

# IN CONVERSATIONS WITH INDIA'S WOMEN ROLE MODELS: A SNEAK PEEK INTO THEIR MENTAL HEALTH, WELL-BEING AND WORKPLACE SUPPORT SYSTEM

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## Abstract

This research study is based on deep insights gained from in-depth interviews with 25 successful women leaders from various walks of life including corporate, medical, armed forces, legal and academic institutions. This study is a compilation of candid conversations via interviews with successful Indian women leaders that attempts to unveil key determinants of successful, healthy and resilient women leaders as they pushed the 'invisible yet existing boundaries' to rise to the top positions of their respective organisations and institutions. The one-on-one leadership interviews series with successful women leaders were carried out with the help of a standardized interview questions to cover psychological and behavioural concepts. This paper titled "In conversations with India's Women Role Models: – a sneak peek into their mental health, well-being and workplace support system" attempts to seek valuable insights from successful woman role models and pass it on to the next generation both to inspire and empower them to take up leadership roles ensuring their mental and physical well-being.

## INTRODUCTION

### **In conversations with India's Women Role Models: – a sneak peek into their mental health, well-being and workplace support system**

Women in India constitute more than 25% of the workforce and so it is important to encourage discussions on prevailing gender issues including gender pay disparity, mental well-being and career opportunities available to them in comparison to their male counterparts. Be it industry forums or Corporate Board rooms, Industry Gurus, or self-proclaimed critics, the one big question that dominates across to often converge into - "Will workplace provide gender equal opportunities to both males and females – will there be an environment that is considered safe and provides the space - mental and physical to women colleagues" OR will conversations continue to simply remain in books as a theoretical framework of something that we all know ought to be done but can never be achieved practically?

Study quoted in the HBR study titled, "*We Interviewed 57 Female CEOs to Find Out How More Women Can Get to the Top*" by Jane Edison Stevenson and Evelyn Orr, it was reported that out of the Fortune 500 companies only 6.4% are run by female CEOs. Well in some ways, it is progress in the right direction, however, it seems that there's a long way ahead as the pace feels excruciatingly slow.

Multiple studies suggest that most women from a young age have desire to lead, inspire others towards a better world. Two elements that would fuel this desire to lead

and excel are **confidence** and **network**. On the other end of the continuum, there are women role models, though a small percentage, who have overcome challenges seeking inspiration around themselves and are successful leaders of today's world leading leaders, organisations and countries.

"In conversations with India's Women Role Models: – a sneak peek into their mental health, well-being and workplace support system", specifically attempts to captures sentiments of successful women leaders by collating themes important to them. It aims to generate valuable insights from successful leaders - woman role models to not only highlight and thus celebrate their success and also inspire the next generation. The study was designed using one-to-one interview method to highlight structures and systems that support or inhibit women on the path towards leadership (*Moustakas C. Phenomenological research methods. New York: Sage Publications; 1994*)

This study endeavours to gain insights and perspectives from successful women leaders about critical issues that were important to them during their career by taking into account their own personal journey including their inspiration, motivation, health and well-being, achievements and their appetite to take risk as they worked hard to make their mark in a world dominated by their male counterparts. "In conversations with India's Women Role Models: – a sneak peek into their mental health, well-being and workplace support system" study aims to serve as a guiding lighthouse for aspiring professionals and students to acknowledge what it takes to pursue excellence in the race to the top. The study also promises to bring out valuable insights and data points to organisations who are genuinely looking to advance their diversity agenda and help build better Workplaces with diverse leadership including both men and women. The study further aims to consolidate these valuable nuggets for reference to aspiring students, professional, corporate and government to leverage highest-potential female leaders and to ensure more women succeed in the future

Essentially, this study is to make an attempt to crack the success-mantra of successful leaders who were achieve great heights and have created a niche for themselves despite the challenges they may have faced in their pursuit of excellence.

## METHODOLOGY

In conversations with India's Women Role Models: – a sneak peek into their mental health, well-being and workplace support system study is a compilation of candid conversations using personal interviews with 25 Indian women leaders from various walks of life including corporate, medical, armed forces, legal and academic institutions. This series of leadership interviews conducted has attempted to unveil key determinants of successful and resilient women leaders as they pushed the 'invisible yet existing boundaries' to rise to the top positions of their respective organisations and institutions.

The one-on-one interviews series with successful women leaders was carried out with the help of a standardized interview questions drawing insights from study on "*Leading Women: Women in Leadership*" Interviews by Jonathan Goldstein, Head of Page Executive, Southeast Asia.

There were 12 questions that were posed to the women leaders to gain insights from their own personal and professional journey.

### Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe your growing up years? Who was the inspiration at the time?
2. When was the first time you took up a leadership role? Was it in school, colleague or when you started working?
3. Did you imagine yourself taking up a leadership role in your career? If yes, do you recollect the exact timeframe you decided to do so?
4. In your opinion, who do you think is a leader? Are there specific traits that make a leader? Do leadership traits differ for men and women?
6. Statistics show that there is inadequate women leaders' representation in the C-suit. What do you think could be few of the reasons?
7. Is it difficult for females to emerge as leaders in the Workplace in comparison to their male counterparts? Can you mention key barriers that you may have faced while climbing the corporate ladder?
8. What motivated you to over those barriers, step up and become a leader in your workplace?
9. How would you describe your "leadership style"? Can you name a few traits that you feel must be present in a leader?
10. Is it true that women need to spend more time to balance their career and personal life including care-giving responsibilities?
11. Is it important to have a mentor to grow as a leader? Did you have a mentor?
12. When you look back, what advice will you give to your 25-year-old self?

### Findings

During the series of leadership interviews, it was interesting to see emergence of common themes although the individuals had never met one another and were from varied cultural and social backgrounds belonging to different age groups.

The question around 'finding their inspiration' received varied answers, however the pattern saw the mention of their own 'mother', further confirming that women always look up to women as role models.

The other question that received similar responses was the question on traits that they admire the most amongst the leader (*Alexander, D., & Andersen, K. (1993)*). The answer to the question was 'authenticity' (*Helena Liu, Leanne Cutcher, David Grant 2015*), the one trait that found mention in majority of the responses from the leaders across industries – private or public organisations.

The question on "support" required to move up the ladder which was met with the unified response of "availability of mentors and coaches" (*R. J. Burke & C. A. McKeen 1990*) that helped leaders to better plan their career and even personal lives.

The question on "ability to take risk" was an eye-opener as there were multiple perspectives on the risk-taking opportunities available and the courage that was required to take it at the right time.

For a few leaders, while it was taking up overseas assignments for other it was taking up stretch assignments in another unrelated department/fields.

The responses from the interviews clearly had a pattern with concepts around self-awareness, authenticity, emotional intelligence, capability to work hard, ability to take into stride (resilience), stress and mental health along with openness to receiving feedback while working alongside a mentor.

Leaders interviewed were quick to call out that not everybody likes a courageous emerging female leader but surely will acknowledge the potential available. Leaders also mentioned about their own vulnerabilities and the fact that these vulnerable moments also provided them the strength when they needed it the most.

One of the successful leaders mentioned of a sweet spot – a space between what one is good at and what one truly enjoys. If that sweet spot is something that is found, its then “when the magic really happens”. With something that one is passionate about, the sky becomes the limit of what can be achieved.

## CONCLUSION

“In conversations with India’s Women Role Models: – a sneak peek into their mental health, well-being and workplace support system” study is not about only getting to know the leaders through their personal stories and inspirations but to also understand the challenges they would have faced while moving up the success ladder.

Learning from the such women role models is bound to serve as inspiration to the next set of aspiring leaders to keep faith and keep moving forward. These 25 women leaders...Industry stalwarts are considered to be powerhouses in their respective playing-fields. This study endeavours to share their successful career journeys to ensure the pipeline of next generation women leaders continue to emerge.

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