

Closing the gender gap through quotas and technology

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“In the last few years, progress has slowed down,” said Christine Lagarde, Managing Director, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Washington DC, adding that gender inequality is not conducive to good inclusive economic growth.

According to the Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2016, the slowdown is partly due to chronic imbalances in salaries and labour force participation.

Isabel de Saint Malo de Alvarado, Vice-President and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Panama, said that women should have the opportunity to be in positions based on merit and not quotas, but admitted that it may take quotas to change the situation. “I don’t think it will happen unless there are quotas,” she said. Lagarde added that gender quotas are in place at the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Robert E. Moritz, Global Chairman, PricewaterhouseCoopers International, PwC, USA, a strong advocate of gender equality in the workplace, stressed that disruptive leadership is needed to improve diversity in the boardroom. He recommended, however, that gender programmes within a company are the way to go as opposed to quotas.

PwC is a supporter of the UN HeForShe initiative to promote gender equality around the world. But Moritz cautioned: “If males are not in the conversation, you will miss it [reducing the gender gap].”

Cynthia Castro, Vice-President, RBA - Reinventing Business for All, Costa Rica, agreed. "Gender inequality affects men because they think it is an issue about women," she said. Castro also underlined the importance of addressing gender bias in the recruitment process, paternity leave and equal parenting, and educating consumers. "You can't be gender-blind in 2017; you have to be gender-smart."

Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, Documentary Filmmaker, SOC Films, Pakistan, and a Co-Chair of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2017, said she took offense when people labelled her a female filmmaker. "I am a filmmaker, not a female filmmaker. What's a female filmmaker?" The award-winning documentary maker also credited technology for improving women's lives and business opportunities. "Women are starting their own businesses using social media, forming networks online."

Mortiz added that technology is useful to manage the balance of professional activities with family responsibilities, and provides data to identify gender problems within a company or organization. "With this information, we can change policies and get to individuals from that information to have an intervention." At a more basic level, de Saint Malo de Alvarado said that mobile phones can provide family planning information for rural women in developing countries who never previously had access.

The 47th World Economic Forum Annual Meeting is taking place on 17-20 January in Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, under the theme Responsive and Responsible Leadership. More than 3,000 participants from nearly 100 countries will participate in over 400 sessions.