

Global Summit of Women: Pursuing Global Gender Parity at High Levels



The 2019 Corporate Women Directors International (CWDI) report focused on female board directors in Fortune Global 500 companies. The news is mixed with progress made year-over-year, but gender equity remains elusive.

— By Sharon Ross

The long-term struggle to achieve gender equity in the board room continues. The Corporate Women Directors International (CWDI) organization, founded by CWDI President Irene Natividad, sponsors the prestigious annual Global Summit of Women and also publishes the annual CWDI Report on Women Board Directors. The 2019 report focused on female board directors of 104 banks, insurance, and mortgage companies in the 2018 Fortune Global 500 ranking of the largest corporations. It is a good news-bad news report.

The good news is that the large majority of financial institutions included in the report have female board directors. The bad news is that women still account for only 24.7 percent of all board director positions as of Dec. 31, 2018. The good news is that 61.5 percent of the boards have reached “critical mass” with three or more women holding board seats. The bad news is that only 14.8 percent of executive officers are women.

"We are closer than we were five years ago, but there is so much more progress needed" is how Natividad succinctly sums up the situation today.

Quotas and Targets Produce Results

Some people bemoan the fact that corporations need government to

force them to include women on their boards. Yet, that is exactly what it has taken for a majority of the financial services companies to reach critical mass of three or more women on their boards.

"Some countries have taken aggressive steps to dramatically increase the numbers of women by legislating quotas or targets with deadlines," Natividad says.

Whatever they are called in a particular company, they proved to be the impetus for accelerating the speed with which women get board appointments. Without the quotas or targets, the incremental increases each year are likely to be 0.5 to 1 percent yearly, which is the pattern in the United States.

Looking closer at the statistics in the 2019 CWDI report, there is solid proof that quotas and targets work. French companies dominate the top ten listing with six companies averaging 44.6 percent of board seats held by women. France is a leader in legislative mandates of quotas for female board directors. The majority of best performing companies were based in Europe because many countries have legislative mandates.

The countries without quotas that had top-performing companies had national initiatives that were advanced by the private sector. For example, Australia made gender diversity a stock exchange listing requirement.

The United States does not have a nationally-driven initiative, and the result is that the companies included in the survey averaged 28.9 percent female directors.

Relentless Pursuit of Goals

Achieving gender parity on boards is only a first step. It remains an elusive concept in the executive ranks. Men continue to dominate C-suite positions with only 14.8 percent of the executive-level positions held by women.

"We need gender parity at the executive level in order to develop future women board directors. The pipeline needs to grow. The numbers show that it is clearly easier to parachute women onto boards rather than grow them internally in a leadership pipe-line," Natividad says.

Developing women to assume executive leadership positions must be deliberate with the company setting goals and managers held accountable. Westpac in Australia achieved gender parity in its leadership ranks in 2017, but it took 10 years and two CEO's who continued to pursue the goal.

"It takes that long to change a corporate culture and build a pipeline of qualified women," Natividad explains.

In the Middle East and Asia, some people may be surprised to learn that countries like Singapore and Hong Kong have been successful in accelerating women into senior ranks. There are also countries like Colombia that are not typically associated with the idea of women in charge, but many women are CEO's of major companies, like paving and tech companies.

"We are going to Bangkok, Thailand, for the 2020 Global Summit of Women because it is often listed in economic forum listings as a top

country for economic empowerment. In fact, the convention center where the summit will be held is owned by women," Natividad said. Thai women make up 40 percent of chief executives and 34 percent of chief financial officers in Thai companies.

Networking on a Global Scale

Though progress is being made to include women on boards, there are even fewer women of color. The reason is found in societal inequality. People of color do not get the same opportunities as white people. In many countries, it is hard to even find employment, much less develop corporate female leaders.

"That is why I work so hard to bring chief diversity officers together, because they are the people tasked with changing work cultures within a certain period of time and with a limited budget," Natividad explained.

However, society has to support getting people of color, especially women, into the workforce in significant numbers before it is possible to get people of color into leadership positions.

One of the major goals of the Global Summit of Women is promoting networking on a global scale. Female entrepreneurs and professionals gain access to corporate leaders and other small business owners. Many women leave the conference with a job offer, after having trouble finding employment before attending the event.

It is a conference for growing and finding leaders. Right now, it is common for the same men and women who are white or people of color to be asked over and over again to sit on boards. Corporate

representatives can meet new qualified women at the summit who they may not have found otherwise.

Be Visible and Get Credit

What advice does Natividad offer women who aspire to top-tier positions in the C-suite and on boards?

"Be visible. Get credit for what you have created, written, or said. Deliberately promote yourself. Get on corporate advisory boards. The advisory boards do not have the same fiduciary level of accountability, but it exposes the woman to the concerns of a corporation," Natividad said. She goes on to suggest getting on a local bank board.

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Unfortunately, women are often undermined by men, even when they manage to get considered for a top-level position. For this reason, Natividad pushes women toward entrepreneurship because they can be their own boss. She likes to see women start and grow a business, taking advantage of opportunities they come across.

A good example are two sisters who found the price of escargot to be too expensive in a Brussels restaurant, so they started the Fereikos Helix snail farming company in Greece and taught farmers sustainable practices. The result is that they are now the biggest exporters of escargot and other related products in their country.

Equal Place in the Sun

Women around the world continue to face difficulties in taking their rightful and equal place in their respective economies.

The struggles may be based in cultural mores, family expectations or limitations, childcare responsibilities, and bias in the workplace. Women frequently have no support structure, making their successes even more remarkable.

"Women deserve an equal place in the sun," Natividad says. "It is nothing more than that."

Thank goodness for visionaries like Irene who refuse to accept the status quo. It is nothing more than that for her.