

A briefcase and a baby

Women alumni, belonging to the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA), got together to address women's issues in the corporate world. DNA gives you more on this initiative and speaks to some of the most successful corporate women in India to know their story.

You will have to fight. Nothing comes easy'

Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Chairman, Biocon

■ How easy or hard was it to rise?

"When I applied 40 years ago, I should not consider myself the reference point. I would like to bring the young educated women of today—not to keep using a relevance point of 40 years ago, which is when I started Biocon. I believe today's young educated women are more aware of her rights and her culture and are accepting of career women. Even now, I still find support coming from the sports and higher education space than in the past."

■ What are the typical obstacles?

"Women have to accept challenges. When you overcome challenges, you actually become very confident and self-assured. That is what gives you the courage to fight on. My childhood was not so family. They were very strict parents. It was not easy to be a woman ready for women in business when I started. I wanted to come out, but I took it on as a challenge and overcame the same, which enabled me to succeed."

There are very few women in leadership roles across the board. Biocon is to be blamed for that because they constantly short women into different kinds of categories. The perception is the media is not showcasing women in leadership positions.

■ What tips would you give young women managers?

"I want to say to young women today that if you consider yourself educated and intelligent, then you have no excuse to constantly be different. Today an educated urban woman has no excuse to be different. You have to be different. If you are not different, your HR is always ahead. I do not think it is difficult for women. If you are really focused on your career, on your profession or entrepreneurship, you will just let all those things distract you. Women, you're looking the outside and you're not looking at why they won't succeed."

"Whenever you fight, there is a gap. It is not easy. But if you want to move ahead, you will have to fight."

I would say to women, please stop making excuses. Fight the social prejudices if you have to. If you are an educated woman, you have to fight the status quo. You have to fight the systems.



Tanushree Shahi
Managing Director, Dalmia Bharat Group

The Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, formed a Special Interest Group (SIG), comprising its women alumni, to discuss and debate the issues faced by women in their personal and professional lives. The first such meeting of this group was held recently in Mumbai, where nearly 75 women shared discussed the typical issues that mid-level women face in India. Some of these include coming back to the workplace after child birth, mid-career transitions, networking in corporate world, need to adapt to corporate culture, and taking senior lead roles. This group of women has decided to help the Institute undertake focused research, design courses, offer workshops and mentoring support.

Prof. Pritesh Basant, Chairperson, IIMA stressed, "The purpose of this group is to encourage alumni to create opportunities for learning opportunities on campus for both faculty and students by developing women focused case studies, undertaking research on issues relating to women and management, evaluating criteria to rank companies on their women in climate policies and designing courses and workshops."

In addition, "We have formed nearly 25 such groups in various areas that include entrepreneurship, healthcare, education, real estate, technology etc. This has created a lot of energy among our alumni who want to contribute to the Institute's well-being. We also have a Women Student Association which aims at ensuring that much more can be done to facilitate the students in undertake detailed research."

According to IIMA officials, the kind of suggestions that came forward during the meet held at Mumbai was fascinating. "One of the suggestion was to ask companies, who come for campus placements, to reveal what role they fit for women employees as part of their PPT."

TYPICAL ISSUES FACED BY WOMEN MANAGERS IN CORPORATE WORLD

- Mid-career transitions
- Networking in corporate world
- Mentorship for women entrepreneurs
- Women on board
- Breaking the glass ceiling

Also, there has been no systematic documentation on such issues, instead focus has been on how women managers can be successful in their work-life after child birth, how many women without these actions or change career path, etc.

Dr. Debraj Basu, IIMA professor, said,

"I always believe in making the best of any opportunity which comes across, which is what I did from transitioning from leading my own business to being the CEO of a global investment business. My past experiences across all my stints helped me reach where I am today. Being different and unique but proven and courageous for me is my key learnings."

■ What are the typical obstacles and how to overcome them?

Women are surrounded by clichés—glass ceiling, work-life balance, cultural fits in the office, the challenges of being a mom, etc.

You can either choose to let these define you or you can move past them and focus doing your best.

I believe that regardless of gender, anyone who is different from convention, faces such difficulties. Being different is an advantage. Personally try to think about the different perspectives I bring to the market as a woman. You will be respected as a professional if you just keep working at it and it gets better and better. When I talk to women, I tell them that you are not born a leader, you are made. You are not born a mentor, you are trained. You are not born a mentor, you are a limited number in senior positions. Yes, more women are moving into this industry now, and I feel more women entering industries makes life easier for other women.

■ What tips would you give young women managers?

Do your dream, follow your passion, work well, and work hard on the feedback that you get. As I often tell my team, we are all a masterpiece and a work in progress at the same time. Look for senior women mentors in your organization who will guide you through your journey of leadership. Finally, you will get a lot of advice on how to be a good manager, how to be a good employee, what to do and how to be. Listen thoughtfully, but remember you are unique. Write your own story, and I promise you the world will listen.

'Write your own story. The world will listen'

Radhika Gupta, CEO, Edelweiss Asset Management Limited (EAML)

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'You are only as good as what you bring to table'

Benu Sed Kamati, MD, HDFC Ltd

■ How difficult was it to rise to the top?

"I would say it is like juggling between personal and work front – you can't get good either. Sometimes, one takes priority over the other, depending on the need."

"I have been fortunate to have a supportive family who helped me maintain the strained ratio of the required balance. Also, the support of the fabulous team at HDFC gave me courage and conviction to go ahead in spite of the challenges."

■ What are the typical obstacles women managers face?

"Even today, I have seen that women are often given limited input to strategic management levels due to work and personal pressures and other work related issues. But with policies on supportive environment, maternity benefit, in-house crises, sexual harassment at workplace, etc., this trend has been reversed now."

■ Your tips for young women managers?

"It is not only good as what you bring to the table. My advice to all young executives is that they should get rid of this concept of gender differences when it comes to work. Each individual has the potential to contribute in their own unique way. Success will surely follow."

■ Your drive to pursue success managers?

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■ What are the typical obstacles women managers face?

"Managing expectations and perceptions can be a huge obstacle until I realized that I don't need to manage people's perception of me to be successful. Also, we often have a lack of belief in our abilities of ourselves which does not happen. Time management and delegation are important aspects I play to."

■ What steps should you take to overcome the challenges?

"Be confident! Be believing in yourself and your purpose, and never second guess either of the two. Being a good role model to your thinking is a good way to start. Don't compare yourself to others. Chances of finding gender equality are high. One may not like it, but those are the cards that you are holding, so play them well."

Don't be too hard on yourself and don't judge yourself by what someone else thinks of you. We need to overcome and stop getting paralyzed by our own perfectionist tendencies. Listen to common reflection when you get totally stuck. It might be a short pause, such as a few deep breaths or a walk or just bang on Netflix!"



'Need to overcome our perfectionist tendency'

Anshu Sarin, CEO, Kavis Hotels

■ How easy or hard was it for you to reach your current position?

"It was not that hard. It was easy and rough, happy and discouraging, fun and rewarding. What I did was to keep moving, knowing all will be ok."

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'If women don't grab chances, fear will set in'

Vidya Shah, CEO, Edelweiss Foundation

■ How difficult was it to rise to the top?

"I think it is usually as difficult for women to grow in their careers. The only difference is that usually women have to make more trade-offs than men, as the responsibility of child bearing and child-rearing, especially if you're sole and main earner in the family. When it comes to careers, the role of the spouse in encouraging the other in career progression, bearing the weight of family equally and making compromises when necessary cannot be underestimated."

■ What are the typical obstacles women managers face?

"My advice to all women leaders is that the most important thing is to have a clear vision of what you want to achieve in your career. If you have a clear vision, then you will be able to work towards it."

■ What are the typical obstacles women managers face?

"Women don't grab opportunities. Few will set in, not allowing them to take on new challenges. In the race to maintain a balance between family and work, women often go through self-inflicted guilt. All you need to do is to be open and be good friends with your family!"



'Identify reason you are working for & work for it'

RM Vishakha, MD & CEO, IndiaFirst Life Insurance

■ How easy or hard was it to rise to the top?

"There are many challenges. It is difficult for me because I didn't even get an opportunity to be considered. The first time I got called for a CEO's interview, I knocked in. In fact, I made it to the final list of five only because Legal & General (the foreign partner in IndiaFirst Life Insurance) had a policy of interviewing a certain number of women candidates. So women must have policies in place to ensure that women have a chance to prove themselves."

■ What are the typical obstacles?

"Obstacles are both internal and external. One is not being given opportunities. Then at the workplace, women's contribution levels are questioned in the room to have the floor. Women are not given the right seat in the boardroom. But in the long run, the external factor is that the situation occurring in late 2008 is not questioned as it is looked at as just an incident."

■ What steps should you take to overcome the challenges?

"Professional. Typically, work has been looked at as a means of earning money. But women must look at work as means to contribute something more and to assert their individuality. Identify the reason you are working for and work for that reason."

'Flexibility and a clear vision is what you need'

Digali Goenka, CEO and joint MD, Watson India Ltd

■ What are the typical obstacles women managers face?

"As women leaders, it is imperative for us to create working environments that promote an equitable and inclusive work culture where employees, irrespective of their gender, are able to attain their full potential. Female, the most challenging tasks have remained to make a difference and make a positive contribution to the organization, while helping it to maintain its competitive edge. As women, we must be open to creating a business model that is built on strong consumer insights and is backed with ethical and good governance practices."

With the new age aspirational consumers, our primary focus has been to understand their needs and requirements and to transform them into business ideas, thereby making innovation as the cornerstone of our business strategy."

■ Your advice to young women managers?

"Regardless of gender, I feel it is important for leaders to have a clear vision and innate passion for the work they do. Agility and flexibility is accommodative changing business and consumer requirements make for good leaders as some of the qualities that have helped me as a woman leader."



■ How easy or hard was it to rise to the top?

"The first step up the corporate ladder is not an easy or hard area irrespective of whether you are a man or a woman. My career in the industry has been relatively free of discrimination. The climb has been long and slow, but this can perhaps be said of

equities and investments for women trying to balance both profession and family."

■ What tips would you give young women managers?

"Be confident and don't let the sky be the limit. Taking credit whenever it is appropriate, showing that you are responsible for things that you are responsible for, making sure that the right work-life balance line, which can be variable for each of us, is maintained. For this, prioritization, sense of humor, and resilience would be necessary."



'Keep hoping for better, victory is on the other side'

Kruti Joshiapura, Director, JWC Logistics Park Pvt Ltd

■ How hard was it to rise to the top?

"Our world has never been easy to allow a woman to rise in any industry. I am grateful to my father for bringing me up with, 'Stay truthful to yourself and believe in yourself'. He taught me that the world is not always fair, but you can always make it better."

■ What are the typical obstacles?

"Well, I think the only obstacle is the male ego. The acceptance of a woman above her because of her skills and intelligence and experience is something that is difficult for a man to digest."

importance and acceptance given to women only in the executive roles. Today, with the number of MNCs entering India, the culture is changing. The thinking of the new generation of men is changing."

■ What are the typical obstacles?

"Well, I think the only obstacle is the male ego. The acceptance of a woman above her because of her skills and intelligence and experience is something that is difficult for a man to digest. The best tip is that I would give any woman in any industry is something that my father brought me up with, 'Stay truthful to yourself and believe in yourself'. He taught me that the world is not always fair, but you can always make it better." Always keep hoping for better; keep moving towards your goal and always keep pushing your limits. The victory is on the other side."

'If women don't grab chances, fear will set in'

Vidya Shah, CEO, EdelGive Foundation

■ *How difficult was it to rise to the top?*

I think it usually is as difficult for women to grow in their careers. The only difference is that usually women have to make more trade-offs than men, as the responsibility of child-bearing and child-rearing falls respectively, solely and mostly on women. Whether for men or women, the role of the spouse in encouraging the other in career progression, bearing the weight of family equally and making compromises where necessary cannot be underestimated.

■ *What are the typical obstacles women managers face?*

For many decades, the assumption has been that family and children are the most important concern for women. As women rise in their careers, this is what preoccupies them most. While bad bosses and a lack of a supportive culture may be blamed as being obstacles along with familial responsibilities, women will need to see workforce participation and career growth to be important to their own personal growth.

■ *Your advice to young women managers?*

If women don't grab opportunities, fear will set in, not allowing them to take up new challenges. In the race to maintain a balance between family and work, women often go through self-inflicted guilt. All you need is to be organised and be good friends with your family!

