

01/05/2003

Dutch boost for women in top management

Zatasha Idris

THE playing field is not altogether fair. Look around and you'll see that most of the bigwig players happen to be men. Perhaps a couple of women muscle for attention, whilst many others sit on the reserve bench - longing to get into the game. The game we're speaking of is not football; it's finance.

In the corporate world, women in managerial or leading positions are few and far between. The good news is that increasingly, women are breaking through the glass ceiling, getting over the many hurdles before them in this fiercely competitive environment.

The number of women in senior posts is increasing every year, yet the figures show we still have a long way to go. According to Fortune 500, only 90 out of the 500 companies have women corporate officers.

In Canada, the statistics are markedly improving, whereby women own or operate 30 per cent of all firms - an estimate of 700,000 companies providing jobs to 1.7 million Canadians.

Recently, the Canadian High Commissioner to Malaysia Jean C. McCloskey said that although women accounted for half or more of the population in most societies, they are more often than not neglected in economic development.

McCloskey emphasised that a woman's role in the economic and political infrastructure is vital for society to progress - an example adopted by the Canadian government to encourage women's advancement.

In the Netherlands, life for a female entrepreneur is a little tougher. Out of the top 100 executives, only one is a woman. Ewald Kist, the CEO of ING Group (one of the largest Dutch multinational companies), is one of the many leading businessmen who realised talent was being wasted by not employing women in head positions.

"Women managers have a good influence on an organisation," says Kist. "If you can strike the balance right, you get a much stronger management team."

Due to the low statistics, the Ministries of Economic Affairs and Social Affairs and Employment established an agency called Opportunity in Bedrijf six years ago, which advises companies on how to get more women into senior management.

One of the consultants at Opportunity in Bedrijf, Margo van Berkel, described the economic situation. The whole system was geared to men earning and women running the home. Today, more women go out to work, but either stop or work part-time as soon as children arrive. Both men and women still feel it's wrong to leave their children with someone else while their mother works full-time.

Despite this deep-rooted traditional thinking, a gradual transformation is occurring in the Netherlands. Before, people voiced their concerns on the lack of women in managerial posts as a social issue. Now however, they realise that it's in their economic interest to promote women. It's undeniable that if you were to have mixed management teams, the results are far more innovative and creative.

Why? Because you would have the perfect balance between men's competitive, result-driven approach and women's aptitude for working with others and combining work and home-life, is van Berkel's opinion.

Similarly, van Berkel believes that women are less hierarchical and more people-centred whilst men tend to be more competitive and status-oriented.

Although the Netherlands is making positive headway into changing their business culture, Malaysia has already made leaps and bounds where women leaders are concerned.

Vice-president of International Federation of Women Entrepreneurs (IFWE) Norazizah Borhan said she is proud to be a Malaysian woman because men in Malaysia have given women opportunities especially in male-dominated areas.

"The Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed initiated this open concept and we are reaping its many benefits. Ten years ago, it would have been difficult for women to even express their struggles and ambitions. Nowadays, it is proven that women can lead, and we have the full confidence of the men that we can do the job."

Norazizah is not your typical feminist advocate. She doesn't spout gender issues. She believes instead that women who want to break through the glass ceiling must deliver and perform the job in hand so as to be taken seriously.

"In order to be respected, you have to be hands-on, be confident of your skills and then the sky's the limit," she says with a smile.

Norazizah has enormous respect for Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Minister of International Trade and Industry, since the latter is proof that women in Malaysia can hold powerful posts.

"Ninety per cent of the women I know are CEOs or hold managerial positions. The annual growth of women playing the lead role in large corporations is on the rise, as they leave their nine-to-five jobs to head smaller corporations or entrepreneurial ventures," says Norazizah.

Naturally, there are a few stubborn souls who believe that a woman's domain is not the office, but the kitchen. Norazizah's response is that women are adept at multi-tasking and juggling obligations, but that they must remember the homefront is an all-important criterion.

On the whole, as Malaysians, we are lucky to have men who place their faith on their female counterparts, levelling out the playing field and utilising talents that might have been otherwise wasted.

Perhaps the Age of the Amazonian female warriors is not so much a myth but more a foresight of what's to come.

* You can witness Dutch businesses, cultures and traditions at the Royal Netherlands Embassy promotion in Suria KLCC and Mandarin Oriental till May 3.