

Women on Board: Beyond Gender Equality to Leadership

Mr. Sivakumeren Narayanan is the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad (TalentCorp). TalentCorp was established on 1st January 2011 under the Prime Minister's Department to formulate and facilitate initiatives to address the availability of talent in-line with the needs of the country's economic transformation program. Malaysia is currently one of the lowest in terms of its female labour participation in comparison with other countries of similar level of economic development.



Q: How has Malaysia fared in the women inclusion agenda?

Albeit with significant progress made over the years, Malaysia has yet to achieve the 10th Malaysia plan's target in this agenda. The female labour force participation rate is the yardstick used in our measurement and as at 2018, it stands at 55.6%. The government aims to achieve 58% in the year 2020. The original target was 59% but it was revised down to 56.5% during the mid-year review of the 11th Malaysia plan. TalentCorp has received a decline in female participation in all levels including leadership roles, mid-management and even entry level, particularly in STEM, raising serious concerns amidst all stakeholders.

Q: In June 2011, the Malaysian cabinet has approved the policy of 30% women at the decision-making level of PLCs. What are the strategic pulling factors by TalentCorp to enable more women to occupy senior decision-making positions?

This must be imposed not only for PLCs but also government-owned machineries such as government-linked companies and statutory bodies. We work with Securities Commission Malaysia to have PLCs adhere to the 30% women representation on their board. In Q3 2018, Malaysia recorded 15.4% women directors on the boards across all public listed companies, the highest in ASEAN boardrooms.

But there is still work to be done at all levels. TalentCorp provides free basic coaching and technical assistance for companies who want to study and adopt the implementation of flexible work arrangements to attract female talent. Many MNCs in Malaysia have adopted various work-life practices, and we understand that it has been challenging especially for the SMEs. Our annual 'LIFE AT WORK Awards' especially recognises companies with exemplary practices to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

TalentCorp also organises Career Comeback Workshops where women on career breaks come and gain insights on how to rebuild their CVs and how to interview successfully. We also connect them to recruiters and potential employers. We have received a lot of requests for engineers to fill vacancies. Regretfully, all the engineers in our database have already been placed in the workforce. We are certain that there is a large group of engineers at large still available and hopefully, with this article, we can encourage more women engineers to register with IEM and be in our database. The companies

who registered with us offer flexible work arrangements and have best practices that lean towards retaining female talent in their organisations.

Today's technologies enable many flexible work arrangements, including the 'work from home' concept. Women tend to leave the workforce to care for their families – their children and aging parents. However, they can still contribute to their companies by working from home. The extension of maternity leave as unpaid leave or the ability to clock in remotely will also encourage more women to stay in the workforce. Unconscious gender bias during recruitment process is also an important aspect to be addressed and eliminated.

Q: In order to increase gender representation on corporate boards, we need to understand the past, present and future. What defines talented women suitable for leadership roles in the past and present? What about the future?

We need more female leader champions. In interim, this needs to be championed by men who make it a conscious effort to ensure enough female participation driving it from top management. The government can only do so much to encourage and it is equally important for associations and NGOs to strongly encourage more female representation at board level, hence becoming the 'voice' of the women in the organization. For the target 30% women in leadership roles by 2020, there must be effort to identify qualified women for these positions. This should begin with the role of HR. We found from our studies that HR personals must be trained well in the hiring and promotion process. Women at top management must be mentored and sponsored to accelerate them to board level. Suppression is discouraged and should not prevail.

The new leadership will be all about knowledge and the ability to understand problems, with continuous learning. If you want to be successful in the new era, you need to feed yourself with constant knowledge about the industry and latest technology enablers. It is about formulating design and how to put all the pieces together. In one word, new leadership is about 'Innovation'.

The women currently in leadership positions must make it their strategy to mentor more females. All the male leaders in the organisation should be assigned a female mentee and the team be provided with equal responsibilities and thereafter be assessed for their ability to deliver the KPIs set.

Q: What are the best ways to address the resistance of many men to gender equality policies and efforts? What's the best process of reaching out to men who are less interested and less involved?

The number of females attending universities is increasing significantly. However despite having more female graduates, the percentage of females in the workforce is much lower than their male counterparts. Men, including fathers and husbands must encourage women to join the workforce, otherwise the nation will lose potential talents and be left with no choice but depend on foreign talent. Acquiring foreign talent proves to be costly and will result in pay inequalities, risk of culture changes and difficulty in scaling down.

Q: Do you think Malaysia needs to do more to address under-representation of women in stem fields? In engineering schools, female students outnumber male students but the high trend is not reflected in the workforce. When it comes to proportion of women in managerial positions and top management positions in public-listed companies, the numbers further reduced drastically.

In the field of STEM, 75% of women make up of human health and social profession, whilst 48.9% in scientific and technical professions, thus it is inaccurate to conclude that women are under-represented in STEM. Of course the statistics on female participation vary at different scenarios such as at universities vs in workforce, in leadership positions and also in different fields such as engineering. The Nurturing Expert Talent (NEXT) initiative is a proprietary assessment system to help students identify their strengths, passion and career choices that are most suited to their skill sets with accuracy of about 98%. Female students should be exposed to more female world leaders for inspiration. Locally, we have Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman, Malaysia's first astrophysicist, the first woman in the history of her alma mater to earn a PhD in physics, the first director of Malaysia's National Space Agency and the first head of the 'Angkasawan' project that had successfully launched the country's first astronaut into space.

Q: Disruption is now the new norm. Do you foresee any disruptions in redefining women and work in the near-future, say 5 years? How should women prepare to excel in the future of work?

Technology disruption and industrial revolution will be major disrupters moving forward. Amidst the rise of a gig economy, there will be more freelance workers and professionals. Women are increasingly

turning to this economy for workplace flexibility. An important point is that disruption is not gender-biased and it affects everyone.

Q: Lastly, how can the public and private sector do more to advance women's economic inclusion?

First and foremost, a supportive women group similar to IEM-WE should be formed within an organisation. Secondly, the female group needs to champion the voice of women using the group as a platform to advocate the need for women empowerment and leadership so that changes can happen from top management. Women should push themselves into leadership positions and women's representation must be made an agenda on HR policies.

In the corporate world, CEOs should set strategies and KPIs on diversity and inclusion. The diversity and inclusion strategy should be holistic to cover all aspects. The board should be conscious on the decision-making process involving women employees including OKUs. Organisations need to realise that the world is changing and it may create negativity if companies fail to make diversity and inclusion a priority.