
Men United, for Women



By Vinika D. Rao , Executive Director, INSEAD Emerging Markets Institute

Men cannot be bystanders in the growing drive for a more gender-balanced workplace.

Male allies, male advocates, male champions, he-for-she. Whatever the label, male sponsorship for female managers is increasingly recognised as essential in organisational efforts to promote gender diversity.

Some companies are beginning to embed the creation of formal sponsorship channels where senior leaders are actively sponsoring women. It's important to note that this is about 'actively sponsoring' rather than mentoring or helping, given the increasing recognition that women managers are largely 'over-mentored and under-sponsored'. Both male and female leaders can be champions or sponsors. However, the practical reality is that men are still in the overwhelming majority of senior management and boards.

Having more women in the boardroom is linked to higher profitability; male executives are in a better position to bring in more women by virtue of their own sheer numbers in decision-making positions. This was one of the takeaways from the annual Asian Women in Leadership Summit (AWLS) in Singapore in May. On the Male Champions panel that I moderated, Ashish D. Pal, Managing Director for Singapore & Malaysia at MSD, said: "If you're

going to have all men in the room, you're not going to get the diversity of thought and experiences to leap frog in a rapidly evolving business environment.”

Another panellist, Sanjeev Chatrath, Managing Director of Global Banking & Financial Markets at IBM, underscored the fundamental reality of male champions having more impact than female ones. “Men control the system and hence, men have to lean in, they have to fix that system,” said Chatrath. “Otherwise it's a very small group of people on the periphery who are discussing in the echo chambers that something has got to change.”

So how might sponsorship help elevate more women to the top rungs of business?

On an individual level, it can be as simple as giving women more of a voice – literally. Hari Krishnan, CEO of PropertyGuru, says he makes a point of soliciting input from female executives at boardroom meetings. Otherwise the women, outnumbered 7-3 by men, would struggle to be heard.

“I have found this method to be highly effective in bringing the quieter voices out at the table, and it definitely helps – even at younger levels,” Krishnan said.

Chatrath, too, is helping women managers speak up. He co-founded a group called Male Allies two years ago in Hong Kong which gives women the chance to communicate directly with male leaders. The group now includes over 40 companies and more than 140 men in C-suite roles. Women, according to Chatrath, “can give them inputs about the kind of challenges that they are facing, what words they used which did not land the way they could have landed, what stylistic change they can make to create a more inclusive environment.”

Timing is key

Timing also matters, as my forthcoming research shows. Many women decide to quit just at the pre-leadership stage, when they have amassed substantial experience but are at a crossroads of personal and professional pressures, perhaps the most vulnerable stage in their careers. The rate of their voluntary departure from the corporate environment, an infamous phenomenon dubbed the ‘leaking pipeline’, can be more than double that of their male counterparts.

My research reveals that active support from male leaders can alter the **self-regulating focus** of women managers from prevention focus to promotion focus. People who have a prevention focus tend to be more cautious and vigilant in their behaviour, so women who are prevention-focused may want to protect the job they have, focus on their duties and obligations to their families, and not chase risky career opportunities.

On the other hand, people who are promotion-focused are more likely to go after their ambitions. They will take up the high-risk, high-reward opportunities that lead to career advancement. We found that active male-leader support can alter this regulatory focus in women, changing it from prevention to promotion. Thus, a woman who receives active male sponsorship at this critical stage in her career may be less likely to fall off the corporate pyramid.

Michael Jenkins, CEO at Human Capital Leadership Institute, sees himself as a “road un-blocker” for women in this phase of their career in his team. At AWLS, he said: “My primary role is to understand what career paths, career routes they would like to ideally take. Then to actively remove the barriers that exist for them to the degree that I possibly can.”

From toxic masculinity to Band of Brothers

It is heartening to see that many **top male executives now lead from the front** when it comes to sponsoring women. They include Paul Polman, who as CEO from 2009 to 2019 oversaw a double-digit percentage increase of women in Unilever’s boardroom, and Bloomberg’s Executive Chairman Peter Grauer, who tasks the company’s leaders with developing and implementing diversity and inclusion plans.

While leadership from the top is critical, so too are institutionalised, formal active sponsorship channels for women managers by both male and female leaders. Only when such mechanisms are in place can companies effectively propagate the gender balance message, address biases and ultimately build a truly inclusive culture.

A growing number of companies are aware of this, judging by the number of male-oriented programmes and **advocacy groups** for women’s advancement in the workplace proliferates. One is **Men as Allies** at JP Morgan Chase. Launched last year, the programme was conceived as a complement to a company-wide initiative, the six-year-old Women on the

Move.

Steven Billiet, Managing Director at J.P. Morgan Asset Management, was among a handful of senior leaders in Asia-Pacific who joined Men as Allies at its launch. He told the audience at the AWLS: “Bringing men into the fold really creates a better understanding of what the issues are. Also, in that role I can really try to influence the broader male organisation of the entities that I oversee.”

If it all sounds easy and collegial, it is because the panellists are all sold on advancing women in the workplace. And their efforts are sorely needed given the glacial pace of growth of women’s boardroom representation around the world. [Deloitte’s most recent survey](#) of companies across the world, published in 2017, showed women held only 15 percent of board seats and 4 percent of CEO and board chair positions, compared to 12 percent of board seats in 2015.

For male advocates the toughest part of their efforts is dealing with entrenched patriarchal biases and discrimination, much of it unconscious and covert.

Krishnan candidly admitted, “I did not act forcefully enough in correcting poor humour when I was younger,” but adds that now, “I always correct the people cracking such jokes, I don’t walk away. I’m completely convinced that men cannot be bystanders.”

Indeed, men can no longer stand on the sidelines. Gender disparity impacts the whole organisation, depleting its resources and impacting its bottom line. It was encouraging to talk to these male champions who actively and determinedly foster the careers of women managers. Male champions, your time has come. Stand up and be counted.

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