

More Than a Quota: Increasing Women in Leadership

Cultural Competence

Career Development



News articles about calls to action for gender diversity and promoting women in leadership are rampant, and gender-centric awards, such as the Female Entrepreneur of the Year and Woman Lawyer of the Year, are increasing in popularity.

I believe gender representation is important, and it is good to see women being recognized for their work. I, too, was nominated for Woman In-House Counsel of the Year 2019 by the Asian Legal Business SEA Awards. Hence, I am not one to dismiss such gender-centric initiatives.

However, I find myself asking: Are these examples of genuine representation and a genuine desire to

celebrate gender diversity, or are these forms of tokenism created to placate public opinion?

Imposing quotas only serves to target a symptom. We should be treating the underlying disease of underrepresentation.

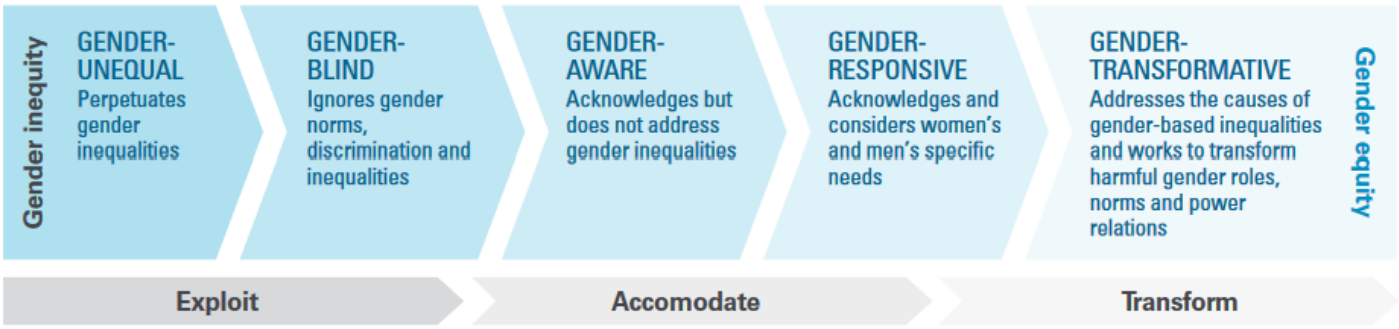
After all, the end goal should be more than just “more women board members,” or “more women award winners.” The end goal should be more capable and credible women in leadership roles who can contribute to a society that is ready to receive them.

While we wait for society to move forward, here are some steps companies can take to foster gender diversity in leadership and ways women lawyers can increase their chances of moving up.

Gender-blind vs gender-transformative policies

Companies and their policies play a crucial role in advancing gender equity in the workplace. Gender-blind policies do not work. Giving the same benefits to all, regardless of gender, will not create equity. Instead, policies should be gender transformative. A gender-transformative policy “addresses the causes of gender-based inequalities and works to transform harmful gender roles, norms, and power relations.”

FIGURE 1: The gender equity continuum[3]



GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES IN THE GLOBAL PROGRAMME TO END CHILD MARRIAGE PHASE II: A SUMMARY FOR PRACTITIONERS

Gender-transformative policies involve listening actively and ensuring continuous engagement with all genders. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work.

For example, a lack of paid maternity leave can have detrimental effects on women’s economic participation in the workforce. But when companies offer a blanket parental leave, it often goes unused by men. It increases when the policy offers paternity leave dedicated for fathers rather than parental leave women can transfer to men.

These gender-transformative policies would help all genders meet their needs and encourage them to stay in the workforce longer — particularly if they have children.

Continuous improvement strategy

Policies should be revisited regularly to ensure that they remain current, identify areas for improvement, and address any structural barriers to help companies create gender equality across the board.

Transparency and communication

In tandem with a continuous improvement strategy, it is also important to ensure that there are specific programs promoting gender equality. They require consultation and open dialogues, particularly with women employees. It is important that they are appreciated, valued, and heard, and that any line of communication is free of gender bias and transparent.

In line with this, a committee comprised of equal representation of genders should oversee approving policies to ensure that all interests and concerns are adequately heard and appropriately safeguarded at the decision-making level. This will also ensure better oversight for equal work equal pay.

Address implicit bias

A person can associate gender with certain stereotypes without being actively aware of it. This known as implicit or unconscious gender bias. Biases in the workplace can negatively impact the recruitment, retention, and promotion of women.

Identifying and acknowledging bias is the first step in combating it. Companies should consider offering implicit bias training for staff, especially those in leadership with hiring and management responsibilities.

Additionally, review hiring descriptions and promotion criteria for implicit bias to ensure there is an equal opportunity for all genders to advance.

Career development programs

Career development programs, particularly for women leaders, are important to ensure that greater visibility is given to women role models within the company who can help to shape and reinforce a culture of gender inclusivity.

AT&T developed an Executive Women's Leadership Experience that invests in mid- and senior-level women leaders who have the potential to reach the executive level. They have also developed programs that provide career opportunities, training, and mentorship for college graduates where more than half are women.

Mentors vs sponsors

It is essential to have a mentor in your life. If you don't have one right now, find one. Mentors help to support growth by offering encouragement and constructive feedback. Mentors are usually significantly more experienced, and they can share the mistakes that they had made along the way. They help mentees grow and overcome the challenges that they may face.

Having a mentor is extremely important for all, but particularly so for women where glass ceilings are real. Having a mentor who supports your growth will challenge you to push your boundaries and strive to achieve more. Your mentor does not need to be another woman in senior leadership — though that can help.

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Seeing a senior women leader overcome adversities and rise to great heights within your industry will give you the strength to push forward. Having said that, and while much has been said about toxic masculinity, there are great male mentors who can help you build your network and make connections.

Spot the difference

A mentor would be someone with career experience or an expertise you value who can support and motivate you with candid advice. A sponsor is someone influential within your company willing to invest their reputational capital to help you rise.

Both are equally important as young women navigate the workspace and try to build their network and gain more visibility. After all, you can do tons of good work but how would you get that promotion if no one has heard of you?

Mentors and sponsors can be found using official channels such as mentorship programs within your company or externally within your community; they can also be found unofficially. One simply needs to reach out and ask. There is no shame in acknowledging that you need help and guidance in certain areas.

Allyship

Lean In Circles are safe spaces for women to share their struggles, give and get advice, and celebrate each other's wins. Inspired by Sheryl Sandberg, it is a network where women can come together to support one another and help each other learn new skills.

I have been fortunate to be a part of two amazing Lean In Circles. One is a group of fabulous women lawyers ranging from in-house counsel to private practitioners to public prosecutors. The other is within my company, consisting of amazing women coworkers where we celebrate each other's wins. Both circles have enabled me to build a strong support network inside and outside of my company, thereby helping me grow as an in-house counsel.

Allyship is extremely important. Join a network of women in your community. If there isn't one, this would be the perfect opportunity for you to step up and be a leader! Start one in your community or your company. This would also be a good way to learn new skills together with a sisterhood of amazing women to guide you through your life and your career.

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Allyship need not necessarily equate merely to sisterhood. It is also important that we acknowledge the role that men play in our lives and how gender equality benefits everyone. Men can also be key allies and influencers to eliminate the barriers facing women today, and they, too, can serve as inspiration to others in their push for gender equity in the workplace.

Role models

Having a good role model will help to guide your life and shape your career path.

My role model is the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. One of her cases that made an impression on me is the case of *Moritz vs Commissioner* 469 F.2d 466 (1972). Justice Bader Ginsburg represented Charles Mortiz who had been caring for his elderly mother but denied caregiving tax deduction because he was an unmarried man. She argued that gender discrimination hurts men as well.

This continues to be the case in the workplace because gender diversity allows for, among other things, multiple perspectives, thereby increasing the creativity and innovation of the workplace and improving the companies' understanding of customers' needs. After all, there has been evidence that diversity leads to better profits.

One of the key lessons Justice Bader Ginsburg leaves behind is her wish to "be remembered as someone who used whatever talent she had to do her work to the very best of her ability." I hope that in my life, both professionally and personally, I will attempt to live by these words.

Having a good role model has helped me follow my life path, professionally and personally. A good role model can be your North Star.

Conclusion

Ultimately, most of the work in achieving gender equity in the workplace requires a mindset change from society, the company, and the individual herself.

Women leaders can, and should be, promoted into roles where they are able to gain direct, relevant experience by leading initiatives and managing people and risks. Collectively, we achieve this goal by making a concerted effort to promote genuine diversity and representation. This empowers not just us but helps generations to come.

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