
Executive women: Is there a future?



By [Mrinalini Reddy](#)

There are plenty of women in the workplace - and in positions only dreamed of a generation ago: airline pilots, scientists, executives. But not TOP executives. In the United States alone, only 14 percent hold the keys to the executive suite, a 2010 report by non-profit group Catalyst reports.

What's getting in the way?

“The private sector has to take some of the blame,” says Anamah Tan, an advisory member for UN Women (formerly UNIFEM) and a long-time Singapore-based women’s rights activist and family practice lawyer. At the higher echelon, companies should make more concerted efforts to appoint women to boards, says Tan. Companies should also provide greater flexibility and training for women who decide to rejoin the workforce after a break to have or to raise children. “Today, technology changes so fast that when a woman takes time off for a couple of years and returns, she needs to be retrained,” she explains in an interview with INSEAD Knowledge. “Employers should take this into account and give her the training and they should also

reinstate her seniority when she returns.” But budgetary constraints often take precedence, she acknowledges, particularly for small and medium sized enterprises and quite often talented women leave the workforce altogether.

Public policy measures might offer some lessons. Initiatives in the form of quotas have proved successful to level the playing field in certain cases, Tan notes, despite the contention that comes with affirmative action. “I don’t like quotas and so I call them a necessary evil,” she says. “I would prefer that we go on merit but the progress for women has been so slow and this provides an impetus.” She argues that this impetus can be effective when instituted wisely as a short-term equalizing tool. Half of the countries in the world today use some type of electoral quota for their parliaments, a 2010 study reports.

At the same time, a more systemic change in societal attitudes toward women as primary caregivers will help women advance in their careers when men can play a greater role in domestic and child rearing responsibilities, says Tan. Access to high-quality affordable childcare can also ease the burden of mid-career women. It is this kind of holistic shift—not just from the private and public sectors—that stands a greater chance of catapulting women. Tan draws a parallel to the approach by the Singapore public and non-profit sectors toward curbing domestic abuse where stricter law enforcement alongside infrastructure development in the form of hotlines, shelters, legal aid and personal protection services yielded improvements.

The coming third billion

A recent report by Booz and Company marked the growing influence of the third billion—women worldwide now entering the economic mainstream for the first time as producers, consumers, employees and entrepreneurs. Their enormous potential is compounded by factors such as their global dispersion and women investing more in the education of their children which multiplies the economic impact, the report asserts. But their full potential is still unrealised as constraints continue to plague certain regions whether it’s inadequate infrastructure, legal prohibitions on female advancement, government restrictions on small businesses and other factors that make it difficult for women to access education and jobs.

While the possibilities are limitless, changes are coming to the fore after a long time of women’s issues sitting at the bottom of the pile, says Tan.

“There is an understanding now that half your population is not being utilised to its maximum so that penny has dropped. Yes, I think it will take a little bit of time for the cream to surface to the top but I am very optimistic and excited about what will happen in the next ten to twenty years.”

Anamah Tan spoke with INSEAD Knowledge on the sidelines of INSEAD’s International Women’s Day event in Singapore.

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