global and Founder-Convener of WILL Forum for Women in Leadership in conversation with Human Capital shares WILL's initiatives, aims and plans in enhancing women in leadership.

**WHY DO YOU THINK A FORUM LIKE WILL WAS REQUIRED FOR WOMEN IN INDIA?**

"Corporate India and its top management leadership cherishes the aspiration of becoming global leaders in the changing world marketplace, and has been struggling to recruit and retain the best talent that will bring innovation and forward-thinking for their organization. However, most of them have forgotten that women constitute 50% of the demographic population and executive workforce in India - and unless they consciously seek to leverage this talent pool of women - and provide an eco-system to nurture them in the workplace, most of them may not succeed in re-defining authentic leadership for future markets and building lasting sustainable organizations."

"At the same time, women in corporate India do not have a platform for articulating their views on defining leadership, best employer companies and HR best practices, corporate governance and ethical leadership, innovation and global market dynamics - all of which are consistently being defined by male-dominated forums across business and industry - in India and worldwide."

"These two factors were the main driving force for creating the "Forum for Women in Leadership" in India - where the women across corporate India could collectively put their thoughts together in a peer-level, candid, informal, distinctive, and substantive-driven way - on how they can redefine their own roles and dynamics

in the organizations and how they can sensitize corporate India towards a better leadership that understands and values women for building sustainable organizations.”

**WITH WHAT VISION WAS WILL FIRST SET UP? WHAT ARE WILL'S OBJECTIVES/GOALS/FOCUS AREAS TODAY AND HOW HAVE THESE CHANGED OVER TIME?**

“The WILL Forum was founded in November 2007 more as a business model - to make the economic case for women in leadership and bring parity and a level-playing field for women in the talent-exercise for board positions, CEOs, and Chief Executive positions. However, during the course of these two years - I have found that there are several complex issues at play in this domain: invisible barriers for women to move up the corporate ladder, lack of mentoring and training opportunities for women, lack of an eco-system that respects women in workplace as equals, lack of a global mind-set that understands the rewards of diversity and inclusivity, and an aspirational-deficit among some women for leadership roles. The focus of WILL Forum has thus redefined itself for focusing on 2 tracks:

- a) Providing collective thinking from women executives to corporate India and CEOs--on how they need to build best practices for women in the workplace, recognize the differential style of leadership that women can bring to business, and transition from the "best practices to the next practice" in leadership.
- b) Mentoring women in mid-career and senior levels - for raising their aspirational levels, providing self-awareness of their roles and responsibilities navigating the corporate dynamics and male-networks, balancing their home-office lives, becoming front-line managers and seeking high visibility and rewards, and responding to business and societal needs.

**HOW CHALLENGING HAS IT BEEN TO ACCOMPLISH THESE OBJECTIVES?**

“It is truly a challenging task to accomplish the mission and mandate of WILL Forum. Most Indian companies continue to look at women in leadership as a low-priority issue, to be taken up when all other matters of ‘business importance’ have been attended to.”

“Further, there is no recognition amongst most Indian CEOs and HR leaders that women constitute an important part of the best talent bucket and bring a new leadership style to businesses - as they are conditioned to working within their formats of looking for ‘leaders like themselves.’ So, the best positions and best compensation packages are not offered to women in corporate India.”

“Mind-sets of Indian companies will need to be changed with good research and data on women as drivers of revenues, profits, and business - and creating women business leaders who will continue to mentor forward-thinking in their organizations. The socio-economic conditioning of Indian society, where women are defined to play the house makers role, and always get second preference in society to male peers - is also a major drawback.”

**PLEASE SUMMARIZE YOUR OPINION ABOUT THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

**IN THE CORPORATE INDIAN WORLD TODAY.**

“Corporate India has so far not accepted the true meaning of building a sustainable organization - where every segment of diversity and leadership needs to be harnessed for best performance. Women are therefore still seen as confined to low-risk, low-responsibility, and low-rewards positions -where they will contribute to the company operations and facilitation, but not viewed as potential materials for CEOs and Board Directors along with male counterparts. This will be the key challenge - to transform the mindset of corporate CEOs and HR leaders to view women as the best talent for CEOs, board positions, presidents, chief operating officers, and top management - rather than just the softer-roles in the company.”

**HOW MUCH IMPORTANCE IS REALLY GIVEN TO GENDER EQUALITY INITIATIVES IN THE INDIAN CORPORATE WORLD?**

“While there is an increasing interest and growing sensitization worldwide- gender equality unfortunately does not find an important place in the corporate planning strategy of most Indian companies - as yet.”

“Large conservative Indian companies like AV Birla Group, Reliance Industries, L&T, Wipro, Futures Group, RPG, Essar, Marico, Grasim, Hindalo, ACC, Asian Paints, Ranbaxy, and public sector companies like Indian Oil Corp., State Bank of India, NTPC, Steel Authority have no metrics to show for women in top-management, and do not seem to have a process for identifying high-potential women and mentoring women leaders through diversity programs.”

“On the other hand, gender-diversity is finding greater acceptance in companies like Infosys Technologies, Tata Consultancy Services, ICICI Bank, Mahindra Group, Genpact, ONGC, JSW Steel, Tata Group, Dr. Reddys Labs, Indian Hotels, Zensar Technologies, Bharti Televentures, where it is receiving high priority as part of corporate strategy.”

“Similarly, MNCs in India like Genpact, Citigroup, GE India, IBM India, Nokia India, Pfizer, Pepsico, Coca Cola India, Deloitte, KPMG, CISCO, Honeywell, Fidelity Investments, BP Castrol, Shell India are all placing high priority on recognizing and launching robust diversity programs in their companies in India. On GE Day for example this year, an entire 2-hour session was devoted to ‘Women in Excellence’, while many Indian companies still have to come to terms with celebrating international women's day at the workplace!”

“In a recent survey on the WILL Handbook on ‘Sharing best practices for women in the workplace’, many companies like Nokia, IBM, GE India, Citigroup scored 100% of the 50 best practices for women in the workplace recommended by the WILL Handbook. Indian companies scored less than 20% of the best practices for women in their companies.”

**HOW DO YOU THINK WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES ARE VIEWED IN THE INDUSTRY AT LARGE?**

“It is clear that Indian industry does not view women in leadership roles in a substantive way, and industry forums seem to address women's issues in conferences

once a year, which is clearly not going to make any real-time impact.”

“There are several corporate HR leaders and CEOs who admit that women cannot be taken seriously in corporate careers, or do not have the right qualifications for executive promotion, all of which may simply digress from the real issue of a providing a level-playing field for women.”

**WHAT ROLE WILL WILL HAVE IN BRINGING ABOUT A CHANGE IN THE CURRENT SITUATION?**

“Over the past 2 years, the WILL Forum has given senior women executive in India something that they never had before: a forum for open and shared bonding, that they can drive, own, identify with, and use for learning from each other and collectively impact their existing status in India. It has held over 20 WILL Forum meetings, with over 1000 women participating from across industry and through the WILL LinkedIn Network.”

“The WILL Forum has already put out the WILL Handbook on ‘Best Practices for Women in the Workplace’, which has received huge orders from Indian and multinational companies for rolling out in their organization. We are overwhelmed to find that companies like Tata Group and Citigroup are using it for guiding their senior managers for building eco-systems for women in the workplace.”

“WILL Forum has also mentored 25 senior women executives through its ‘Creating women business leaders program’ in 2008, and the WILL Mentees 2008 are from companies including Citigroup, Infosys, Tata Consultancy, Tata Power, ICICI Bank, Nokia, Indian Hotels, ONGC, Zensar Technologies, Bharti Airtel, Deloitte, KPMG, Dr. Reddys and others. We will continue the WILL Mentees batch of 2010 and 2011 onwards.”

“The WILL Forum has hosted CEOs and Executive Directors from Tata Steel, ONGC, Citigroup, Tata Sons, Infosys, KPMG, GE India, Genpact, Deloitte, Mahindra Group, BP Castrol, Azim Premji Foundation, Zensar Technologies for open panel sessions - and corporate HR heads to bring them into the dialogues on barriers for women in moving up the corporate ladder.”

The WILL Forum has rolled out the ‘Executive education program for women’ for mid-level women to make a step-change in their careers - for over 50 women executives of Genpact in 2009 - and will be conducting these programs across industry in 2010.”

“We have already received outstanding feedback, support and commitment on the change that we are seeking through the WILL Forum - and corporate India seems most inspired by the valuable mandate.”

**WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WILL AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN CORPORATE LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN? HOW DO YOU WISH THESE AWARDS TO BE PERCEIVED BY INDUSTRY?**

“The WILL Women Choice Awards are most unique in India and worldwide as they are given to men and women in business who have shown a deep passion, outstanding commitment, and high delivery in ‘inspiring, driving, and mentoring’ an eco-system for nurturing women in leadership in their companies - and driving

inclusivity and gender-equality for best rewards to business and society.”

“WILL Women's Choice Awardees are therefore not women business CEOs - but those who are consistently and actively changing the workplace dynamics for providing leadership roles for women. The WILL Awardees are the WILL Forum's role models for making the change that we seek for building sustainable and inclusive companies.”

“WILL Awardees include people like Mohan Das Pai (Infosys Technologies), Richard Rekhy (COO, KPMG), Parag Saigaonakar (Deloitte), H.M.Nerurkar (CEO, Tata Steel), Arun Nanda (Executive Director, Mahindra Group) and women from IBM, ONGC, Zensar Technologies, Tata Consultancy Services, Genpact - who have been driving women in leadership in their companies. We believe that this would be one of the most coveted awards for corporate Indian women and men to strive for - in business.”

**HOW ARE THE WINNERS CHOSEN AND FACILITATED?**

“Nominations must be sent by companies for individuals with rigorous documentation on the programs and accomplishments in the area of women in leadership and diversity enhancement. Metrics for number of women in top-management, and processes to enhance this roster - is an important submission of the nomination process.”

“The WILL Women's Choice Awardees are facilitated at a distinguished ceremony at the Annual WILL ‘2009 Women in Leadership Conference’ and presented the WILL Awards. The WILL Awardees become part of the WILL Mentoring Council for developing new leaders in corporate India.”

“The WILL Awardees will be our role models for multiplying the thought-leadership and processes for bringing women into leadership positions - and we hope to create 20,000 more women business leaders in corporate India over the years to come!”

**WHAT IS YOUR ORGANIZATION'S PLAN FOR 2010?**

“During 2010 we will be working to release the ‘WILL best employer's survey’ which benchmarks Indian companies according to diversity, sustainability, and best practices in the workplace.”

“We will also be releasing the WILL ‘Independent women director's roster’, which will enable companies to access senior and qualified women who would like to seek a board position. Considering that there are only 2% independent women directors - out of 9,000 companies list on the BSE - this will be an important contribution that we can make to corporate India.”

“We will also be working on creating the WILL Mentees Batch of 2010 for cross-industry mentoring of women - and building partnerships with global institutions like Women's World Banking, Financial Women's Association, Gender Reporting Initiative, Wharton School, and other - so that we can combine strengths with the global community of excellent women and men in business.”

**HC**