



## Tailored Approaches Needed for Gender Balance

**Greater male involvement and tailored programmes are emerging as sources of hope in tackling gender inequality in Asia.**

The lack of gender parity in leadership roles, pay and conditions is a worldwide phenomenon but particularly pronounced in Asia. As described in a **white paper** released on the occasion of International Women’s Day, our findings from in-depth interviews with 42 men and women across Asia’s financial services and technology industries, show that 86 percent of respondents believe gender discrimination is still prevalent in the Asian workforce. Meanwhile 79 percent felt that this discrimination is mostly unconscious, meaning without the intent to discriminate. Caused by widespread “second generation gender bias”, such discrimination is particularly dangerous because it is hidden. It is one reason for the numbers of women managers rapidly tapering off as they ascend the Asian corporate ladder, leaving the higher echelons of management and boards overwhelmingly populated by men.

Gender initiatives to bridge the gap have so far failed to connect. Statistics like female **board representation** rates demonstrate this. South Korea, with less than 3 percent, and Japan, with less than 8 percent, illustrate one extreme of women board representation rates in Asia. Singapore is only at about half of its stated target of 20 percent by 2020 and while the situation looks better in Australia (27.4 percent), there is still a long way to go. In many ways, Asia is still catching up with basic initiatives

already prevailing in many parts of the world.

The good news is that executives we spoke to across the region, both men and women, recognised the need for urgent action. They shared with us a clear picture of what’s working, what isn’t and what companies need to do more of. We interviewed women in senior leadership positions and mid-level roles, as well as men in senior positions (who were identified as champions of change by their women colleagues). One finding that came through clearly was that men have an important role to play in advocating for and enabling the advancement of women. Active male advocacy is considered essential to bring about the kind of radical change that is sorely required today. Without this, the pace of change will continue but it will be too slow. Because men still make up the bulk of leaders, women’s careers can be greatly influenced by their involvement. In fact, all but one of the senior women we interviewed stated that men in influential roles have had a positive impact on their careers. While women-only networks and support groups help, women want men involved even with these activities. Christine Lam, CEO of Citi in China, noted: “We are preaching to the choir if we keep telling each other that we are good enough. Involve men – don’t do women-only stuff. You are excluding diversity when you do that.”

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**  
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

## What's working

There was widespread agreement that technology has had a positive impact on retaining women in more senior roles largely through the enhanced flexibility of time and location that it has brought to the workplace. Flexibility is attractive to all genders and our interviewees urge companies to provide men with the same opportunities. Only when men start to work remotely or on a flexible basis will the hidden penalties and stigma attached to flexible work disappear. Most companies have introduced parental leave and other policies that allow working mothers and fathers to manage their personal commitments along with their work. This not only helps women achieve balance but encourages men to do their part in the family as well.

## What's not working

But flexible work policies are no silver bullet in the face of unchanged or slowly changing societal expectations. Our study found that even in fast-growing Asia, certain cultures still assume that if there is a conflict between work and family obligations, a woman's primary responsibility is her family, unlike the expectations of her male colleagues. From our conversations, motherhood emerges as the most crucial development in a woman's personal life that impacts her professional life. Maternity-related discrimination is still disturbingly prevalent due to strong societal expectations in the region. One senior interviewee told us that she had faced open questions about when she planned to have a baby and how that would impact her work.

But some encouraging developments are emerging on the male front. Male champions told us that acknowledging the real struggle women in Asia face and providing flexibility in the workplace has helped them retain women. "They are quite aware when they get some help. They acknowledge it with gratitude and remember the people who provided it," said one interviewee.

### How male champions advocate for women

Boris Liedtke, Distinguished Fellow at the INSEAD Emerging Markets Institute and former CEO of a large asset management firm, noticed that women had a relatively lukewarm initial reception to an offer of an international move with a promotion. He decided to inform managers about what they might encounter.

They "conducted a series of ad hoc trainings/discussions with senior managers prior to them engaging in a discussion with one of their staff to sending them abroad. In particular, we wanted to make sure that managers were aware of the

different gender approach that we had witnessed when offering a staff an international opportunity. Women tended to analyse and consider the issues of moving abroad upfront and more diligently than their male counterparts. This frequently leads to a delay in the decision to accept or reject the offer.

Managers needed to be aware of this different approach and not simply jump to the conclusion that the person is not interested in the career opportunity".

Nainesh Jaisingh, Global Head - Principal Finance, Standard Chartered Bank: "It's about ensuring supply, getting more women into the management ranks, developing their qualifications and skill sets and opening the doors for them to establish their credentials."

Sudipto Ghatak, Deputy Chief Risk Officer - Asia Pacific at a major European bank: "Hire fairly, pay fairly, promote fairly, this is still where most of the work is required."

Pankaj Narayan, VP Partners APJ, Citrix: "Allow flexibility of hours and location and accept some intertwining of personal life with the work life."

Jeremy Broome, head of HR Asia-Pacific, Deutsche Bank: "Our role is to ensure that we have policies in place and a supportive culture, so that we can accommodate employees however their family situation may change. Although, it is ultimately up to them to decide what level of flexibility they require to best perform their role and balance family life."

## The next frontiers

How organisations handle the post-maternity return to work is still seemingly neglected while there are positive developments emerging with regard to childbirth. One is gender-neutral parental leave policies. Twitter, for instance, has a parental leave of 20 weeks. Since 2016, in Asia, Deutsche Bank provides parental leave to the primary caregiver, irrespective of whether it is the mother or the father of the child.

"Your benefits influence behaviour," said Hari Krishnan, CEO of PropertyGuru. "If your paternity leave is one month, while maternity leave is four months, what are you telling them?"

Women in our survey felt that a potential way of preventing motherhood from possibly derailing their careers was to have pragmatic career planning advice at an early stage of their careers that considered maternity. Identifying specific needs and training accordingly for a maternity absence and re-entry was touted as one possible way of putting the issue front and centre as a reality to be planned for and consciously integrated.

Visit [INSEAD Knowledge](http://knowledge.insead.edu)  
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

Such tailored solutions expand beyond the individual. We also found that, given the diversity of Asia, 90 percent of our respondents thought global or regional policies alone are insufficient to address gender disparity in Asia. The majority suggested that global minimums with local customisation would be more useful. 31 percent thought customised, national-level policies would be necessary. This was illustrated in one interview with a CEO who provided uniform remote working policies across the region and mandated one day of working from home a week to remove any stigma attached to this benefit. This made him very popular in India and Indonesia where travel time can be horrendous but unpopular in Japan and Hong Kong where homes are small and have limited space to work. Permitting babies in the workplace was important in some countries but less so in others where extended families traditionally care for children.

Given the high degree of unconscious bias and the difficulty both men and women face in tackling it, respondents unanimously agreed on the need for bias awareness training. For instance, 93 percent of our respondents believed people could be trained to be more aware, hence mitigating this problem. But they also agreed that it has to be consistent and repeated, a one-time training at the time of on-boarding, for instance, was considered insufficient.

When asked whether bias training should be done in mixed or single gender groups, opinions were split. Half of the men felt that single gender sensitivity training would be useful, as they were keen to increase their self-awareness without fear of embarrassment. One male IT leader saw men-only programmes as “a must for the sensitisation of males”.

### **Men, step up**

The enthusiasm of the men in our sample to lead the way was encouraging and is a potential game changer in the drive to increase the pace of change. In fact, 92 percent of female respondents and 89 percent of male respondents felt that male advocacy was essential for tackling gender inequality. Male champions can be strong agents of change given that they are in decision-making positions. Helping them be more aware of their unconscious biases is one step.

But a more impactful strategy companies can apply is through structured programmes of advocacy. One of our interviewees explained that his company has formal programmes to match high potential women with senior leaders who then guide and support their development. They also have a programme for women who have taken a long career break; designed to bring in more women managers, high potential women wishing to return to work can

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**  
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

embark on a 12-week internship, at the end of which a job may be offered.

Gender disparity in senior corporate roles is “not a women’s issue – it is everyone’s issue,” according to Fabiano Siufi, CFO at Microsoft Singapore. Across genders and organisational levels, everyone needs to get involved to “Press for Progress”, in keeping with the theme for International Women’s Day 2018.

***Vinika D. Rao*** is Executive Director of the **INSEAD Emerging Markets Institute (EMI)**. EMI is a leading think tank on issues related to economic development and business management in emerging economies across the globe. It develops cutting edge pedagogical material, research publications and data sets related to emerging markets. You can connect via email at [emi@insead.edu](mailto:emi@insead.edu) or follow Vinika on Twitter at [@VinikaDRao](https://twitter.com/VinikaDRao).

***Paddy Padmanabhan*** is the Unilever Chaired Professor of Marketing at INSEAD and the Academic Director of the **INSEAD Emerging Markets Institute**. He is also Programme Director of the following executive education programmes at INSEAD: ***Asian International Executive Programme***, ***Leading the Effective Sales Force*** and ***INSEAD Leadership Programme for Senior Executives - India***.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on **Twitter** and **Facebook**.

Find article at  
<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/tailored-approaches-needed-for-gender-balance-8566>

Download the Knowledge app for free

