

Gender in the Job

An Interview with Harjinder Kaur, MD and CEO of Comvision Pvt Ltd



Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* was about the comfort of women with power and the comfort of women as leaders. Five years after the publication of the landmark book we wanted to assess if the situation has changed so we spoke with Harjinder Kaur, MD and CEO of Comvision Pvt Ltd, in Hyderabad, who broke the glass ceiling to start an IT solutions company in 1995. Since then she has diversified into e-toll integrated solutions, RFID based Tags implementation for Highways, e-governance & large scale system integration, intelligent traffic / transport solutions for Smart City Implementation; again the only woman doing this in India.

Q. You, as a woman, have been a pioneer in your field of work. Tell us about Comvision's journey.

A. I started the company in 1995 in Delhi. We started by conducting IT specialised trainings. I come from a small town, but my dad always encouraged me to do something. Women need that kind of encouragement. In those days, this support was even more necessary as there were very few women in business and in IT sector it was even more difficult to find them.

Post marriage, I started the business in Hyderabad. The Government of Andhra Pradesh was our biggest buyer because the corporates were only in Delhi and Mumbai. I was very focused. I delivered even when some tough projects came my way. My team was my strength. We would always sit together and brainstorm. Also, the attitude of Andhra Pradesh government was very forthcoming. Their tender conditions did not have prerequisites. They asked for proof of concept (POC) if you were successful in POC they would give the project to you. Hence, a lot of MSME sector came to the forefront. We could give some turnkey projects to the AP government.

A first of its kind project – e-governance implementation 'TWINS' – was done by us in India where we gave citizens multiple services under one roof way back in 1995. The then President of the United States of America, Bill Clinton, was especially brought to Hyderabad to show our work. Doing that project was a huge challenge not due to technology issues but due to the mindset of bureaucrats as they were not ready to share the database. It took a lot of time to convince them. This gave me a lot of learning.

We diversified into north India. Then we recognised the huge potential in intelligent traffic transport solution – an integrated solution. Our state-of-the-art e-toll solution is an ERP especially designed to suit Indian vehicles, payment systems and calibration in India. Our strong audit features give an unbeaten strength to management, thereby increasing the revenue.

We have further diversified into traffic signalling automation. This is a huge requirement under the smart cities implementation. It senses the traffic and turns the signal automatically through a controller. It works not only for one signal but for the entire corridor. And the whole corridor works seamlessly. So the road infrastructure does not need enhancing always but traffic has to be regulated to smoothen its flow.

Q. *The role of CEOs is unique in that they stand at the top of the pyramid and all the other members of the organisation take cues from them. Those who fail to model the desired mindsets and behaviour or who opt out of vital initiatives risk seeing the transformation lose focus. Do you agree?*

A. What has always worked for me is team building and team spirit which has to be kept high always. People become your success. The people who come to join us they know they will learn. There is a lot of in-house training. When they are given challenging situations they learn. There is leader in everybody.

When I started it did matter that I was a woman. Twenty years later it does not matter now it boils down to whether you are competent enough to deliver or not. Being technology-based work they would doubt. But

the moment you start talking it ceases to matter whether one is a woman or not.

Q. Do you agree with Sheryl Sandberg's premise in her book Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead? That is, women are seriously under represented at top management level and at boardroom level.

A. In the last few years, the situation has changed. There are more and more women in the board room now. I agree, leadership traits people usually feel are masculine.

Women have to tend to home, families, parents that emotional support is needed by them. So we give them that. They are an important part of our work force. For example, when a female employee goes on maternity leave, in our organisation, she has the first right of refusal. As I have also gone through it hence I understand.

In my case I won't say that. The way we multitask. I always tell my HR to recruit more women. They are more responsible. They deliver on time. After recruitment there is no extra edge that is given to a man or a woman.

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All promotions are merit based.

Q. Do you see any change in mindsets and behaviour of organisations towards women and their role at the top level?

A. Now we are more and more conscious that gender parity has to be bridged. Also, in a competitive global economy, no business can afford to leave talent on the sidelines. Everyone deserves a fair shot at success, no matter his or her gender, background or beliefs.

Q. Also do you see a change in the mindset of women and do they see themselves at the top of the ladder?

A. I have seen that if women start young they do not leave their careers midway. They have become career conscious. The older women sometimes adjust. Younger women come back. Now women are very courageous and they want to have their career. Women aren't quitting their jobs or 'opting out'. In fact, a survey found that women, on an average, quit their jobs at the same rates as men, or even less often. At the higher levels, women are more likely than men to stick around.

Q. How does your organisation propagate inclusiveness for women at work? Please mention some of the initiatives that Comvision has co-opted. What is your organisation doing to increase gender parity?

A. Gender integration has been established as a global strategy for promoting gender equality, which refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women. I am conscious that we should first put these principles into

practice in our daily lives, which starts with our own office.

We recruit/interview women from different fields like Information Technology, Human Resource and Management, Social media at all levels in our organisation. In Comvision, 30- 40 per cent women are recruited every year and the organisation ensures that they are paid and promoted as per their capabilities.

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Female employees are entitled to 3 months of maternity leave. If somebody wants to take a year off/does not want to continue their job, we accept this. We also agree to their return-to-work date if they wish to rejoin us. ■