



# Women bosses can change the world by challenging the ‘virility myth’

*In the corporate world, men still dominate executive roles while women struggle to achieve high-up positions – despite outperforming their male counterparts in such roles. Social entrepreneur Isabella Lenarduzzi believes that an influx of women in such roles will see a revolution in management styles and corporate values.*



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January 22, 2018 by **David W. Smith**

Study after study reveals an embarrassing truth for those male chauvinists who want to preserve masculine hegemony in the corporate world. Rather than struggling to survive in “a man’s world”, female CEOs often outperform their male counterparts. Yet, despite hard evidence of competence, women hardly ever get appointed as bosses. Worldwide, only 4% of CEOs and 10.5% of CFOs are female, according to the Swiss consultancy Egon Zehnder. There were small signs of encouragement in the US this year when the number of women CEOs on the Fortune 500 rose to a record 32, but that’s still only 6.4% of the total. It begs the question – if women’s natural empathy

...secondly, but also coming out of the total relege the question: If women's natural empathy makes them inspirational leaders, why do they rarely get a chance? And what can be done to change the situation?

**Isabella Lenarduzzi**, a Brussels-based social entrepreneur, has been obsessed with solving these issues for 30 years. She founded the gender equality agency Jump, which has branches in Brussels and Paris, to “change the world” by creating the conditions that allow women to reach the C-suite. When women finally arrive in greater numbers, it will accelerate the process of change, triggering a revolution in management styles and corporate values, she believes. “Everyone will benefit. It will even lift the burden on men, who are as much victims of their own virility myths as are women,” Lenarduzzi says.

Quotas are controversial, but they have been effective in rebalancing the boardrooms in some countries. Since 2011, for example, the **share of women on boards in Italy** has increased from 8% to 32%. Meanwhile, in France it has risen from 21% to 38%. Although Lenarduzzi supports quotas as a “necessary medicine” for boardrooms, she says they wouldn’t work for the C-suite. Instead, the best strategy is to root out how the **“virility myth”** is undermining women’s progress. This is her goal when she works on gender diversity with large corporations, including Microsoft, the oil giant Total, and the French banks BNP Paribas and Société Générale.

“The ‘virility myth’ means men are expected to act like warriors for the company. They always have to show thrusting ambition and sacrifice their time for the company, which must come first ahead of family. It’s easier for men to make such personal sacrifices as their identity is built more around their work,” Lenarduzzi says. “But women find this culture deeply unattractive. Their identity tends to be built around family and home life, as well as work. If they find themselves working long hours on someone else’s schedule, they can no longer be both the parent and the professional they want to be. For that reason, we’ve seen a lot of European women dropping out of politics and business.”

A few years ago, the US lawyer Anne-Marie Slaughter wrote a famous article in The Atlantic, entitled “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All”, in which she explained her reasons for quitting a high-profile job as the **first woman director of policy planning at the State Department**. It wasn’t so much the culture of long hours that bothered her, it was the fact she had no control of when she worked those hours. At the time, Slaughter’s teenage son was having a tough time at school and needed more support from her. She explains how she was made to feel guilty for abandoning her dream career and giving up on the myth that women “can have it all”. Although she wrote that she still believed women would one day be able to “have it all”, it was not possible “...with the way America’s economy and society are currently structured”.

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The best leaders create democratic, less  
hierarchical environments

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Anne-Marie Slaughter compares the working environment in Washington – which was similar to

Anne Marie Slaughter compares the working environment in Washington – which was similar to most private companies in the inordinate demands it made on her time – with her previous role as an academic. Although university life also required her to work long hours, she had the ability to set her own schedule. In contrast, most **US bosses** are expected to be at the beck and call of their companies, even at weekends.

A minority of women can call on the help of their partners with domestic duties. **Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook COO**, has gone as far as saying that the most important decision a woman takes for her career is her choice of partner. The ambitious Lenarduzzi is a case in point. She has frequently worked 15-hour days, but when her children were young, her husband was able to leave his job as a civil servant early to take care of them.

But the reality is that few women are so fortunate in their choice of partner, in part because flexible and part-time roles are not that common in most countries. Even if a partner were able to do a much larger share of the parenting, many women would still reject the offer, according to Slaughter who believes there is a “maternal imperative”. She says the instinct is felt so deeply that most women will reject roles if they create a large imbalance between work and family life. “I don’t believe fathers love their children any less than mothers do, but men do seem more likely to choose their job at a cost to their family, while women seem more likely to choose their family at a cost to their job,” she argues.

Slaughter admits she has entered the controversial world of **gender stereotypes**, but few would dispute her view that society should place a higher value on either men or women who make choices that put family ahead of work. “If we valued the people who make those choices, we would do everything possible to hire and retain them; if we did everything possible to allow them to combine work and family equally over time, then the choices would get a lot easier,” she writes.

There may be sound business reasons behind encouraging a different idea of what makes a good leader. Research suggests we tend to promote narcissists with an inflated sense of self-worth, according to psychologist Amy Brunell, from Ohio State University. But narcissism and over-confidence are inversely proportional to the qualities found in good leaders, according to Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, a psychology professor at University College London. We end up with more of the cult of ‘virile’ male bullies described by Lenarduzzi. The best leaders create **democratic, less hierarchical environments**, in which everyone feels free to contribute, ChamorroPremuzic argues. Numerous academic studies suggest this type of emotional intelligence is more common among women than men.

Lenarduzzi accepts the theory that women bosses often have a more consensual leadership style, but is keen to avoid the belief that it’s all down to hormones and that “biology is destiny”. She prefers to argue that women’s superior emotional intelligence is a consequence of being stuck in a subordinate position to men for millennia. She admires the work of the anthropologist Professor David Graeber, from the London School of Economics, who has described how power “makes people stupid”. The wealthy are so secure in their social positions that they don’t need to understand how others feel and, therefore, lack empathy. Meanwhile, the poorer people are, the more they have to comprehend the emotions of others. Graeber’s research is relevant to **women in a patriarchal social structure**. He argues that women’s subordinate position means they have to spend a lot of time working out what’s going on in the minds of men and have become more adept at ‘reading’

other people.

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## Forcing workers to stick strictly to office hours is incompatible with school schedules

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Whatever the reasons behind women's superior emotional intelligence, there is powerful evidence that it makes them good leaders. A study of **female CEOs** in the Fortune 1,000 showed they achieved three times the financial returns of S&P 500 enterprises run by men. Quantopian, a Boston-based trading platform, carried out the simulation, in which US\$100,000 was invested in 80 businesses run by female CEOs, between 2002 and December 2014. Another US\$100,000 was invested in the S&P 500 businesses run by men. According to the algorithm, the women CEO fund would have ended up worth US\$448,158, or a return of 348%, while the S&P 500 investment would have risen to \$222,306, or a return of 122%. Meanwhile, a larger international study of leadership from the Pietersen Institute for International Economics provided more evidence of women's capabilities. The Institute analysed results from 21,980 global, publicly traded companies, in 91 countries and showed that having at least 30% of women in the C-suite added 6% to net profit margin.

**Male chauvinists** will continue to argue that women are ill-suited to being bosses if they are unprepared to devote every waking hour to the cause. But do women really need to accept that the culture of "time macho" is conducive to superior performance at work? A study at Stanford University by John Pencavel suggested long hours at work could actually be counter-productive. Pencavel found that employee output fell sharply after a 50-hour working week, and it dropped off a cliff after a 55-hour week. When someone worked 70 hours, he or she produced nothing more with those extra 15 hours. Longer hours have also been connected to absenteeism through ill health. In view of the study, is "time macho" a useful example for leaders to set?

Even if we accept that bosses sometimes have to work long hours, Slaughter believes it's possible to make the working environment more amenable to women leaders with families by raising awareness of a few practical issues. The first is that forcing workers to stick strictly to office hours is incompatible with school schedules, which were designed for an era when women didn't work. Similarly, the need to travel constantly plays havoc with childcare arrangements. The common source of these, and other similar problems, is that the culture of work is more office-centred than it needs to be in the light of technological changes.

The long hours in busy times, Slaughter argues, could be done away from the office. Armed with e-mail, instant messaging, phones, and videoconferencing, she says "we should be able to move to a culture where the office is a base of operations more than the required locus of work". Working from home when children are in bed, or ill, allows women to maintain the balance between work and family life, even whilst putting in long hours. "But changing these policies requires much more than

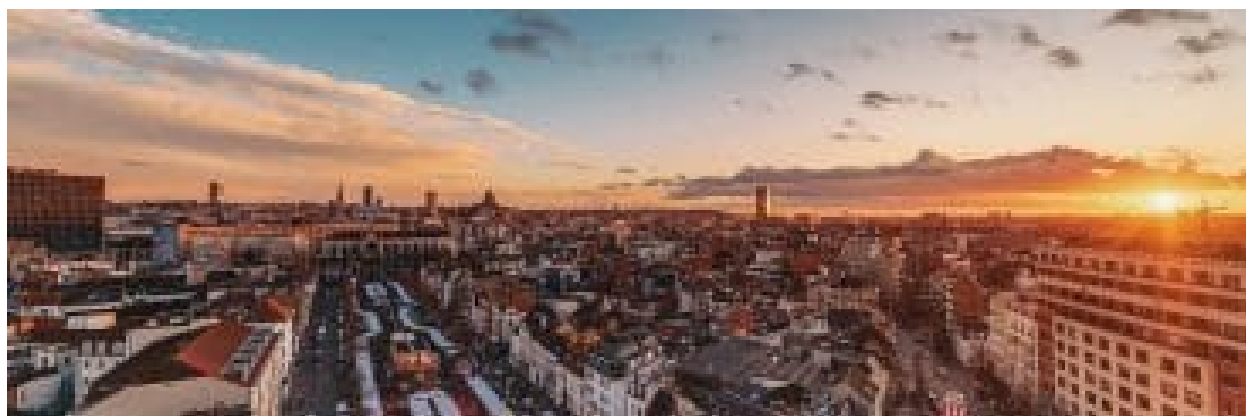
speeches. It means fighting the mundane battles – every day, every year – in individual workplaces, in legislatures, and in the media,” Slaughter writes.

Lenarduzzi also argues that women would benefit from a relaxation of the unwritten rule that after a certain age it's too late to become a boss. Typically, society expects careers to peak between the ages of 45 and 55. This timeline made sense when males retired at 65 and women at 60. But now with average life expectancy soaring to 80, and beyond for females, a woman could easily work into her 70s and become a boss in her late 50s, or early 60s. This would **give mothers more flexibility** to move into part-time roles whilst their children are growing up, but still have the time to reach their full potential.

Lenarduzzi cautions women that they should not drop out of the workplace altogether, however. “That’s a real trap that women must avoid,” she says. “All our research at Jump shows that when men take on a greater proportion of the childcare, they make sure they retain contact with their workplaces in part-time roles. Offering more part-time roles would help women in this period, as well as men, to stay in touch while achieving the work-family balance they crave.



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