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Is a bamboo ceiling stifling the rise of potential leaders?

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Asian women face the double-jeopardy of gender and culture in Western workplaces

Can you kill two birds with one stone? Apparently not. Despite the best of intentions, employers cannot expect their female-focused diversity policies to do double-duty in tackling other areas of discrimination, such as the 'bamboo ceiling'.

Jessica Yustantio, a doctoral researcher and tutor in the school of management at UNSW Business School, says that while more women may be stepping into senior executive positions and boardrooms, the workplace policies and programs that cleared their path are not necessarily helping people with diverse cultural backgrounds, such as Asian Australians.

The idea that diversity policies can be 'one-size-fits-all' is one of the myths holding back the understanding of what it takes to build a fair and inclusive workplace, says Yustantio.

And while efforts to combat bias against women can undoubtedly benefit others, each group faces its own challenges, she adds.

When you see that people born in Asian countries make up around 10% of Australia's population, dominate the lists of the top academic performers at school and university and yet are mostly absent from boardrooms and the top of corporate hierarchies, you know something is amiss.

People with Asian background make up only 3% of C-suite senior leaders and 1.6% of CEOs in Australian organisations, according to the 2018 report, 'Leading for Change: A Blueprint for Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Leadership Revisited', by the Australian Human Rights Commission.

Aside from the unfairness indicated by this under-representation, Australia appears to be missing out on the full contribution of people whose potential has been thwarted by bias – unconscious or otherwise.

Yustantio says the bamboo ceiling may not even be a bias against people of Asian background, but a result of a bias in favour of leaders who look Anglo-Saxon.

Passed over

According to Yustantio, people of Asian background are often siloed into jobs and career paths where they perform very well (such as data analytics, for example), but are offered few opportunities for advancement.

"Where they start off is where they stay," she says.

Many also flee the corporate environment to start businesses, which may work out well for them, but it means Australia's big businesses are losing some of their most entrepreneurial and talented potential leaders.

"Speaking to ex-colleagues who have left corporate positions to set up their own businesses, they always say entrepreneurship is so much more flexible – they can do what they want, they're more passionate, there is more drive," says Yustantio.

"Then, towards the end of the conversation, they'll say the politics of climbing the corporate ladder in Australia is difficult – and too 'white'.

"I think it's tough when you don't look the same as the other people in the room – when there is an assumption that because you're Asian, you're good and are better off dealing with 'the numbers', rather than the people side of things. As a consequence, Asians are often passed over in promotion decisions for the opportunity to lead.

"If you can't even reach the opportunity, how can you actually show that you're good at it?"

Physical difference

Research into the stereotyping of Asian Americans finds they face a double-bind if they try to challenge the stereotype of the deferential Asian.

In a University of Toronto study, groups of students stereotyped Asians as being less dominant than whites, but also judged them negatively when they violated this stereotype. East Asians (often stereotyped as the most deferential) who were more dominant at work also reported being harassed more in the workplace.

Like women who violate the 'feminine' stereotype, Asians will be less liked if they appear dominant, but will not be seen as leaders if they do not project dominance.

It is also possible for someone's Asian-ness to be merely skin-deep. They may have an Asian appearance, but no connection to an Asian culture because their family may have been living in Western cultures for generations, or they may have been adopted as a baby into a non-Asian family.

"But if someone looks physically different to the white leader prototype, automatically they have to try twice as hard to fit in and show their leadership competence," says Yustantio.

While Asian women face the double-jeopardy of gender and culture at work – which means they are even less likely to be appointed to leadership roles – men of Asian heritage tend to keep quiet about any discrimination they face, according to Yustantio.

"It makes them perceived as less masculine if they bring up the topic that they are being discriminated against," she says.

A further challenge for the men is that employers, in trying to get some diversity in their executive ranks, may promote an Asian woman and believe they have killed two birds with one stone, says Yustantio.

Emotional labour

People of Asian background are often encouraged to lean in and adopt behaviours to fit in with the dominant group. Yustantio says this is not necessarily a bad thing and may mean speaking up more often.

"For myself, I'm always better with words via email, but in face-to-face meetings I have to push myself out there. In order to get your ideas across, you have to speak up, but there's definitely discomfort."

However, this can become a problem if people are required to fake it and be inauthentic.

"You suck up the emotional labour and you think that it's a short-term thing but, in the long run, you just end up feeling very depressed and anxious each time you're not yourself."

This emotional labour starts right at the job application process. A US study found that employers prefer job seekers who display excitement, disadvantaging those whose culture encourages a calm, cool appearance – such as Hong Kong Chinese.

Yustantio says she has encountered executives who complain they are expected to be chameleons at work.

"We're often told to blend in. Appear as if you're into the beer and rugby thing to get people to see you as part of the club. But at the end of the day, the fake-it-till-you-make-it won't work because it just doesn't come across as authentic. In this day and age, leaders influence by being authentic."

Kickstarting change

Yustantio says she was not a supporter of quotas to enforce diversity in the past, but has changed her mind after seeing how they have kickstarted change for women. Targets can be effective in changing people's perceptions of what leaders look like.

Role models and networks are crucial if people of Asian background are to see their possible selves in corporate leadership.

In line with the motivational theory of role modelling, having role models who share the same social identities can increase the role aspirants' ambitions, motivation and achievements.

Employers can also put in place processes to ensure that everyone who is qualified gets a chance to show their potential as leaders. This could include making sure that everyone in a team gets a chance to lead a meeting and that everyone's input is sought and heard.

Research by Ascend in the US has shown that while Asians and white Americans were equally likely to have supervisory positions (40%), people who were not classified as

white were significantly less likely to lead a meeting, giving them few opportunities to present themselves as potential leaders.

"As members of a multicultural society, we have a responsibility to eliminate stereotypes and biases. Societal problems like the bamboo ceiling cannot be eliminated by simply raising awareness through programs such as cultural diversity training workshops," says Yustantio.

"Change can only come through action, and the time to take action is now."

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