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Katharine Hamer



Originally from London, freelance writer and editor Katharine Hamer is currently based in Vancouver, Canada. She began her career as a researcher for ITN and BBC Television and has since written for several major Canadian media outlets, including CBC News and *The Globe and Mail*.

# Boardroom breakthroughs

Encouraging workplace gender diversity

Despite a huge change in attitudes to gender roles in the past century, there are still very few women occupying the top positions of power. Researchers at universities across the UK are looking into what barriers still exist in the workplace for women and what is being done to redress the balance

In explaining her bid for the American presidency, Hillary Clinton said that she hoped to break “the highest and hardest glass ceiling”. While there are many factors which determine a successful run for political office, there’s no denying that glass ceilings still exist for women; not only in the United States, but around the world. Although workplace diversity is believed to give organisations a greater competitive edge, only a handful of women sit in the director’s chair at Fortune 500 companies.

“One CEO that I interviewed recently said that the glass ceiling was a myth in women’s minds that held them back,” observes Dr Val Singh, deputy director of the International Centre for Women Leaders at Cranfield School of Management. “Whilst I think there is some truth in the fact that if we perceive a barrier, we may think it larger than it really is, the meagre 3.6 per cent of top executive posts held by women shows that there are many structural organisational barriers in place – these are not figments of women’s imagination.”



### Female FTSE index

British universities are leading the pack in researching ways to foster female leadership. The International Centre for Women Leaders is widely recognised as being at the forefront of research into boardroom culture and female directorships. Its mandate is to “lead the national debate on gender diversity and corporate boards”. One of the centre’s projects, the annual female FTSE index, has received strong support from the highest levels of the UK Government, which uses the centre’s statistics as the official benchmark of women’s progress each year. In her introduction to the 2007 edition of the index, secretary of state for equalities and minister for women, Harriet Harman, wrote: “When I helped launch the female FTSE index in 1999, I found that many of Britain’s boardrooms were a no-go area for women and many were populated by ‘the Chairman’s Chums’... Eight years ago, 36 per cent of FTSE boards had no women – today, that figure is down to 24 per cent.”

Publishing the index has also led to a shake-up within British companies.

According to Singh, the number of women directors has doubled since she and her colleagues first began reporting on female leadership almost a decade ago. “We have heard anecdotally,” she says, “that several chairmen of companies with no female directors felt uncomfortable at shareholder meetings when someone raised the question of whether the board was still all male. They were embarrassed being chairman of a company in the bottom part of the female FTSE index, and resolved to consider gender diversity when appointing new directors.”

It seems there are many factors affecting the issue of gender diversity in the workplace; supply and demand being one of them. Aurora Chen is a Taiwanese doctoral student at the International Centre for Women Leaders, researching the difference between executive MBA graduates in the UK and in her home country. Chen notes that MBA enrolment figures for women in Taiwan are currently high – higher in fact than in the US or UK. “Taiwan has experienced and is still experiencing rapid economic growth which

has, in turn, led to a dramatic increase in demand for managers,” she explains. “This, coupled with rising educational levels among working women and the changes in social acceptance of gender equality, has led to an influx of female managers.”

However, according to Dr Singh, there is still some way to go in global terms. “Gender role stereotypes are persistent,” she says. “We can gender-proof and change policies, but they are often implemented by people with attitudes that are entrenched and discriminatory against women in management, particularly those with children.” Singh’s colleague at International Centre for Women Leaders, Dr Ruth Sealy, adds, “It is often very hard for women to combine top jobs with family, if they are the main child-carer and the organisation is not child-friendly, which often only needs to mean allowing employees to work flexibly.”

### Positive action

A number of UK universities are addressing the issue of positive action to redress the balance. Bradford University School



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of Management recently established the Centre for Inclusion and Diversity. With a focus on diversity in health-care services, the centre has attracted doctoral students from Egypt, Pakistan and Nigeria. One research project currently underway looks at Positive Action Measures in the European Union, Canada, the United States and South Africa, with the aim to “better understand the role that positive action measures can play in practice in preventing or remedying discrimination”.

The issue of positive action can have its difficulties as it sometimes raises hostilities. “In our women’s corporate network research,” says Dr Singh, “we found women reporting that some men were suspicious of the networks, disparagingly calling them a “witches’ coven” or a “knitting circle”. In reality, the women’s networks were run in a very business-like manner and made many contributions to the organisation as well as helping women with their careers.”

“We consistently find that women do not want positive discrimination, as

## Women now account for around 60 per cent of graduates worldwide, and several studies have shown a link between women in senior leadership roles and profitability

they strongly believe in meritocracy,” Dr Singh continues. “They want open and transparent systems that are operated fairly.” Indeed, according to key speakers at a March 2008 Economic and Social Research Council international conference on gender, class, employment and family, gender inequality remains “complex and persistent”.

### A tipping point

“There’s no denying the continued segregation of jobs by gender, the persistent gender pay gap and the fact that blatant discrimination still rears its ugly head in some workplaces,” says Alison Maitland, senior visiting fellow at City University’s Cass Business School and co-author of the book *Why Women Mean Business: Understanding the Emergence of our Next Economic Revolution*. “We think most of the problem, though, is unintentional bias – what we call the ‘gender asbestos’ inside the corporate edifice.”

She believes that “we may be at a tipping point” when it comes to gender equality in the workplace, citing several examples from *Why Women Mean Business*: women now account for around 60 per cent of graduates worldwide, and several studies have shown a link between women in senior leadership roles and profitability.

The book, she says, “is about the unprecedented importance of women globally as drivers of economic and corporate growth, and about how companies that do a better job of attracting, retaining, promoting and marketing to women can gain competitive advantage. Gender is not a ‘women’s issue’; it is a strategic business issue,” she continues. “What needs to happen now is



Above LtoR, Avivah Wittenberg-Cox and Alison Maitland, authors of *Why Women Mean Business*



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for leading business men who believe in change to get together and start speaking out about the economic and business imperative for women and about how they plan to create change inside their companies. It's time for male business leaders to look in the mirror and say: Change starts here!"

According to Maitland, women's participation in the labour market and as consumers is boosting growth. For example, she says, women have filled 6 million out of 8 million jobs created in the European Union since 2000. "Goldman Sachs calculates that closing the gap between male and female participation rates in employment would boost US GDP by nine per cent, Eurozone GDP by 13 per cent and Japanese GDP by 16 per cent," she adds.

The corporate world is taking notice. In 2006, global investment bank Lehman Brothers sponsored the launch of the London Business School's Centre for Women in Business. Its mission is to become "the pre-eminent research centre

for leadership and knowledge on women in business in Europe".

In 2007, the centre published a report entitled "Inspiring Women: Corporate Best Practice in Europe". The report examined the business practices of 61 organisations in 12 European countries and found that a significantly higher number of women filled senior management roles in the public and not-for-profit sector, in law firms and in publishing. It also recommended that, "if women are to flourish at senior executive levels", they must have equal access to training and leadership programmes.

Other institutions throughout the UK are conducting research in this area. For example, Queen Mary, University of London and its Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity has produced reports for the Equal Opportunities Commission, the European Social Fund and the Economic and Social Research Council. The Centre also hosts a Gender and Industrial Relations study group and a Women at Work seminar programme.

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## “Gender is not a ‘women’s issue’; it is a strategic business issue”

‘just going to go off and have children’ then this is reflective of understandings of how work is organised that have been with us since the industrial revolution,” Dr Elliott continues. “This assumes, for example, that work must be undertaken in a certain place, between certain hours and that managers and leaders should behave in certain (masculine) ways. This leads – at least in western industrialised countries – to an understanding of ‘successful’ leaders that sees them as somehow separate from followers, as individuals who have the skills and knowledge to lead an organisation single-handedly. This view of leadership does not recognise it as something that always takes place in a social setting and fails to acknowledge that if an organisation is to succeed it requires the willing participation of all employees, not just those who sit in the boardroom.”

Clearly, the research of women in leadership roles is a complex field, incorporating, as it does, both the value of absolute gender equality in the workplace and specifically female concerns such as child rearing. However, according to Sealy, women “bring a different background, experience and style, all of which helps contribute to better decision-making and corporate governance.”

Studying this subject really can make a difference to the issue of gender diversity in the workplace. Researchers from Cranfield alone have given presentations to the United Nations, to the British government and to CEOs around the world. Indeed, as more research on the matter comes to light, it is helping to create new ways of thinking which in turn can help drive the issue forward, to the benefit of all society, not just women.

### Celebrating differences

The importance of positive role models and inspirational figures is highlighted at Lancaster University Management School’s Women, Diversity and Leadership Academy, where the focus is on exploring women’s personal journeys through the workplace, with research that tells “stories of extraordinary women” and reflects on “the history of women and leadership.” The academy’s primary aim is to make women’s leadership both natural and visible – as evidenced by the quotations cited on its website from some inspirational women: Coco Chanel (“It’s amazing how many cares disappear when you decide not to be something, but to be someone”) and Helen Keller (“One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar”).

“The Women and Leadership Academy aims to both celebrate the breadth, variety and innovative nature of women’s leadership,” says Dr Carole Elliott, a lecturer at the Academy. This in itself has challenged what is considered a “success” in leadership. “If one of the assumptions is that women are



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### Further information

Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity at Queen Mary’s School of Business and Management, University of London  
[www.busman.qmul.ac.uk/cred/research-equality-diversity.htm](http://www.busman.qmul.ac.uk/cred/research-equality-diversity.htm)

Lancaster University Management School – Women, Diversity and Leadership Academy  
[www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/women-and-leadership](http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/leadership/women-and-leadership)

International Centre for Women Business Leaders at Cranfield University School of Management  
[www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/research/centres/cdwbl](http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/research/centres/cdwbl)

University of Bradford Centre for Inclusion and Diversity  
[www.brad.ac.uk/acad/health/research/cid/index.php](http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/health/research/cid/index.php)

Lehman Brothers Centre for Women in Business at London Business School  
[www.london.edu/womeninbusiness.html](http://www.london.edu/womeninbusiness.html)

Warwick Institute for Employment Research  
[www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier)