

# WOMEN IN MAJOR PROJECT LEADERSHIP



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on 17th October 2017

At its ninth [Gender Balance Initiative](#) event, the Major Projects Association invited a range of speakers to share their experiences and knowledge of women in major project leadership.

The significance of the topic and the scale of the challenge is clear when one considers that whilst 90% of government policy is delivered through major projects, across the Government Major Project Portfolio, only one in four of the 243 project leaders (senior responsible owners) are female. At director general level the statistic falls to one in six. The data also shows that the imbalance is greater in departments that have more significant major projects, where the pay gap is also greater.

Many current approaches to tackling this issue focus on helping women to fit into a masculine, male-dominated system. Sue Pritchard argued that this will never work; she believed that institutionalised gender difference remains a man-made problem, perpetuated by 'the alpha male club', one of the most powerful determinants of organisational culture. Delegates also spoke of their experiences in the project environment, where an alpha male culture persists even on projects which have set hard targets for gender parity.

Whilst HR teams are working hard at ensuring diverse and inclusive recruitment processes, at senior levels leaders are selecting their teams for future projects 'in their own image', without transparency and often with bias. These cultures are perpetuating the power gap in businesses and institutions – something which John Edmonds, co-author of the book *Man-Made*, described as a scandal of enormous proportions.

Through interviews with 115 successful women, the book identifies why there are so few women in positions of power today and looks at what should be done to address it. Edmonds pointed out that just 38 of the top 700 positions in the FTSE 350 companies are held by women and only 1% of board positions in the FTSE 100 are advertised. And yet companies claim to promote individuals on merit. How can this be true, he asked, when girls outperform boys at school but are failing to become business leaders?

*'Unless you get what is happening in your workforce right, people will come into your organisations, look around and after a couple of years say: "I don't think so".'*

Suzy Firkin, Principal Associate, WISE

Other barriers were identified by co-author of *Man-Made*, Eva Tutchell, who noted that the glass ceiling could be better described as a glass labyrinth. Women routinely underestimate their talent, skills and experience. They tend to wait for recognition rather than pushing themselves forward. Women interviewed all noted that they were physically scrutinised by men, who saw them first as women before they saw them as professionals. Maternity breaks are viewed as an inconvenience by companies, and part-time work remains stigmatised as a failure to commit fully to work.

*'We were staggered at the number of women who are at the top of their profession, who are extremely competent, that are still looking over their shoulders. Every single woman told us that she was lucky. If you think your success is due to luck then where does your self-belief come in?'*

Eva Tutchell, Co-author, *Man-Made*

Systemic barriers are not the only hurdles. At the Environment Agency, which boasts a 2,200-person strong Women's Network, confidence is annually voted as the biggest career barrier for women in the organisation. To address this, the Network urged the HR department to develop a career and personal development programme for women, which was subsequently expanded to cover all protected characteristics. According to Claire Bell, Co-Lead of the Women's Network, it has made a huge difference, with participants more likely to seek and achieve promotion.

## WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS?

- 1) Enforce the equal pay act and the sex discrimination act with a public agency that takes care of these issues, that funds and supports women and takes class actions. Groups provide protection.
- 2) More transparency – companies ought to reveal how they pay men and women and what their structures are in gender terms.
- 3) Direct intervention through quotas. It worked in Norway and it worked for the Labour party.
- 4) Disrupt the perceptions of what is a normal career as this is based entirely on the male experience. Work breaks should be regarded as a normal part of life.

For the Environment Agency, the impact of its Women's Network has been a steady year-on-year growth in women throughout the organisation since the initiative was launched in 2009. At executive manager level, the staff is 38% female, up from around 22% in 2007.

Having an outward-looking and inclusive network with clear and mutually beneficial goals is one of the gender balance initiatives that is proven to work, said Suzy Firkin, Principal Associate of **Women in Science and Engineering (WISE)**. Longevity too is critical, as organisations can lose momentum once initiatives are implemented and efforts can fade.

Firkin reported that during WISE's annual benchmarking activity against their **Ten Steps**, the step 'Educate your leaders and give them accountability for change' was the lowest performing measure for two years in a row. The fact that leaders are not being accountable or educated around gender balance could be a key reason that women are not progressing as often as their male counterparts, and why so many companies struggle to retain senior women.

Despite over 30 years of positive action programmes and changes to legislation, gender equality has stagnated, said presenters, and this means that companies should look at doing things differently to ensure that more women move into major project leadership. Despite the initial controversy of Norway's positive discrimination movement to create equality on boards it has been a major success, fundamentally correcting inequalities and winning over its critics.

In the major projects environment clients are increasingly asking for their project teams to be as diverse and representative as the end users that projects serve. Companies that fail to act could fail to win work in the future. Manon Bradley of the Major Projects Association Gender Balance Initiative has recognised that clients hold an important lever, and she is working with the **Infrastructure Client Group** to find a collective response to this issue.

Head of Human Resources for the UK and Ireland at AECOM, Adam Rawlings Smith, described how they are trying to create an inclusive culture. Their five-part strategy aims to create a balanced system where merit is the only thing that counts.

*'I believe it's really important to promote on merit, that's the only way you can ensure a fair process. However, that's dependent on agreeing what merit is and defining it correctly across an organisation. I see it as our job to help people think differently about what merit is and what is required. If you don't get this right, and promote for the wrong reasons then you'll create further problems.'*

Adam Rawlings Smith, Head of Human Resources, UK & Ireland, AECOM



#### POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Is our definition of merit failing women by being too 'man-shaped'?
- Does your company advertise senior and board-level positions?
- What are the cultural obstacles preventing women from taking leadership roles in your organisation and how could these be addressed?

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Sue Pritchard, Director, Food, Farming & Countryside Commission, RSA  
 Adam Rawlings Smith, HR Director, UK & Ireland, AECOM  
 Jackie Roe, Programme Manager, Tideway, CH2M  
 Aman Sharma, Director, Chander Change Consultancy  
 Eva Tutchell, Co-author *Man-Made: Why So Few Women Are in Positions of Power*

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