

Research reveals women driving growth globally, but challenges at executive level remain

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New global research released by the US-based Boston Consulting Group (BCG) has revealed that women are increasingly defining the entrepreneurial economy and will create 70 percent of the global growth in income at the household level over the next five years.

The research - which surveyed 12 000 women in 22 countries - found that women spend over 70 percent of consumer dollars worldwide. The study also found that women account for half of university students across the globe. The findings led CNN to declare this October that, "the largest growing economic force in the world isn't China or India - it is women".

Despite these gains, Michael Silverstein, a partner at BCG, said in the Report that women still earn only 77 cents for every dollar men do. And the ranks of female CEOs are still thin. "Most of the big companies are worked by men, for men," he said.

Dr Marjolijn Dijksterhuis, Director of the Women in Leadership programme running at the UCT Graduate School of Business in May and July this year, argues that much needs to be done in order help women break through the glass ceiling that exists in many organisations.

"This increasing centrality of women to driving growth is not reflected at the senior level of business and government, where women are increasingly present but still the minority," said Dijksterhuis.

"Women have a bigger role to play at the level where executive decisions are made," she said.

The GSB Women in Leadership programme is one of the few programmes in the country to target women at this level, and it has been designed to facilitate the jump to senior leadership by grooming proven women managers to become contemporary leaders able to deal with the complex and ever-changing business world of today.

In fact, Dijksterhuis maintains that the shifting business landscape and the growing calls for something other than "business as usual" in the midst of the fall-out from this year's economic downturn could further count in women's favour as they look to break in to more senior positions.

"The increasing complexity and uncertainty of business in a globalised world are waking us up to the limitations of traditional management paradigms. It is becoming clearer that the ability to lead people through change and toward cooperation and innovation has become essential to the success of organisations, and companies are now looking for leaders who can inspire that change.

"I believe women have a lot to offer in terms of these more people-oriented demands," she said.

Dijksterhuis, however, emphasised that the Women in Leadership programme is not about creating an "us versus them" mentality, but instead recognised that women in the workplace often share similar experiences and challenges, and that understanding these is the first step to overcoming them.

This is supported by feedback from those who have completed the programme in previous years. Beverley Damonse, Executive Director of the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement, described the learning she experienced as "profound".

“Women in Leadership provided me with a challenging though nurturing space in which to begin the re-discovery of my personal and professional self: to unpack aspects of self, woman, leader and friend from another perspective or context. My mirror image was not always easy to engage, but the learning was profound and strongly affected by the life stories and leadership experiences of my fellow participants and the energy and commitment of a very talented team of facilitators.”

Elaine Rumboll, Director of Executive Education at UCT GSB who attended the pilot programme in 2008 said, “One of the main issues we face as women leaders is our ability to charter the difference between our intention and impact. This programme gave me enormous insights into my own leadership practise and helped me to draw on my stakeholders with a much greater sense of clarity and effect”.

The course is offered by the Executive Education unit of the UCT GSB and runs this May. It is aimed at women in middle or senior level positions. Contact Junita Abrahams on 021 406 1323 or .

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