

Women in Asia Struggle to Land Top Management Roles

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Top management roles at multinational corporations in Asia are typically held by Westerners. But not just any type of Westerner—regional directors and CEOs are also predominantly men.

While overall participation in the workplace and post-secondary degree attainment has become nearly equal for men and women in places like Hong Kong, the picture isn't the same for many multinational corporations in Asia.



Bloomberg News

Facebook Inc. COO Sheryl Sandberg advocated inspiring women to achieve their goals in her book “Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead.” She delivered a speech to students in Seoul July 3.

There are “some big challenges” in Asia when it comes to women’s efforts to break through the glass ceiling, said Nick Marsh of executive-search firm Harvey Nash[HVN.LN -0.58%](#). “Whereas in the States and Europe there are board development programs, they were not prevalent in Asia.”

Mr. Marsh believes multinational corporations in the region have a long way to go, but are still far more diverse than locally based companies. “When I talk to more local companies in Hong Kong and China and ask if diversity is on their agenda, they’ll typically say no. Many say they’ll just choose the best person.”

In Hong Kong, just 2% of CEOs are women, according to McKinsey & Company’s Women Matter report.

The leadership trend mirrors the reality across the region more broadly, where women in Asia occupy just 1.1% of CEO, CFO, country head and related positions, according to a 2012 Catalyst study.

Asia's talent pool is affected by uneven local markets, which vary greatly in gender representation. In Japan, for instance, the McKinsey report finds women make up just 2% of board members, a situation that may be in part caused by a lack of available childcare.

"Women in the workforce have challenges that are different from men," said Sylvia Lee, who heads Oracle Hong Kong. "This has often resulted in women leaving the workforce midway through their career. We need to recognize that, and provide a good support network for them to encourage and motivate each other."

Women lacking confidence in their leadership ability may also be a driving factor in the gender disparity.

"Women do not put themselves forward at the same rate, and may exclude themselves from opportunities if they don't think they have 100% of the skills required," said Mr. Marsh, "whereas men may be more likely to put themselves forward if they think they've got at least 50% of the skills."

While Hong Kong's top business leaders may be ahead of other parts of Asia, they are, on average, behind Europe and the U.S., and significantly farther behind parity, consultants say. According to the 30% Club, a group dedicated to increasing women's representation on boards, 40% of Hong Kong-listed issuers don't have female directors on their board, while another 37% list just one female director.

The Hong Kong Stock Exchange looks determined to break that trend. Effective September, it will ask companies to report on board diversity and have an explicit diversity policy. Louisa Wong, founder of Asia executive search firm Bó Lè Associates, believes the move might be helpful, but thinks real change will be driven by employees themselves and women leaders within organizations.

Even at multinational corporations, the progress of women in senior leadership roles can be likened to an hourglass, said Mr. Marsh. "You see a better pool of people at the top but it really thins out a level or two down from the CEO or board of directors." Women make up a large number of entry-level positions, but often see waning representation at management levels.

Top executives will have to recognize that a more balanced management team could help drive success in business, said Mr. Marsh.

Brad Adams, human resources research director at advisory firm CEB, said many top companies are looking beyond the notion of diversity to the concept of "inclusion management," which emphasizes broad thinking, openness to new ideas, deeper understanding of customers or supply chains, and the diversity of markets.

But ending the gender disparity will require conscious effort. "Diversity needs to be done proactively," said Scott Price, president and CEO of Walmart Asia. "It does not happen by default."

–Riva Gold

Comment:

- *guest* wrote:

Not saying there is no discrimination. That being said, most women don't want the extremely long hours and lack of a balanced life that many top execs have...and that's not necessarily a bad choice. It's not politically correct to say this of course. Most women in business that we work with, for example, are just not nearly interested and tend to tune out more quickly. The women who are really gung-ho about business that we work with are often CEO's.