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### Gender equality in Asia: It might get uncomfortable

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# Gender equality in Asia: It might get uncomfortable

March 29, 2020

Prof. Richard R. Smith

We did a study to take a closer look at gender equality across more than 900 companies and nearly 500,000 survey respondents.

As organizations acknowledge international women's day this month, it strikes me that many businesses obviously need to spend much more than a day to advance women in the workplace! It is no secret that addressing gender equality in business has been a challenge in our Asia region. The societal norms, generations of assumptions, and even legal limitations have created hurdles for accepting women in business roles and leadership positions. While this is changing in many countries, the number of women in top political and business roles is much lower in Asia than global averages. If we consider economic potential associated with this missing segment of human capital, Asia could add \$4.5 trillion USD to the annual GDP by 2025. Given an increasing number of female university graduates, aging populations, challenge of skills development, and need for new sources of labour, embracing gender diversity provides a clear opportunity.

Do we need to make men uncomfortable in order to improve gender diversity? The evidence would suggest – yes! When we take on the challenge of diversity, we must recognize that it requires changes in behavior, which can be awkward and challenging

Through my collaboration with the Great Place to Work Initiative, we decided to take a closer look at gender equality across more than 900 companies and nearly 500,000 survey respondents for our recent research report. The largest gaps between the male and female respondents mirrored findings from other studies that suggested that women are not provided with the same opportunities as their male counterparts as shown below.

## Largest gender gap items:

1. People here are paid fairly for the work they do.
2. I feel I make a difference here.
3. Everyone has an opportunity to get special recognition.
4. Managers avoid playing favorites.
5. Promotions go to those who best deserve them.
6. I want to work here for a long time.
7. People avoid politicking and backstabbing as ways to get things done.
8. Management does a good job of assigning and coordinating people.
9. My work has special meaning: this is not "just a job".
10. Management shows appreciation for good work and extra effort.

Through the analysis, we find that companies that have limited gender diversity (male dominated) actually report strong employee results in teamwork and belonging. However, as the gender balance improves by adding women to the mix, we find that the men report a less positive view of teamwork and belonging. In other words, the men become uncomfortable as the traditional "Boys club" is disrupted. The good news is that for those companies with a higher level of diversity and gender balance, the sense of teamwork is high for both men and women – but this takes time.

Do we need to make men uncomfortable in order to improve gender diversity? The evidence would suggest – YES! When we take on the challenge of diversity, we must recognize that it requires changes in behavior, which can be awkward and challenging. In some cases leaders may feel uncertain and colleagues may be sensitive when working in a mixed gender team for the first time. While diversity has shown to foster positive results in terms of innovation and outcomes, it can take time for diverse teams to learn to work together. It is important for team members to create the right environment that is inclusive so that everyone feels a sense of belonging. In other words, just by having diverse people does not provide the benefit of different backgrounds and unique contributions – people must feel free (and safe) to share.

Many companies may work to improve their diversity by hiring people with different backgrounds, but this can have negative consequences if others in the organization are not ready to operate in an inclusive manner. Making a shift to be more inclusive for women will require not just policy changes, but changes in day-to-day management and individual behavior. In the short-term, this can make things less comfortable for the men in a male-dominated workplace, including making male leaders feel less certain about their actions, as assumptions are challenged, and new behaviors are adopted to promote greater inclusiveness.

To help leaders at all levels embrace diversity, some organizations require goals associated with building a more open and diverse workforce. This may surface the need for training of managers to understand and recognize bias in decision-making related to people-decisions

Taking on the challenge of diversity takes time and effort from top leaders with the support of experts who can help guide the efforts. Reviewing the results across Asia a few key action steps emerge:

1. **Address People Decisions:** One of the immediate priorities (and largest gap areas noted in our study) is related to pay, promotions, and recognition. Establishing clear expectations and criteria for advancement with a high-level of transparency is required.
2. **Make Diversity a Management Priority:** To help leaders at all levels embrace diversity, some organizations require goals associated with building a more open and diverse workforce. This may surface the need for training of managers to understand and recognize bias in decision-making related to people-decisions.
3. **Make Personal Connections:** To actively address inclusion and begin to create a sense of belonging, managers can reach out to identify similar and different experiences and interests to their own. Demonstrating curiosity in learning about families, cultures, hobbies, and interests in a work-appropriate way can help break down barriers.
4. **Recognize and Reward Manager Behaviors:** It is often easy to start a diversity initiative, but much harder to keep the momentum. Recognizing and rewarding managers who try new behaviors, undertake efforts to create more inclusive teams and take active steps to improve the openness of the work environment reinforces those efforts.
5. **Use Data to Measure Efforts:** Collecting quantitative and qualitative data to measure and manage your diversity and inclusion initiatives can provide baseline measures and allow you to track progress over time.

While addressing diversity can create challenges for business in our region, it also provides an opportunity for those that choose to embrace the differences. Gender diversity is a clear starting point given the significant differences in experiences of equity and opportunity between men and women in many organizations. By taking clear actions to improve gender diversity this year, perhaps we can deliver improved gender equality results by the next international women's day!

The full Great Place to Work sponsored research report on Asia can be accessed [here](#).