

Man Overboard: Overcoming Gender Stereotypes to Increase Women's Leadership and Gender Parity on Boards

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December 2021



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

This report is written for The Future of Work Lab for the Women at Work series.



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Methodology

This work was supported by a review of the existing research into gender stereotypes as an impediment to women's career progression in general, as well as in their access to leadership and board roles. To garner a deeper understanding of the Australian context, and women's experiences, three women with board, mentoring and leadership experience were interviewed. These experts serve as case studies and provide a great insight into the real-world experiences of women in the workplace – adding a further dimension of qualitative analysis and learning.

The Experts:

Expert 1:

Expert 1 has a wealth of experience in leadership and board member roles across government, not-for-profit and membership organisations. Initially working as a lawyer, she found a deep passion for environmental sustainability and a strong interest in governance matters. In addition to her board member positions, she also works as a strategic facilitator, coach, and trainer. She undertakes work to support increasing equality and diversity in boardrooms.

Expert 2:

Expert 2 has built an impressive career in the public service, where she has committed to delivering positive outcomes for the Victorian community. Noting the importance of energy as an essential service – and therefore an issue of social justice – she has primarily worked in the energy regulation space, in government agencies, as a consultant, and in an Australian Energy Market body. In her current position, she serves as a key leader of a Victorian Government agency, and on a Public Sector board focused on environmental sustainability.

Expert 3:

Expert 3 is a dedicated and highly regarded leader in the environmental sustainability sector, with 15 years' experience in board roles. She has worked across the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors, in the often male-dominated industries of infrastructure, technology, transport and energy. Beginning her career in the navy – she has continued to bring her strategic and collaborative partnerships skills into her own authentic and values-based style of leadership.

Introduction

Significant progress has been made towards gender equality in the workplace. Australia recently surpassed its target of 30 per cent women on ASX 200 boards – and is among only a handful of countries, including Canada and the United Kingdom, to have achieved this without legislative quotas (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021; Patten, 2020). However, outside of this target, it has been noted that little ground has been made on women's representation on boards since – and this is even more so for companies outside the ASX200 (Cassells & Duncan, 2021).

There has been even less progress in women's representation in leadership roles. In 2021, women held only 5 per cent of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) roles in the ASX 200 – a figure unchanged from last year, and lower than the ratio in 2018 and 2019 (Chief Executive Women, 2021; Patten, 2021). When more broadly viewing the ASX 300, this figure drops even further to just 6 per cent (Chief Executive Women, 2021; Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2021a).

No female CEOs were appointed in ASX 200 companies in 2021 – with just one woman appointed as a CEO in the ASX 300 (Patten, 2021).

Australia is not alone in these statistics, in fact, whilst the United Kingdom reported the highest ever proportion of women on the Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) top 100 companies, they have lagged in including women in Executive roles (Vinnicombe et al., 2021). In the US context, Williams et al. (2014) predicted that at the present rate of change it would take 276 years for women to equal men as CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. Today just 8.1 per cent of CEOs in the Fortune 500 are women (Hinchliffe, 2021).

As Sue Morphet, former President of Chief Executive Women, highlights education was once thought to be the great equaliser in terms of women having the same financial opportunities as men (University of Melbourne, 2020). However, Australian women have been graduating from university at higher rates than men for the last decade (Chief Executive Women, 2021; Workplace Gender Equality Agency,

2019). Women in board roles also tend to hold higher qualifications than their male counterparts, including postgraduate qualifications such as PhDs, MBA or more general Master's degrees, and a higher rate of undergraduate degrees (Watermark Search International, 2021; Patten, 2020). Female directors are also far more likely to have formal governance training (Patten, 2020).

There are real concerns that these statistics surrounding women's leadership roles will not improve in the future. Research undertaken in 2017 found that the biggest drop off for women's representation in the pipeline (a 59 per cent drop) was in the step from those occupying key management positions to the role of CEO (Chief Executive Women, 2021). Many key management roles held by Australian women are support roles, such as the Head of Human Resources or General Counsel, which sit outside the typical 'pathway' roles that lead to CEO appointments, such as Chief Financial Officer (CFO) or Chief Operating Officer (COO) (McKinsey & Company et al., 2017). As covered in a report by the Chief Executive Women (2021), "today, women hold only 14 per cent of line roles with profit and loss responsibilities, showcasing a narrow pipeline of women positioned to progress to CEO roles in the future".

The Chair of the 30% Club Australia, Nicola Wakefield Evans (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2021a), reflects, "the underrepresentation of women in key executive roles in our leading organisations presents a threat to the progress we've made with women on boards".

A significant body of research indicates that gender stereotypes can create significant barriers for women's advancement into leadership roles (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). This report seeks to understand the impact of these gender stereotypes on women's career progression. This will firstly be explored through a review of the academic literature, and then include the insights of three experts with board and leadership experience in Australia. Although gender stereotypes can impact women in the workplace in a variety of ways, for the purposes of this report the focus will be on:

- The Double Bind – how women are put into lose-lose situations
- Breaking The Business Case – why women's inclusion is about more than just numbers
- Not So Great Expectations – how women are held to impossible standards
- The Authority Gap – how women's expertise is undermined
- The Fallacy of Meritocracy – how women are kept out of the boardroom
- Imposter Syndrome – how women's confidence is impacted

Ultimately, things have changed for women; however, gender stereotypes do persist, and for that reason there is still a long way to go. To conclude this report, our experts identify areas where progress can continue to be made, including looking at the broader definition of diversity (including cultural diversity and consideration beyond a gender binary) and why this needs to be a focus for boards, how women can send a message about tokenistic inclusion, and why targets are important.

The Importance of Boards

Boards play a critical role in the success of organisations. They are responsible for the organisation's overall governance, management and strategic direction, and are held accountable for corporate performance in accordance with the organisation's goals and objectives (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2020). In fulfilling its role, boards undertake a number of actions, including:

- determining the organisational strategy
- monitoring organisational and financial performance
- driving decision making
- directing and counselling the senior executive team
- monitoring and ensuring compliance with regulations
- connecting organisations to the external environment
- making important personnel decisions including CEO appointments (Carter, D'Souza, Simkins, & Simpson, 2010; Erhardt, Werbel, & Shrader, 2003).

ASX Boards

Prior to 2009, there was little to no movement in the proportion of women on ASX200 boards (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021). A 2008 report by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) showed not only a low number of women on ASX boards, but that that number had in fact declined from 8.7 per cent in 2006 to just 8.3 per cent. It also showed that more

than half of ASX200 boards had no women on them at all. The release of this report is widely considered to be the catalyst for action on board diversity in Australia (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021).

The ASX Corporate Governance Principles and recommendations were the first corporate institutional response to bringing more women onto Australian boards (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021). The first diversity-related recommendation was introduced in 2010, and was strengthened and further defined in 2014, and again in 2019 (*Ibid.*). The Council has chosen to take an 'if not, why not' approach – where entities are required to disclose where and why they have not conformed with its governance practices (*Ibid.*). The recommendations are broadly recognised for having played an important role in providing transparency and community expectations for reporting on diversity (ASX Corporate Governance Council, 2021; Fitzsimmons et al., 2021)

Currently, the ASX 200 boards have a makeup of 33.7 per cent women, whilst ASX 300 boards have 32.1 per cent female representation. In the ASX 200, there were 21 companies that had only one woman on the board, and one company that had no female board members at all (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2021a). There are still ten ASX 300 boards that still do not have any female representation (Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2021b).

Where some progress has been made in women's representation on boards, it has not been equally reflected by women in leadership roles. In 2021, women held only

5 per cent of CEO roles in the ASX 200 – a figure unchanged from last year, and lower than the ratio in 2018 and 2019 (Chief Executive Women, 2021; Patten, 2021). The percentage of female CEOs further drops to just 6 per cent when viewing the ASX 300 (Chief Executive Women, 2021; Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2021a).

In the last year no female CEOs were appointed to the boards of ASX 200 companies – with just one woman appointed as a CEO in the ASX 300 (Patten, 2021).

Unfortunately, this statistic does not appear poised to change soon, with women holding only 14 per cent of line roles with profit and loss responsibilities – the roles which are considered the 'pipeline' into CEO positions (Chief Executive Women, 2021). As stated by Chief Executive Women (2021:5), the fact that 62 per cent of ASX 300 companies have no women in line roles in their executive leadership teams "suggests a blind spot in ambition and governance across a significant proportion of ASX300 companies". Just 6 per cent of C-suite executives anticipate significant changes in leadership in the next 12 months (Sutherland & Winter, 2021).

Public Sector Boards

Public sector boards are responsible for the strategic direction, governance and risk management of public sector entities in line with the relevant legislation (Victorian Public Sector Commission, 2020). Public

Sector Boards have expectations that go beyond the governance standards of Private Sector Boards – for example, Public Sector Boards must perform in the public interest and accordingly must act ethically and in line with public sector values to retain public trust and confidence (Victorian Public Sector Commission, 2015).

Public agencies are also subject to extensive accountability, including further transparency and reporting – with public entities being responsible through their Ministers to the Parliament and ultimately the people (Victorian Public Sector Commission, 2015). Additionally, public sector boards do not set their own strategies – they must be generally consistent with government policy, and take into account the Minister’s views (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, 2018; Edwards et al., 2012).

❖ Commonwealth Government

On 1 July 2016, the Commonwealth Government of Australia (2020) introduced a target of 50 per cent women in Government board positions overall, with men and women each holding at least 40 per cent of positions on individual boards. This new target replaced the previous gender diversity target of women holding 40 per cent of Australian Government board positions overall. As of 30 June 2020, women represented 48.5 per cent of appointments across all Government boards, and 36.9 per cent of Chair and Deputy Chair positions across Australian Government boards (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2020).

❖ Victorian Government

In March 2015, the Premier of Victoria announced that women would make up 50 per cent of all new appointments to courts and paid government boards in Victoria (Victorian Government, 2016). The effectiveness of this target is reflected in the rapid rise of women in Victorian Government Board roles from 39 per cent in March 2015 to 49 per cent in September 2016 (Victorian Government, 2016). As of 2020, the number of women on major boards sat at 55 per cent (Victorian Public Sector Commission, 2020).

Expert 1 reflects on how rapidly the transition to gender parity on Victorian Government Water Boards occurred. In

September 2015, the Victorian Government made the decision to spill all 135 board positions across its 19 water authorities (Beilharz et al., 2015; Preiss, 2015). Although the rationale behind the spill was to support a stronger focus on climate change, it presented a monumental opportunity to gain gender parity across these boards (Preiss, 2015). As Expert 1 summarises, due to this prior policy decision to appoint 50 per cent women to boards, gender equality was achieved on these boards almost immediately, which in turn changed the dynamic in the boardrooms, where it had gone from male dominated to equal overnight. Considering the impact of this rapid achievement, Expert 1 asserts, “yes, the ASX can do it. They’re just not courageous enough to do it – there’s just too much vested interest at play”.

Further reflecting on just how glacial the rate of change can be, Expert 1 noted that she had just received a survey from a prominent membership organisation who – after years of reluctance to implement a policy change – were still using the term ‘Chairman’ in their communications. Expert 1 concludes, “it is too slow to change. I think if you look at the ASX100 and 200, we think ‘great, we’ve got to 30 per cent women on boards’. I think that’s amazing, but it’s not equality”.

Expert 2 recognises the success of the Victorian Government targets:

I think what the government has done has been really important, in terms of leading the way for ensuring gender equality when it comes to our decision-making institutions. I think that needs to be the same for the private sector. I know, there are organisations that are doing things all by themselves in order to achieve that – but in terms of pay scales and pay equality, you need decision makers to innovate in order to achieve those outcomes. I think cultural change is a major part of it as well, but that takes time. If we’re serious about making things happen quickly, then you need interventions.

Gender Stereotypes as Barriers for Women's Career Progression

What are gender stereotypes?

Stereotypes are the generalisations made about the attributes or characteristics of a group of people (Catalyst, 2007; Hentschel et al., 2019). Gender stereotypes are therefore the different expectations associated with men and women, and how they are expected to behave, and how they appear to others (Eagly, 1987; Heilman, 1983).

One theory suggests that these stereotypes derive from the social roles men and women undertake at both home and work (Eagly, 2013, 1997). This understanding is based on the gendered division of labour, which has existed in both foraging societies and more socioeconomically complex societies (Wood & Eagly, 2015). Typically, women have taken on more of the work in the domestic sphere, including caretaker roles (Hentschel et al., 2019). As a result of these contrasting social roles, essentialist inferences are made about what men and women are 'like', which leads to gender stereotypes (Koenig & Eagly, 2014).

Specifically, on the one hand, men are expected to be assertive, ambitious, decisive, and dominant. Whilst women are expected to be communal, warm, nurturing, expressive and friendly (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Babcock & Laschever, 2003).

Gender Stereotypes and Leadership

Gender stereotypes have been thought to account, at least in part, for the absence of

women in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rhode, 2014; Koenig et al., 2011). Eagly & Karau (2002), suggest that this might be the case due to the incongruity between the perceived attributes held by women, and those assumed to be important in leaders. Research undertaken by Schein (1973), produced the 'think leader – think male' analysis, which found that participants aligned the attributes needed in managers with those perceived to be possessed by men, but not women. It is these stereotypes that create invisible, yet powerful obstructions to the progression of women's careers (Catalyst, 2007).

Ming Long, a financial management and accounting executive, as well as being the first Asian-Australian woman to head an ASX200 listed company, reiterates that there are many underlying assumptions about what leadership and what CEOs should look like (Sales, 2021). Long highlights that the further you are from these stereotypes, the riskier you can seem, in her mind the stereotype for the CEO of an ASX200 company is a "a six-foot-two white Caucasian male" (Sales, 2021). In general, Long suggests that there are so few women in leadership roles because there are so many assumptions about what a woman's role is in society (Blakkarly, 2018). When this gender stereotype intersects with cultural or ethnic diversity, the barriers become twice as hard to overcome (Blakkarly, 2018).

In reflecting on the characteristics that make a good leader, all three of our

experts agreed that there are qualities that exist – regardless of gender, as Expert 3 notes, "I think the first thing I'd say is we can all learn to be better leaders, regardless of gender, and that leadership is a lifelong learning experience".

Expert 2 expressed a similar sentiment:

I think a good leader is the person that listens, and I think that can often be used in a cliché way, but it is really important because of the need to understand the materials before you. A good leader will also make a call and is willing to stand behind that call. Where I've seen leadership not work is where leaders – the heads of organisations or people in leadership roles – are not willing to make a call, or once a call is made and something goes wrong, they run away at 100 miles an hour.

Expert 2 also explored her own understanding of the generalisations that are typically made about men or women:

I think it'd be fair to say that the [female] leaders that I've observed, are probably more collaborative and are more willing to listen and are less likely to have a pre-formed view before a matter is being considered. Whereas a male leader will often approach a matter with an already formed view and is less likely to change their mind following a dialogue or by reviewing additional material. That's a very generalised

approach. I have seen particularly that collaboration and wanting to work as a team rather than as an individual – that would be the other reflection. The female leaders that I've observed often like to bring everybody with them on the journey from start to finish, whereas a male leader is quite happy to be by themselves and be the leader and expect everyone to follow.

Expert 3 comments on the changing landscape for women's inclusion in leadership roles, and how this in turn has altered the traits that are expected from leaders. In the 1980s and 1990s there was a strong focus on task and results-based leadership, which could often be quite performative. Today this has evolved towards a leadership style that is more authentic and purposeful. "... the style of leadership – of what people want and what people will follow – has changed. Therefore, we all need to adapt regardless of gender." However, she also notes that women do naturally bring some specific traits into their roles:

I do think females have four superpowers. Women tend to be more empathetic, and that brings an authentic leadership style that can be attractive for people to follow. I also think women are great multitaskers and tend to take a more strategic view – they can see across silos. And then finally, I think women find a way that they can communicate from the heart and lead with genuine purpose. I do think anyone can develop those skills, but they tend to come more naturally to women, and that is extremely engaging and creates connections with people that are true and from the heart.

A recent study into stereotypes and desired leader attributes in Australia, found that men continued to be associated with agentic traits (such as, acknowledged, ambition, assertiveness, credibility, and judgement), but that women were strongly associated with a diverse range of both agentic and communal traits (such as accountability, client-focus, collaboration, communication, development of others, empathy, flexibility, focus, innovation, inspiration, problem-solving, reflective practice and vision) (Griffiths et al., 2019).

Whilst gendered stereotypes seem to persist – research has also revealed a weakening of the traditional masculine ideals of leadership (Koenig et al., 2011). Kark et al. (2012) uncovered females were more likely to be rated as 'androgynous' (i.e., a blend of masculine, agentic and feminine, communal traits) than male managers, and that androgyny was more strongly related to effective and transformational leadership. In the study undertaken by Griffiths et al. (2019), a change in the desired traits of leaders – where both agentic and communal qualities were favoured – suggests that there is a preference for the qualities that are more generally associated with female managers.

1. The Double Bind — How Women are Put Into Lose-Lose Situations

Men are still largely viewed as the default when it comes to leadership roles (Catalyst, 2007). This 'think-leader-think-male' mindset, presents a huge impediment for women's advancement into leadership positions, and by extension performing well in them when they are achieved (Schein et al., 1996; Catalyst, 2007; Koenig et al., 2011). The clash between female stereotypes and the expected characteristics of leaders, means that even the most qualified women will have to overcome overwhelming preconceptions that they are not equipped to lead (A. H. Eagly & Karau, 2002).

In addition to these stereotypes making it difficult for women to ascend into leadership positions, it also imposes conflicting expectations for how women should behave in these roles (Koenig et al., 2011). When women leaders behave in ways that match their stereotypes, they are viewed as less competent leaders – and conversely, when they act in ways that contrast the female stereotype, they are judged as being 'too tough' and even unfeminine (Catalyst, 2007). Behaviours that would be positive attributes in men, such as assertiveness, are often classified as abrasiveness in women (Rhode, 2016). Though women who take on masculine attributes might be viewed as more competent leaders, this will come at the cost of being liked by others (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Catalyst, 2007; Bohnet, 2018).

This creates double standards and double binds for aspiring women leaders – where

they can be liked but not respected, or respected but not liked, in settings that may require individuals to be both in order to succeed (Rhode, 2016; Catalyst, 2007; Bohnet, 2018). Women in this case are 'damned if they do and doomed if they don't' (Rhode, 2016; Catalyst, 2007).

As pointed out by Julia Gillard and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (2020: 277), based on the research "women leaders need to walk a tightrope between being seen to have authority while not being seen to lack empathy and nurturing skills. The female leaders interviewed in their book, earnestly reported that these challenging expectations limited their behaviour in some way (*ibid.*).

Academic Jen Overbeck has theorised that the first women who entered male workplaces learned how to fit in by either accentuating their femininity to establish that they were not threats, or by assimilating and becoming 'one of the guys'.

This is a reflection that is also shared by Expert 3:

If I look back at my early career, I can remember being in an organisation working for my first female CEO. My reflection is that she lost her femininity through that process, and back then – maybe in the late 90s – that was what you had to do. The feminine side of women seemed to be considered a sign of weakness and didn't fit in with what people thought was the key recipe for a CEO. I have seen that shift dramatically over time, but that was very concerning as a young woman – 'was I going to have to trade that off to become a leader?'

Research has explored the double standards that are placed on women's emotions in the workplace. Tiedens' (2001) found that men who expressed anger in a professional setting were given higher status than those who expressed sadness. Brescoll & Uhlmann (2008) then tested if this status was also given to women who performed the same way, however professional women who expressed anger were found to be given lower status and wages and were perceived as less competent than men or unemotional women. This research also showed that

whilst men’s emotional reactions were attributed to the external environment, women’s emotional responses were perceived as being related to their internal characteristics – where they were viewed as “being out of control” or “an angry person” (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). Overbeck suggests that this places an undue cognitive load on women – where they have to cover up their anger, whilst their male counterparts may be able freely share it (University of Melbourne, 2020).

Expert 1 touched on this double standard in relation to the differing expectations of men and women, where she pointed out that in circumstances where men might be revered for their behaviour, women would be penalised for exhibiting those same traits.

As already discussed, Griffiths et al. (2019) found through quantitative analysis that people preferred attributes in their leaders that were more commonly associated with women than men – and that in the Australian context there is relatively little incongruity between the characteristics of effective leaders, and the traits associated with women. However, despite the evidence that women possess the preferred leadership traits – there continues to be limited female leaders in corporate Australia (Griffiths et al., 2019).

Expert 1 delves into a similar experience, where she is currently becoming accredited in a leadership tool – The Lifestyles Inventory (LSI), “all of the research shows the more blue, more constructive styles, an organisation or a person employs, the more effective the workplace is, and the more effective you are. What was fascinating though was that being high in red, which is the more aggressive style, is a positive correlation to a higher salary”.

Expert 1 goes onto to state:

I was livid when I saw [the LSI salary results] because it’s rewarding aggressive, competitive, powerful behaviours. I guess I should know that this is the case because we all live in this society, and in the world, so we know that this is what is rewarded. But seeing it in the evidence – so ‘blue styles have greater effectiveness, but hang on salary gets a tick for red behaviour?’ I think that sometimes those power,

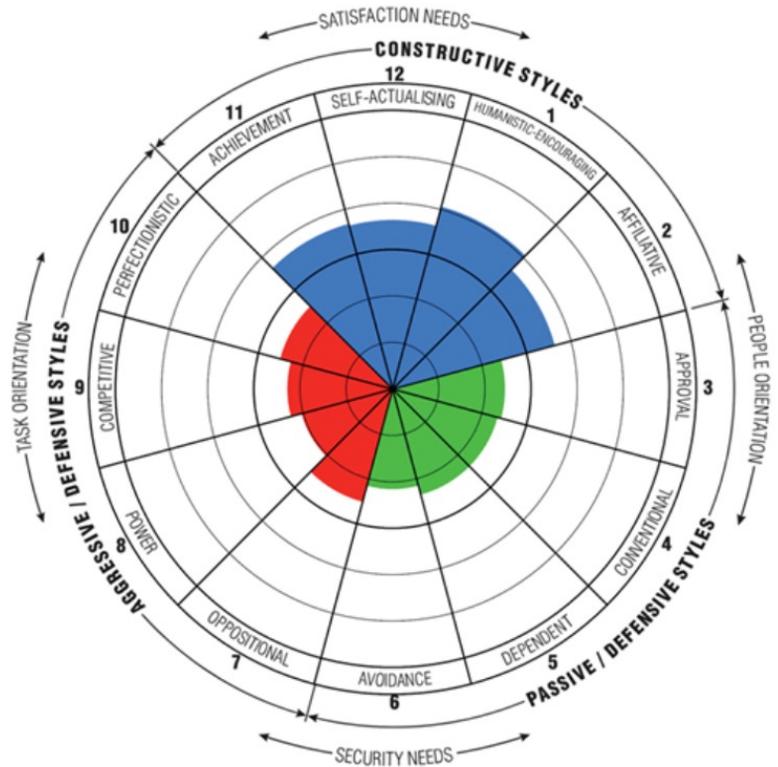


Figure 1: The Circumplex is typically incorporated into Human Synergistics’ measurement tools including as the Organisational Culture Inventory and Life Styles Inventory (*The Circumplex - Human Synergistics, n.d.*)

competition, perfectionism traits are anecdotally the more masculine sides of leadership, and they certainly get rewarded. Is that more effective leadership? I would say no, I think the more effective leadership is a more collaborative style, and that may be seen as a more feminine style of leadership, but I think it’s just good leadership to be honest. I think it’s just good leadership. It’s not feminine or masculine, or whatever it may be. It’s just good leadership.

As further articulated by Expert 1, the answer to getting more women in leadership roles is not about women learning from men, because they have ‘leadership all worked out’ – “No, it’s not just about that, because as we talked about earlier, as soon as women exhibit [men’s] traits, they’re penalised for it. We

need to dismantle the patriarchy first”.

2. Breaking the Business Case — Why Women’s Inclusion is About More Than Just Numbers

Increasing the diversity of boards is now broadly accepted as an important goal (Rhode & Packel, 2014). One of the primary motivations for this push is ‘the business case’ for increasing diversity on boards, where diversity is thought to improve organisational processes, performance and increase profits (Fairfax, 2011; Rhode, 2016; Watson-Lynn & Schaefer, 2017; Rhode & Packel, 2014; Fitzsimmons et al., 2021). As one interviewee from research-led by Fitzsimmons et al. (2021) identified: “I’ve looked at a lot of the research and I do have a view that companies perform better if they have diverse leadership and the leadership is both on the board side, but also the

However, this view can also be problematic as it rationalises the imperative for increasing board diversity to maximise firm value and enhance shareholder returns (Rhode, 2016; Fairfax, 2011)

The literature focused on building the business case for gender diversity on boards typically falls into three categories (Rhode, 2016). The first theorises that as men and women have differing strengths, the inclusion of women onto boards will also bring different, yet valuable capabilities. The beneficial traits that are thought to be brought by women include, teamwork, people-oriented approaches, being more risk adverse, and tending to be less arrogant and overconfident (Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2020; Rhode, 2016). The theorised differences between men and women's leadership styles led the former International Monetary Fund Director, Christine Lagarde, to suggest that the global financial crisis could have been avoided had the 'Lehman Brothers been the Lehman Sisters' (van Staveren, 2014). As reported by a female director in interviews conducted by Konrad et al. (2008: 159), "Women are more cooperative and less competitive in tone and approach. Women often provide a type of leadership that helps boards do their jobs better."

The second claim in favour of the business case for diversity suggests that as women have differing life experiences to men, this will bring a wider range of options and solutions into the boardroom. This is the case because women are more likely to come from roles outside of the traditional board member pipeline, such as the CEO and COO, and are also more likely to hold an advanced degree, and have an interest in philanthropy and community service (Rhode, 2016). This is emphasised by studies that point to women having a stronger commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and that more gender diverse boards perform better across most CSR measures. It is also thought that the incorporation of more diversity into the board allows for more robust discussion and high-quality analysis to take place. This potentially enables better decision-making by allowing the 'tough questions' to be asked, and overall lessening the board's ability to take extreme positions (Rhode, 2016).

Finally, the last argument for the business case is that it can improve the

organisation's reputation and meet the expectations of its stakeholders, by signalling its commitment to providing equal opportunity, representation and inclusivity, and forward-thinking leadership (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021; Rhode, 2016). This can also lead to expanded opportunities for women, and to establishing credible corporate behaviour. A case study in the negative effects of not actioning diversity is shown in the adverse publicity that Twitter received when it decided to go public with a board of all white men (Cain Miller, 2013).

Whilst some research does point to gender diversity increasing the performance and decision-making of boards – the positive correlation between the two should not be overstated. Given the vast differences across boards and organisations, it could be that larger and high performing firms are better positioned to attract diverse candidates, have more resources to devote to pursuing diversity, or face greater scrutiny from stakeholders on improving diversity (Rhode & Packel, 2014; Bohnet, 2018). It is important to note that causation does not equal correlation – whilst some evidence supports diversity increasing performance, other research has found the opposite or little to no correlation (Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2020; Rhode & Packel, 2014).

This has led many to critique using short-term indicators of performance as the best way to measure the impact of diversity (Rhode, 2016). Building the business case for diversity in turn reinforces gender stereotypes, as it imbues women with the 'feminine characteristics' that are identified to be the preferred traits for high performing boards and leaders. However, one of the ideas put forward by Expert 1 suggests that women shouldn't solely be expected to bring the highly sought after 'constructive styles' to their roles – rather "everyone should bring that behaviour to the boardroom". This is to say, that boards, including men, should be more held accountable for their culture and decision-making, and the onus of an organisation's increased performance should not just rest upon those with diverse backgrounds. As Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala (2020) conclude:

It is tempting to say that the rise of empathetic, nurturing, team-building women leaders would give us a kinder and gentler world. But

this reasoning bakes in gender stereotyping of women. Are we really aiming for a world in which a self-centred, egotistical, ruthless man can still claw his way to the top and be viewed as a successful leader, but a woman can only get there if she is caring and sharing?

The moral imperative for moving away from male dominated boards is clear – a flourishing society and economy cannot afford to exclude half of its workforce (Rhode & Packel, 2014; Patten, 2020). The underrepresentation of diversity on boards means that a large segment of the community and workforce are not included or heard in conversations at some of the most powerful tables in corporate Australia (Patten, 2020). Increasing women's inclusion on boards reflects a society that is committed to equal opportunity, and recognition that boards need to be fairer and more representative of the societies they operate in (Patten, 2020; Rhode, 2016).

3. Not So Great Expectations — How Women are Held Up to Impossible Standards

The Chair of the Australian Gender Equality Council, identifies pervasive stereotypes as "being the root cause of Australia's gender segregated economy, and are responsible for pushing an unequal burden of domestic responsibilities on to women, thereby creating an unequal playing field for the acquisition of career capital needed for progression into executive and CEO roles" (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021:6).

Stereotypes create exceptionally high standards for women in the workplace – a burden that is not shared with their male counterparts (Silva et al., 2012). The connection between gender stereotypes and perceptions of women's competence is particularly impactful for mothers (Rhode, 2014). Research repeatedly demonstrates that having children increases judgements that women, but not men, are less qualified and less available to meet the demands of the workplace (Cuddy et al., 2004; Rhode, 2014).

Other cognitive biases can exacerbate the effect of these stereotypes, where it is easy for people's brains to notice and recall information that confirms prior held assumptions, while ignoring information

that contradicts it (Rhode, 2014). For example, if an employer assumes that a working mother is likely to be less committed to her career, they will more easily remember the times that she left early than the times when she stayed late (Rhode, 2014).

Expert 1 noted that she also thought the inverse was true, where men received exceptional praise for performing the same childcare duties for which women are disadvantaged:

My understanding of the research is that if men need to leave early to pick up the kids from school – the response will be "oh, wow, what an amazing person, you are taking an interest in the kids", whereas if a woman heads off early to pick up the kids from school, it's like, "oh, well, are you sure you can work full time? Are you really sure you're up for this leadership role? You know, maybe you don't want this extra responsibility, maybe it would be better that you just do this other role".

The term 'working father' does not carry the same negative connotations as 'working mother'. One study found that in an evaluation of job applications from equally qualified candidates – mothers were disadvantaged in measures such as perceived commitment, competence, and starting salary (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Rhode 2014). On the hand, fathers suffered no such penalties, and in some measures benefitted from being a parent (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Rhode 2014).

Undoubtedly the ongoing expectations about women's roles in society as the primary caretakers create significant barriers to career progression. As Expert 1 offers: "Women are penalised if they have the audacity to have a family life or a personal life or whatever it may be – 'clearly they're not up for the job'".

Experimental studies have shown that where all is equal between men and women, except gender, women are held to higher standards and reviewed as less competent. For example, when women are nice and considerate, they are just conforming to expectations – however when men display these behaviours they are likely to receive positive responses as they have gone 'above and beyond' (Eagly

& Carli, 2007; Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2020). One such study found that males, but not females, were likely to receive more promotions when being more helpful to coworkers (A. Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Women in the workplace face shifting goalposts – whilst men are offered advantages and preferential treatment. This is evident through studies that have shown when identical resumes are rated more favourably depending on whether they have male or female names, or when men are given higher bonuses even when they have identical employee profiles to women (Rhode, 2014; Bohnet, 2018). In environments where men can be promoted on potential alone – women need to prove their performance, and in general the standards for evaluation can always shift to favour men (Foschi, 1996; Babcock et al., 2003).

4. The Authority Gap – How Women's Expertise is Undermined

Sieghart (2021) coined the term 'authority gap' to describe the ways in women are not afforded the same authority as men, even when they are the leaders or experts in their fields. This manifests itself in everyday experiences, where women are underestimated, talked over, ignored, patronised, and generally not taken as seriously as men (Sieghart, 2021). Although Sieghart (2021) does acknowledge that there has been progress in equality, the reluctance to listen to, and be influenced by, women's views is the 'mother' of all gender gaps. The consequences of this are far reaching – with women likely to be paid less, promoted less, and progress less in their careers, as well as experiencing lowered confidence and feeling less entitled to success – which can seemingly confirm negative expectations of female leaders (Sieghart, 2021; Vial et al., 2016).

The authority gap is a reflection of unconscious biases that leads us to associate men with leadership and women with the home (Sieghart, 2021; Catalyst, 2007). This 'think-leader-think-male' mindset, presents a huge impediment for women's advancement into leadership positions and performing well in them (Schein et al., 1996; Catalyst, 2007; Koenig et al., 2011). The clash between the perceived demands of leadership and women stereotypes, creates preconceptions that women lack

leadership qualities, which underlies the biased evaluations of women as leaders (A. H. Eagly & Karau, 2002).

It was easy for all three women experts to identify experiences, or times in their careers in which their skills or 'authority' had been undermined.

Expert 3 recalled a distinct moment in her career when this occurred:

After I left the Navy, I applied for a job in government and I can remember the last discussion in the interview process was: 'you're a young, short female – how do you feel about driving a manual government car?' So, I said 'it should be okay because I drove a warship to Pearl Harbour and didn't crash it, so I think that the manual car is okay'.

I don't think it meant so much at the time, it means much more now that I've been asked that question.

Expert 1 vividly recalled attending an event where they hosted a panel with a woman – the clear authority in her field – and two of her male colleagues. Every time a question was directed at the female panellist, one of the male panellists would add a final statement to her response. This happened every time she spoke. Expert 1 was attending the session with her female peers, who were also in disbelief at what they were witnessing. It was also noticeable to the Chair of the panel session, who attempted to put the questions directly to her – but it continued to happen. Interestingly, whilst the men continued to get the last word in when the woman spoke, Expert 1 noted that they didn't do this to each other. This supports the research by Banks (2021) which points out that men interrupt women far more than each other in meetings.

Expert 2 reflected on a similar experience, where her opinions held more weight when repeated by a man: "Being in a male setting with men who dominate conversations, you'll say things and they won't hear it – but then their male colleagues will say it, and they'll go 'yeah, that's a good point'. The number of times I've seen that is extraordinary."

This tendency to reattribute women's comments to men, is a reflection of 'micro-inequities' – which is the theory that

individuals are either singled out, overlooked or ignored or discounted because of an unchangeable aspects of who they are, like race or gender (Rhode, 2014). Slaughter (2014: xvi) articulates this as the “butterfly syndrome, in which a woman makes a remark that stays on the table like a caterpillar until a man says the same thing and it becomes a butterfly.”

Expert 2 is a trained economist and throughout her career has had her skills and expertise undermined. The first incident began right out of university in a graduate program, where she was assigned into a ‘softer’ policy area, whilst her male colleague, without an economics background, was put into the economics-focused area of pricing. The assumptions about her experience and background even extended to when she worked as an advisor in a Minister’s office, “once I was in a meeting and another advisor said to me, ‘this concept is a bit complex, it’s got to do with economics’. I just stopped and said, ‘lucky I’ve got an economics degree’”.

Perhaps one of the most obvious illustrations of the refusal to accept a woman’s authority, was described by Expert 1. One of her clients was a woman on a board headed by a male Chair. The Chair had indicated his intention of stepping down from the role but decided to stay once he found out this woman was interested in going for the Chair position – as he didn’t think she had the necessary experience. Although a painful reminder that this type of behaviour continues, fortunately this woman did end up receiving enough votes to be elected the Chair. Expert 1 stresses that unfortunately this story is not unique, “I hear this stuff all the time from the women in my network about how they get undermined by people who don’t think that they should step up into leadership roles”.

Expert 2 points out that while these types of stereotypes continue and are consistent, they do not occur as much as they used too. She also reiterates how important it is to ‘call out’ this behaviour, especially now that she’s now in a senior leadership role:

People are not going to say, ‘you’re a woman, so we’re not going to listen to you’, it’s not that direct – it’s always subtle things, particularly in the public service environment,

but you still need to call it out regardless of how subtle it is. It’s often unconscious too, often the middle-aged white men, or even older, I genuinely don’t think they know what they’ve done. I would say that in 99.95 per cent of cases, they don’t know that a comment they’ve delivered can be perceived or is discriminatory towards women or the comment treats the woman differently to the male colleagues or infers that someone has knowledge, or no knowledge based on their gender. That’s why calling it out is good for everybody because then they think actually, ‘that’s right, maybe I shouldn’t be saying things like that’.

Both Experts 2 and 3, came to the same conclusion when dealing with this type of behaviour over the courses of their careers, in that you need to remind yourself that it’s a reflection of them – not you. Expert 2 specifically identified that in her experience, “people who display that conduct never win”.

5. The Fallacy of Meritocracy – How Women are Kept Out of the Boardroom

Applying a meritocratic approach within workplaces is often thought to increase fairness and equity, by providing an equal chance for everyone to advance or be rewarded, based solely on their merit (Castilla & Benard, 2010). However, research demonstrates that the promotion of meritocratic culture within organisations, can ironically exacerbate biases – with managers favouring men over equally qualified women (Castilla & Benard, 2010).

The ‘just world’ bias is a psychological phenomenon to describe the belief that individuals get what they deserve (Rhode, 2014). This often culminates in people adjusting their evaluations of performance to match the outcomes they observe. For example, if women are absent from the top jobs, then the convenient explanation might be that they are missing the right qualifications or commitment (Elting, 2018; Rhode, 2014). These views are highly detrimental in that they create barriers in allowing women to prove their true capabilities and thus establish a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies (Rhode, 2014).

Subsequently, this perception of meritocracy is often used to oppose quotas – where it assumes standards are lowered so that ‘undeserving people’ can be promoted to meet diversity requirements (Elting, 2018; Whelan & Wood, 2012). This also implies that the predominately white male make up of boardrooms represents the most talented and qualified individuals (Elting, 2018). As Elting (2018) argues what this reveals is “that meritocracy is less meritocratic than you might think, and it rewards ability somewhat less than it rewards things like sycophancy, loyalty, nepotism and connections”.

The fallacy of meritocracy and its tendency to support in-group favouritism is also corroborated by the former President of Chief Executive Women, Sue Morphet (University of Melbourne, 2020):

Even though people say they’re employing on merit, it actually is merit in their own likeness. Therefore, it’s self-perpetuating. You employ people who look like, feel like, behave like, you, versus having a look to say, ‘What is right for our organisation? What type of leadership style is required? And what talents do we need to be able to take us to the next level?’

As Expert 3 notes, networking is the traditional process for board selection, which is problematic as those who sit on boards and in nominating committees are typically male. This insular network is then built of people that are already known and trusted – people they will continue to work with outside of their executive careers, and likely be the people they went to school with – making it difficult for anyone on the outside to get in. As evidenced here, in-group favouritism in the workplace creates significant challenges for women’s career development (Tinsley & Ely, 2018; Rhode, 2016). Those who are less embedded in the networks, particularly in male dominated environments, consequently miss out on opportunities to build support and garner important information (Tinsley & Ely, 2018; Ibarra et al., 2013). Furthermore, those who are not afforded contacts and information may not even be aware of the full range of available possibilities, such as mentoring or professional development (Tinsley & Ely, 2018; Rhode, 2016). In these opaque environments, it is then unsurprising that

women tend to conform to the gender stereotype that ‘women don’t ask’ (Tinsley & Ely, 2018).

As emphasised by Chief Executive Women & Male Champions of Change, (2016: 6), “using familiarity, high visibility and networking as stage-gates before assessing potential capacity to perform in a role deprives us of the full pool of meritorious candidates”.

In relation to how to better improve these processes, and support getting more women onto boards, Expert 3 believes that there needs to be greater transparency around selection processes for boards and executive appointments. This would ideally be included as part of the Environmental, Sustainable and Governance reporting (ESG) for ASX companies, where they would have to declare how the selection process was carried out – including who sat on the selection panels, and that the panel itself was diverse. Expert 3, further explains the growing importance of transparency:

You could blow your reputation very quickly these days. The community – and I say that, that’s all of us – will demand to see more transparency around selection processes and inclusive diversity of boards. I do think that’s the critical thing that has been holding diversity and equality back, and I think that increased transparency is what needs to change.

Moreover, quotas can be one way to overcome the gender stereotypes that women are unsuited for leadership, which in turn prevent women from seeking out leadership opportunities (Bohnet, 2018). As noted by Bohnet (2018: 238), “far from elevating the under-qualified, quotas prove in fact to broaden the pool of qualified candidates”.

6. Imposter Syndrome and Women — How Women’s Confidence is Impacted

The impacts of these stereotypes can also extend to women’s own beliefs about themselves, creating a psychological glass ceiling (Rhode, 2016). As gender stereotypes set societal expectations for how men and women should behave – these in turn create ingrained beliefs that women should be communal, focused

on the welfare of others, likeable, and friendly (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Rizvi, 2017; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

As Rizvi (2017) points out, women’s internalisation of these expectations or beliefs offers an explanation as to why successful women are so quick to put their achievements down to luck or chance, and why women are so reluctant to claim credit for their own success. As Rizvi goes on to state, even the highest performing women are, “falling over themselves to appear nice and non-threatening” (Rizvi, 2017: 7).

The expectations that women should put the needs of others ahead of their own impacts the way that women behave (Babcock & Laschever, 2003). For example, well-known Australian corporate leader Ming Long discusses the distinct thought process that comes from often being the only woman in a room, “So, I think over time you have a level of expectation that that bias is always there against you. I’m always thinking about when I should talk, how I should say it, how I should amplify – sometimes there’s another woman in the room – what they’ve said so that people will respond to a recommendation” (Sales, 2021).

These expectations have high impacts for women in the workplace, particularly in the corporate environment, as it is structured to reward behaviours that are inherently the opposite (Rizvi, 2017). The list of rewards for these behaviours is extensive: self-promotion is a fast track to moving up the ladder, competitive behaviour closes on big deals, dominant behaviour is offered leadership opportunities, and more money is rewarded to those who ask, not those who work for it (*Ibid.*). Women are then left with an impossible trade-off between being liked – as is expected of them – and being successful (*Ibid.*).

The effects of these gender stereotypes are evident, where women constantly undervalue their own worth and undermine the belief that they can succeed. As Expert 1 reflects:

Women definitely experience imposter syndrome. Maybe men do as well, but women *definitely* experience it. I had a conversation just yesterday with a female client about stepping into the board chair role. She said ‘oh, I’m not sure – I don’t have much experience’. I said

to her – you’ve been on the board for three years, you know, that’s not no experience. You’ve been asked to do it; you’ve got the support.

As highlighted by Expert 3, “women don’t negotiate hard enough because they don’t think they deserve it ... they think that they just happen to be in that leadership position”.

This too is reflected in the research – the aptly titled book *Women Don’t Ask*, showcases that while men do ask for the things that want, such as promotions or salary, women simply don’t (Babcock & Laschever, 2003). This is due to a general unwillingness from women to be perceived as too demanding, pushy, or difficult, and undervaluing their own worth. The consequences of which mean that women are more likely to be overlooked for promotions, assignments and other experiences that are necessary to advance in the workplace (Rhode, 2016).

The characteristics that are expected to be held by women, such as being communal and focused on the welfare of others, also typecast women into specific roles in the workplace. Research has identified that managers generally see women as being more suited to roles like human resources, rather than those with profit and loss responsibilities – which are usually the pipeline roles to becoming a CEO (Wellington et al., 2003; McKinsey & Company et al., 2017; Sales, 2021; Silva et al., 2012). As Expert 1, suggests:

I think women do experience imposter syndrome, and it’s not helped by undermining, gaslighting, and ‘white-anting’ sometimes by others. My punt is that whilst women are increasingly in the boardroom, they’re not increasingly in the chair role, or chairs of committees or even chairs of Risk, Audit and Finance. They’re probably more the chairs of People and Culture, rather than Risk, Audit and Finance. That’s my guess.

It’s not so surprising then, that when all three of our experts were asked about what advice they would provide women seeking to advance into leadership or board roles, all focused in on building confidence, despite the very real gender barriers.

Expert 3 offers the following advice:

I would say to women, please empower yourself, empower other women and that's the recipe to success – it's about paying it forward to another female emerging leader. I do think we have a responsibility to do that. But we need to know it's okay to be embracing all those different superpowers. Because that's the key ingredient that makes female leaders so exceptional.

Expert 1, when queried about what advice to offer women aspiring for leadership roles, "Oh, just do it. Put your hand up. Let everyone know". Going into more detail, Expert 1 outlines:

We need boardrooms that are equal and diverse. I know that there is unconscious bias at play that makes that hard for women. However, if you can – put your hand up and do it, tell everyone you know that you want a board role, reach out and be assertive and confident about that.

It will be helpful, obviously, for the organisations that you joined to be part of, but it will help you as well because it gives you experience of an organisation from a strategic view and that can help you your own kind of thinking, development, and career.

That makes the world a better place and it helps the other women in that boardroom as well, if women do it.

Expert 2 noted:

I think always back yourself – I think backing yourself is really important. Know that you're not alone. Don't be afraid to challenge the status quo. Remember what your purpose is and follow that purpose and that objective. I think collaboration and bringing people along with you on that journey to affect change is really important as well.

As is also reflected by academic Jen Overbeck, no one should be hearing the message that they should act like either a man or women, rather:

Everybody should be hearing [that] we have a range of behaviours that

we are given permission [to use], that we're fully entitled to enact in ourselves, and that we should look at the situation and what that situation demands, and we should match our behaviour while maintaining our own integrity and authenticity.

Jan West, an experienced board director, recounts the importance of mentorship for overcoming those effects of 'imposter syndrome' when first starting out in her career:

I became ambitious to become a manager, and I was the first female audit manager in, I think, Australia. Having achieved that, then the partnership track presented itself. I wasn't particularly ambitious to achieve that because, again, you cannot be what you cannot see. I had a partner who took me aside and said, 'Do you realise if you actually put your head down and worked at this you could become a partner?' And it was a realisation that somebody mentoring you and giving you that encouragement does make a big difference. And with his encouragement, I then became ambitious to achieve that.

When asked if she didn't realise that becoming a partner was a possibility until someone encouraged her to go for it, Jan stated "Absolutely, yeah. On two counts. One, there weren't any [female partners]. And on second count, [I had a] "I'm not good enough" view of the world, "everyone else is better" type perception"(University of Melbourne, 2020).

Expert 1 also advocates for the use of mentoring or women's networks:

I think there's a lot of work to do to make boardrooms a truly inclusive place – and it's not yet. So, you also need to find your group of women, and it's why I do the work that I do to support women. It's so that this group of women have a cheer squad around them and can then continue to make that contribution in the boardroom. Because even though you're sometimes going to get swept down in the boardroom, you've got a cheer squad of women who are going to lift you up.

Conclusion — Okay, Now What?

An analysis of the existing literature on gender stereotypes has been undertaken to identify whether this continues to create barriers for women's progression into board and leadership roles. Through interviews with three female experts with board and leadership experience, it has become clear that although there has been significant change, gender stereotypes do continue to persist in one way or another.

As acknowledged by all three of our experts – although the landscape for women's inclusion in the workplace has improved, there is still much work left to do.

Setting Targets

As established in a report produced by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (McKinsey & Company et al., 2017) there is a strong relationship between targets to increase the representation of women on boards and the actual share of women on boards. The organisations that have set consistent targets for women on boards, have in the last six years increased the number of female board members at twice the pace of those without any targets (Cassells & Duncan, 2021). For example, the 2015 targets set by the 30% Club Australia and the Australian Instituted of Company Directors (AICD) to increase the number of female directors in the ASX 200 has achieved a 19 per cent increase to 33.7 percent as of August 2021 (Fox, 2021).

Chief Executive Women (2021) has also strongly emphasised the effectiveness of targets to drive an increase in the representation of women in leadership teams – with half of ASX100 companies setting targets of 40 per cent of each gender, and 54 per cent of these companies now on the cusp of achieving gender balance in their leadership teams (Chief Executive Women, 2021).

Expert 2 firmly believes that targets are important for making real progress in this space:

I think we need targets because of the world of unconscious bias. People employ people or recruit people to positions that look like them, speak like them, and have had the same experiences. The only way to counteract that, in the short term, is through interventions – through targets and through affirmative action ... I think cultural change is also a part of it as well, but that takes time. So, if we're serious about making things happen quickly, then you need interventions.

As Associate Professor Jen Overbeck (Cassells & Duncan, 2021) notes, traditional interview processes tend to favour men. However, one of the ways that this can be overcome is through targets.

What we find over and over is that when organisations or governments

do implement quotas it is one of the few things that actually works, because there's an issue of critical mass. Until you have a critical mass of women in those positions, and this is not just for gender – it's for any underrepresented group – but until the numbers are there, the dynamics don't change. The key thing that will make things change in terms of gender balance is simply having more gender balance. Behaviours, norms, dynamics, will change when the numbers change. And so, a lot of times quotas are the only way to get there.

Noting that little progress has been made since the achievement of the 30 per cent of women on boards target – the WGEA has stressed the importance of organisations firstly setting a goal and focusing on this as an outcome, and then getting serious about setting an ambitious goal – more than the most common target which is set at the bare minimum of 30 to 33 per cent (Cassells & Duncan, 2021). As asserted by Whelan & Wood (2012), there is widespread evidence that specific, measurable, and challenging targets, with feedback on their success are the most effective and robust intervention for behaviour change and improving performance.

How to Avoid Being the Token Female

As highlighted by Rhode & Packel (2014), much of the increase in women and minority directors is reflected by the same people sitting on multiple boards, rather than the appointment of new individuals. This is a concerning development, where the appointment of these 'trophy directors' or 'tokenistic female or minority members' will decrease the pressure for continued diversity efforts (*Ibid.*). This issue was acknowledged by Expert 1 when looking at the ASX, where it is "essentially recycling some of the same women around."

Expert 3 provides insight into what individuals can do to combat stereotypes, support greater diversity, and importantly, avoid tokenistic representation:

I still see a number of public events where it's all men. I can't believe that we still do that ... it's up to us as women to not be the 'tick in the box', it's up to us to do more research and thinking, and say 'no, I'm not going to be the one that fills your quota'. You need to show a genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion, whatever that event may be or whatever that podcast or whatever it is – it's up to us to always question that. We must always test that because if I just did a token female [role] and went onto a speaking panel, that's not gender representation – that is only two gender representations – and if we're

all white, and we're all in the same age bracket, that's not diversity. All of us need to continually challenge this to get proper gender representation and proper diversity in every aspect we can, in terms of the ultimate outcome of being inclusive.

I think you should always say you're never going to go into a public speaking event if there's no diversity on the panel. I will not go and speak on any panel, and I won't go and listen to a panel that is all one gender. I won't partake to be the token female – by being the token female you're filling a quota that just gets them off easy. If you're invited to that kind of event you need to question and look at the whole agenda and see female representation or diversity in gender across the entire program.

Diversity — Why It Is More Than Just Two Genders

All of the experts also agreed that diversity is much broader than just women's representation. This is firstly because gender is not binary, as Expert 3 has touched on – it does not just consist of men and women but is rather a whole spectrum. To date so much of the diversity debate has been focused primarily gender equality as being tied to women's representation.

Expert 1 also points out that diversity is not just about gender – but cultural diversity, age diversity, people with disability, people with different sexualities, people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, several of the experts emphasised the importance of intersectionality and diversity in life experiences.

As Expert 1 argues, a broad range of voices should be heard in the boardroom, with the inclusion of "people who have different life experiences and not everybody who grew up in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and went to a private school and went to university".

This is also a point emphasised by Dr Kristin Ferguson, Deputy Chair of the ABC, and a Non-Executive Director on ASX-listed boards, "The most critical move is the intersection of gender and ethnicity, or gender and sexuality, or gender and disability, and making sure we are representing all women, and that all women's voices are heard. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with migrant backgrounds too" (Hislop, 2020).

The issue of 'male and pale' boardrooms has come into the spotlight, with reports that despite increasing numbers of female board members over the past five years, the ASX300 continues to lack – or is even decreasing in – cultural diversity (Patten, 2020; Watermark Search International, 2021). The Australian Human Rights Commission's 2018 report found from a

cohort of 372 Australian chief executives and equivalents – a whopping 97 per cent were from an Anglo-Celtic or European background. A highly damning statistic from a country that has dubbed itself ‘the multicultural nation’.

When it comes to implementing diversity in the boardroom there needs to be assurances that this responsibility is not just left to women, and as Expert 1 emphasises we need to acknowledge the full scope of what diversity means:

If all we do is replace all the old white men in the boardroom with old white women – we haven't won.

Getting diversity into the boardroom can't just all be on the women's side – it can't be ‘oh we need a culturally diverse woman, who happens to be a lesbian and has a disability’. It needs to be mixed up on both sides as well, so we are getting people of all diversities in the boardroom. All the evidence shows that groups make better decisions when their makeup is diverse. We therefore need that level of diversity in boards, so they are making the best decisions they can.

Expert 3 also critiques that diversity initiatives can tend to be solely focused on the upper levels of an organisation, which does not promote the career progression of women or other genders, and does not truly reflect diversity in the organisation as a whole:

There is still not the depth of leadership roles within an organisation that would have a good representation of all genders – looking inclusively at the full range of genders, not just male or female.

What happens is you might look at a corporate and you'll see there's two or three people who are non-men on the board. And then you might look at the executive team, you might think, 'Oh, that looks pretty good'. The problem is the level below – there's not enough female leaders developed underneath that to come up, and that's the real issue. When you look at an organisation, you should be evaluating the whole look of the organization, not just the top two layers.

This notion has been tentatively concluded in Norway, where legislated quotas for a minimum of 40 per cent women on corporate boards – has translated to further changes at the top (i.e., more women managers), but has not influenced the total number of women employed an organisation (Bohnet, 2018).

As concluded by Expert 2 “our boards should reflect our community, because otherwise the decisions aren't going to be for the community. I'm a big believer that diversity in all its forms, not just gender, needs to be demonstrated in our decision-making institutions”.

Final Thoughts

As Rhode (2016) argues, to make real progress towards gender equality we must confront the ‘second-generation’ problems that are not about deliberate discrimination, but rather the underlying unconscious biases that we encounter every day. As discussed in this report, gender stereotypes are still alive and real, and continue to create barriers for women who seek to progress into leadership and board roles. This paper focused on ways

that gender stereotypes manifest, through the ‘double-bind’, ‘the business case for women’, ‘high expectations’, ‘the authority gap’, ‘the fallacy of meritocracy’, and ‘imposter syndrome’. This analysis was enhanced by the real-world experiences of three women experts who throughout their careers have been on boards and leadership roles. This paper has concluded with a short discussion of what can be done to support women's advancement in the workplace, diversity, and inclusion more broadly. This has emphasised the importance of targets, saying no to being a token inclusion, and recognising that diversity is much more than just gender.

As stated by Catalyst (2007: 1), “if companies fail to acknowledge and address the impact of stereotype bias, they will lose out on top female talent. By creating a false dichotomy between men's and women's characteristics, stereotypes narrow the range of effective behaviours within the workplace overall”. It is not only important for organisations to address inequalities in their board and leadership roles for their own reputations and commitments, but more broadly because if Australia aspires to be – and promotes its values as being – egalitarian and equal opportunity, it cannot exclude half its population from taking part in the most important decisions being made across the country.

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