If tech intelligence is shaped by a homogenous group of men, its ‘thinking’ will adapt inherent biases present in the system. AI, after all, learns and replicates from training data, says Nandita Koshal

Leadership in internet-driven technology firms has long been viewed as a bastion of male domination. Latest figures by Statista, a German online portal for statistics, confirm that tech is still not a “woman’s world” as the female lot still form a minority in its workforce. Figures are even more schismatic when we consider the percentage of women occupying leadership positions in the top tech companies of the world. While in Netflix, women hold an encouraging 43 per cent of the leadership positions, the picture becomes bleaker as we consider the percentages for Facebook (30), Apple (29), Google (26) and Microsoft (20). All these data are well below the desired level of 50 per cent that depicts gender parity.

This trend is, however, not specific to big tech companies only. Even the start-up and entrepreneurship ecosystem has witnessed biased trends against women. According to Silicon Valley Bank’s ‘Women in Technology Leadership 2019’ report on tech executives in the US, the UK, China and Canada, while 56 per cent of start-ups have at least one woman in an executive position, only 40 per cent have minimum one woman on the board of directors.

These trends highlight the need to bring more and more women in technology space, especially in leadership roles. The imperative goes beyond the narrative of just maintaining gender parity. Technological advancement constantly needs new and diverse knowledge, perspectives and intellectual and technological innovations. With technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT) and Robotics seeing tremendous growth, wherein we are trying to make machines think like humans, it is essential to bring elements of diversity, inclusivity and heterogeneity in the world of intelligence.

If “intelligence” in the world of technology is largely shaped by a homogenous group of “men”, it is more likely that “thinking” of technology will adapt the inherent conscious or unconscious biases and prejudices of the section. This is largely because AI learns and replicates from the training data. The algorithms developed will, thereby, imbibe the prejudices present in the data. It is, hence, essential that more women become part of the core teams developing technology to make the future of intelligence unbiased.
It is also found that diversity in tech and business leadership positions positively affect profits of the firms. A 2016 study at Pearson Institute for International Economics demonstrated a positive correlation between women at the C-suite level and firm profitability. According to their research, a firm with 30 per cent women at C-suite level leadership can expect a 15 per cent boost to their profitability.

Apart from bringing in more diversity, inclusivity and profitability to the firms, women bring fresh perspectives, narratives, creativity, flexibility, visibility, responsibility and dynamism to the firm. Further, a report from First Round Capital found that companies with a woman on their founding leadership teams outperformed all-male companies by 63 per cent. Women may be a minority in tech but their power and presence is definitely rising in the world. According to the Forbes’ 2018 list of world’s 100 most powerful women, 20 are from the tech industry. The cohort of women in leadership positions in tech is substantially increasing in this list of power women. The list saw the likes of Susan Wojcicki, CEO YouTube, who figured as the seventh most powerful women in the world, closely followed by IBM CEO Ginni Rometty and Facebook’s COO Sheryl Sandberg, figuring in the 10th and 11th position in the list.

China’s Jean Liu, president, Didi Chuxing and India’s Roshni Nadar Malhotra, CEO, HCL Enterprises, also featured as 10 most powerful women in tech according to the same list. All these prominent executives have been celebrated not only for their leadership skills but also for changing the face of the industry and for demonstrating utmost responsibility and sensitivity in dealing with the adverse situations.

The rise of women in leadership positions has partly been attributed to the strategic move by companies. According to this manoeuvre, women are promoted to a C-suite position when likelihood of failure is more, especially when a company is going through exceptionally challenging times, a concept now widely known as glass cliff. While cases like that of Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer might give credence to this theory, glass cliff should be viewed by women as an efficacious opportunity to break the glass ceiling. A shining example of this is Anne Mulcahy, CEO of Xerox from 2001 to 2009, who successfully managed to turn the company around after being promoted at a time when Xerox was tottering on the verge of bankruptcy. In fact, Harvard Business Review study had found that while men were preferred to head a successful company by respondents (67 per cent), majority (63 per cent) opined that woman should take over the company in crisis. Glass cliff rather than being viewed as a trap for ambitious women should be seen as chance for women to break the stereotype and demonstrate their mettle.

As we strenuously emphasise the need for women leaders in internet-driven tech industry, it is also imperative to address why there is lack of them thereof. Undeniably, factors like difficulty in balancing demanding leadership jobs and family life, lack of flexible work hours, biased perceptions and thinking of immediate career options than planning long term career goals play an important role.

Similarly, women also face problems in getting good mentors as men get wary to mentor women due to fear of allegations of sexual harassment and exploitation. The main reason, however, why technology leadership still remains a male bastion, lies in the concept of comparative advantage that both the genders respectively have. While women are considered to be adept at managing people, men are considered to be more skilled at managing technology. As an economic principle, it is most profitable and efficient to allocate resources according to comparative advantage that resource has, especially if the opportunity cost of allocating resources to opposing trades is high.

Industries work on the principle of profitability, which explains their natural learning towards male leadership. Hence, most of the tasks like fund raising, hard negotiating and production processes, which form the core of leadership decisions, are usually male dominated. Whereas, processes like managing human resource, communications, managing risk in which women thrive, although very important, may not necessarily be considered core attributes.

However, this should not be construed to imply that women and men should only function within these social constructs. Wherever, it’s a choice between a more skilled woman and less skilled man or vice-
versa, preference should be given to skill and merit. Therefore, it is essential for women to come out of their comfort zones and imbibe those attributes which are core characteristics of becoming leaders.

The need for bringing more women in technology no longer remains a question of equality alone, it has now become a necessity, too. Both men as well as women will need to change their attitudes and attributes to bring in more women in the industry. Diversity and inclusion are going to be the keywords in driving the world of technology and women can definitely be prognosticated to play a significant role in this new era of intelligence.

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