

Make Way for Women: Removing the Barriers to More Gender-diverse Leadership

We may have thought the glass ceiling had been shattered some time ago, but a persistent paltry showing of women's participation in decision-making levels prove that this is not the case. In fact, apart from the glass ceiling, women also continue to struggle daily with what is known as the 'sticky-floor' syndrome. As numerous studies show, this is to the disadvantage of organisations, and of aspiring women leaders themselves.

The recently concluded survey by TalentCorp showed that women made up around 27% of management positions in the 130 Malaysian publicly listed companies surveyed. This is neither reflective of the approximate 60-40 ratio of female to male graduates from universities in the country, nor is it reflective of the number in entry or mid-level positions. As we move higher up the ladder, the picture is even bleaker with only 5% women representation at the CEO level. The government's policy to increase the number of women on boards of listed companies has also shown meagre growth thus far with only 14% representation in the top 100 listed companies as at December 2015.

The public sector boasts a slightly more favourable record with 34% of decision-making positions in the public service held by women, although only 5 secretaries general of the 24 ministries are women (20%). Political representation, however, is disproportionately low. Only 168 of the 1900 nominated candidates in the 2013 general elections were women (8.8%), and 80 of them were elected, representing just 11% of seats. Only 23 of 222 Members of Parliament are women, just over 10%.

On the ministerial Cabinet there are 30 men (92%) and only 3 women (8%). Only one heads a ministry. There are no women Chief Ministers, nor has there ever been.

Why it Matters

These numbers are raising concern simply because numerous studies have shown that organisations with a greater number of women in leadership roles are more profitable and are better able to compete and grow, which in turn, is better for everyone.

An influential study of 150 countries in Europe, Africa and Asia by the World Bank, came to the conclusion that women leaders are more trustworthy and less corruptible.¹ It has also been argued that liberal democratic institutions, which provide more effective checks on corruption, are also 'fairer' systems that promote gender equality. Therefore, they provide a better explanation for the co-existence of higher female representation and less corruption.²

So where are the women leaders?

As pointed out in the TalentCorp study, there is the factor of women dropping out of full time careers before reaching senior levels and the most common reason for this is family commitments. But there are other factors at play

¹ David Dollar et al, 'Are Women Really the Fairer Sex? Corruption and Women in Government' in The World Bank Working Paper Series No. 4 (The World Bank, 1999).

² Sung Hung-En, 'Fairer Sex or Fairer System? Gender and Corruption Revisited', in Social Forces, Vol. 82, No. 2 (2003).

that validate both the 'glass ceiling' and 'sticky floor' theories.

1. Organisational factors

Some organisations could intrinsically present an inhospitable culture. Masculine values underpinning organisational culture have a systemic influence, which creates an environment in which men are more 'at home' than women. This might explain the low participation rate of women in Malaysian politics, which has traditionally been male-dominated thus creating a sense of a networked 'boys' club' that women find difficult penetrating. Indeed, this phenomenon is also present in the corporate world where men's greater success in achieving promotions is due in part to their greater use of informal networks as opposed to women's greater reliance on formal promotion processes alone.³

In some instances, organisational influence extends to systemic discrimination - defined as a system of direct and/ or indirect discriminatory practices that operate to produce general career disadvantage for women. The organisational and managerial values in such organisations tend to be characterised by stereotypical views of women's roles, attributes, preferences and commitments. These in turn influence decisions about who is suitable for particular positions, who is seen to have potential and so forth.

New research by Stanford University's Clayman Institute for Gender Research found that men and women are assessed very differently at work and that this is due to unconscious bias about women's capabilities. Appraisers, regardless of gender, are significantly more likely to critique female rather than male employees for coming on too strong, and their accomplishments are more likely to be seen as the result of team, rather than individual efforts,

³ Sue Loughlin, 'Barriers to Women's Career Progression: A Review of the Literature', in State Services Commission of New Zealand, Working Paper No 6 (1999).

contrary to their male counterparts. According to the research, if organisations see women as more team-oriented and men more independent, women may be likely to be shunted into support roles rather than landing the core leadership positions. Over time, such stereotypes get internalised, sapping women's confidence in their own abilities to handle higher responsibilities.⁴

Women's chances of advancement in organisations are also affected by a culture where the commitment to career and the organisation is demonstrated by 'face time'; where long hours is the best indicator of productivity; where 'real work' can only be done full time; and where those who are 'serious' will be available at all times.

2. Cultural and societal norms

Most modern societies inherited a patriarchal system with men as head of the household. Their responsibility as breadwinner gave men control over the resources that supported and ensured the survival of his family. Women's traditional orientation towards caring for the household – even though it involved a great number of chores and responsibilities — was considered to be of lesser value.

This traditional division of labour affected attitudes toward their respective empowerment even as women became more active in the workplace. Social norms typecast men and women in terms of opposites, men typically being described as strong and active and women as weak and passive. Moreover, male traits tend to be valued more highly in the workplace than female traits. Achievement-orientation, independence and aggressiveness of men, for instance, tend to be valued more highly than the nurturing and affiliation traits typically ascribed to women.

⁴ Rachel Silverman, 'Gender Bias at Work Turns Up in Feedback' in The Wall Street Journal, (updated 30 September 2015).

Research, however, has indicated that there are, in fact, few gender differences in ability, attitude and commitment but scepticism towards women's ability to lead persists.⁵ Differences between the abilities, attitudes and behaviour of men and women managers were found to be more perceived than real, for instance, that women are less equipped in skills or temperament to handle the arduous role of a senior manager. Most studies of practicing managers have debunked such stereotypical differences between genders.⁶

Furthermore, as the Stanford study above showed, there are traits that are more acceptable in men than in women, such as being authoritative, assertive, ambitious and politically astute. Thus when women leaders demonstrate such traits, they are looked upon unfavourably, sometimes inviting jibes and labels.

3. Self-sabotage and Personal Factors

A 2014 white paper by Bain & Co found that women and men start their careers with equivalent levels of aspiration, but there is a big drop-off with the women who have been in their organizations for some time. After some years of working, they become less certain of their interest in going for top spots, unlike men. And this has no correlation with marital status or motherhood.⁷

Part of the problem is that women harshly judge their own ability to fit into the leadership mould. As such, also unlike men, they self-minimise, undersell their experiences and capabilities and do not put themselves forward for challenging roles and assignments.

⁵ Manjulika Koshal, Ashok K. Gupta, Rajindar Koshal, "Women in management: a Malaysian perspective" in Women In Management Review, Vol. 13 Issue 1 (1998).

⁶ Heilman, Madeline E. "Sex Discrimination and the Affirmative Action Remedy: The Role of Sex Stereotypes" in Journal of Business Ethics, 16(9) (1997), pp 877-889.

⁷ Bain Report, *Everyday Moments of Truth: Frontline Managers Are Key to Women's Career Aspirations* (Bain & Co., 2014).

Many women consider that to take on senior roles, they have to put aside the values and behaviours they believe define who they are, which are deemed incompatible with those roles. This includes having to downplay the importance of family and children in order to be seen as being serious about their career, creating a constant struggle for them.

The perception that they cannot be as committed to their jobs because of their family commitments is also common, that they cannot have the best of both worlds. Some believe that the balance between work and life that they have managed to achieve in their current position cannot be maintained at a higher level, and therefore will choose not to pursue advancement. Ironically enough, research indicates that the presence of a partner and children affects women significantly more than men. Successful women are always asked how they balance career and their homes. Men never get asked that question, because more often than not, it is a non-issue.

Needless to say, feelings of anxiety, stress and guilt are further inhibitors to having more women in leadership; as is fewer role models who have transcended existing challenges.

Removing the Barriers

The advent of the knowledge based economy paved the path for a new generation of workers who are not only required to be skilful but knowledgeable to cope with the fast pace of changes in the competitive environment. Such an environment calls for transformational and adaptive leadership behaviour, including the ability to manage changes and support employees as they take on more challenging responsibilities.

A study of 7280 leaders conducted by Zenger-Folkman in 2011 shows that women possess certain advantages that can be complimentary to the skills of their male counterparts, thus creating teams that are better equipped to thrive in contemporary organisations. These

advantages include: emotional intelligence; communication; initiative; problem solving; decision making; self-development; and bringing about change.⁸

However, after talking about it for some years now, if we want to make real progress on promoting more women, we need to have less talk and more action. The first step to addressing the persistent lack of participation of women at senior roles is recognising the existing barriers. To remove the barriers requires a three-legged solution, that is conscious and decisive effort on the parts of organisations, women and men.

In Malaysia, men still represent over 70% of management and an even higher proportion of C-suites and boards. They need to be fully engaged in creating more balanced and diverse leadership. But women too need to check their own biases and they must step up to allow men to fully buy in to how their roles can be a positive contributor in organisational advancement.

Numerical targets are also extremely helpful, like the government-initiated target of 30% women on corporate boards. In individual organisations too, leaders could set enforceable goals themselves, rather than rely only on government action.

We set numerical KPIs for almost everything else. The same should apply in promoting diversity. Setting clear goals and holding leaders accountable for meeting them will go a long way in overcoming entrenched biases.

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Chief Editor

Dr. Hamidin Abd Hamid

Chief Executive Officer

Razak School of Government

Writer

Karen Chand

⁸ Zenger Folkman, *A Study in Leadership: Women do it Better than Men* (Senger Folkman, 2012)