

## FEATURES

# 'It's not women we need to fix, it's the workplace'

Diversity consultant Avivah Wittenberg-Cox tells *Jamie Johnson* why gender balance is good for the bottom line

**I**f you want to run a successful business that caters for a Chinese market, the strategy is simple: hire Chinese people to help manage it, learn the language and culture of the Chinese, and think about the future by having young Chinese talent in your leadership pipeline.

If you replace the word "Chinese" with the word "women", the business sense remains the same, but it is a

**Balancing act: Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, right, says male boards need to be shown proof that companies with more women in senior roles generate more profit**



strategy barely recognisable in companies up and down the UK and around the world.

So says Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, CEO of 20-First, a gender consultancy firm that aims to help build balanced businesses and has published statistics showing that, globally, 80 per cent of consumer goods purchasing decisions are made by women – yet the executive committees of the world's 20 biggest retail and food companies are 82 per cent male.

Last week, *The Daily Telegraph* revealed that a government-backed review showed that FTSE bosses were using "pitiful" excuses to keep women out of boardrooms, while yesterday, the CEO of Qatar Airways drew audible groans when he told a press conference that his airline "has to be led by a man, because it is a very challenging position".

Wittenberg-Cox's assessment is withering: "If anyone is still doubting the capacity of women to lead, you can ask where the [real] issue lies. Is it with the women, or is it with the men that hold these opinions? The problem is that we still have a generation of men running companies who did not grow up in a gender-balanced business world."

The softly-spoken CEO continues: "In every single company, it's the leadership team that [needs to start] the conversation around gender in a positive way."

I begin to ask what she does first if she goes into a company and finds a poor gender balance. "This is every company," she interjects, immediately. "It's not if you go into a company, it's when you go in."

Wittenberg-Cox's firm has been called upon by some of the world's biggest brands, including Nestlé, Bayer and Unilever, to change mindsets rather than set targets.

"What we do is walk in and have a session with the executive team and do an audit of what's going on, what their leaders think of the topic, what their numbers actually mean. Very often they don't have data in legible ways. They need two pictures."

Wittenberg-Cox politely asks for my notepad and pen and draws an x-y axis with a line going from left to right, increasing slowly over time.

"This is percentage of women, and this is time. And what they [see] is, 'Oh it's going up over five years, and that's progress.' But then we show them another graph and..."

She draws another x-y axis: seniority and time, with two lines representing the ratio of men and women in each role. As seniority increases, those two lines diverge, with more men taking the top jobs than women, despite there being roughly equal numbers at entry.

"What they need to see is that at every promotion level, the percentage of women goes down and the percentage of men goes up. We show them the data, and then we shut the door and let them have it out with each



JULIAN SIMMONDS FOR THE TELEGRAPH; GETTY IMAGES

other." The *Telegraph's* Women Mean Business campaign is shining a light on the inequalities faced by women in business, from re-entry into the workplace after having children, to funding gaps in start-up financing. Most UK businesses are currently grounded in what Wittenberg-Cox calls "fix-the-women strategies".

She explains: "You look at the City and gender is totally framed as a diversity issue. But diversity is so vast and as soon as you're in that bundle you lose out because there are 5,000 other dimensions to focus on. The fact that women are 60 per cent of the market often gets lost. If you look at what they try to do, everything in the UK is aimed at 'let's help women' and I say 'let's stop helping women, let's start fixing workplaces'.

"Women's networks, women's

coaching, mentoring for women, it's all well-meaning but in the City, there are conferences for women and it's a really good way to get an award, to look good, or say that you're so progressive. [But] the guys that lead it, they'll come in at the beginning of a women's conference and say 'I so support you' and then they leave, as if it's not their business."

Wittenberg-Cox's key point is that it is very much in their business interests to have a balanced leadership team.

A Credit Suisse report from 2016 showed that companies with at least one female director received a better return on their investments compared to those with all male boards, and that companies where women occupied at least 15 per cent of senior management

roles generated 50 per cent more profit than those where less than 10 per cent of senior managers were female.

"Most people don't get the business link," she says, "so we have to show them and prove it, so that they buy it."

Once the business case for gender balance has been made, the next step is for companies to understand how the current imbalance was reached in the first place – "They haven't got a clue. They think it's a really strong meritocracy because they got there, and then how do you change things?" – before they can begin to fix it.

So how does she go about it? Are all-women shortlists the answer, or should high-paid men take pay cuts, like at the BBC? Last week, Huw Edwards, 53, became the latest male presenter to apparently agree to a pay cut of at least 20 per cent, equivalent to around £120,000.

It is not about pitting men against women, she insists, but an extreme devotion to balance: "We want gender-balanced shortlists because we want gender balance. Promotions need to be gender-balanced. Instead of 'men taking pay cuts', it should be 'check that salaries are balanced'."

She attributes her passion to her mother, who was born in Berlin in 1925, hid from the Nazis in France, was deported back to Germany and survived the Holocaust, all before she turned 20, when Canada welcomed her with open arms.

Now 56, mother to two 20-somethings, Wittenberg-Cox says that education is the starting point for success: yet as more research by 20-First shows that 60 per cent of the world's graduates are female, why is the road to the top still dominated by men? Because women leave work to have children?

She jumps in again: "Men have children, too, but no one ever says that. Everyone talks about maternity as the crux of the issue but it's not. Let me make that clear. It is a huge issue, but leadership cultures are still based on masculine norms. Parental leave is a huge step – we have got men to be fathers, but we haven't got them to be balanced, dual-career managers."

She is keen to illustrate that progress is being made: "I often ask women, is there any other year you would rather have been born in? The answer is always, no. This #MeToo stuff is bad now, but can you imagine what it was like 20, 30 years ago? Just ask any woman that you know what it was like before." But she is equally keen that we pick up the pace, while there is still some distance to go.



To find out more about the *Telegraph's* Women Mean Business campaign go to [telegraph.co.uk/women/business](http://telegraph.co.uk/women/business)