Moving Toward Gender Diversity in Southeast Asia
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Moving Toward Gender Diversity in Southeast Asia

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September 2017
Given the looming talent shortage in leadership positions in Southeast Asia, companies must take bolder steps to promote gender diversity, rethink their assumptions on what works, and go beyond policies focused on cultural interventions to making meaningful changes. We interviewed over 25 companies and surveyed 1,600 employees in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam to uncover issues associated with promoting gender diversity, analyze what is working best across the region, and set out clear steps.

A SLOW PUSH TO CLOSE THE GENDER GAP
Southeast Asia has come a long way with women’s participation in the workforce, however, progress has been slow. With the exception of Vietnam, the lack of progress is even starker at senior levels. While most governments in the region have taken the lead in increasing gender diversity at senior levels by introducing hard targets, private sector companies have been slow to follow.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS ON GENDER DIVERSITY
With limited resources available, companies must focus on the most effective measures that provide the highest return. The two key areas to focus on—retention and advancement—go hand in hand. Our research shows that gender diversity is most positively affected by interventions that actually change the way people work and interact, rather than by broad statements and policies. Supporting women at moments of truth, building an environment where women feel supported, and developing role models are key.

IT’S TIME TO ACT ON GENDER DIVERSITY
Globalization, economy shifts, and the presence of women trailblazers are changing the cultural and demographic status quo. Governments are acting on gender diversity and companies should follow. Companies need to take a businesslike approach, think about what gives the largest return on investment, and follow through with their gender diversity policies.
Discussions about gender diversity are still very much in the early stages across most of Southeast Asia (SEA). Engagement levels vary significantly across countries, company types, and industries. But overall progress has generally been organic with most companies choosing to institutionalize a limited number of interventions—typically those required by law or perceived as “market practice.” Some governments, blue chip local companies, and MNCs have been more active, but there has been little research as to which measures are the most valued by female employees.

Given the looming talent shortage in the region, now is the time for companies in Southeast Asia to take bolder steps to promote gender diversity. To maximize the “bang for the buck” for their efforts, they need to rethink their assumptions on what works in promoting gender diversity, and go beyond policies focused on cultural interventions to making meaningful changes to how work gets done in their organizations.

As part of a global BCG study on gender diversity, we have interviewed over 25 companies and surveyed more than 1,600 employees in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia. We interviewed CEOs and top executives from over 25 of the most prominent companies in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia to understand their perspectives on diversity, the obstacles they have faced, and the effectiveness of activities they have launched to increase gender diversity across all levels of their organizations. In Singapore and Malaysia, we also surveyed approximately 1,600 employees in 14 companies while in Vietnam, we ran an open survey with approximately 500 respondents. Participating companies spanned financial services, energy, public sector, technology, media and telecommunications and general industry organizations.

Executives and employees named key obstacles for increasing gender diversity in their organizations. They identified which of 39 discrete diversity interventions (interventions related to advancement, leadership, culture, and retention) presently exist within their organizations, and of those, which are most and least effective, and which should be prioritized immediately.
Indonesia (interviews only), and Vietnam to uncover issues associated with promoting gender diversity, analyze what is working best across the region, and set out clear steps companies and their CEOs should take right away to increase gender diversity.

**A Slow Push to Close the Gender Gap**

Over the last few decades, Southeast Asia has come a long way with women’s participation in the workforce. Increasing globalization and fast economic development in the 1980s have shifted cultural assumptions and demographics, driving female workforce participation in the SEA region to 42%, higher than the global average of 39%. However, progress since the 1990s has been slow, with only a 2 percentage point increase over the last 30 years in female workforce participation; with almost no improvement in Indonesia1. The lack of progress, with the exception of Vietnam, which now has one of the highest shares of women in CEO/board level positions in Southeast Asia, is even starker at more senior levels, with women comprising only 12% of board members at SEA's largest companies. (See Exhibit 1.)

![EXHIBIT 1 | Gender gap remains significant in SEA](image)

While most governments in the region have taken the lead in increasing gender diversity at senior levels in government bodies and state-owned enterprises by introducing hard targets (for example in Malaysia, the share of women at board level has increased from 6% in 2010 to 14% in 2015, approximately, after introduction of quotas), private sector companies have been slow to follow with more active interventions. BCG research shows that although there are some notable exceptions and success stories, few companies in SEA have taken a very proactive stance on gender diversity. Companies tend to limit interventions to the
FOUR BELIEFS THAT HINDER GENDER DIVERSITY

Belief #1: The current state of gender balance is a natural equilibrium, as women naturally give up their careers for family
This speaks to deep-rooted cultural biases. In reality, women don’t want to give up their careers. Our research shows that more than 75% of women in surveyed companies intend to seek promotion within or outside the current company. In fact, women in countries that are seen as more traditional such as Malaysia and Indonesia are just as keen to advance their careers as their counterparts in more liberal Singapore.

Belief #2: We have bigger and more urgent priorities, specifically growth, transformation, and internationalization
Certainly companies in SEA are adapting to changing sources of growth in their home markets and structural shifts in the global economy. However, in our work across the region, we see that business leaders often cite the talent gap as one of the biggest impediments to achieving their business objective, be it growth or transformation. In this context, it is difficult to justify not doing everything you can to get the most from the talent available to you, especially leveraging the female talent you already have. Closing the female talent gap, therefore, must be a business imperative—this requires active interventions and won’t “just happen.”

EXHIBIT 2 | Women want to be promoted
Intent to seek promotion and stay in the company

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BCG research
Belief #3: Promoting gender diversity comes at the expense of meritocracy
Companies highlighted that active interventions could backfire by causing successful women and others around them to second-guess why they were chosen for promotions, or by reinforcing stereotypes. This concern was heard most often in Malaysia and Indonesia, which are also the least advanced in promoting gender diversity in the region. However, in companies where the thinking and conversation on gender diversity is more advanced, such concerns came up less frequently, if at all.

Gender diversity interventions have to be designed in a way that does not give the appearance that women have been promoted unfairly. Transparency is key. As we explain later in the report, the most effective and successful interventions are not perceived as unfair—as quotas are—but are focused on work-life balance and benefit the wider employee community.

Belief #4: Focusing on gender will come at the expense of wider inclusion (race, ethnicity, age, and others) which is also important
In multicultural and ethnically diverse SEA, race, ethnicity, and citizenship inclusion agendas are important for both governments and companies. Some companies in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia have a number of initiatives to address better inclusion of a specific race or ethnic group, nationalities, or even age groups in addition to gender. These priorities compete for resources and management’s attention and time.

However, the real issue is that companies are treating diversity components as silos even though they ultimately strive for the same overall goal—fostering an inclusive culture. Spending more time and resources on gender diversity can help companies to not only increase inclusiveness, but also expand the pool of diverse talent available.

most basic and rarely experiment with interventions beyond what is mandated by government or established market practices. This is despite the fact that the vast majority of companies identified gender diversity as important and understand the business case behind it.

But even companies that actively pursue gender diversity often fail to achieve it. Of the 39 activities we included in our survey, respondents believed their companies participated in an average of 30. Employees in 30% of companies surveyed recognized all 39 interventions². Yet, fewer than 50% of the survey’s women respondents agreed with the statement, “My company is doing a lot to improve gender diversity,” and fewer than 30% of women felt they had personally benefited from their company’s gender diversity program.

This disconnect implies that companies are investing significant time and money, but that there is little evidence to determine which measures will be the most valued by their women employees; and in the end, they are failing to achieve gender diversity goals.
Men and Women: Two Points of View

With the exception of Vietnam, our research shows that men and women have very different views on the subject of gender diversity and how much their companies are doing to improve it.

Men tend to be much more positive about the status of gender diversity in their companies. The majority of surveyed men in Singapore and Malaysia (61% and 71% respectively) perceive that their organizations have good gender diversity in the top management team compared with only 40% and 44% of surveyed women. Men in Singapore and Malaysia (80% and 60% respectively) also feel that their companies are doing a lot to improve gender diversity, compared with only 46% and 43% of women. In our interviews with Indonesian companies, we heard evidence of similar misalignment between senior management and women while in Vietnam, the dichotomy is less evident.

There is also a major difference of opinion about what the key obstacles are to achieving greater gender diversity. Women across Singapore and Malaysia consistently perceive advancement, leadership, and retention as the key obstacles to gender diversity in their organizations (61%, 37%, and 33% in Singapore; 38%, 37%, and 33% in Malaysia). However, senior managers, who are predominantly male, are generally not aware of any obstacles at all (only around 50% of male senior managers indicated that there are any obstacles) and those who are aware of any issues think that recruitment is the key one.

Vietnam, on the other hand, has one of the highest shares of women in top positions in the SEA region, arguably due to the alignment between men and women in understanding the key obstacles for greater gender diversity.

Misalignment can result in resources being allocated to interventions that are addressing the wrong issues and hence do not contribute to better gender diversity. Unless more investment is put into addressing obstacles related to retention and advancement, progress on closing the gender gap in senior positions will remain slow.

There are also discrepancies between what is perceived to be effective (by senior managers) in promoting gender diversity in leadership, and what is actually making a difference (to women, the intended beneficiaries). Only the views on culture-related interventions are aligned between women and senior management. For advancement-related interventions, such as talent management, mentoring, and sponsorship, as well as retention-related interventions, such as flexibility (formal and informal), parental leave, part time hours, management support of personal commitments, and childcare support, women report higher actual effectiveness than perceived by senior managers. Conversely, leadership interventions such as public commitment, having an official gender diversity strategy, and diversity taskforces, are rated less effective by women, but, perceived to be highly effective by senior management. In addition, in general, advancement related initiatives are rated lower in actual effectiveness by women (albeit women report these initiatives as having higher effectiveness than perceived by senior managers). However, this tends to be due to poor implementation rather than the belief that these initiatives are inherently unworthy—see section “How good are your existing initiatives”.

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EXHIBIT 3 | Men are much more positive about the status of gender diversity than women

My company has good gender diversity in the top management team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of respondents</th>
<th>MALAYSIA</th>
<th>SINGAPORE</th>
<th>VIETNAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My company is doing a lot to improve gender diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of respondents</th>
<th>MALAYSIA</th>
<th>SINGAPORE</th>
<th>VIETNAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My company has made progress in the last 1-3 years in improving gender diversity in all levels of the company

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of respondents</th>
<th>MALAYSIA</th>
<th>SINGAPORE</th>
<th>VIETNAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BCG research
Our research shows that gender diversity is most positively affected by interventions that actually change the way people work and interact, rather than by broad statements and policies. The popularity of leadership and cultural interventions shows that companies are investing a lot of effort in those that are not necessarily effective.

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### EXHIBIT 4  |  Men's and women's perception of key obstacles for gender diversity differs

Less than 50% of senior manager men indicated that there are any obstacles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VIETNAM</th>
<th></th>
<th>SINGAPORE</th>
<th></th>
<th>MALAYSIA</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior managers</td>
<td>Female employees</td>
<td>Senior managers</td>
<td>Female employees</td>
<td>Senior managers</td>
<td>Female employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>25 27 30</td>
<td>10 27 26 28 9</td>
<td>16 29 29 26</td>
<td>6 29 30 27 8</td>
<td>17 30 20 29</td>
<td>14 25 24 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>13 22 22 41</td>
<td>9 21 18 36 17</td>
<td>5 19 32 32</td>
<td>6 25 25 34 9</td>
<td>14 23 21 39</td>
<td>15 17 23 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention</td>
<td>10 31 35 24</td>
<td>9 24 37 22 9</td>
<td>19 35 16 26</td>
<td>8 25 40 20 7</td>
<td>15 27 28 26</td>
<td>18 29 22 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advancement</td>
<td>11 25 26 36</td>
<td>10 28 33 22 7</td>
<td>5 19 16 32 26</td>
<td>20 41 20 12</td>
<td>19 24 24 30</td>
<td>14 21 17 22 37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BCG research

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### EXHIBIT 5  |  Not all interventions have proven effective, especially in advancement and leadership
These interventions may be helpful to kickstart the diversity journey but lose effectiveness if not followed through with interventions that change how work is done.

On top of that, SEA companies with a regional footprint have to deal with the complexity of operating in a culturally and ethnically diverse region. For example, role model visibility was rated much higher (among top five most effective) by women in Singapore. Malaysian women on the other hand cared more about on-site childcare while parental leave outreach was highlighted by Vietnamese women.

Given all these differences, not surprisingly, despite the large number of interventions launched, only around 45% of women in surveyed companies believe there has been progress made in gender diversity over the last three years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MALAYSIA</th>
<th>SINGAPORE</th>
<th>VIETNAM</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actually effective</strong></td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Childcare on-site</td>
<td>Informal flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Anti-discrimination policies</td>
<td>Management support for personal commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent management</td>
<td>Anti-discrimination policies</td>
<td>Part-time working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal flex</td>
<td>Role model visibility</td>
<td>Public commitment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EXHIBIT 6 | There are differences in what works across the region**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MALAYSIA</th>
<th>SINGAPORE</th>
<th>VIETNAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived effective</strong></td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public commitment</td>
<td>Gender diversity strategy</td>
<td>Gender diversity strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievance systems</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Public commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-discrimination policies</td>
<td>Diversity task force</td>
<td>Gender-neutral evaluations/promotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role model visibility</td>
<td>Management support for personal commitments</td>
<td>Tracking KPIs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Misaligned understanding on effectiveness of interventions

Source: BCG research

Challenging Assumptions on Gender Diversity

With limited resources available, companies must not only determine which measures are effective, but also focus on the initiatives that provide the highest return.

There are two key areas on which companies must focus: retention and advancement. These two are by far the largest obstacles women face today in their companies, and they require interventions designed to address them specifically. Companies should seriously consider how much effort they want to expend on leadership, recruiting, and culture interventions.

Retention and advancement go hand in hand—without fixing retention, one cannot expect to fully solve advancement, and vice versa.
Focus on the most effective measures

This is not a numbers game; it’s the payoff that counts. We have identified three types of initiatives with the highest payoff across the region on which companies should focus. They are interventions that (1) capture moments of truth, (2) build positive role models, and (3) achieve an inclusive work environment.

**Support women at the moments of truth**

Throughout a woman’s career, there are likely to be several instances when an employer’s commitment will be tested. The first test is usually pregnancy, when it is necessary for women to take a break from their careers. This is usually followed by a need for increased flexibility to raise a family. The third time the employer is tested is when a female employee at mid-career is under pressure due to caring for aging parents, and other family duties. Often a rebalancing of personal and career obligations is necessary. How these moments of truth are dealt with generally defines women’s perception of their employers, as well as tests employers’ commitment to gender diversity.

The majority of companies adopt maternity leave policies that match the legislation in the country. Some companies in Southeast Asia have introduced extended maternity or parental leave. For example, an additional four weeks of maternity leave has been very much welcomed by women, but interestingly, not perceived as very effective by senior managers. One of the reasons for this paradox is the complexity of balancing a company’s needs while the woman is absent, with the woman’s career ambitions. This balance becomes more challenging the longer the leave period, for example, extended no-pay leave of a year or more. A majority of companies promise women on extended leave a place in the company when they return, without clearly defining what that role will be, and that creates uncertainty.
for women. More effective are companies that guarantee women can return to a role with the same level of seniority. One Indonesian conglomerate for example makes an extra effort to ensure that women come back to a role as senior as the one they left without putting a limit on the length of the leave of absence.

For moments of truth beyond childbirth, interventions that allow adjusting work-life balance have proven to be most effective. Ad-hoc parental leave, part-time employment, flexibility to work from home, and management’s understanding of the importance of personal commitments are consistently ranked as the most effective initiatives. These are also interventions that many companies already have in place, whether formally institutionalized or discretionary. However, simply having these interventions is insufficient. One of the key requirements of work-life balance interventions is overcoming the face-time culture that is still very common in many SEA companies. Companies that are most advanced in gender diversity often don’t question the need to work flexibly, and, some encourage all employees to work off site on occasion. There are, of course, practical challenges, such as how you communicate to clients which days an employee is in the office, and how you review whether an appropriate amount of work gets done day to day.

To be effectively implemented, flexibility needs to be embedded in a company’s culture. Leadership commitment won’t be enough, as in a majority of companies, it’s the (mostly male) line managers who are facilitating flexibility discussions and making the ultimate decisions. Therefore, driving understanding and alignment with other colleagues, especially men, is required.

This can get complicated: in some countries, men are less willing to change their behaviors to achieve gender diversity goals. This is largely because they are afraid that their welfare will be affected, for example, that they will have to bear a heavier workload. One way to overcome this is to ensure that work is redistributed transparently and fairly, and to establish a process for tracking satisfaction, and capturing and investigating complaints. This process has been adopted by a global bank in Singapore. Moreover, it should be emphasized that flexibility is not there only for women, but men can equally benefit from this initiative.

**MAKE YOUR ROLE MODELS VISIBLE**

Approximately 50% of women ranked increased visibility and exposure to female leaders and role models among the top five most effective initiatives. Despite being ranked as very effective, (and significantly more effective than investing in interventions related to leadership commitment or gender policy declaration), there is relatively limited effort invested in building positive role models. One of the key reasons for role model success is it’s perception as “walking the talk,” especially if the role model has been grown internally.

Choosing the right role models is critical. Women must be able to relate to the role models. For example, some women value role models who have achieved professional success while having children. But there will also be women who relate to senior women with no family at all. Naturally, there is no one perfect model, and to achieve success, companies must think about selecting a larger number of role models with different priorities and stories to share.
The role model must also be approachable, have some mentoring abilities, and be willing to engage junior women. Not all women are open to mentoring. Interestingly, during our interviews we heard about multiple cases where successful women are not perceived as helpful, perhaps because they had to claw their way up and believe that their successors should make their own way as well.

In addition to building female role models, identifying male employees who support gender diversity, and rewarding them, can lead to greater chances of success. This point is specifically important, especially in countries where men do not view gender diversity as an issue.

**CASE EXAMPLE: SHELL MALAYSIA**

In Malaysia, many companies face challenges in retaining female talent. Women are under a lot of pressure to start families at a young age and find it challenging to balance those expectations with work commitments. Many chose to drop off the ladder despite their ambitions to become executives.

Shell Malaysia was having trouble meeting its targets for percentage of women at higher level positions, due to high attrition rates. To increase retention of younger female talent, Shell set up the Shell Women’s Network (‘SWN’) as an avenue to increase visibility of successful women and for female leaders to engage and mentor younger colleagues. SWN unites a large number of senior women from different backgrounds who have taken different paths to achieving success.

The diversity of role models in SWN is what makes this program so successful.

**BUILD AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE WOMEN FEEL INCLUDED**

Ensuring an inclusive work environment is important for driving gender diversity—or any kind of diversity. Uniformly making organizations across the region safe and comfortable places for women is one of the more effective ways to attract and retain talent.

At a minimum, companies need to address harassment and discrimination issues. This is still a problem despite all the perceived actions to improve gender diversity, and despite the fact that most companies say they have anti-discrimination policies. Shockingly, 20% to 40% of women have experienced or seen incidences of gender discrimination at their companies. To really make anti-discrimination policies work, companies need to increase the effectiveness and safety of escalation channels and adopt a “no tolerance” policy on discrimination that is publicly enforced by leadership.

Given the relatively traditional cultures in Southeast Asia, companies must also consider how to avoid polarity in career/family dimensions. Dissolving the perception that it’s a zero-sum game can go a long way to improving inclusiveness. Companies across the region have been successful in organizing social events where
the whole family is invited to a woman’s workplace and the importance and value of women’s work is celebrated. Other companies have encouraged men to take advantage of flexibility interventions helping to beat the stigma of men who take a more active role in family and childcare in a society where men are measured by their success at work.

**CASE EXAMPLE: SGC VIETNAM**

One of the challenges many Vietnamese women face is the demand from family to spend more time caring for their children. While women do have career ambitions, family commitments and lack of support from employers often eventually force them to quit their jobs or choose not to be promoted. Given the importance of the female workforce, SGC attempted to alleviate the pressure to leave by making the company more inclusive to families. SGC frequently organizes social events that invite husbands and children to the office. This allows families to spend time together, creating bonds among the company’s families. Another objective is for husbands to understand and appreciate what exactly their wives do at work, and for children to be proud of their mothers. This initiative has reduced husbands’ demand for their wives to leave their jobs.

Through this and other gender diversity initiatives, SGC has been able to retain talented women and has a high female participation rate of 65% to 70% overall, 55% in management and close to 30% in top leadership.

**How Good Are Your Existing Initiatives?**

A good initiative with bad implementation is just another bad initiative. Some well-meaning interventions are not bringing in expected returns despite a significant effort invested. While these interventions, mostly focused on advancement, are aligned with key obstacles, they suffer from poor implementation.

Our research shows that interventions yielding lower payoffs across the region include (1) interventions supporting professional development, (2) bias reduction efforts, and (3) interventions increasing leadership commitment.

**SUPPORTING CAREER ADVANCEMENT**

Companies invest a lot of effort in career advancement interventions such as specific training programs designed for top performers (men and women), executive coaching, and sponsorships. They top-up by organizing women-specific trainings that focus on building confidence, increasing presence, and honing presentation skills, as well as mentorship programs. These programs can be expensive and require significant resources and commitment from management if they are to be effective.
Many of these programs are not delivering the expected results. Most women think that shortcomings in implementation are the key impediment. Training programs are often episodic instead of systemic. And it’s even more difficult to keep sponsorship and mentorship programs consistently active over a long period of time. To make sponsorship and mentorship more effective, there must be a greater accountability on the part of sponsors or mentors to help women succeed, moving from advisor to advocate.

Another challenge cited in our interviews is bias (unconscious or otherwise) around evaluation and promotion. In Southeast Asia, stereotypes are very much alive, and there are certain perceptions of what is suitable for women and what is not (for example, sales jobs, which require a lot of golfing, wining, and dining are seen to be unsuitable for women). This leads women to disengage, as their skills are not used and their opinions are not valued.

A strength-focused approach to women’s development can be a solution. Based on learnings from BCG’s Apprenticeship in Action initiative, women tend to respond better to development programs that are based on their strengths rather than those that focus on correcting their weaknesses. If companies were to focus on women’s strengths, rather than the skills historically deemed important for a particular role, evaluation and promotion bias could be reduced. One company in Vietnam found a very elegant way to promote a woman to CEO in an industry perceived as men-only with a significant wining and dining requirement. The promotion was based on the woman’s strengths in operations, and the traditional social aspect of the role was simply taken over by another senior person in the company. This way the company managed to get the best of both worlds and keep the talent in the company.

**Bias reduction training**

Bias reduction training is usually organized as a one-off training organized by a company. Therefore the effect tends to be short-lived and managers quickly revert to unconscious bias as there is no effective day-to-day system in place.

A more effective way to address the issue is to design a process that removes the potential for unconscious bias in day-to-day activities. This can be done by removing names from résumés, involving more women in the recruiting and interviewing process, and designing a scoring system for promotions that is objectively based on skills and merit, rather than abstract and subjective judgment.

**Transparency and leadership’s commitment to gender diversity**

During our interviews with executives, we heard from companies that the key success factor for gender diversity is commitment from leadership, and that gender diversity must be embedded in company values and culture—with leadership ensuring follow-through. This includes leaders making their support known publicly both inside and outside the organization. Only when diversity is practiced at the top, will the lower levels of an organization follow.

We heard great examples from Indonesia where some companies established a diversity role to oversee progress, and other companies declined to enter a business
relationship due to the fact female executives were not treated respectfully by the potential partners. These kinds of leadership interventions show commitment and provide encouragement to women.

One of the key reasons companies are not seen to be committed to gender diversity is the inconsistency of management policies. Initial momentum is often lost as the usual business priorities take over. Companies should think about complementing official policies and statements with hard accountability measures—they should run diversity as a business project, setting milestones and monitoring progress. Only hard discipline will push gender diversity through all levels of the organization.

Some Interventions Will Not Move the Needle

Our research shows that there are some interventions that simply do not resonate with women and are not effective enough to actually make a difference. Companies should reconsider how much effort they expend on interventions such as female advocacy, engaging in public debates, gender pay gap analysis, employee surveys, and the like. These interventions are great for generating momentum, however, their value quickly diminishes if there’s no follow through with hard policies and actions.
Conclusion: It’s Time to Act on Gender Diversity

Now is the time to act on gender diversity in Southeast Asia. Local economic growth, globalization, and global economy shifts are changing the cultural and demographic status quo. The presence of women trailblazers has helped to challenge assumptions on the role of women. Governments have been first to push a more proactive stance on improving gender diversity and begun to adapt. Companies must now follow.

There are no quick wins in the gender diversity game. Without serious commitment, progress will continue to be slow. Companies need to take a businesslike approach, think about what gives the largest return on investment, and follow through with their gender diversity policies.

NOTES
1. World Bank Data
2. Companies that participated in our survey tended to be more proactive in gender diversity
3. CEO, Board level, legislators
4. For standard maternity leave it is usually expected that the employee will come back to same job
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For Further Reading:
To read our recent global gender diversity report Getting The Most of Your Diversity Dollars, please visit: https://www.bcg.com/careers/working-at/women/publications.aspx.