

Still a long way to go

Seven years ago, the government set an aspirational target of having boards of directors comprise at least 30% women by 2016. The result, however, missed the mark by a long chalk.

Boards consisted of only 13% women on average and the government had to tweak its target for the top 100 companies in the country, instead of across the board. At the end of last year, boards comprised 19.2% women on average.

Setting a target and directing listed companies to achieve it was clearly not enough. That is why the 30% Club Initiative — a global movement founded in the UK to place women in 30% of all leadership positions at all levels of organisation — was introduced in this country.

The Malaysian 30% Club was launched in 2015. Tan Sri Megat Zaharuddin, Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah and Tan Sri Zarinah Anwar were appointed co-chairpersons. Last year, Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan and Datuk Mohaiyani Shamsudin joined the club as advisory co-chairs.

The club makes it a point to state in all its materials that gender diversity is not simply a matter of corporate social responsibility — it is good for business. “Numerous studies show that a diverse board results in improvement in the financials of a company. In today’s scenario, international funds look at board diversity as a component to consider before investing in companies,” it says.

Malaysia’s corporate sector is rising to the challenge, albeit more slowly than expected. In the meantime, there is a need to train women for board positions. This role is taken on by LeadWomen Network, a platform that empowers women to grow and develop as great leaders and role models.

Deloitte Malaysia risk advisory leader Cheryl Khor says there is currently no shortage of initiatives that promote having more women on boards of directors. “While that stands, organisations need to be more resourceful in selecting candidates and looking for candidates beyond titles and strict experience-related requirements. Why not assess candidates based on their potential?”

Khor points out that versatile and dynamic professionals are agile and can adapt and learn to become great leaders and board members. “On the other hand, women themselves need to be more proactive in considering career advancement and when aspiring to be on boards. Search for the right companies for an opportunity in a leadership role that also provides the right profiling and personal branding.”

She adds that despite the availability of mentoring programmes, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership and board roles. “Traditional approaches to diversity are getting women in the door and fostering retention and development, but

not advancing sufficient women to leadership quickly enough. Despite decades of increased focus on quotas, development, women’s rights and flexibility, only a fraction of women are on boards, let alone CEOs, of large companies.”

Khor says something is clearly missing from the strategies to empower and advance women to top-level positions in the private and public sectors. “The missing link is the process to empower, invest, accelerate and, most importantly, have inclusive leadership.”

Lee Soo Fern, leader of Malaysia talent and Asean diversity and inclusiveness at EY, points out that men still call the shots. “It is a reality that the boardrooms, leadership and decision-making circles today are still dominated by men. Women do not always get a seat at the table. Or if they do, they are sometimes made to feel that they need to prove their ability or worth, or they need to work much harder and that they are not there just to meet a quota,” she says bluntly.

She adds that in addition to meritocracy, diversity and inclusiveness, consideration should also be given to decision-making or the appointment of board members. “Having a quota helps place a visible target or goal to strive towards and to measure achievement.”

However, Lee hastens to add, such quotas should not be at the expense of meritocracy. “Women also need to be comfortable and confident to hold their own and not be intimidated by their surroundings,” she says.

Ultimately, everyone needs to work towards eliminating unconscious bias in the environment and provide everyone who is capable — women and men alike — access to opportunities and a seat at the table, says Lee.

Pauline Ho, people partner at PwC Malaysia and member of the Malaysian 30% Club’s steering committee, is a strong advocate of mentoring. “Mentoring opens doors for women. It did for me! I am a strong believer in the power of mentorship as I have benefited from it,” she says.

“It is an invaluable experience for the mentor — an independent person with no vested interests other than to provide guidance and share experiences — to play a part in helping the mentee achieve her aspirations.”

She adds that the 30% Club’s board mentoring scheme not only allows mentees to learn from the experience of senior board members



I have seen how gender diversity contributes positively to board performance

> **Tunku Ali Redhaudin**

but also provides them with the opportunity to network with other board members. “I certainly hope to see more mentees from the programme appointed to boards. A number of them are already in the pipeline to be considered for board placements.”

Noor Ashikin Abdullah, director and co-head of institutional equities at RHB Investment Bank Bhd, who is one of the mentees, echoes Ho’s sentiment. “The sessions with my mentor, [CIMB Group Holdings Bhd director] Teoh Su Yin, have been enlightening. We sat down together and agreed that I needed to reinvent myself,” she says.

Noor Ashikin’s background was largely in the investment sector — research, fund management and stockbroking/investment banking. “The banking horizon has changed. So, as bankers, we need to keep up with the fast pace of financial technology. My discussions with Teoh also led me to pursue my interest in Islamic banking. To this day, we continue to exchange news and ideas,” she says.

Bumi Armada Bhd chairman Tunku Ali Redhaudin Tuanku Muhriz is one of the mentors because he believes that gender diversity leads to board performance. “I became a mentor because, in addition to wanting to see board membership be more representative of the population, I have seen how gender diversity contributes positively to board performance,” he says. “I sit on a number of boards that vary in composition and I find that the conversations (and the resulting decision-making) are better when a broad mix of skills, backgrounds and experiences are well represented. Given the significant proportion of women graduates entering the Malaysian workforce currently, it would be good to see more female role models in the corporate world,” he adds.

— By Jennifer Jacobs



Khor



Lee



Ho



Tunku Ali Redhaudin