

If we want to know more about the kind of people who run the world, we could study those who run countries, corporations or colleges. Or we could just skip that and look at the delegate list for the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, the annual schmoozefest of the world's most powerful people, to find that men rule the world.

This may not surprise any of us, but the fact that their power is only becoming more entrenched does seem a bit surprising, not least because Davos's organisers have publicly tried to invite more women.

Two years ago WEF introduced a quota system to encourage female participation, which demanded that its 100 most important (ie generous) partners send one woman to the annual meeting for every four men. And yet somehow, since then, the proportion of women has fallen from 17% in 2011 to 15% of the 2,500 delegates for this year. So much for that ploy.

When the quota was introduced, it did seem as though progress was being made. For a start, there were a few more sessions about "women as the way forward" featuring Indra Nooyi and Sheryl Sandberg and lots of glamorous events with the likes of Nobel prizewinner Lleymah Gbowee.

But it was a different matter for the companies themselves, who avoided the quota altogether by sending four rather than five delegates. That's right – they would rather send fewer people to the top table than mix the all-male bias up a little. Add to that all the delegates who were exempt from the quota – businesses, universities, media outfits and charities who still haven't achieved gender parity – and the fact that the proportion of women has actually fallen seems less surprising.

Adrian Monck, WEF's managing director in charge of communications, blames the fact that a gathering of the world's most powerful simply reflects the way things are. "If we hold the glass up to global leadership, the reflection that comes back is this. And it's just not good enough," he says.

And he's right. Just 23 of the chief executives of the Fortune 500 companies are women – that's less than 5% – and there are only four women running FTSE 100 companies. WEF does itself few favours, of course – its 10 managing directors are all men.

If you look at the breakdown of Davos delegates, the ultimate bosses of companies are nearly all men. In the energy sector there are only three female representatives out of 82 – which is less than 4%. There are only eight women out of 65 representing the global health and healthcare sector (12%). Those representing the top echelons of the press, charities and politics tend to be

only slightly more balanced towards gender equality. Out of 225 press delegates, 53 are women (24%). Analysing the number of women from governments, there are 44 out of 288 (15%), and there are just 54 women from civil society out of 192 (28%).

WEF introduced the quota at a time when it was under the greatest pressure to justify the control exerted over us all by the 1%. Hidden away in a difficult-to-reach alpine village, its location and stringent security have so far protected the conference from the protests that spread around the world a few years ago.

Yet Fernando Morales-de la Cruz, activist and founder of something he calls the Itinerant Museum of Art, says that the failure to address the gender balance of Davos is reflected in its failure to address other inequalities. "They also keep talking about ending poverty but, I'm sorry, I want to see results."

Don't we all? There are many who argue that the makeup of a tiny super-elite is irrelevant to the world's poorest people. More women will make no difference. But there must be some correlation between the fact that the majority of the poorest and most powerless people on the planet are female, while the exact opposite is the case for those at the top, making the decisions. As a reflection of who exerts the power globally, it's pretty crystal clear.