

Let's not perpetuate the gender bias

While the support for the cause of greater representation of women directors on corporate boards is well meaning, it smacks of a patronising attitude. The focus should be on putting an end to exclusionary practices and on changing the mindset of board members



RAMA BIJAPURKAR

They say one should never look a gift horse in the mouth, but frankly, I am sick of all the support, no matter how blue-blooded, that the cause of women directors on corporate boards has been getting. There has been an explosion of people and organisational services dedicated to the cause of "training and mentoring" women directors; and, worse still, selling the cause by enumerating ways in which boards would benefit from having women on them.

A recent article in this newspaper, as an illustration of this, says women are good for boards because they are responsible, sincere and diligent (and men are not?); "respectful of management and other board members, bring orderliness into the boardroom" (is this a description of the new maid?) and "less risk-taking, thoughtful, and bring balance to the board's decision-making process". It's time the men protested what is purported to go on in boards without women!

In my past 15 years as an independent director, I can't remember any significant talk or action on the subject of training and mentoring directors, presumably because they were usually men and it could be safely assumed that they came in "boardroom-ready" or were capable of learning on the job. Apparently, the

opposite assumptions hold true for women, despite the facts showing that women who have entered the fray to get independent directorships, are as well-educated and experienced in their fields as their male counterparts.

Well-meaning as all the support for the cause is, it sadly smacks of the very gender bias that we are seeking to rectify. It is time to change the discourse and practice of how we have handled the first round of mandatory inclusion of women on boards.

The do-gooders must change their dominant logic. Their job is not to convert good quality raw material into finished products that are fit to occupy a board seat, but to enable wider and better deployment of the already available finished products. The number of "job-ready" high-quality resumes that have emerged from the woodwork, thanks to an opportunity pool created by a new law, is already large enough to belie the claims of companies that there were just not enough women who fit the bill.

Nomination committees (nomcom) of most Indian boards don't work rigorously and/or are notoriously clubby. Whenever they commission external search firms to draw up a list of women candidates who fit their criteria, the results are quite startling — positively. When they follow their usual practice of starting with "who do we know who will be good for our board?", the list splutters to a halt after a small, predictable list of prominent women. Many boards insist on "proven", "experienced" directors when it comes to appointing women. In the case of men, they are happy to give "freshers" a chance based on a terrific professional resume and some friendly reference checking on emotional quotient and independence (not always considered a positive attribute).



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY

So please, will all those supporting the cause, help us get a level playing field by sensitising and mentoring existing male board members on their unconscious gender biases? And please could we direct our energies to the more urgent task of training and mentoring chairmen of boards and nomcoms on how to run the boards in a better way, rather than helping women become better board members.

The answer to the question of why we need more women on corporate boards, is this: not *vive la différence* or because they provide the yin to the yang. Women directors are women professionals, not professional women. Women need to be included because their "share of qualifications" is higher than their share of board seats. Exclusion of anyone qualified for a job based on their chromosomes is bad, *per se*.

Women do not also need to be mentored on how to seamlessly ease their way into the board club; it is the boards that need to become less clubby! Indian boards have a very high CQ — clubby quotient — that is, board members who have off-board business relationships or sit on other boards (present and past) together or have reciprocal board seat arrangements.

Whenever non-Indian directors join Indian boards, we have seen chairmen make changes in processes to enable them to perform in a culturally different environment — be it in managing their low ambiguity tolerance or in their need for more order, discipline and formality in how meetings are run. Chairmen can and must extend the same consideration to women, who come on to their boards, and in the process set the tone for more diverse, yet inclusive boards.

Reservation or compulsory inclusion of qualified women in corporate boards has been a good thing. It has forced companies to fish in a hitherto untapped pool of equally qualified talent and widen the base of corporate governors that India has.

If at all women directors need special mentoring, it is not in how they can stand up to the prevailing "you are not yet worthy enough" discourse and change it. They need mentoring not in how they can fit into their assigned roles and play by the existing rules, but in how they can become confident enough to question the rules and change them so that they can perform better and make the boards better, too.

The author has been an independent director on several Indian boards