Study on Gender Micro-Aggressions in India

By

WomenLead India

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Key Words: Diversity and Inclusion, Micro-Aggressions, Leadership, Talent Management

Abstract

General Background:

According to Grant Thornton's Women in business: Beyond policy to progress report, though the percentage of leadership roles held by women in India has increased to 20 percent (still low comapred to global benchmarks), 30 per cent of the respondents said they have no women in the leadership roles.

Specific Background: This points to the presence of deeper barriers to growth of women to leadership positions, the biggest being micro-aggressions (intentional and unintentional slights against women), an integral part of the glass ceiling.

Knowledge Gap:
While the concept of micro-aggressions is very prevalent in the west, it was still to be explored if Micro-aggressions are also experienced in Corporate India and if so, which were the most commonly experienced gender micro-aggressions in India. Also what coping strategies to Women Leaders in India use to counteract these micro-aggressions.

Here we show that women in Corporate India do perceive the existence of micro-aggressions much like their international counterparts.

Results, including the methodological approach and the interpretation of the results
We used a random online survey of corporate women to establish if micro-aggressions are perceived and to narrow in on the most common micro-aggressions experienced. This was followed by depth interviews with 30 CXO level women leaders to understand the nuances of their experiences and their coping strategies.

Our initial results indicate that micro-aggressions exist in Corporate India, including:
1. A common perception that women are getting special privileges.
2. Women are given feedback on personality significantly more than their male colleagues. And they are either perceived as too aggressive or too soft.
3. Women themselves are reluctant to negotiate because if they do they are perceived as pushy and receive a pushback.
4. Any discussion between 2 women colleagues is assumed as a personal chat instead of a professional discussion.
5. Women think they are being held to higher standards of competence & performance than men.
6. Women feel that critical conversations happen in after office parties and conversations, which you might not be able to attend.

Implications
Our results have implications for talent management as well as leadership interventions for women. It also helps women keen to rise in leadership positions to adopt a very strategic response to the specific micro-aggressions they face in their work context.

Introduction:

Overt gender bias has been largely eliminated in large corporations and gender diversity is on the agenda of most companies as research has indicated that there is a strong correlation between number of women in leadership positions and financial success of organizations. **A study by Nordea points towards the same**. "Nordea analysed nearly 11,000 publicly traded companies across the globe over the last eight years (prior to 2017). The results showed that on average companies with a female chief executive officer or a female head of the board of directors had a 25 per cent annualised return since 2009, more than double the 11 per cent delivered by the MSCI World Index." (Nordea, 2017)

"In India, women make up 42% of new graduates, but only 24% of entry-level professionals. Of these, about 19% reach senior-level management roles. Women hold only 7.7% of board seats and just 2.7% of board chairs." (Kathuria & Singla, 2017)

Human Resource departments are working to create policies that are fair to women as well as create leadership interventions to enable women to ascend to higher leadership positions. Despite that, the number of women in leadership remains low. This points to deeper barriers to the growth of women in leadership. Could "second generation gender bias" be the reason?

Objective:

The objective of the research paper was to first establish the existence of "second generation gender bias" in corporate India and then explore which specific micro-aggressions are most commonly experienced by women in corporate India.

Post this, the focus was on delineating the coping strategies that CXO level /Senior Management level women leaders had adopted to overcome the barriers posed by these micro-aggressions.

Theory:

Social psychologist Faye Crosby, reported that most women deny being personal victims of gender discrimination even when it is objectively true, however they agree that women in general experience gender discrimination. (Crosby, 1984). Women over the last 50 years have worked very hard to get gender out of the equation and be recognized for their competence and therefore are in denial that they have experienced gender discrimination personally.

One key reason is that they are not experiencing overt gender discrimination but are experiencing "second generation gender bias". Second generation gender bias is distinguishable from first generation gender bias in that it appears to be neutral, equally applicable to both genders but it reflects masculine values and life situations of men who have been and still are the dominant group in the workplace. Second generation gender bias is akin to "something in the air", not easy to pin down but very real for those at the receiving end. These deeply entrenched gender biased dynamics impact hiring, promotions, remuneration etc. in companies and are exhibited against women by both men and women. This is because both men and women are products of the same patriarchal culture.

One key aspect of second generation gender bias is gender based micro-aggressions. **The term "micro-aggressions" was coined in 1970 by Chester M. Pierce,** psychiatrist and Harvard University professor to describe denigrations inflicted on African-Americans by non-African-Americans. Over time, this term has been used for denigrating messages to any

socially marginalized group including women because of their group membership. Ill intent of the perpetuator is not necessary for it to qualify as a micro-aggression (Microaggression, 2018). In itself each micro-aggression does not seem significant but as a cumulative it's impact is immense very alike to Lingchi (Death by a thousand cuts) practiced by imperial China.

Methods:

The research design for understanding the existence and manifestation of 'micro-aggressions' was a combination of:

a) Secondary Research: The objective of this phase was to study the existing literature in this area in order to build an initial framework for the Quantitative and Qualitative Research.

b) Quantitative Research: The objective of this phase was to test our hypothesis of existence of 'micro-aggressions' at work place and provide a base for the extensive Qualitative Research.

c) Qualitative Research: The objective of the qualitative phase was to get deeper into the 'micro-aggressions' and understand how they play out at workplace, what is the kind of impact they have and what are some of the strategies women leaders are adopting to counter them/mitigate their incidence and impact.
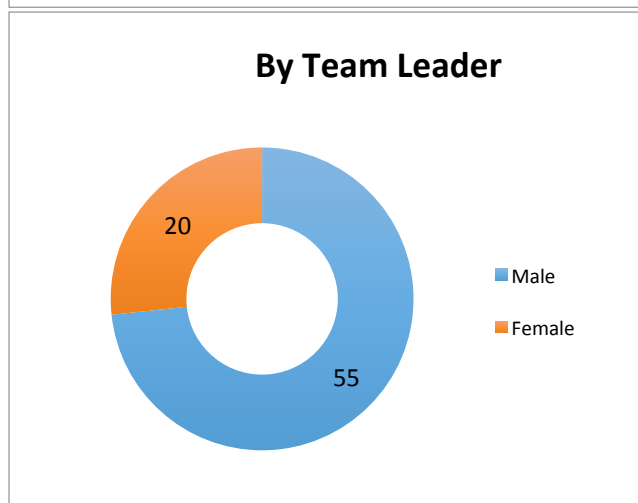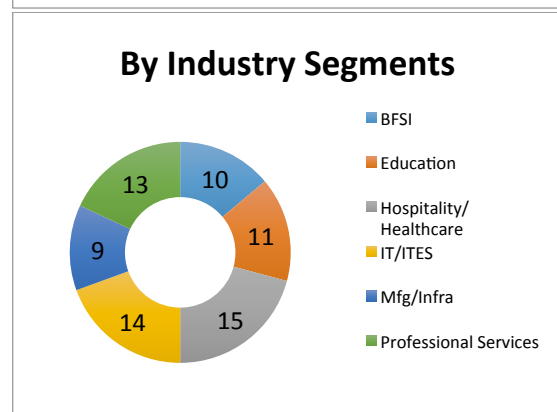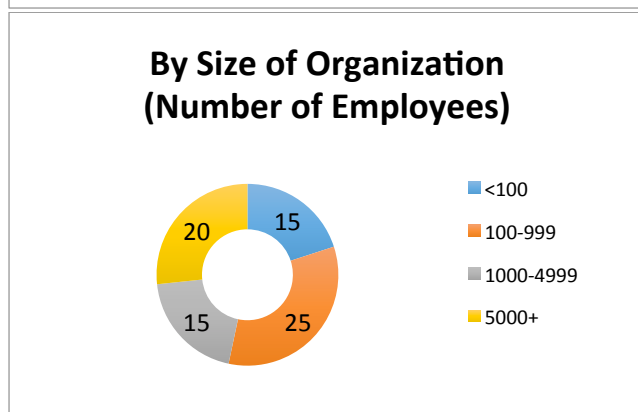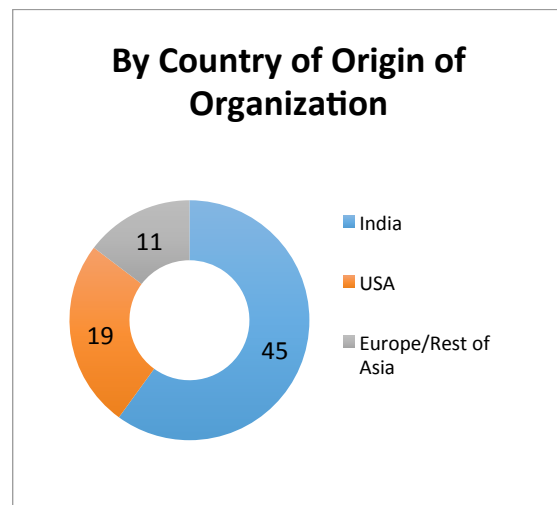
Quantitative Research:

The first step was to conduct an exploratory qualitative research with 5 CXO level women in Corporate India. This basically confirmed the findings of Faye Crosby as most of them denied being personal victims of gender bias.

The next step was to create a comprehensive list of micro-aggressions from a literature review. This helped us isolate 24 specific behaviours that would qualify as micro-aggressions. We then went back to our original sample and asked them if they had personally experienced this behaviour. The surprising finding was that each one of them reported personally experiencing a couple of the micro-aggressions.

We then went in for quantitative research. We opted for a random online survey, which we propagated via email and social media such as WhatsApp & LinkedIn. The survey was exclusively for women in Corporate India, targeted towards middle and senior levels. Since attrition at middle levels is one of the key challenges being faced by Corporate India, it was important to focus on this segment to really understand the incidence of micro-aggressions in the middle echelons and above. A total of 75 women leaders across different industries were covered.

The demographic split of the women leaders covered in the quantitative phase is as follows:

![Women Lead logo]

By Levels

- CXO — 12
- Senior Management — 20
- Mid-Senior Management — 21
- Middle Management — 16
- Junior Management and Others — 6

By Country of Origin of Organization

- India — 45
- USA — 19
- Europe/Rest of Asia — 11

By Size of Organization (Number of Employees)

- <100 — 15
- 100-999 — 25
- 1000-4999 — 15
- 5000+ — 20

By Industry Segments

- BFSI — 10
- Education — 11
- Hospitality/ Healthcare — 15
- IT/ITES — 14
- Mfg/Infra — 9
- Professional Services — 13

By Team Leader

- Male — 55
- Female — 20

Number of Responses: 75

The results were analysed using aggregation and cross tabulation to deep dive into differences and patterns emerging by different demographic cuts. The raw data was analysed and we isolated the top 6 micro-aggressions reported.

Qualitative Research:

The next stage was to go for depth-interviews with 30 CXO level/Senior Management women leaders (Excluding the initial 5). In the depth interviews we asked about their experiences with micro-aggressions, with special focus on the top 6 micro-aggressions we had isolated via the quantitative survey. We probed on strategies they used to overcome the micro-aggressions.

The demographic split of these 30 women leaders is as follows:

Levels	Number of Interviews Conducted	Size of Organizations	Number of Interviews Conducted	Industry Segments	Number of Interviews Conducted
CXO	12	100-999	10	Hospitality/Healthcare/Real Estate	7
Senior Management	18	1000-4999	12	IT/ITES	6
		5000+	8	Mfg.	6
				BFSI	7
				Retail	4

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The content of the in-depth interviews was analysed according to the type of micro-aggression reported and strategies to overcome the same.

Data & Results:

Top 6 Micro-aggressions in order of prevalence:

1. A common perception that women are getting special privileges. (77% Yes)
    - This makes majority of them (56%) defensive and stops them for asking what they might need.
2. Women are given feedback on personality significantly more than their male colleagues. And they are either perceived as too aggressive or too soft. (76% Yes)
3. Any discussion between 2 women colleagues is assumed as a personal chat instead of a professional discussion. (68% Yes)
4. Women themselves are reluctant to negotiate because if they do they are perceived as pushy and receive a pushback. (65% Yes)
5. Women think they are being held to higher standards of competence & performance than men. (61% Yes)
6. Women feel that critical conversations happen in after office parties and conversations, which you might not be able to attend. (61% Yes)

As one senior women leader mentioned in an interview, "There is so much happening in the name of diversity, but somehow things are not really changing on the ground."

And the bias against women is perpetuated by both men and women as these two instances suggest. *Shelly* a senior finance professional in a large Indian organisation: "I have never faced any bias but have seen biases and have handled biases within my teams. Also one should not shout bias for every small thing. I am biased. If I see any two women talking and on a break, I assume it is personal. Because it is. Men don't talk personal stuff."*

On the other hand, Dipa* shared: "I am at the CXO Level in a global organization. However, one day I was sitting in the meeting room having a discussion with another women colleague. This peer of mine just stops at the door and asks, "What are you two girls gossiping about?" It was highly irritating and I had to react to that statement then and there, asking him not to disturb our official meeting."
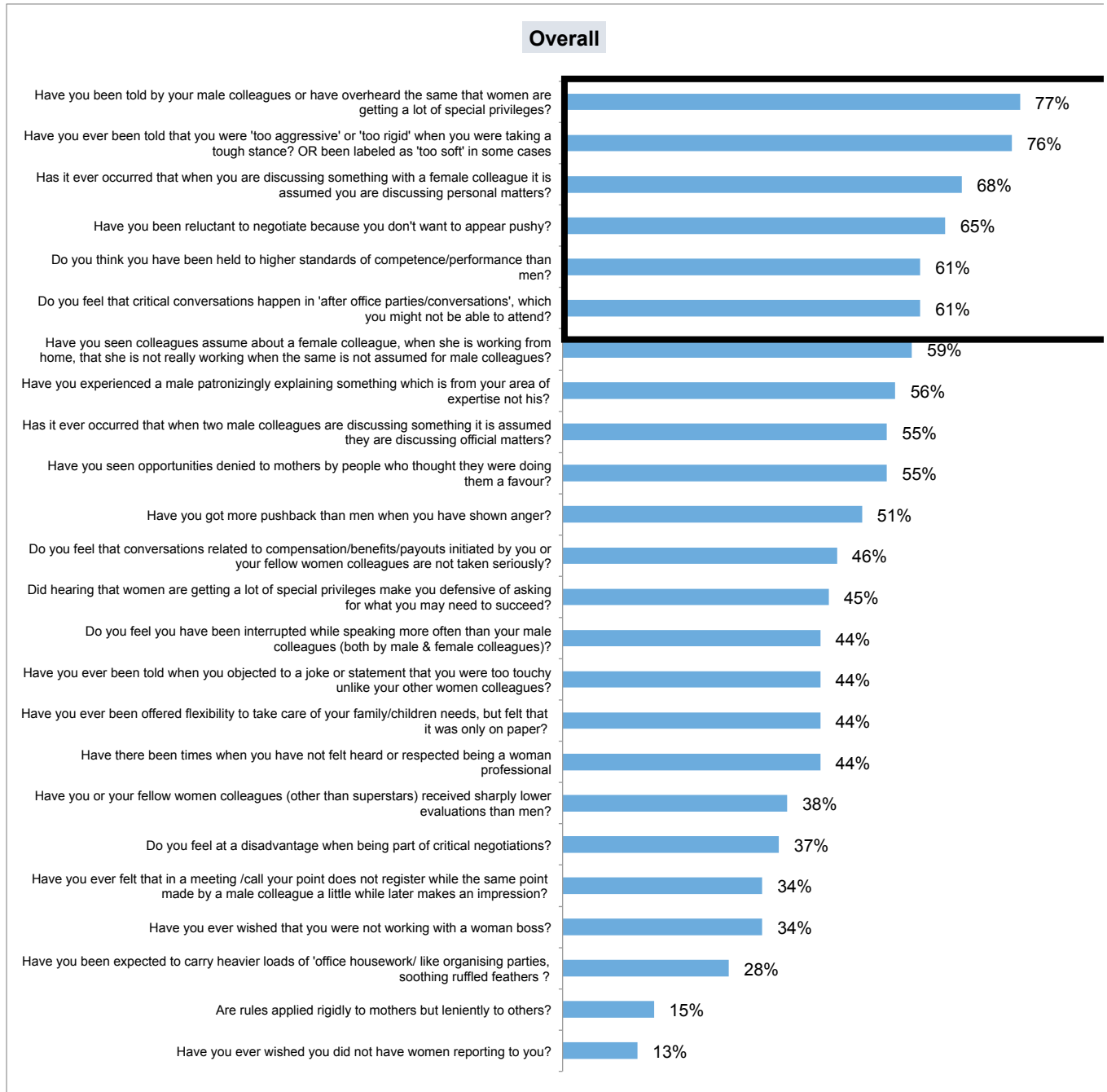
Overall

Statement	%
Have you been told by your male colleagues or have overheard the same that women are getting a lot of special privileges?	77%
Have you ever been told that you were 'too aggressive' or 'too rigid' when you were taking a tough stance? OR been labeled as 'too soft' in some cases	76%
Has it ever occurred that when you are discussing something with a female colleague it is assumed you are discussing personal matters?	68%
Have you been reluctant to negotiate because you don't want to appear pushy?	65%
Do you think you have been held to higher standards of competence/performance than men?	61%
Do you feel that critical conversations happen in 'after office parties/conversations', which you might not be able to attend?	61%
Have you seen colleagues assume about a female colleague, when she is working from home, that she is not really working when the same is not assumed for male colleagues?	59%
Have you experienced a male patronizingly explaining something which is from your area of expertise not his?	56%
Has it ever occurred that when two male colleagues are discussing something it is assumed they are discussing official matters?	55%
Have you seen opportunities denied to mothers by people who thought they were doing them a favour?	55%
Have you got more pushback than men when you have shown anger?	51%
Do you feel that conversations related to compensation/benefits/payouts initiated by you or your fellow women colleagues are not taken seriously?	46%
Did hearing that women are getting a lot of special privileges make you defensive of asking for what you may need to succeed?	45%
Do you feel you have been interrupted while speaking more often than your male colleagues (both by male & female colleagues)?	44%
Have you ever been told when you objected to a joke or statement that you were too touchy unlike your other women colleagues?	44%
Have you ever been offered flexibility to take care of your family/children needs, but felt that it was only on paper?	44%
Have there been times when you have not felt heard or respected being a woman professional	44%
Have you or your fellow women colleagues (other than superstars) received sharply lower evaluations than men?	38%
Do you feel at a disadvantage when being part of critical negotiations?	37%
Have you ever felt that in a meeting /call your point does not register while the same point made by a male colleague a little while later makes an impression?	34%
Have you ever wished that you were not working with a woman boss?	34%
Have you been expected to carry heavier loads of 'office housework/ like organising parties, soothing ruffled feathers ?	28%
Are rules applied rigidly to mothers but leniently to others?	15%
Have you ever wished you did not have women reporting to you?	13%

Table 1: Overall % Yes scores for each Micro-aggression statement (Base: 75)

Trends by Demographics:

	Overall	CX0	Sr. Mgmt	Mid to Sr. Mgmt	Mid Mgmt	<100	100-999	1000-4999	5000+	India	USA	Europe/ Rest of Asia
Base:	75	12	20	21	16	15	25	15	20	45	19	11
Have you been told by your male colleagues or have overheard the same that women are getting a lot of special privileges?	77%	55%	74%	90%	87%	60%	72%	92%	89%	68%	100%	80%
Have you ever been told that you were 'too aggressive' or 'too rigid' when you were taking a tough stance? OR been labelled as 'too soft' in some cases	76%	45%	68%	90%	80%	73%	56%	77%	78%	73%	82%	80%
Has it ever occurred that when you are discussing something with a female colleague it is assumed you are discussing personal matters?	68%	45%	53%	80%	80%	67%	76%	62%	72%	64%	82%	60%
Have you been reluctant to negotiate because you don't want to appear pushy?	65%	55%	58%	70%	60%	67%	36%	69%	50%	70%	59%	50%
Do you think you have been held to higher standards of competence/performance than men?	61%	45%	68%	45%	73%	60%	52%	62%	50%	61%	65%	50%
Do you feel that critical conversations happen in 'after office parties/conversations', which you might not be able to attend?	61%	64%	58%	50%	60%	53%	68%	62%	56%	61%	47%	80%

Substantially higher percentages

	Overall	CX0	Sr. Mgmt	Mid to Sr. Mgmt	Mid Mgmt	<100	100-999	1000-4999	5000+	India	USA	Europe/ Rest of Asia
Base:	75	12	20	21	16	15	25	15	20	45	19	11
Have you seen colleagues assume about a female colleague, when she is working from home, that she is not really working when the same is not assumed for male colleagues?	59%	64%	53%	55%	60%	73%	36%	85%	39%	59%	65%	50%
Have you experienced a male patronizingly explaining something, which is from your area of expertise not his?	56%	45%	37%	75%	67%	67%	44%	46%	56%	57%	53%	60%
Has it ever occurred that when two male colleagues are discussing something it is assumed they are discussing official matters?	55%	45%	37%	55%	73%	60%	36%	62%	44%	52%	65%	50%
Have you seen opportunities denied to mothers by people who thought they were doing them a favour?	55%	45%	42%	55%	73%	53%	8%	77%	67%	48%	65%	70%
Have you got more pushback than men when you have shown anger?	51%	45%	42%	50%	53%	60%	12%	46%	28%	52%	47%	50%
Do you feel that conversations related to compensation/benefits/payouts initiated by you or your fellow women colleagues are not taken seriously?	46%	36%	47%	45%	53%	47%	72%	54%	44%	45%	53%	40%
Did hearing that women are getting a lot of special privileges make you defensive of asking for what you may need to succeed?	45%	36%	37%	40%	67%	33%	64%	46%	39%	43%	35%	70%

Substantially higher percentages

	Overall	CX0	Sr. Mgmt	Mid to Sr. Mgmt	Mid Mgmt	<100	100-999	1000-4999	5000+	India	USA	Europe/ Rest of Asia
Base:	75	12	20	21	16	15	25	15	20	45	19	11
Do you feel you have been interrupted while speaking more often than your male colleagues (both by male & female colleagues)?	44%	55%	53%	45%	20%	67%	68%	38%	17%	41%	53%	40%
Have you ever been told when you objected to a joke or statement that you were too touchy unlike your other women colleagues?	44%	27%	37%	65%	47%	47%	44%	23%	39%	43%	47%	40%
Have you ever been offered flexibility to take care of your family/children needs, but felt that it was only on paper?	44%	45%	37%	40%	47%	33%	44%	38%	44%	48%	29%	50%
Have there been times when you have not felt heard or respected being a woman professional	44%	9%	37%	55%	60%	47%	52%	31%	39%	43%	47%	40%
Have you or your fellow women colleagues (other than superstars) received sharply lower evaluations than men?	38%	27%	37%	40%	60%	33%	0%	23%	44%	39%	47%	20%
Do you feel at a disadvantage when being part of critical negotiations?	37%	18%	32%	40%	47%	27%	0%	23%	44%	34%	35%	50%
Have you ever felt that in a meeting /call your point does not register while the same point made by a male colleague a little while later makes an impression?	34%	18%	16%	55%	33%	40%	0%	15%	28%	30%	35%	50%

Substantially higher percentages

	Overall	CX0	Sr. Mgmt	Mid to Sr. Mgmt	Mid Mgmt	<100	100-999	1000-4999	5000+	India	USA	Europe/ Rest of Asia
Base:	75	12	20	21	16	15	25	15	20	45	19	11
Have you ever wished that you were not working with a woman boss?	34%	18%	26%	35%	40%	27%	0%	31%	39%	41%	24%	20%
Have you been expected to carry heavier loads of 'office housework/ like organising parties, soothing ruffled feathers?	28%	9%	32%	30%	33%	20%	0%	31%	22%	27%	35%	20%
Are rules applied rigidly to mothers but leniently to others?	15%	0%	5%	25%	20%	33%	0%	8%	11%	14%	18%	20%
Have you ever wished you did not have women reporting to you?	13%	27%	11%	15%	7%	13%	0%	8%	22%	11%	18%	10%

Substantially higher percentages

Table 2: Overall % Yes scores for each Micro-aggression statements by Level, Size of Organisation and Place of Origin of Organisation (Base: 75)

a) Women in Middle and Mid-Senior Management levels face these micro aggressions more strongly then women at senior management level and above.

In the words of Indu*, "There are biases all the time. I have faced them in my profession. I have quit jobs, changed profiles, tried business However, I really felt the biases even more sharply first after marriage and then after my daughter was born. I get no support with her parenting or for my career. Whenever I complain I am advised to quit. I in exhaustion had to choose family. At work you are constantly proving that you are a professional and pretending that you are not distracted. But you are and why do I have to prove that I can handle a job and parenting with ease. Why aren't the men in the room questioned? Recently, I had to give an important presentation and my boss said, "Are you sure you will be able to come? Actually we cannot take a risk with this presentation. Indu next time. Paul to handle this one." He is a very good boss otherwise but what bothered me is the nonchalance with which he spoke. I doubt he even thought of gender bias or even knows that such a concept exists."

b) Women are held to higher standards of performance at critical inflexion points - middle management and senior management level.

As shared by Rama*: "I work in Customer Service at a retailer which has 41 stores across India as well as online presence. I have 2 teams reporting to me. The first is an all men's team of 16, which is the projects team, and the second is an all women's team of 25 visual merchandizers. I many times have to be decisive and assertive due to timelines. And finally it is not a democracy with a free for all. However, when I say "Sorry that's not happening. This is how it will happen", I notice that the all male team's reaction is very different that the all women's team. In the men's team I am viewed as an aggressive control freak with no

appreciation of the team ideas. Where as in the women's team I am viewed as an assertive and decisive collaborative leader. Instructions and guidance are instantly followed without any grumbling. I am held to high standards. Being a working mom, I am always having to put a lot more effort and focus in my job to constantly prove that I can do it and am competent."

c) In the larger organizations , women leaders are hearing much more about getting special privileges as well as their growth process is being interrupted post becoming a mother.

Sameera* a senior systems professional in a major FMCG company: "My male colleagues are absolutely apprehensive about the quota system that we have defined at each level. I am now hearing complaints from them that they are going to lose out on promotions because of the percentage targets at each level that the organization is working towards"

d) The women leaders in smaller organizations (<1000 employees) are more likely to work with the sentiment that they are not heard or respected as a women professional (47%/52%). In these organizations, they feel interrupted more often and they have been told they are too touchy when they have objected to a particular joke**.**

e) It is not surprising that the talk around special 'privileges' is more in Organizations with origin outside India. On the positive side, they appear to be managing the 'after office' culture better vis-a-vis the Indian counterparts.

As Prita* (L&D leader Asia Pacific, ITES) shared: "We were recently organizing a communication workshop for our women employees. I had so many of my male team members coming and asking me, why are you doing this kind of an intervention only for women? Don't we also need to improve in this area?"

f) Organizations with Origin outside India have shown a higher incidence of opportunities being denied to mothers in the guise of doing them a favour... though US based organizations offer greater flexibility to women to take care of their family/children needs

g) Women Leaders in Indian origin organizations appear to be more reluctant to negotiate to prevent appearing to be pushy.

As Sandhya* (Operations, Real Estate firm) says, "I have been stuck in my current role for such a long time. I know that I have the ability to manage more projects than I am currently handling, but can't they assess it themselves and give me that responsibility. Why do I need to negotiate and snatch this opportunity from them? I don't know how will they react?"

h) While 18% of senior CXO leaders have agreed that they have wished that they never work with a woman boss, 27% of them accepted the fact that they have wished that they did not have women reporting to them. This corroborates with the qualitative research where senior women hold the fact that women can't stay late or have more familial responsibilities against them.

Maya (A senior marketing professional in an office equipment MNC) claimed, "Female subordinates come with a lot of issues." She herself had a maid, a backup to her maid and a backup to the backup maid.

However, women struggle to be heard across the board as testified by Anu*,Regional BD Head, Global Hospitality Chain, *"I am working in an industry where it is rare to find a woman in a BD role. It means working odd hours and meeting all kinds of people. In the initial calls, when 4 of us managing different regions used to come together for reviews, if I state my point of view, they wouldn't even listen to it. Multiple times, I have had to put my foot down. The only thing I keep telling myself that if I am not forceful, I will not be able to survive in the industry."*

The pushback to being "aggressive" can be immense. Sami* an operations leaders in a large chemicals firm, *"I am called a man-eater in my team. I know that but I am ok with that imagery."*

The cost of these micro-aggressions vary but it is clear that no matter how women overcome them their effect is there. The cost could be inclusion and a say in decision making: *Rama* shares, "I am all the time told I am too pushy. The real stuff happens after office hours and I had learnt to participate in the boy's clubs and it worked well for me till I had my boys. With kids it's just not possible and I feel that I miss out on a lot of important information leave alone decision making as the next day I am clueless. The men will say, Rama we discussed it yesterday over drinks. It infuriates me. But I would rather spend that time with my sons going out for pizzas or helping them with homework that those fancy parties. I don't miss the fun as much as I miss the feeling of inclusion actually.*

Or the cost can just be isolation to the point of loosing top talent. *Shelly* remembers, "When I was in the training team of a large private Indian bank, one of my trainers was a stunner but had performance issues like absenteeism and late coming. Her performance in the training room was amazing. Her training the room used to be full. Scores were always high and training efficacy on the business floor appreciated. She was a tigress in the room. Everyone wrapped in her stories and she really knew how to hit the nail on its head. But she was never given any credit. The other trainer's men and women alike would attribute everything to her looks. This upset her so much that she just put in her papers and never came back."*

Strategies for mitigation of:

1. Unwillingness to negotiate: "Women negotiated less than their male counterparts. Sixty-eight percent of women accepted the salary they were offered and did not negotiate, a 16-percentage point difference when compared to men (52%). **(GlassDoor, 2016)**. Some of the strategies which appear to be working when it comes to negotiation include:
   a. Having a strong mentor network/advocates who can guide them through the process and provide the necessary push when required.
   b. A high level of preparedness – Being armed with facts and figures which can support their performance and growth potential
   c. Organization needs being the focus – When women are seen as negotiating for themselves, it is possible that they are seen as 'aggressive', 'selfish' and likely to receive a backlash. However, when the argument is reframed with focus on organization needs, it is better accepted.
2. Feedback based on personality (too soft or too harsh): **Fortune's analysis** of 250 American reviews found that 58.9% of those evaluating men contained critical feedback, whereas 87.9% of those received by women did. What's more, men's

negative feedback was predominantly constructive, whereas women was much more like to be personality-based and negative, with the word 'abrasive' particularly likely to come up.' ((Torrance, 2015) The strategies to mitigate the impact of this micro aggression includes:

    a. Maintaining a detailed record of performance on KPIs on aspects related to quantity and quality.

    b. Ensuring participation in 'high profile' projects.

    c. Leveraging mentor networks and women networks in order to talk about professional successes.

3. Exclusion from informal networks: In our CXO Interviews, lot of leaders mentioned about how do they mitigate the impact of not being a part of these informal meetings, where apparently 'important decisions' get taken, much before they are formally discussed in the office. The mitigation strategies for these include creation of powerful women networks, coffee meetings and lunch and breakfast meetings.

Discussion & Implications:

The study confirms the large scale prevalence of "micro-aggressions" in corporate India and provides a clue regarding the changes which need to be made in order to create equal opportunity workplaces. Our results have implications for talent management as well as leadership interventions for women. It has been a known fact that middle level attrition has been one of the key challenges that Corporate India is facing from a talent retention perspective with respect to women. Apart from other constraints, these micro-aggressions might be playing an important role in causing dissonance, lack of engagement and ultimately, attrition at the middle management level. Our research provides more clarity around how gender stereotyping manifests itself at workplace. The second generation biases could be the core of what we know as the 'glass ceiling'. Our study also helps women keen to rise in leadership positions to adopt a very strategic response to the specific micro-aggressions they face in their work context.

Sheryl Sandberg famously said, "In the future, there will be no female leaders. There will be just leaders," is something India Inc. should internalize. It's time for gender diversity to move away from being a checklist item in board meeting agendas and really look at it as a way of impacting business profitability."

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