

Gender & leadership

Assisted by legislation and a changing social climate, women's representation in management is being translated into senior leadership roles but women still remain under-represented within board positions. Gendered structures within labour markets result in occupational segregation.

HORIZONTAL SEGREGATION

Horizontal segregation indicates occupations with high male or female representation. Female occupations refer to where the proportion of women employed is greater than women's representation in the labour force. Women are sex stereotyped into female occupations. Young women require encouragement to enter male-dominated professions.

Inequality arises from the values society attaches to women's occupations and the status, prestige and pay attached to them. Fewer female occupations are high status; low status occupations attract low pay.



VERTICAL SEGREGATION

Vertical segregation refers to gender inequality resulting from women's concentration in the lower echelons of organisational hierarchies. Despite women's labour market participation increasing, women continue to face difficulty in entering managerial ranks. Vertical segregation is compounded by women's propensity to work part-time which restricts women's access to leadership roles.

Horizontal segregation affects vertical segregation: the smaller the percentage of women in a profession, the lower their chances of getting to the top of it. Organisations need to specifically consider women for leadership roles and take positive action.

GLASS BARRIERS

An explanation for the reinforcement of vertical segregation may lie in invisible (but firmly embedded) glass barriers to women's career progress. Discrimination, stereotyping and gender bias combine to create the 'glass ceiling': an invisible but impermeable barrier that limits women's career advancement.

When women are appointed to senior leadership roles, there is evidence that they are given precarious positions. Such appointments are known as 'glass cliffs'. Women's success (or not) in these roles make their everyday actions more visible and subject to criticism than is the case for men.

SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Company boards are predominantly male. Members are drawn from a senior management pool and if this contains few women, there is no talent pipeline in place to change the status quo.

Gender diversity on boards presents a number of advantages, including

a diversity of opinions, improved boardroom behaviour, commitment to hard work, an enhanced company image, and the provision of role models for aspiring women leaders. Women also show moderation, for example, in executive pay setting.

GLOBAL MOBILITY IMPLICATIONS

Future leaders are required to have global experience. Accessing international assignments is critical if senior leadership is to have greater female representation. But here lies a problem. Women are hindered not only by the glass ceiling but also by a glass border and these reinforce each other.

The sectors that employ the largest numbers of assignees are masculine (extractive industries for example) and so horizontal segregation helps to explain why women comprise only around a third of international assignees. Vertical segregation plays a role too. Assignees tend to be drawn from senior positions and women hold fewer of these.

Greater attention is required to ensure that women gain access to career enhancing international assignments. Open and transparent selection systems and policies that support women's requirements for mobility are needed.

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