



Recruit More Women in Managerial Positions for Gender Equality

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Sujata Saxena is the acting Director of the ICAR-Central Institute for Research on Cotton Technologies (ICAR-CIRCOT), Mumbai, India. Dr Saxena is Principal Scientist (Organic Chemistry) & Head I/c, Chemical & Biochemical Processing Division, ICAR- CIRCOT, Mumbai. Dr Saxena has been associated with numerous research projects. She has published many scientific papers, articles and book chapters and presented more than 20 papers at national and international conferences. She was part of the joint CICR- CIRCOT team which developed three naturally brown-coloured desi cotton germplasms registered by Plant Germplasm registration Committee of ICAR. Dr Saxena is the recipient of JRF and SRF of CSIR for Doctoral degree. She is a Member of TC 38 (Textiles) committee of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and is associated with Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) as member of TX 05 and TX 07 sub-committees on textiles. Dr Saxena is Senior member at the American Association of Textile Chemists and Colorists, USA, and was a consultant in projects funded by UNDP and ICEF on development of application techniques for natural dyes on cotton.

Describe your professional journey, the challenges that you faced as a woman and how did you resolve them?

I am Dr Sujata Saxena, MSc, PhD, Principal Scientist (organic chemistry), currently working as the Director (Acting) of the Central Institute for Research on Cotton Technology (CIRCOT), Mumbai, India. ICAR-CIRCOT is a premier institute under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) well known in the cotton fraternity for its contributions in post-harvest processing technology of cotton. I am married to Dr Gopal Krishna, Director and Vice chancellor of the Central Institute of Fisheries Education (CIFE), Mumbai under the ICAR. I am also the proud mother of a son and a daughter both pursuing their chosen professions.

My professional journey had been good and satisfying as I got to work in various research projects pertaining to varied aspects of cotton post-harvest technology such as chemical processing and finishing of cotton and its blends; application of natural dyes to cotton; cotton value chain; application of plasma and nanotechnology to cotton utilisation of cottonseed and its by-products. Some of these were projects sponsored by international and national organizations such as UNDP, ICEF, NAIP, NFBSFARA of ICAR, TMC, DST etc. and others were funded by the institute.

I was working for my doctoral degree on a CSIR fellowship when I was selected as a scientist in ICAR and after taking an

extension of about seven months to complete the experimental studies, I joined CTRL, Mumbai (as CIRCOT was then known) toward the end of 1986. That was the beginning of my long and continuing association with cotton. Over this period, I got promoted to the positions of scientist (Senior scale), Senior Scientist and then Principal Scientist. As I rose in seniority, I also discharged the duties of Section in-charge, Head of the Division and now I am the Director (Acting) of the institute.

Being a woman, I too faced quite a few challenges in my professional journey and first of these was to stay alone in a city far away from my parents. Luckily, I was able to get accommodation in the institute's staff quarters and my colleagues and neighbours were helpful and supportive. After my marriage, my husband (also a scientist in ICAR) was posted in Mumbai but in a different institute (CIFE) because he is a veterinarian. Working in different institutes had its own advantages and challenges. One advantage was that our meetings, seminars and conferences were at different times and one of us was there with the kids. One disadvantage was that one of us had to commute a long distance; it was my husband initially when the kids were small and me later. There were issues of day care as none of our parents or close family members were staying with us so I extended my leave beyond the usual maternity leave (it was three months at that time) to about a year on both occasions and thereafter we were lucky to find families who took good care of them.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments.

As a researcher there were many occasions in which I got exciting results from the experiments and I felt proud of those. The first of these accomplishments worth mentioning was when I was able to develop a process for dyeing cotton with Lac dye, a dye thought to only work on wool and silk. What made it even more special was that the work was carried out on a first-ever consultancy project at the institute sponsored by National Handloom Development Corporation. I was later invited to present the work at the Union Ministry of Textiles, New Delhi. Another big professional achievement that I am proud of is that presently both I and my husband are heading our respective institutes as Director and that may be a first instance for our organisations.

Have you had a role model who inspired you?

My mother was a role model for me. She was a college teacher as also performed the household responsibilities very efficiently. She took great care to ensure a sound educational foundation for me and my siblings. She was always there to listen to us and was well-recognised among her students for her teaching skills and the knowledge of her subject which was mostly self-acquired.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

I always wanted to work, be independent, do something good for the society and my dream was to be in a managerial position.

Do you think as a female researcher, have you confronted gender bias and what did you specifically to overcome?

I do not recall any gender bias as such until I got married and my husband too got posted at Mumbai. Professionally I was not being taken seriously and also my two long maternity leaves — especially the second one — was not taken in a positive light by my superiors. I worked hard to overcome it and when I got into senior positions, I took care that the special needs of the women researchers working under me are taken care of.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

Yes, as Director, I make all decisions on the entire activities of the institute. Earlier, as Head of the Division, I was looking after the day-to-day activities of the division and was making recommendations to the Director about divisional research and purchasing activities. Earlier, when I was a senior scientist, as a member/chairperson of important committees such as the Purchasing Committee, Prioritization, Monitoring and Implementation, etc. — I contributed to the decision-making process. At the level of scientist, I was responsible for the planning and execution of my research projects.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve contribution of women scientists?

I would like to change the perception that women are not committed to the development of the organisation and they take undue advantage of the many facilities available to them under various measures introduced by the government to help improve participation of women in the workforce. I would expect women working in my Institute to also be responsible and committed employees while shouldering the responsibilities of the family and motherhood. I would like to provide them all possible support so that they can give their best on both fronts.

What policies has the Government adopted for the benefit of women employees?

The government of my country has introduced several measures that have benefitted women in all sectors. There is equal pay for equal work for men and women. Women are entitled to 'paid maternity leave' of six months on two occasions. There is also a provision of 15 days paternity leave for male employees. Women employees in the government sector are also entitled to about two years childcare leave during their career to take care of sickness and examination needs of the children until the second child is 18 years old. There is also a provision to provide crèche facilities if there are enough women employees at a workplace though it has not been implemented so well for various reasons. Whenever possible, husbands and wives are posted in the same city. It is also mandatory to have an Internal Complaints Committee headed by a woman in a senior position in each organisation for prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace to investigate the complaints of women.

What else do you think can the Government do to support women employees?

I think that the existing policies for the organised sector are quite sufficient and any further incentives may be counterproductive. While recruiting a research fellow for a time-bound project, people try to avoid candidates who are likely to take maternity leave as that would affect the project's progress. More incentives and policies however are needed for women in unorganised sectors such as agricultural employees who work on daily/monthly wages. There is also a need to improve the hostel facilities for girl students and working women. Better day-care facilities for children near the workplace/residence would also help women to join and stay in the workforce. Flexible working hours and work from home facilities shall also be a boon to women with small children.

What is the one thing that you think can remedy gender inequality?

Making the workplace more diverse by recruiting more women, especially in management positions, can be of much help in reducing gender inequality. All facilities to enable women to fulfil their biological responsibilities need to be provided, of course. Providing for such facilities should not be seen only as

a 'support for women' but a support to society as children who are well cared for today will be better citizens tomorrow.

What can an international organization do to recognize and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

An international organisation can study the experiences of the women in various countries, list the problems they face

— their needs and expectations — and come up with the most important areas that need to be addressed to empower women. It can also the government policies across nations and suggest guidelines that are in line with the biological and social requirements of women. This can encourage women to join and stay in the workforce which in itself will help to mitigate gender bias.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC