

Gender

Why we need more women in the C-suite

Pradipti Jayaram

[Study and Work in USA](#) - Get Complete Info On Course, Fees Admissions& Dates. Apply Now.

www.educationext.com/Study_In_USA

Several studies have shown that women bring value and better ethics to a corporate board. It's time for them to forge ahead

“Real change will come when powerful women are less of an exception,” says Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg in her book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*.

These words will resonate with many ambitious women. Many of them would have toiled day and night but may not have attained the heights men have reached. Despite many workplaces having more women than men, and seeming diverse enough, one can't help but wonder why most private cabins in offices continue to be occupied by men!

According to a 2013 article in *Forbes* magazine, 4.6 per cent of Fortune 500 CEO positions and the same percentage of Fortune 1000 CEO positions are occupied by women. Likewise, despite greater parliamentary participation, women are still outnumbered four-to-one in legislatures around the world. These are startling figures, especially because UNDP data show that about 50 per cent of the world's population is female, but they own just one per cent of the world's wealth!

However, things are looking up. Today, Janet Yellen, a woman, heads one of the world's most powerful financial institutions, the US Federal Reserve. But it's important to figure out what is needed to improve women's representation in the higher echelons of industry or government. And if such increase in representation will lead to an improvement in corporate governance and ethics.

To help answer these question and promote dialogue, Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai, (GLIM) recently organised a conference titled: ‘Successful Women in Management’, that included a panel discussion. The discussion was moderated by Hema Bajaj, Professor, GLIM, and the panel comprised Anita Tripathy, President, InVentiv International Pharma Services Pvt Ltd; Kalki Subramanian, transgender activist and founder, Sahodari Foundation; Preethy Unnikrishnan, Head, Campus Recruitment at TCS; Seema Raghunath, Head, Leadership Development, India and Sub-Saharan Africa, John Deere India; and Sharda Batra, Director - HR, compensation and benefits, Morgan Stanley.

Bajaj set the tone of the discussion by asking: “A leader is not specified by his/her gender but by the qualities he/she exhibits. So, will a woman as a leader really make a difference?”

Elaborating, she said, “As per a study conducted by consulting firm Caliper, women leaders are more assertive and persuasive, have a stronger need to get things done. Women are masters at multi-tasking, highly collaborative, transparent, and stronger in interpersonal skills. At the same time, they are empathetic, flexible and collegial.”

Is gender the key?

Building on the idea that women do, in fact, bring value to the boardroom, she pointed to evidence that suggests having three or more women on corporate boards can lead to improvement in performance, diversity and corporate governance. “But not all studies agree that women on boards make companies better; though most do acknowledge that the presence of women changes the behaviour of male board members, governance style and often has an effect on the decisions the board ultimately arrives at,” she added. “Women leaders bring better corporate governance, while being transparent, collaborative and empathetic reflects the ethical side of leadership.”

“Data show having just one female director on the board cuts bankruptcy risk by 20 per cent,” said InVentiv’s Tripathy. She spoke about how women’s moderate risk appetite prevents them from taking decisions which may backfire in the long run. While they have their eye on the bottom line, they can also foresee the ramifications of ill-considered decisions. Aside from looking at all contours of a problem, and being multi-taskers, they are also the moral compass of the board. “If the Lehman brothers were the Lehman sisters, the financial crisis could have, perhaps, been averted,” she said. To this, Morgan Stanley’s Batra added: “Multi-tasking and thinking are major arms in a woman’s armour.”

John Deere’s Raghunath pointed out that statistics show that the Indian career woman of today is the most aggressive and ambitious in the world. Despite this, she added, most women are unable to make that critical jump from middle to senior management.

Improving diversity

TCS’ Unnikrishnan emphasised that young women need more role models in organisations. While Raghunath agreed that gender diversity was important, and more women being hired in corporates was imperative to this, she didn’t believe the leader’s gender affected the success or failure of an organisation. “If you’re good, you’re going to get there,” she said. “These are the times of alpha talent, not just alpha males or females. Women can succeed if they are not afraid.”

Sahodari’s Subramanian added a third dimension to the discussion on the need for gender diversity in light of the transgender minority. According to her, their poor level of education, rejection by mainstream society and violence meted out to them are the primary reasons for their social exclusion. “If it’s difficult for women to participate in the corporate world, think of how difficult it is for a transgender,” she added. Discrimination, like in the case of women, has prevented them from gainfully participating in the economic system. To enable this, she felt a safe environment is imperative.

Substantiating on this point, TCS' Unnikrishnan recalled an anecdote by Sudha Murthy, Chairman of the Infosys Foundation. As a young graduate, Sudha was livid when a job advertisement posted by a Tata company stated that 'lady candidates need not apply'. She sent off a postcard to JRD, protesting the discrimination. Soon, she was offered the job.

One day, she was waiting for Murthy, her husband, to pick her up after office hours. He was late. Seeing her alone, JRD decided to wait with her. When Murthy arrived and Sudha rushed out, JRD called after her and said: "Young lady, tell your husband never to make his wife wait again." With this anecdote, Unnikrishnan drove home the point that adequate safety was important to enable women to go out and work.

"Once you're in, it's only your ability and the results that matter," said Morgan Stanley's Batra, summing up the discussion.

(This article was published on August 19, 2014)