ROLE OF WOMEN IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS PRACTICES: A SECTORAL ANALYSIS IN INDIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the current state of sustainable business practices in India, highlighting challenges, opportunities, and future directions. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative data from surveys, interviews, observations and case studies. The findings reveal that Indian businesses driven by government initiatives, consumer awareness, and economic benefits are increasingly adopting sustainable practices, This paper also explores the critical role women play in promoting sustainable business practices across various sectors in India. Despite facing numerous challenges, women are increasingly driving sustainability initiatives, entrepreneurship, and innovation in sectors such as renewable energy, agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism. However, challenges like lack of awareness, limited resources, and regulatory barriers still persist. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers, businesses, and civil society to overcome such challenges and promote sustainable business practices in India.

Introduction

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment in achieving sustainable development. In India, women are increasingly playing a vital role in promoting sustainable business practices, driving entrepreneurship, and innovation. This paper aims to explore the role of women in sustainable business practices, focusing on various sectors in India.

India's rapid economic growth has been accompanied by increasing environmental degradation and social inequality. Sustainable business practices offer a solution, enabling companies to reduce their environmental footprint while promoting social responsibility and economic growth. This paper aims to explore the current state of sustainable business practices in India, highlighting challenges, opportunities, and future directions. The role of Women entrepreneur in economic development is inevitable. Women are also willing to take up business and contribute to the Nation's growth. Women in all sectors have proved her ability to initiate, organize, plan and operate their involvement and organization's growth efficiently. Despite this the women percentage in strategic positions in India are very much countable. According to the studies, women's representation in leadership positions in India is relatively low. A report by McKinsey Global Institute found that women hold only 17% of senior leadership positions in India. If we talk of women involvement in top level, middle level and operational level in an organization in India the numbers are very low.

| Organization Management Hierarchy	% of Women Representation	Observation (based on secondary data)	Usual Barriers
Top level Management	5-10%	Top-level positions are often held by men, and women face various barriers to reaching these positions.	Social Challenges, Family challenges, Political Issues Gender Discriminations
Middle Level Management	15-20%	A critical level where women can make a significant impact, but face challenges in advancing to higher positions.	Family challenges, Gender Discriminations
Low Level Management	25-30%	Women involvement is high comparative to other two levels. This requires specific skills and expertise. Also has assigned time schedule unlike the other two levels.	Social Challenges, Family challenges,

Literature Review

Research has shown that women's participation in sustainable business practices can lead to improved environmental outcomes, social justice, and economic benefits. Women are more likely to prioritize sustainability and social responsibility in business decision-making. However, women face numerous challenges, including access to finance, networks, and markets, as well as stereotypes and bias. Women growth in professional journey is heavily affected by the invisible barriers called as glass ceiling effect. Such barriers prevent women from rising to higher-level positions in their careers, regardless of their qualifications and abilities. These barriers can be due to various factors, like:

Discrimination	• Unconscious biases leading to discriminatorypractices, like unequal pay, lack of promotions, and limited opportunities.
Stereotyping	• Women are stereotyped as being less capable or less committed to their careers, leading to limited opportunities foradvancement
Lack of mentorship and networking	• Women usually have limited mentorship, networking opportunities, making it harder for them to advancein theircareers.
Work-life balance	• Women face challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities, leading to perceptions that they areless committed to theircareers.
Organizational culture	• Some organizations are not having a culture that is inclusive or supportive to women, making it harder for them toadvance.

Women and Glass Ceiling Effect

Women are facing many challenges during their professional journey. Some challenges are visible and few challenges are invisible but these cause huge impact on the career growth. Same invisible barriers prevent individuals from progressing, being promoted to senior level position within an organization. The glass ceiling a term first introduced by Marilyn Loden in 1978 used for such barriers preventing women from being promoted to leadership position during their professional growth. As per report published by the economic times only 18.3% women hold senior leadership positions in Indian organizations. As per the data from LinkedIn users and resources it is observed that only 18.3% women are in positions of manager and above which is very low compared to the number of women joining corporate world at entry level.[4]
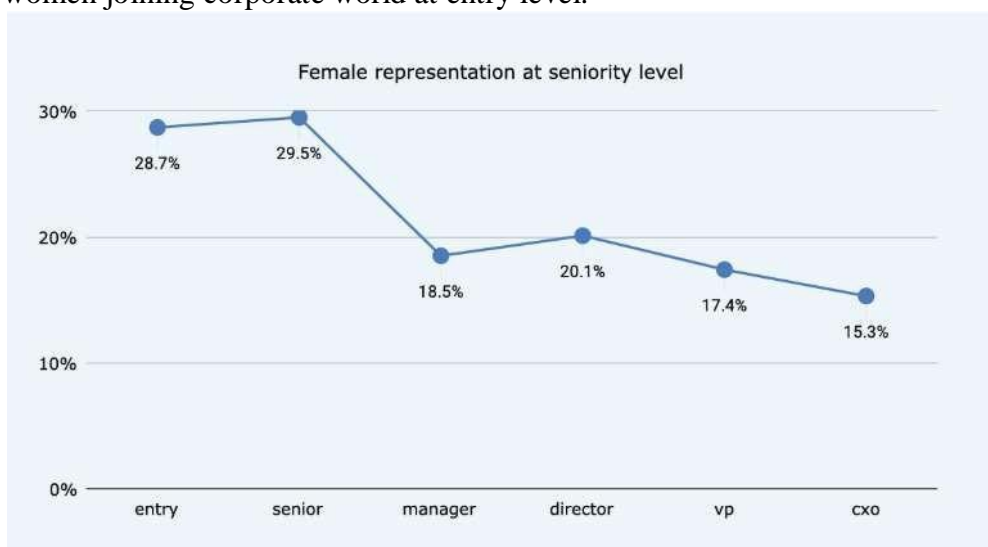
Source : Data From LinkedIn Economic Graph[4]

Effects of the Glass Ceiling
1. Limited career advancement: Leading to frustration and disappointment.
2. Lower pay: Women experiences pay disparities, leading to financial inequality.
3. Lack of representation: Leading to a lack of diversity and inclusion.
4. Talent loss: Organizations may lose talented women due to the glass ceiling effect

Breaking the Glass Ceiling (invisible barriers) requires following initiatives :
o Organizations should implement diversity and inclusion initiatives, such as training programs, mentorship schemes, and diversity targets.
o Leadership commitment: Leaders can demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion by setting clear goals and expectations.
o Flexible work arrangements: Organizations can offer flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting and flexible hours, to support work-life balance.
o Networking opportunities: Organizations can provide networking opportunities, such as conferences and networking events, to support career advancement.
• Existing Sustainable business practices adopted by Organizations in India
o 71% of organizations offer inclusion and diversity training to their employees, promoting a culture of acceptance and empathy along with provision of gender-neutral workplace.[5]
o 62% of organizations offer inclusive benefits options, recognizing the diverse needs of their employees and providing support for their well-being.[5]
o Tata Steel's "25 by 25" scheme aims to have 25% diverse employees in its workforce by 2025, focusing on intersectional gender diversity.[6]

o Schneider Electric's Global Pay Equity initiative has achieved 99.6% coverage of its workforce with a goal of pay gap less than 1% for all employees.[6,7]

Problem Statement

Despite growing recognition of the importance of sustainable business practices, women's contributions to and leadership in sustainability efforts remain underrepresented and undervalued. The lack of women's participation in sustainable business practices hinders the development of inclusive and effective sustainability strategies, ultimately threatening the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This research aims to investigate the role of women in sustainable business practices, exploring the challenges and opportunities that women face in driving sustainability initiatives and promoting environmentally responsible and socially equitable business practices.

The researcher is addressing to the following research questions
- What challenges do women face in accepting leading position and in driving sustainability initiatives?
- How can women's leadership and participation in sustainable business practices be increased and supported?

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the invisible challenges faced by women during career advancements.
2. To study the women participation in implementing sustainable business practices.

Hypothetical statement

Null and Alternate Hypothesis

H0 : The glass ceiling effect is not a barrier to women's advancement to leadership positions and participation in sustainable business practices in organizations

Ha : The glass ceiling effect is a significant barrier to women's advancement to leadership positions and participation in sustainable business practices in organizations.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data. A survey of 72 women entrepreneurs and business leaders was conducted, including in-depth interviews with 20 respondents. Case studies of women-led sustainable businesses in India were also analyzed. Secondary data is collected through published articles, blogs and journals. Primary data is collected through interview, questionnaire and observation techniques. Data has been collected from 72 respondents holding varied positions in different sectors in organizations. Scope of research is limited to organizations in Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad geographical location.

Data Analysis and Findings

- 88.89% women working professionals have faced challenges while undergoing through their respective carrier advancements. Primary data reveals that majority of women found family and social issues as one of the major challenges during their professional journey. In many places due to gender discrepancy women professionals have to compromise with carrier growth.

Challenges observed by women in work culture	
- Gender bias	29.17%
- Lack of opportunities	16.67%
- Stereotyping	5.56%
- Limited networking opportunities	12.50%
- Family Issues/ Society pressure	43.06%

- 58.33% women agreed that above mentioned invisible barriers have limited the career advancements of working women professionals. 64% respondents have lost their self-confidence due to such barriers.
- Majority of respondents feel that the sustainable practices adopted by organizations are more beneficial and important for women.
- Organizations are following many sustainable business practices. 71% respondents have confirmed the sustainable business practices adopted by the organizations. Renewable energy, women recruitment policies, pollution free campus, CSR initiatives, adoption of village and many more such sustainable practices are initiated by organizations. 32% women leaders have acknowledged their involvement in organizational sustainable business practices initiatives.

	Sustainable initiatives adopted by organizations in various sectors	
1	Renewable Energy	Use of Solar Panel, LED bulbs, low utilization of Genest, Energy audits on regular basis. Women are playing a crucial role in promoting renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind power. Women-led enterprises, such as SEWA's solar-powered irrigation systems, are providing sustainable energy solutions for rural communities. Tata Power, Adani Green Energy, and ReNew Power are investing heavily in solar energy, reducing dependence on fossil fuels. Suzlon, Gamesa, promoting wind energy, reducing carbon emission
2	Women's Cooperative Society	Taking initiatives in promoting sustainable agriculture and eco- friendly products. SEWA- Self Employed Women Association in India is taking initiatives in promoting sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship among women in India.
3	Corporate Social Responsibility and Initiatives	Initiatives like adopting village, blood donations, support to education, Donations to society and needy ones, sponsoring girl education, construction of toilets in schools and villages.
4	Water Conservation	Tata Steel, Hindustan Unilever, and Infosys are implementing rainwater harvesting systems. Grundfos, Xylem, and Kirloskar Brothers are providing water-efficient technologies reducing water waste and promoting sustainable water management, rainwater harvesting.
5	Waste Management	Tata Steel, Hindalco Industries, Vedanta Limited are implementing recycling programs, reducing waste.Infosys, Wipro, and Tata Consultancy Services are implementing composting programs, reducing food waste. Women-led businesses are more responsive in waste reduction and recycling practices and in minimizing wastes.
6	Pollution Free Campus	Inclusion of E-vehicles / cycles, Cycle tracks. Walking zone inside the premise.
7	Green Building	Many companies like Infosys, Wipro, and Tata Consultancy Services are building LEED-certified green buildings, reducing energy consumptions and taking efforts in reducing carbon emissions.
8	Agricultural	Women farmers are adopting sustainable agricultural practices, such as organic farming. Women's cooperatives, are promoting sustainable agriculture and food processing. Companies like Tata Chemicals, Mahindra Agri Solutions, and Bio Basket are promoting organic farming practices, reducing chemical usage. John Deere, Trimble, and Granular are providing precision agriculture solutions, optimizing water and fertilizer usage.

9	Manufacturing	Women are leading initiatives to reduce waste, increase energy efficiency, and promote sustainable supply chain management in
		various manufacturing sectors. Women-led enterprises, such as Eco Femme and Aakar, are developing eco-friendly products.
10	Tourism	Women are developing sustainable tourism initiatives, such as eco-tourism. Women-led enterprises, such as the Women's Tourism Cooperative, are promoting cultural heritage and environmental conservation
11	Sustainable Packaging	Companies like Tata Global Beverages, Hindustan Unilever, and ITC Limited are using biodegradable packaging materials, reducing waste. Patanjali Ayurved, Himalaya Drug Company, and Emami Limited are adopting minimal packaging practices, reducing waste.

Researcher has done the Chi-Square test. The calculated p value has come as 0.02 which is less than 0.05 and so **Null hypothesis is rejected and alternate hypothesis is accepted. Which shows that - The glass ceiling effect (Invisible challenges) is a significant barrier to women's advancement to leadership positions and participation in sustainable business practices in organizations.** Such invisible barriers are Gender bias, family and social challenges, stereotyping, lack of networking and opportunities affects the career advancements of women professionals.

Challenges	limited career advancement	Affected my self confidence
Gender bias	0.05	0.07
Lack of networking & opportunities	2.30	3.36
Stereotyping	0.16	0.24
Family and Social challenges	1.46	2.13

x2	9.77
Df	3
p-value	0.02
Significance level	0.05

Benefits of Women's Involvement in Sustainable Businesses
- Women bring diverse perspectives and expertise, driving innovation and creativity in sustainable businesses.
- Women's involvement can lead to greater social impact by addressing the one of the SDG goals, by addressing issues such as education, healthcare, and economic empowerment.
- Women's leadership in sustainable businesses can also result in improved environmental outcomes, reducing carbon emissions and promoting sustainable practices.

Initiatives for enhancing Women participation in sustainable business practices : Despite the progress made, women face numerous challenges, including access to finance, networks, and markets. Stereotypes and bias also persist. However, opportunities exist for women to drive sustainability initiatives, entrepreneurship, and innovation.
- Access to finance: Provide women with access to finance, markets, and networks to support their sustainable business initiatives.
- Capacity building: Offer training and capacity-building programs to develop women's skills and knowledge in sustainable business practices.
- Networking and collaboration: Foster women's networks and collaborations to promote

sustainable business practices, share best practices, and provide mutual support.
- Policy support: Develop policies and regulations that support women's participation in sustainable business practices.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role women play in promoting sustainable business practices across various sectors in India. Women's participation in sustainable business practices can lead to improved environmental outcomes, social justice, and economic benefits. Policymakers, businesses, and civil society must work together to address the challenges women face and provide opportunities for women to drive sustainability initiatives.

Now a days in many organizations women are increasingly taking on decision-making roles in sustainable businesses, driving strategy and innovation. Women are also involved in starting sustainable businesses, leveraging their skills and expertise to address social and environmental challenges. Increasing women's representation on boards of sustainable companies bringing diverse perspectives and expertise. But this number is very low. Necessary measures are to be taken by the organizations for overcoming the invisible barriers. Policies are to be drafted by policy makers keeping glass ceiling effects in mind for enhancing women umber in strategic levels.

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