

GENDER EQUALITY

Diversity makes for a dynamic workplace

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Although gender equality is an age-old discussion, it remains a controversial topic.

Two prominent researchers in the field, Ronald Burke and Susan Vinnicombe, argue that gender has become a "business issue" rather than merely a "woman's issue".

Given increasing competition for a limited talent pool, the quality of a company's human capital could be a competitive advantage. The gender composition of boards and top management therefore increasingly gain attention from policy makers, the media and researchers. International and local statistics, however, show that less than 20% of directors are females.

In 2007, two US researchers, Alice Eagly and Linda Carl, argued that the glass ceiling metaphor was no longer apt in the 21st century.

They said women were not challenged by one obstacle, but encounter several difficulties to advance their careers.

They proposed an alternative metaphor of a labyrinth as women are confronted by work-life balance issues, discrimination at work and prejudice based on their gender.

There have been reports of successful women being reluctant to support other women – the so-called queen bee syndrome. Women also experience self-doubt and guilt due to an inability to achieve a work-life balance. A lack of access to corporate networks to advance women's careers has also been noted by researchers.

The debate on board gender diversity changed over the past two decades. In the 2000s, proponents offered several reasons why gender diversity should be encouraged. Researchers reported that women brought fresh perspectives to board-

room discussions, were less likely to resort to group thinking and had a more collaborative leadership style than men. If there were open communication channels, people tended to be more comfortable about voicing their concerns, resulting in a constructive atmosphere to share ideas. But diverse opinions may result in conflict and slower decision-making.

The debate shifted from reasons for limited female directors and why this status quo should be tackled to a discussion on how corporate female participation could be encouraged.

Some women complain that it is difficult to obtain access to male-dominated corporate networks. The term homosociality refers to the general orientation to associate with individuals like oneself. Men often tend to associate with other men when forming corporate networks.

NOMINATION COMMITTEES SHOULD SOURCE PROMISING WOMEN BOARD CANDIDATES AND OFFER THEM SUPPORT

Both sexes should, however, be encouraged to avoid homosocial networks and rather engage with directors from both sexes to learn from each other's experiences.

Companies should continuously grow and develop the talent pipeline by allocating (more) resources to developing promising female employees. Line managers should provide challenges to women to prepare them for career advancement. Their job satisfaction should be regularly monitored.

If continuous development, further studies and mentorships are encouraged, the director talent pool will be enlarged.

According to the critical mass theory, three or more women

directors are required to really bring about corporate change. Nomination committees should source promising women board candidates and offer them development support.

Companies should also review their work policies for parents to facilitate and support work-life balance. There should be a focus on the quality of an employee's work rather than the number of hours spent at a desk. If long working hours are reduced, women might have more flexibility to meet their family responsibilities.

Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg sets an example.

She leaves work at 5.30pm to spend time with her family. More women should follow her example and support or request family-friendly policies.

Men should also be encouraged to take advantage of family-related benefits. Household responsibilities should be shared, to allow both partners to develop their careers.

Another option to advance board gender diversity is legislation. In Norway, female board diversity is enforced by means of a quota, while former Labour government minister Lord (Mervyn) Davies introduced female board targets in the UK.

But board gender diversity should not be legislated in SA.

In light of gender activist Germaine Greer's comment that "if a woman never lets herself go, how will she ever know how far she might have got?", women should make the most of the opportunities offered to them. They should challenge their firms to enlarge women's access to mentoring and other development opportunities to ensure a more equal workplace, not only at board level, but throughout companies.

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Confronting inequality:

Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg is pushing for more women in the workplace and in leadership positions. /Reuters