



Leadership Edge

## Addressing the Gender Chasm in Tech: Aspiring to Equality

**Namratha Roy**  
HR Director, Microsoft

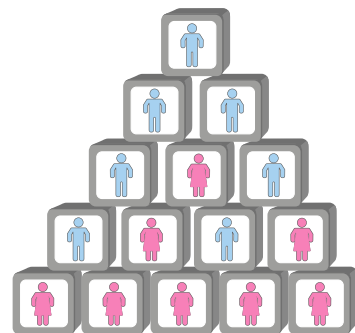
*The technology sector in India is growing at a fast pace and witnessing a shift towards a culture of inclusion. However, there is no denying the fact that women tend to face many systemic and institutional barriers to grow in their careers or simply stay in the workforce. In this article, Namratha Roy, HR Director, Microsoft reflects upon the power of positives: a confluence of grit, growth mindset and allyship that could act as catalysts, enabling women to overcome self-limiting beliefs and accelerate their path to successful careers in the tech industry.*

## Taking Stock of the Tech Pyramid

The tech ecosystem in India is undergoing a noticeable positive change, with more women choosing STEM education (science, technology, engineering & mathematics) in higher numbers than in many developed countries. India boasts of 52% women in IT education as compared to a mere 19% in the US and EU. In science it is 51%, compared to 39% in the US, according to Catalyst, a global non-profit working with leading companies to build women friendly workplaces.<sup>1</sup> However, these promising numbers in STEM education don't translate into a strong representation of women in senior leadership roles in the tech workforce.

While change is indeed happening, organisations are not moving fast enough to remove even 'low hanging' hurdles in order to foster a culture of inclusion and equity in the workplace. Concurrently, society is not changing fast enough to address the issues of patriarchy that women in many cultures face. All this really adds up to create forces of resistance that women somehow must overcome while navigating their careers, making it a largely uphill journey.

It is true that the representation of women at the base of the pyramid is strong, but it starts to taper at mid-career levels and worsens at senior levels. India's IT-BPM<sup>2</sup> industry currently employs nearly 3.9 million people, and over 34% are women (~1.3 million). While this percentage is much better than the overall female share (24%) of India's total workforce, data shows us that over 51% of entry-level joiners are women, over 25% of women are in managerial positions, but less than 1% are in the C-Suite.<sup>3</sup>



As women enter the workforce from educational institutions, they have a few vectors to deal with: assimilating into organisations and their cultures and learning the technical capabilities they need to succeed in their jobs. Promotion velocities are higher early to mid-career, and most women, at the start of their careers, demonstrate the drive to achieve big career milestones.

<sup>1</sup>Rathor, S., Misra, A., Phadnis, S. & Shankar, A. (2020, March). Why Indian women may dominate tech world of tomorrow. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/why-indian-women-may-lead-the-tech-world-of-tomorrow/articleshow/74472307.cms>

<sup>2</sup>IT BPM stands for Information Technology-Business Process Management

<sup>3</sup>451 Research, S&P Global Market Intelligence. (2018). Women in Tech: India Leads the Way. <https://go451research.com/women-in-tech-india-employment-trends.html>

However, the complexity of roles and therefore expectations start widening within three to four years into the system. As women grow into mid-career leaders, the number of vectors they need to engage with multiply to include life events like marriage, children, and the need to manage dual careers and aging parents, just to name a few. Those forces of resistance now become a huge mass that have to be pushed out of the way and often. Apart from personal reasons, systemic biases from within the organisation start kicking in.

### **Sliding into the Comfort Zone**

There is probably some truth to the fact that women slide quickly into that proverbial comfort zone, albeit unconsciously. But why does this happen? Self-limiting beliefs contribute heavily to the quick arrival into the comfort zone and the reluctance to expand the zone. 'I don't have time to do much more,' 'I don't have the skills to do anything else,' 'I am not good enough to apply for that bigger role,' 'I am not good at networking so I can't find my next project.' These are all self-limiting beliefs that make that comfort zone a safe space to be in.

Comfort zones are not necessarily evil—all of us need them at some point in our careers and our lives. There have been times when I was exhausted and chose calm over the anxiety and panic of pushing myself outside my comfort zone, which turned out to be a wiser call.

“ However, careers are rarely built without stretching ourselves and the question is really about the timing, the extent of the stretch and the impact it has on our emotional health.



Self-awareness, therefore, becomes critical in understanding what is that optimum stretch for each one of us. For example, some of us introverts struggle to network and make connections. Instead of panic inducing stretches, we can perhaps set a gentler goal of making one new connection every month. Being kind to ourselves and understanding our own tolerance is crucial for us to be able to take the small or big steps that will help us in overcoming our self-limiting beliefs, inching us closer towards our career and life goals.

## **Leadership Competencies for the Win**

My firm belief is that men and women have equal potential to demonstrate all leadership competencies but the unique contexts that apply to them influence the way these competencies actually present in the workplace. Women are doing sensationally well in areas like problem solving and collaborating across boundaries. This is good for the companies they work for and good for the world as they bring diversity to the thought process that in turn leads to better, more inclusive products and services. Women are also discovering that their vulnerability and authenticity are gifts in the modern workplace that is thankfully starting to value these qualities.

That said, there is an opportunity for women to strengthen their ability to influence, enabling them to make a wider impact. A breakdown of the skills needed to influence broad outcomes points to confidence, authentic presence, and communication. Similarly, women in general lag in taking ownership of their careers. We tend to see men more ready to take ownership by actively seeking growth opportunities, taking risks, seeking out mentors and sponsors and raising their hands for bigger roles even when they are less ready than their women colleagues. And here lies the rub—data shows that women tend to be perfectionists and wait to be 130% ready before applying to roles. Self-awareness, risk taking, and assertiveness are key for women preparing to take ownership of their careers.

While women and men do not show up differently in how they demonstrate engineering capabilities, I have noticed a gap when it comes to women developing a product mindset and a business perspective. Gaining a deep understanding of the business requires leaders to extend themselves into interfacing directly with customers and the eco-system at large. As both men and women progress to more

senior leadership roles, product ownership comes with the territory and unless women demonstrate curiosity and a non-linear understanding of the eco-system, the gap will remain and continue to widen. Lastly, leading in ambiguity is an area of opportunity for women aspiring to leadership roles. The world of tech and for that matter, any industry segment exists in an increasingly complex, ambiguous environment both outside and inside the company. The ability to make decisions with incomplete information and shrug away the self-imposed notion of perfectionism, is a critical attribute.



**The willingness to experiment, fail fast and learn fast is crucial to leaders' ability to succeed in senior and CXO roles.**

## **Grit, Growth Mindset and Allyship**

Given that challenges in some form or the other are consistently applicable to all women, what really differentiates women who have upwardly mobile careers is grit. Women who have had longevity in their careers and have been able to move into progressively more responsible positions demonstrate grit. Angela Duckworth's research on school children<sup>4</sup> proves that children who achieve are not the ones with the highest IQ but those who have demonstrated high levels of grit and a growth mindset.<sup>5</sup> The same applies to women in the workplace. In her book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Duckworth talks of grit as the ability to identify long term goals and going after them relentlessly. The nuance, however, is that gritty people also know when to change course and try new opportunities. In the context of women in the workplace, grit is about finding ways to navigate the environment at home and at work and not giving up, even in the face of discouragement or outright rejection.

During the course of my career, I have found that grit matters more than innate talent, or the educational institutions women come from. Giving up because 'everything is just too hard' is easy, but the gritty folks play the long game and often make wise short-term trade-offs in the interest of achieving longer term

<sup>4</sup>Ted Talks Education (April, 2013) [https://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_grit\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_passion\\_and\\_perseverance?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance?language=en)

<sup>5</sup>Growth mindset is an idea developed at Stanford University by Carol Dweck. It is the belief that the ability to learn is not fixed, that it can change with your effort. Suggested reading – *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* Paperback, Illustrated, December 26, 2007



goals. Trade-offs or choices could be in the form of being off-ramp for a few years or at times making safe career bets rather than taking the big risks. Women with grit also demonstrate resilience when their target moves and a few more years are added to their original plans. They are not discouraged by the fact that rewards and recognition may not come as frequently or at par with their male colleagues. Grit is also intertwined very closely with the growth mindset. Women with grit are not afraid of failure and use the experience to learn and change as they do not see failure as permanent. They believe in the ‘power of yet’ as opposed to the ‘tyranny of now,’ an idea advocated by Carol Dweck<sup>6</sup> who believes that this gives one hope into the future and fosters growth through perseverance. It makes people believe that they are on a learning curve rather than a dead end.

Building a network of mentors and allies is also critical in successfully navigating work environments and careers. While mentors play an extremely valuable role in opening doors and creating visibility to opportunities that might otherwise not be accessible, allies stand up for us when we are marginalised or subject to inequities. In fact, allies are often seen and heard much better than those who are affected. I cannot stress the importance of intentionally building this network of support and not relying solely on the immediate manager to champion us.

## **Actioning Systemic Solutions**

While beliefs, grit, growth mindset and allyship play a significant role in enabling careers, systemic solutions in hiring, development and retention of women need to evolve in tandem if we are to see an exponential growth of women in senior leadership roles.

<sup>6</sup>The Power of Yet (September 2014) TEDxNorrköping <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-swZaKN2Ic>

**Hiring:** While aspirations are necessary, the solution to increasing representation cannot be hard coded goals as this can quite quickly degenerate into tokenism that is counter cultural for most organisations. That said, with women still occupying less than 20% of C-Suite and board positions and in less than 5% of CEO roles, we do need to urgently interrupt the biases and practices that are inhibiting our ability to hire a truly diverse workforce. Inclusion nudges that re-engineer how job descriptions are written and where they are posted, the make-up of the interview panel and numerous other parts of the hiring process can have transformational results in attracting women and mitigating bias.

**Development:** The role of the immediate manager and the quality of career development conversations between managers and their women team members have a disproportionately high bearing on an organisation's ability to move the needle towards more inclusive senior leadership teams. Articulating expectations of managers and holding them accountable for being great developers of diverse talent is essential. Using their power and resources to sculpt opportunities that help women build on strengths and bridge development gaps and nudging them to reach out for that big role can create that enabling and supportive culture. For organisations at scale, institutional nudges through processes and tools could provide that much needed encouragement to a woman to raise her hand for a project or an international assignment that might accelerate her career.

**Retention:** Organisations which successfully build diverse leadership teams also focus relentlessly on retaining their talent through creating a culture where women can bring their authentic selves to work and where their voices are valued. Retaining talent is very hard work and organisations must be non-linear and courageous in curating solutions that challenge current assumptions. The pandemic has upended so many aspects of our lives and women have borne the brunt and dropped out of the workforce in alarmingly large numbers. Now more than ever, there is an urgency for organisations to be bold and creative and not allow it to be so easy for women to walk out the door. For example, COVID-19 has taught us a lot about productivity, so might this be an opportunity for organisations to be location agnostic and retaining trailing spouses and partners who otherwise might have left? Even in the aspect of retention, organisations must hold managers accountable to leave no stone unturned in their ability to retain their women talent.



## Nurturing Role Models of the Future

There is no question that the tech ecosystem is experiencing positive change and the impact of this will definitely be felt by the next generation of the workforce. The interesting thing is that millennial women have grown up with the kind of role models that were not visible to Gen X. Although still not a substantial number, women in leadership roles have been witnessed by millennial women. The impact of this is powerful—millennial women tend to dream bigger, take risks and reach more assertively towards their goals.

The millennial generation is also more comfortable with demonstrating growth mindset, experimenting, failing, and learning. They demand a culture where all voices are heard and they can be their authentic selves, and in this context, are very discerning about their choice of employers. They display surprising clarity towards values, culture, social impact and their own thresholds.

Even for companies with super attractive employer brands, millennials can force them to look hard and deep within themselves to truly live their culture.

“ In a world where empathy and vulnerability are THE most critical attributes in managers and leaders, millennials will vote with their feet and gravitate towards leaders who truly demonstrate care and empathy.

This new brand of leadership is what will drive the bigger change in tech, enabling organisations to evolve culture more rapidly and also make deeper and broader social impact.



**As you shape your own path,  
Dream Big, Be Gritty, and Be  
Kind to Yourself!**

*Namratha Roy is a proven global leader with deep experience in developing and executing organisation and people strategies across companies like Cisco Systems, Groupon, Microsoft and the Tata Group. With an impressive 30-year career in Human Resources in India, China, Singapore and the United States, Namratha has built high performance teams driving transformational growth through innovative solutions across talent acquisition, total rewards, organisation design, diversity and inclusion, and change management.*