

THE DEBATE

How to improve gender equality in business

More women may now hold board positions, but has a boardroom focus helped women overall in the workplace?

OVER the last 10 years the UK has made significant progress on gender representation in the boardroom; almost three quarters of FTSE 350 companies have met the government target of 40 per cent of women on boards, according to the FTSE Women Leaders Review 2025. And the United Kingdom is one of the few countries to have achieved this without quotas. A voluntary approach, led by business leaders in the boardroom, has been key to this success.

Currently, only nine per cent of FTSE 100 CEOs are women, highlighting the opportunity for businesses to take more deliberate action in preparing and promoting female talent. Ensuring more women are placed in key succession roles will widen the pool of future CEOs, and improve gender diversity overall. The 30% Club has set ambitious new targets, encouraging organisations to work towards 50 per cent gender representation, which we hope will

YES

Pavita Cooper



drive long-term change at every level of business.

We need to challenge the assumption that the most senior leaders are men, and getting women in the boardroom is the first step of this path. Normalising female leadership is critical if we are to encourage young women to aspire to lead at the top of organisations in all settings. Even the most progressive board must guard against the assumptions and blind spots that help perpetuate barriers to equal participation.

It is on all of us to ensure the path to gender parity doesn't take another 10 years.

Pavita Cooper is the UK chair of the 30% Club

THE VERDICT

A recent boardroom report revealed that the proportion of board positions held by women in listed companies reached an all-time high last year, with women occupying more than two in five seats on the boards of FTSE 350 companies. But does this signal real progress?

In some ways, of course. As Ms Cooper argues, this is a significant change and, even more encouragingly, it's been led by businesses themselves. Having women in the boardroom is not trivial, it sets the standard for the rest of the company. But Ms Beresford is right to scrutinise this stat. Most of these positions are non-executive, meaning women are by and large still not actually pulling the levers.

And, indeed, another recent report can confirm this prosperity is not exactly trickling down, with the UK having simultaneously fallen to its lowest ever ranking in PwC's Women in Work Index, thanks to a sluggish gender pay gap and low female employment. It looks like a top-down approach is no silver bullet after all.

NO

Johanna Beresford



LAST week, FTSE 350 published this year's Women Leaders Review Report, which revealed that more women now hold board positions than 10 years ago. These, however, are mostly non-executive roles (43 per cent) vs leadership positions (35 per cent). Meanwhile, the number of women in CEO positions has dropped by one, to five per cent. The data is simple, our gender pay gap isn't going to decrease overall unless we see more women take up the most senior position: CEO.

Quotas alone don't work, they just become tick-box exercises that drive the wrong behaviour in organisations. Alongside a change in corporate governance, change in parental leave policies and leadership behaviour, they can do more good. Look at Norway, where 14 per cent of CEO positions are held by women.

The UK voluntary approach to gender diversity is the right one, that is government-backed and business-led. But it will only work if organisations look at changes to

behaviour and systems to encourage women to take up the CEO role.

So why after decades of work have we made such poor progress on women taking up this most senior position? Human psychology, I believe, is part of the problem. A recent study showed that 59 per cent of men aspire to be CEOs vs 40 per cent of women. Yet, this doesn't account for the fact that men outnumber women approximately 17 to 1 in this position. We invest billions in consumer psychology, but very little on the psychology of leadership behaviour and what can drive a change in the decisions to appoint women into these roles.

Johanna Beresford is the CEO and founder at In Diverse Company

“ We need to challenge the assumption that the most senior leaders are men

“ The gender pay gap won't decrease until we see more women take up the top role: CEO