



WHERE ARE WOMEN LEADERS TODAY?

LET'S LOOK AT HOW WOMEN ARE FARING IN UPPER MANAGEMENT IN
2016

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More than 35 years have passed since Iceland's Vigdis Finnbogadottir became the world's first directly elected female head of state. The fact that she was re-elected three times before retiring in 1996 shows just how popular she ended up being. Her election could have marked a turning point for women in all professions, confirming that their leadership abilities are both as effective and appreciated as those of their male counterparts.

And yet, all these years later, things aren't quite so rosy. While there has been a slight upward trend in the number of women leaders, the overall proportion remains low. As of 2015, women hold just 104 (19%) of the seats in the United States Congress. Currently, 11 women serve as Head of State and 10 serve as Head of Government according on United Nations data, amounting to around 10% female heads of state overall.

Women in business

Women [hold 46% of jobs in the United States](#) and hold 50% of middle management positions according to a [recent report](#) by the International Labor Organization. Even more significantly, a report from the US Department of Labor noted that women outnumbered men in executive roles in the areas of finance, human resources, education, medical and health services, accounting and auditing, budget analysis, real estate and social and community services. So, while women have made considerable advances in middle management, the statistics remain deeply disheartening at top-management level. In 2015, [only 4% of Fortune 500 chief executives were female](#).

Best places for women leaders

Despite this gloom, some bright spots do exist! In Norway, [for example, around 38% of board members are women](#). This is no accident. In 2008, the country passed a law which required the boards of publicly listed companies to be made up of women by at least 40%. Although Norway hasn't reached its goal yet, the rest of the world has been watching closely to see what impact this law will have, and, at present, the results seem positive.

Both France and Spain are seriously considering bringing in new legislation or formal quotas, while Sweden reached 28% by 2015.

What is more, it is not just countries that are introducing such targets: businesses are also setting themselves ambitious goals in respect to the number of women in senior management.

Companies that set these targets for themselves do not do so out of general concern for gender equality, but because the business case for doing so is strong. [Research](#) in this area points to the value which can be added by gender-diverse teams. For example, companies with more than three women in managerial roles tend to have better returns on equity and assets than competitors of theirs with a less receptive approach to women. They also score higher in terms of organizational performance. Likewise, female board members tend to be very well-prepared for meetings, which encourages their colleagues to do the same. This leads to better discussions and, ultimately, to better decisions. There is a clear business case for hiring and promoting women for more senior roles.

Lonely at the top

When a minority makes up less than 15% of a social category, we tend to talk about tokens. All those who find themselves in this position are typically subject to huge pressure due to their visibility and because they feel the need to represent not only themselves, but their category as a whole.

At 25% - currently the target for many companies - women still constitute a minority, but are no longer tokens. The tipping point is 35%; once this level is reached, visibility becomes less of an issue and their identity as women becomes less salient. Beyond this point, when a woman speaks, she is heard as an individual, with her own individual background, education, values and personality, and no longer merely as 'the woman'. Her opinions and views are no longer reduced to her gender.

There are currently so few women in top management roles that, in that arena, women are perceived as outsiders. This marginalization creates a kind of legitimacy gap, insofar as women do not fit the dominant (male) stereotype of what it is to be a leader. Men are associated with 'agentic' behavior, meaning that they tend to be proactive, assertive, dominant, and in control of situations. By contrast, women are associated with 'communal values', such as friendliness, support, and a warm and caring attitude. When we look at these two sets of traits, it becomes clear that the agentic approach is the one we associate with leadership.

Act like men to get ahead?

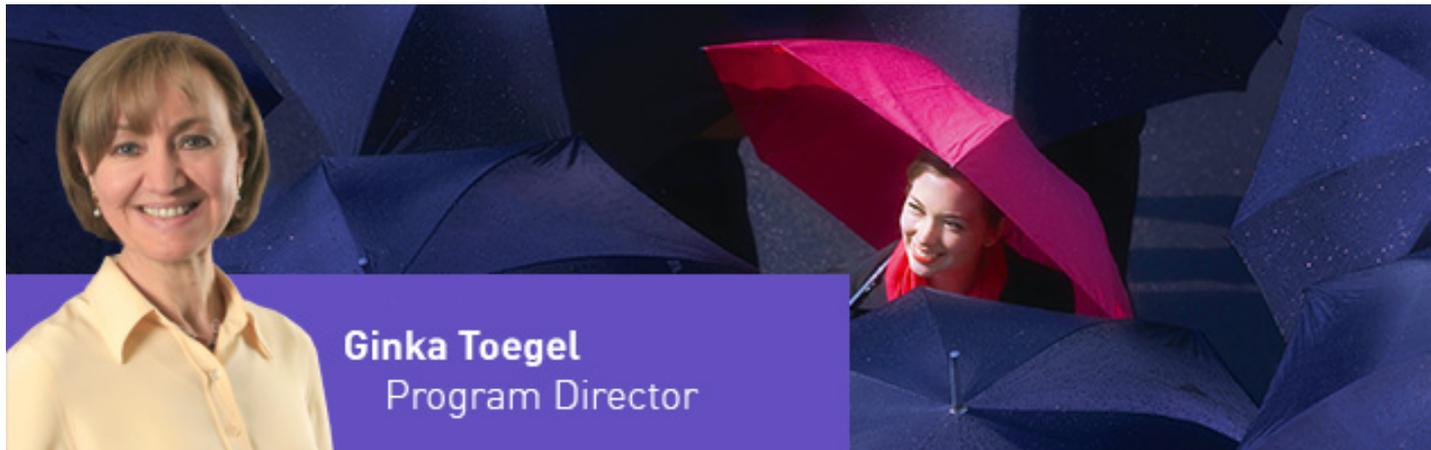
By acting like men, women violate gender stereotypes, making them appear phony, which can negatively impact them as leaders. Women would be better advised to use a blend of both male and female characteristics. Indra Nooyi, the chief executive and chairwoman of PepsiCo, does this very successfully. She is capable of making tough decisions and is very assertive in negotiations, but those she works with also describe her as extremely warm and caring.

Future progress

Despite disappointing statistics, I think that there is good reason to be optimistic. I believe that, in the next five to ten years, we will see drastic changes for the better. Women managers will contribute to this positive shift by understanding that there are a certain number of expectations related to organizational leadership and by developing their skills accordingly. Men can both help and benefit by making the effort to understand the specific problems faced by women leaders.

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