

Women in management: is it time we make gender balance a priority?



PARITY

WHEN CANADIAN PM Justin Trudeau was asked why it was important for him to have a gender-equal cabinet, he didn't hesitate: "Because it's 2015," he said. Three years later in Poland, that sentiment still doesn't seem to have caught on.

As an infrastructure lawyer and partner at a sizeable Polish law firm, I frequently spend time with leaders of major industry players – often as the only female in the board room. Statistics confirm this is no coincidence. According to a recent report by TOR Consultants Group, there are roughly six men for every woman on the boards of Poland's transport, railway and infrastructure companies. Women act as chairperson in only 18 cases.

Some justify this by describing such sectors as traditionally "reserved for men" (though the work conducted is hardly physical). However, a similar trend exists in other markets, including (sadly) the legal industry. A 2017 analysis revealed that barely 22 percent of the partnerships of Polish law firms are female (the third worst ranking in the CEE region, ahead of only the Czech Republic and Austria).

Astonishingly, this imbalance seems to be generally accepted, including by women themselves. The reasons for this are manifold and complex. Studies suggest years of the status quo may have affected women's thinking: they are often less self-confident than male peers; more likely to feel unqualified to apply for a position. They seldom ask for raises or promotions.

Perhaps a more important question than "Why?" is "What can be done about it?" A number of obvious tools can be employed such as codes of good practice (which are not always effective), or legislative intervention introducing diversity quotas. Most importantly, however, a shift in thinking is needed, and not only among the male population; women need to conquer their own mindsets as much as the "traditional" views of society.

In the words of Ewelina Betiuk, Executive Director at TOR Consultants Group, "[...] the issue of career advancement largely depends on the women themselves. They must

show fortitude to overcome excessive pursuit of perfection and a tendency to critically evaluate their own actions and skills, which often prevents them from successfully negotiating. When there are no legislative or systemic solutions, it is also extremely important to understand the power of solidarity among women."

Striving for gender diversification on management boards ought to be a major goal for businesses too, and not only because of the expectations of corporate social responsibility. As studies conducted in various sectors have shown, gender-balanced management boards simply perform better.

It is an issue that cannot be ignored any longer. After all, 2015 is already a long time ago.



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