

# BUSINESS

## Call for mindset change to turn more women into leaders

They must also step up for senior roles, says advocate of greater female representation

Rosalind Ang

As companies seek to diversify their workplace and boardroom, hiring people for diversity can appear perfunctory, inviting talk of tokenism, said Singlife group chief executive officer Pearlyn Phau.

"Companies need to look beyond policies and guidelines and inculcate a mindset shift towards embracing diversity and imbuing that within their companies' culture," she said.

The insurer's senior leadership has seen its female representation rise from 27 per cent in 2021 to 29 per cent in 2022.

UOB has also incorporated diversity in its leadership, with nearly 40 per cent of the bank's senior management positions held by women as at December 2022.

Many other companies have also reported an increase in this area. In March, it was found that women made up 36 per cent of all director appointments to the top 100 Singapore Exchange-listed companies in 2022. This is the highest proportion since 2013, when such data was first collected.

It comes after the Singapore Exchange (SGX) announced in 2021 its new rule requiring listed companies to disclose their board diversity policies for financial years starting from 2022.

But tokenism can sometimes lead to companies appointing one woman to multiple boards, said Ms

Georgette Tan, chair of non-profit organisation BoardAgender, which advocates the advancement of more women into senior leadership roles and the boardroom.

"This doesn't grow the pipeline of women taking on board leadership roles," she said.

In January 2023, SGX Regulation said it will limit the tenure of independent directors on the boards of listed issuers to nine years.

This helps to ensure that board positions get opened up and that new board members are brought into the organisation, said Ms Tan.

On the journey to higher female representation on company boards, women must also step up to take on leadership roles, she said.

BoardAgender launched a mentoring programme for aspiring women directors in 2021. Now in its third year – with the latest class set to begin in July – the programme has seen an increase in the number of applicants, said Ms Tan.

She added: "Women who take on board leadership roles may fear that their voice is not heard if they are the only woman on the board. We need to change that mindset. They need to believe that they are in the role not because they are women, but because they have the capability to make a difference.

"Even if it starts with one woman on the board because of tokenism, if the one woman can make a huge difference, that itself is a

good outcome."

If women on boards are given the chance to actively contribute, that will encourage the companies to bring more women in, she added.

It is not just leadership in a company that needs to be diversified – the workforce needs diversification as well, said companies that spoke to ST.

Some small and medium-sized enterprises have taken it upon themselves to diversify their pool of employees.

One of them is legal tech firm Founders Doc, which hires solely based on ability and aptitude tests, without considering the candidates' gender, race or age.

"It is this diversity that promotes an excellent environment for people to work in because we get input and insights from people of different backgrounds," said Founders Doc founder Rachel Wong.

Singlife also hires all new employees based on the merit of their skills, knowledge and experience, regardless of their background, said Ms Phau.

"To better promote gender equality in the company, we also offer equal parental leave to new parents, regardless of gender. This means fathers receive four months of paid paternity leave to bond with their children, just as mothers do," she said.

Mr Stephen Pimbley, director of architecture firm Spark Architects, said having a policy of more female representation in the company is a form of sexism in itself.

"Why would you place somebody in a role just because of their gender? You hire people from di-



Above: (From left) Spark Architects' Ms Jessica Leong Chung Mun, associate director; Ms Lim Wenhui, partner and director; and Mr Stephen Pimbley, director.



Left: Ms Rachel Wong, founder of legal tech firm Founders Doc. ST PHOTOS: BRIAN TED

created for the younger generation."

Founders Doc's Ms Wong has had similar experiences.

"Coming from a family of career-oriented and strong women, I never felt that I was restricted from doing something because of my gender," said Ms Wong. "When I entered the workforce as a lawyer, women were told to take a back seat. I realised that people were unhappy if I spoke too much. I had to let my male colleague speak before me at work and not dominate the conversation."

However, "society as a whole has definitely progressed in terms of accepting female leaders," she noted.

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verse backgrounds because they can bring a different perspective and expertise to the table. But if they don't, then they'd be there just to make up the numbers," he said.

It could also lead to female employees not being taken seriously, if they were hired or promoted because of a policy, he added.

But while female company lead-

ers whom ST spoke to did not experience such tokenism, they said they have encountered sexism in their careers.

Spark Architects' partner and director Lim Wenhui said: "When I was still growing in my career, I would get condescending comments from male colleagues, such as being labelled as opinionated. I think these incidents have de-