



Women in leadership positions

A report following a survey of women CEOs, Chairs and Presidents in cooperative and mutual insurers



Hilde Vernailen, CEO, P&V Group, Belgium and ICMIF Board member

Foreword by Hilde Vernailen

CEO P&V Group, Belgium and ICMIF Board member

When I was invited to write the foreword to this report I was truly humbled. I have been working with ICMIF for more than 10 years and have represented P&V on the ICMIF Board for four years. During that time I have consistently been impressed with the Federation's commitment to exploring the real issues that matter to its members. I have also had the pleasure of working with many of the female leaders from ICMIF's membership and have benefited and been inspired by their strength of purpose and genuine respect for all of the people that they serve.

It goes without saying that the quality of talent within any organization can make or break it. In my experience talent at any level of the organization must include the right balance of male and female energy. Achieving this at a senior level often requires a firm desire and commitment from the Board. The very fact that 29 of ICMIF's member organizations have chosen to appoint females into CEO, Chair and President roles tells me that our mutual and cooperative models appears to be more enlightened than the stock company alternatives.

While the case for greater gender equality has indeed been widely debated and reported on, this report truly stands out for me in that it represents the opinions and views of 14 female cooperative and mutual insurance leaders. Unlike other reports, the participants have been overwhelmingly candid.

Almost without exception they have used this opportunity to wholeheartedly share their views and experience in the hope that they will help other member organizations to make better decisions when they consider the vital issue of talent.

As a CEO myself, I know and respect that fact that knowledge and information is power. In this report ICMIF and its female leaders have been generous with their insights and their knowledge. It is my hope that this report will assist current and future generations of women achieve their potential and lead to the emergence of more enlightened businesses.

Kathy Bardswick, President and Chief Executive
Officer, The Co-operators Group, Canada
Past Chair and current Board member of ICMIF



Preface

Insurance sometimes has the reputation for being a conservative industry, run in time-honoured ways by groups of men. Recent research by the International Cooperative and Mutual Insurance Federation (ICMIF), however, suggests that - in the cooperative and mutual insurance sector at least - women are taking a much more significant role in the senior management and governance of many companies.

As is well known, there has recently been considerable political and business discussion of appropriate ways to promote the increased representation of women on the Boards and senior management teams of large businesses. Given this public interest, ICMIF took the decision in early 2013 to invite women CEOs, Chairs and Presidents in cooperative and mutual insurers to give their views on the subject. Fourteen replies were received, ten from female leaders in the Americas and two each from female leaders with firms in Europe and Asia. ICMIF wishes to thank all the CEOs, Chairs and Presidents who responded, not least for the evident care that was taken in completing the nine questions in the survey.

This report offers a summary of the responses received. It is being published by ICMIF in the belief that the survey findings will be of interest to all cooperative and mutual insurers (whether they are led by men or women), as well as to cooperative and mutual businesses in other sectors, to other insurance firms, and indeed more generally to policy-makers and opinion-formers in international and national agencies and organisations.

The survey was carried out anonymously and the majority of responses are not accredited. Since the survey was carried out, however, permission has been sought and granted by various women CEOs, Chairs and Presidents of ICMIF member organisations to use key quotes to illustrate the report.

“CEOs I admire have an ability to project their humanity and truly engage others to buy into the vision they are offering”

Kathy Bardswick

A close-up portrait of Mariela Silva de Reyes, a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, wearing a red top. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is slightly blurred, showing a building with a tiled roof and some greenery.

Mariela Silva de Reyes, General Manager,
Equidad Compañía de Seguros S.A., Honduras

“Equidad Honduras is known for constantly motivating its female employees to assume positions of greater responsibility. In fact, we offer a training programme aimed at strengthening the minimum competencies required for the positions filled by women.”

Mariela Silva de Reyes

Introduction:

Women in leadership in the insurance sector

Men continue to predominate in the world of business. According to the UN, just 13 of the world's largest 500 corporations were led in 2009 by a woman. Taking a global average, the percentage of women in senior management positions (including posts such as CFO/Finance Director, Human Resources Director, and Chief Marketing Officer) was 20% (2011 figures), with the percentage falling to 15% for the US and below 10% for Japan.

It is a similar story in terms of the composition of Boards of Directors. Only 12% of members of the Boards of European companies were women in 2009. Only 16% of directors of US companies were women.

Despite this, there is evidence from a number of studies that businesses which have a better gender balance in their senior management and governance teams are likely to do better when it comes to the bottom line. A literature review undertaken by the Council of Women World Leaders details over a hundred such studies and McKinsey & Co is among a number of other organisations to have produced reports exploring this topic.

Admittedly, a little caution is appropriate in interpreting these findings. A recent report for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) pointed out that causality is not necessarily proven: is it that Boards with more women members generate better performance for their companies or is it the other way round, in that better performing firms are more likely to seek women as directors or to be more attractive to women looking for directorships?

Nevertheless, the case for greater gender equality in business governance and management comes down, at root, to a simple argument. It is that companies which are selecting their senior executives and their directors predominantly or exclusively from only half of the population are almost certainly missing out on talent.

Recent years have seen gender issues discussed at international and national level in relation to best practice in corporate governance. The decision by Norway in 2003 to impose formal quotas on the gender composition of boardrooms (at least 40% of the members of Boards of quoted companies are now required to be composed of women) has attracted considerable attention. Norway's lead has been followed by similar moves in other European countries, including Spain (2007), Iceland (2010), France (2011), Belgium (2011), Italy (2011) and the Netherlands (2011). A proposal for a quota scheme for the whole European Union/EEA was debated at length in 2012 but following hostility from some member states has now been withdrawn. Elsewhere in

the world, the Malaysian government announced in 2011 a quota of at least 30% representation by women in decision-making positions in private sector companies. The Indian government is also proposing that at least one director on Boards of five or more members should be a woman.

In relation to senior management – and in particular to the top management position, that of the CEO – progress towards greater gender parity seems to be progressing at a glacial pace. In fact, Grant Thornton has detected an actual decline in the percentage of women holding senior management posts, down from 24% in 2009 to 20% in 2011.

The OECD report mentioned above talks of what it calls the 'leaky pipeline' – in other words, the fact that although women do not appear to lag behind men to any significant extent in entering the business sector very few women reach the higher levels of their businesses. Somewhere along the way, in effect, the 'pipeline' lets through male candidates but appears not to enable women candidates to pass.

The OECD suggests several factors contributing to the 'leaky pipeline'. These include:

- Absence of a supporting policy framework, including education, employment and social policies
- General norms and cultural practices within countries
- Inadequate formal and informal corporate practices, including human resources practices and the commitment of management

The report goes on to spell out a number of initiatives being taken by companies to attempt to improve the situation.

In relation in particular to the insurance industry, a useful report from the United States reinforces this general perspective. Insurance Networking News joined forces with the Association for Professional Insurance Women (APIW) in 2011 to survey 180 people working in the sector in Women in Insurance Leadership Insight Report. Of the 180 respondents, the vast majority (86%) were women.

The report found that 41% of those surveyed were in organisations where 5% or less of senior leadership roles were held by women. A further 20% were in organisations where women held between 6%-10% of senior leadership positions and 10% reported that 'there are no women in senior leadership roles

in my organisation'. Put another way, only about one in six of the insurance professionals were in organisations where women were present in any significant numbers in senior management – and this category included firms where the percentage of women could be as low as 20%.

The report made the following observation: "Women working in the insurance industry continue to fight challenges that affect their professional development. Some of these challenges are similar to women working in other industries, and at the same time [some are] unique to women in insurance and financial services. Some struggles are recognizable and even obvious, some are not."

In this context, how does the cooperative and mutual insurance part of the insurance industry measure up? In recent years, ICMIF has been producing an annual survey of the management and corporate governance of larger and medium-sized cooperative and mutual insurers, with data obtained from companies' annual reports. ICMIF's findings suggest that women are taking a much more significant role in the senior management and governance of many of these companies than in the case elsewhere in business.

Of ICMIF's 214 member organizations, 29 had women as CEOs, Chairs or Presidents representing a proportion of 13.6%.

While this is certainly not grounds for complacency, it will be seen that is a significantly higher percentage than that found generally in the business world (and certainly than the 2.6% reported by the UN for the top 500 global companies). Women CEOs and top level leaders are particularly strongly represented in cooperative and mutual insurers in the Americas. In North America, seven out of 18 companies are led by a woman (39%). In Latin America and the Caribbean, seven out of 47 member companies have a woman CEO or Board leader (15%).

There has also been a significant increase in the number of women appointed to the top job in recent years. The 29 women CEOs and Board leaders of ICMIF firms today compare with a figure of just six in 2005.

The latest edition of ICMIF's annual Members' Governance Report was able to access data for 118 of the 164 companies in full membership of the Federation. (Annual reports for the remaining 46, predominantly smaller firms, were not available).

It looks at the representation of women on the Boards of these member firms, and here again there is a strong indication that some if not all cooperatives and mutuals in insurance are well ahead of their investor-owned industry counterparts. The latest data available is from the Members' Governance Report 2012, which uses 2010 annual reports and which surveyed 108 member firms. This found that 25% of the ICMIF member firms in the survey had three or more women on their Board of Directors. ICMIF's data can be compared directly with data for the insurance industry, where in 2010 16.7% firms had three or more women as Board members.

These industry-wide data come from the 2011 *Women on Boards* report from GovernanceMetrics International (GMI), a global analysis which offers a sectoral breakdown by industries and which in the case of insurance used a survey size of around 150 companies. GMI suggests incidentally that the percentage of firms with three or more women directors is slowly climbing in the industry, from 14.9% in 2009 to 18.3% in 2011. (There are still some insurance companies with no women directors at all; here regrettably data for cooperatives and mutuals are almost identical to GMI data for the whole industry, at just over 31% of companies.)

The past few years have seen many cooperative and mutual insurers re-emphasise their unique governance model as member-owned organizations and re-assert their principles as values-driven businesses, using the 'cooperative and mutual difference' as a strong market differentiation tool. Many of ICMIF's members have taken a very strong lead in terms of environmental and social business objectives, including adopting formal policies on sustainability and socially responsible investment. In this context, it would be expected that cooperatives and mutuals would also be market-leaders in their HR practices and in particular would ensure that all their staff, women and men alike, were given the opportunities to realise their potential and advance their careers. Twenty-nine cooperatives and mutuals have decided that the best person to lead them at the present time is female, but even in the cooperative and mutual sector men still predominate at senior levels. This report aims to explore in more detail the experiences and approaches of these successful women CEOs and Board leaders, in order to tease out broader lessons for the whole sector.

There has been a **significant increase** in the number of women appointed to the top job in recent years. The **29 women CEOs, Chairs and Presidents of ICMIF firms** today compare with a figure of just six in 2005.

Arlene Sabaris, General Manager, Cooperativa Nacional
De Seguros, Inc. (COOP-SEGUROS), Dominican Republic



The key leadership attributes of being a CEO, Chair or President

Our first question was deliberately a short one, and left completely open: **“What do you see as the key leadership attributes of being a CEO, Chair or President*?”**

But this short question provoked some fascinating replies, perhaps some of the most interesting of the whole survey. There was evidence in most of the responses of careful thought and deliberation.

There was an emphasis not only on having the necessary professional skills – such as being able to think strategically and give direction to the business – but also on having the appropriate personal qualities. One CEO distinguished these two sides to her role in the following way:

“I would break down the attributes into two main buckets;

- a) Your values and character: passion for what you are doing, commitment, courage (which I think is really critical), honesty and transparency, confidence but [being] humble at the same time, i.e: willing to admit you are human and make mistakes and willing to learn from others, and a bone deep respect for others and sense of fair play.**
- b) Your capabilities: strategic thinking, people skills such as communication and listening, knowing the business, complex problem solving.”**

“It seems to me that it is easier for women to admit when one of their team should be given the chance to shine.”

Arlene Sabaris

She concluded with the following sentence:

“CEOs I admire have an ability to project their humanity and truly engage others to buy into the vision they are offering.”

There was broad agreement on the professional skills which CEOs needed to bring to bear on their job. Two replies, for example, talked of the importance of being able to take decisions and to give a strong lead to the direction of the business. But more of the responses focused on the personal attributes of the CEO’s role. Many of the same words and concepts appeared again and again in the answers we received. Words such as ‘vision’ and ‘courage’ appeared several times. The concept which was mentioned most often was the necessity of behaving with honesty and personal integrity.

One CEO put it like this:

“A CEO must have integrity and perform her duties with utmost diligence and honesty. She must also adhere to high moral standards and set as an example to her subordinates.”

Another wrote:

“A good leader must be passionate about what they do and possess the highest level of integrity.”

There was talk of leadership by example, and of always delivering on promises and commitments made. One CEO included the following in her reply:

“A CEO must not only be able to lead and motivate her staff but must also be a role model to her subordinates. A good CEO must be able to “walk the talk” and be able to impart her skills not only intellectually but through leadership by example.”

*For the purposes of illustrating survey responses, and to preserve anonymity of respondents, all respondents will hereafter be referred to as “CEOs”.

Interestingly, three replies mentioned the need for CEOs to be prepared when necessary to show humility in their role.

One person wrote the following:

“A leader must have courage to make the difficult decisions and the humility to realize that he or she does not know all the answers. A leader must be respectful of others because only by showing respect toward others will he/she earn respect from others.”

Another said:

“Open mindedness and humility. A CEO must be open to suggestions and must be humble enough to admit that she doesn’t know everything. She must be willing to consider suggestions/proposals from subordinates and work hand in hand with them in achieving the company’s goal.”

One CEO warned against the dangers of the big ego:

“In many instances, the ego gets the better of leaders and doesn’t allow them to reach their potential.”

And she added that this could perhaps be less of an issue with female CEOs:

“It seems to me that it is easier for women to admit when one of their team should be given the chance to shine.”

Another theme which several CEOs addressed was the need to promote team-working. One CEO put it like this:

“Ability to listen to opposing views and to craft a vision to execute. Ability to attract talent and form a cohesive team with a wide diversity of talent and experience to enable superior execution of the plan.”

However, showing humility and encouraging team-working does not remove the need for courage and leadership. There is the requirement, when appropriate, to be prepared to eschew the easy route forward. One person said that, for her, there was the responsibility **“to take risks and explore uncharted waters”**.

Several women CEOs stressed the need for confidence. One wrote:

“Having self-confidence, showing initiative, and having the drive to make things happen, or finding suitable ways to resolve or overcome problems, and developing interpersonal relationships.”

Self-confidence, it was suggested in one reply, comes from self-knowledge:

“I think the most important thing is to understand yourself and how you impact and communicate with others. The strongest leaders in my opinion are the ones who understand themselves and the environment in which they operate. In order to lead, you have to inspire people to follow. You need to have a vision and understand people well enough to know what it will take to get everyone working toward that vision.”

There was also a hint in one reply, which mentioned the need for CEOs to exercise self-control, of the particular pressures which women CEOs might have to cope with as a result of traditional gender attitudes.

What came over in almost all the responses was the desire to lead a cohesive team, one that felt engaged and involved in the strategic management of the business. Communication was without doubt the overriding attribute that women leaders valued most, coupled with humility, respect, listening skills and passion.

Nevertheless, leaders come with many different attributes and skills, so it may be appropriate to end this section with the following comment:

“There is no single answer to what makes a good leader. Everyone has different styles and different strengths and weaknesses. I have seen very effective leaders use many different approaches.”

“It seems to me
that it is easier for
women to admit
when one of their
team should be
given the chance
to **shine.**”

Sandy Parrillo, Chief Executive Officer,
Providence Mutual Group, USA
Former chair of NAMIC



Do *women* have different management styles from men?

Our second question was also a short one, but again attracted lengthy comments in reply. The question was: **“Do you think female CEOs approach the job differently from the way that male CEOs do?”**

The hidden agenda in our question was whether the old stereotypes about male and female approaches to management have any validity. Two of the respondents decided to tackle our hidden agenda head-on. Here is what one CEO wrote:

“I hate to stereotype male vs female. I have seen male CEOs approach the job similarly to females and vice-versa so I am always reluctant to suggest men and women have a fundamentally different approach.”

But she also went on to qualify her reply:

“What I will say though is that I think women are innately better able to keep a number of different foci top-of-mind at the same time and may tend to be more inclusive. Studies have proven that men are more apt to focus on one thing more effectively while women think more tangentially. I think as a result, women may have a more natural tendency to be more inclusive and more thoughtful. Again, I am reluctant to suggest there are major differences.”

“In my encounters with other women CEOs they seem to be more open to listening to counsel from others. Women CEOs are more willing to embrace a participative style of management as opposed to an authoritative style.”

Sandy Parrillo

There was a similar response from another CEO:

“There still exist stereotypes about the different leadership styles of men and women, i.e:

- **Female leaders: excel at “nurturing” competencies such as developing others, building relationships, exhibiting integrity and engaging in self-development.**
- **Male strengths: the ability to develop a strategic perspective, taking initiative and driving for results.**

I do not agree with these stereotypes: women have proved that they make as good leaders as men do. Men and women become senior leaders because they have the required qualities, skills and work experience for the position.”

But here too the CEO went on to partially qualify her statement, suggesting that there might be a difference in attitudes and management styles, women being more likely to be collaborative and less likely to be competitive or dominating.

This was picked up in another response:

“In my encounters with other women CEOs they seem to be more open to listening to counsel from others. Women CEOs are more willing to embrace a participative style of management as opposed to an authoritative style. Some male CEOs may view this as a form of weaknesses which it is not. I have read studies that suggest when a woman is on a board of directors or head of a management team there is a different tone at meetings. There is more openness, willingness to ask questions and egos are left at the door. Women are known as nurturers and whether justified or not, I believe women are viewed as more caring, compassionate and trustworthy.”

Another CEO made this comment:

“In general, most of the women I know in leadership positions tend to lead with a more collaborative style than men.”

And another response makes a similar point:

“I think that female CEOs are better at listening, so the directions that we give benefit from input from others.”

But two comments also suggested that, in order to succeed in a predominantly male world, women might sometimes find themselves having to play the more traditional leadership role expected of them:

“I have also seen women who have felt that they had to fight harder than their male co-workers to get where they are. In those cases, I have seen them continue to feel like they have to prove themselves every day. I think it takes a while of being the top position before this goes away (if ever).”

And:

“Female heads are more flexible in some aspects – especially on the work-life balance, giving space to all, more nurturing. But one cannot generalise – it depends whether she has internalised a more ‘male’ way of leading or an alternative ‘female’ way.”

There was caution from some at the idea that women’s approaches to their role could necessarily be easily distinguished from those undertaken by male colleagues. One CEO said:

“As CEOs, we carry out the same role in the same way, in terms of how we approach the job.”

She added that in the past the distinct roles assigned to men and women were the result of social conditioning. Now, both men and women were demonstrating their competence at undertaking the same jobs, she said. Even here, however, there was an acknowledgement that women could have different skill-sets from men: for example, women CEO could be more meticulous, she suggested.

Success at board and senior management level comes, perhaps, from ensuring diversity, and not only in relation to gender. Here is the comment from one CEO on her company’s approach:

“There is significant research that indicates boards and senior leadership that approach problems differently produce better results (higher ROI) than a group that brings identical perspectives to a problem. Our company embraces this and strives for diversity at the executive, management and board level. We feel diverse experiences and perspectives give our company the best opportunity to excel. We look at diversity from a wide range, racial, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. and actively search for individuals that bring this diversity.”

“In general, most of the women I know in leadership positions tend to lead with a more collaborative style than men”

ICMIF's female CEOs, Chairs and Presidents

Maria del Fernandez	La Nueva	Argentina
Rosana Ibarra	Seguros Rivadavia	Argentina
Louise Petschler	COBA (formerly Abacus)	Australia
Hilde Vernailen	P&V	Belgium
Sylvie Paquette	Desjardins General Insurance Group Inc.	Canada
Monique F. Leroux	Desjardins Group	Canada
Anne Gaboury	Développement international Desjardins	Canada
Kathy Bardswick	The Co-operators	Canada
Georgina Díaz Sánchez	SSVMN	Costa Rica
Anne Mette Toftegaard	LB Group	Denmark
Arlene Sabaris	Cooperativa Nacional De Seguros, Inc. (COOP-SEGUROS)	Dominican Republic
Daysi Rosales	Seguros Futuro	El Salvador
Marie-Hélène Kennedy	ROAM	France
Mariela Silva de Reyes	Equidad Compañía de Seguros S.A.	Honduras
Alice Gálffy	TIR Biztosító	Hungary
Sigrún Ragna Ólafsdóttir	VÍS	Iceland
Mirai Chatterjee	SEWA	India
Carmen Barboza	Aseguradora Tajy, Propiedad Cooperativa, S.A.	Paraguay
May Dawat	CARD MBA	Philippines
Cynthia Alvina*	CISP	Philippines
Ewa Stachura-Kruszewska	TUW TUW	Poland
Liudmila Bonderenka	Tsaritsa	Russia
Zinaida Vorobyeva	OJSC	Russia
Ann Sommer	Länsförsäkringar	Sweden
Maj-Charlotte Wallin	AFA	Sweden
Susan Wilkinson	UMAL	UK
Janet Katz	American Agricultural Insurance Company	USA
Janice Abraham	United Educators	USA
Sandy Parrillo	NAMIC	USA

*At the time of writing Cynthia was President of CISP



Georgina Díaz Sánchez, General Administrator, SSVMN, Costa Rica

Are cooperative and mutual businesses more inclined to appoint *female* CEOs?

Our third question focused on whether cooperatives and mutuals, because of their governance and ownership structures, are any more inclined than other companies to give the top job to a woman.

The question we asked was this: **“Do you feel that the fact that your company is a cooperative/mutual in any way affected your career progression and/or your appointment as CEO? Or is the governance structure immaterial?”**

Replies here were mixed. One CEO gave a one-word answer: **“No.”** Another wrote: **“Difficult to say.”** A third said: **“Not for me personally.”**

But some replies were more nuanced. One CEO wrote:

“Well...there are an increasing number of women running North American insurance companies, albeit not enough yet. I think [my company] being a co-operative did make a difference in that I have never felt I had to prove myself more because I was a woman and I think our culture has always encouraged team work rather than competitiveness amongst our leaders. I am aware of other insurance companies with very skilled senior women who are having trouble breaking through the top spots because the culture is so competitive and they don't want to play the game that is required. In addition, [my] organization celebrates and supports family so I never had to wonder whether I could have a family and a senior leadership role at the same time.”

“It is easier to progress in cooperative companies as they are democratic and ideas are taken into account. I think that there are more opportunities for women to rise through the ranks in cooperative and mutual companies than in other types of company.”

Georgina Díaz Sánchez

Another reply drew attention to the fact that CEOs at her cooperative were elected by member delegates rather than through a more traditional appointment approach. The CEO wrote: **“The governance structure gives equal chances to men and women who are qualified to run for president. It is up to the candidate to prove that she or he will be the best person to be elected.”**

One reply, from a CEO in Latin America, suggested that cooperatives and mutuals did specifically improve opportunities for women:

“It is easier to progress in cooperative companies as they are democratic and ideas are taken into account. I think that there are more opportunities for women to rise through the ranks in cooperative and mutual companies than in other types of company. If we look at cooperative principles and put them into practice, these promote equal opportunities regardless of gender.”

Another respondent from a cooperative organisation in a developing economy wrote:

“Being a cooperative has been very positive for exercising my leadership.”

But regrettably it is also clear that cooperatives and mutuals are not necessarily any more progressive than other forms of business. One CEO said that her Board was entirely comprised of men, and she put her appointment down to the fact that it was overseen by an external recruitment agency rather than directly by her own Board. Another reported frankly: **“I am the very first female President of our cooperative and I must admit that my being appointed as such was because of circumstances which left the Board without any choice. But I feel that if circumstances would have been different, I would not have been appointed.”**



Carmen Barboza, General Manager,
Aseguradora Tajy, Propiedad
Cooperativa, S.A., Paraguay

Is there still a 'glass ceiling'?

The idea that there comes a point for women executives where they fail to be able to progress their careers because of barriers which exist but which are not acknowledged by their companies – the so-called 'glass ceiling' – has been much discussed. We asked CEOs for their views. Our question was: **"Do you believe there is a 'glass ceiling' for women executives in the world of business generally, which prevents them from being promoted to the extent that a comparable male colleague would be? If so, how can it be broken? Does this apply in your country/region or is this something you do not feel to be prevalent where your organisation operates?"**

This question like earlier questions elicited some carefully considered replies. The consensus was that there do remain invisible barriers which hold back women more than men. However, there was also a sense that the situation was gradually improving. In one respect, the fact that our survey was specifically of women who were holding positions as CEOs suggests that the barriers can indeed be overcome.

One CEO gave a useful definition of the issue: **"For me the 'glass ceiling' refers to all the invisible and unspoken stereotypes in the corporate culture that prevent women leaders from exploring their full potential and at the same time the limits for advancement the women are setting themselves out of self-doubt."**

Another wrote:

"I do believe there is a glass ceiling and a double standard. I hope this goes away over time as new generations and more women continue to enter the workforce, but the overall leadership in insurance is still male-dominated. I think it will be broken over time, as the 'old regime' retires and moves on. I still hear stories from women about the double

"It still exists as a hangover from the past, but this view is slowly disappearing in our country, thanks to better knowledge and more equality in the conditions and abilities of both genders. Today, there are successful female executives in many companies, including cooperatives, mutuals and insurers."

Carmen Barboza

standard, for example when a man takes a day off to attend a school function for a child, he is viewed as a 'good father', but when [a] woman does the same thing her loyalty and dedication are questioned. I see it less than I used to, but it still happens."

And a third CEO replied:

"I do think the proverbial glass ceiling still exists in some industries more so than others and in some companies within the insurance industry. Unfortunately too many women feel they have to make a decision between family/ children and a career. Still today it is easier for men to juggle the two demands. My organization supported my having [several] children."

There were some replies which suggest that progress is being made. Here is one comment from a CEO of a Latin American insurer:

"It still exists as a hangover from the past, but this view is slowly disappearing in our country, thanks to better knowledge and more equality in the conditions and abilities of both genders. Today, there are successful female executives in many companies, including cooperatives, mutuals and insurers."

Another CEO from Latin America pointed to her own experience:

"I believe that to some extent, women themselves are to blame for having failed to stand up to a culture of 'machismo', particularly in Latin America. However, I believe that we can break through this 'glass ceiling' by introducing gender equality awareness programmes from a very young age and encouraging the women in our organisations to continue studying and preparing themselves to take up these posts. It's more a matter of attitude, self esteem and perseverance. For example, I come from a poor family and started working at the age of 16. My first job was as a receptionist for an insurance company and I spent 20 years

working my way up the ladder before reaching my current position - and I'm a woman. The difference is attitude and perseverance, so we should provide encouragement in this regard."

A woman CEO from the United States made this observation:

"The glass ceiling certainly existed at a point in the past. Today I do not see as many overt limitations on women executives. Empirical studies would suggest, however, that women are underrepresented in the [senior management suites] and boardrooms. In my opinion some of this underrepresentation is simply because women have not been in the management track. It is going to take time but I believe we are making great progress. In the US over 50% of the college students are female and many of these young adults will be starting their career and will develop into leaders of organizations. I look at my parents' generation and women held nearly all administrative/clerical positions in the financial services industry. In my generation of baby boomers, there is more of us who have dedicated ourselves to a professional career and we are represented in management positions. My daughter who is a college student will likely be competing against more women than men for management level positions."

One CEO pointed out that it is for men as well as women to work to remove barriers for women's advancement:

"The 'glass ceiling' has to be broken by concerted efforts, and especially by male leaders."

There were suggestions for strategies which companies could undertake to help combat any residual barriers to career advancement for women. One CEO offered six ideas for action:

- One key thing that comes before all the initiatives one company can put in place to advance women: that is, **having executives who truly believe that women really matter.**
- The second thing is the **sincere willingness of companies** to invest time and money to change things.
- And companies must **put in place practices** to facilitate it. Among these practices, some are really important: setting clear goals, getting organizational buy-in, building a strong pipeline of candidates, coaching, development in action and sponsorship.
- They should be setting **concrete objectives**, creating opportunities and measuring progress.
- Create **women network opportunities** and give them access to the traditional influence networks,
- That is the only way to enlarge the **base of talented and experienced women** ready to compete on equal terms for jobs at the highest levels in our organizations. It is simply smart business to build **a richer talent pool.**

Several CEOs stressed the need to ensure that rising women managers are given adequate coaching. One reply will conveniently take us on to the subject we will deal with in the next section:

"Yes there is a glass ceiling. One of the ways to break it could be by having women mentored as soon as we see high potential in them. The mentor's mandate would be to help them throughout their career, 'push' them because often women think that they are not ready."

“The
‘glass ceiling’ has
to be **broken** by
concerted efforts,
and especially by
male leaders.”



Janet Katz, Executive VP & CEO,
American Agricultural Insurance Company, USA

The value of *mentoring*

We asked the question: **“How important or otherwise in your own career has it been to have women role models and/or mentors?”**

The answers back suggest that almost all the CEOs have found it helpful at earlier stages of their careers to have role models – and, where mentoring has been available, this has been particularly valuable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, few of the role models have been women, however.

One CEO wrote briefly: **“No women role model or mentor for me in the past.”** Another said: **“None at all. There was no women in high positions when I started. A third wrote: Women role models in my early years were non-existent. My role models were men but I strive to be a role model for young women now.”**

Some CEOs were more fortunate. One replied:

“I was very fortunate to have some very good mentors in my career, both male and female. I think it is important to have strong mentors, but I don’t know if it necessarily has to be a woman. It really depends on the environment at your company.”

Another said:

“Of course, it has been very important to have role models and mentors: women and men. During my professional career, it was other people’s leadership that inspired and influenced me. I identified many mentors and asked them for advice. All the mentors in my professional life were people who believed in me and gave me their full support. They played an important role of advisors during my entire career.”

“I was very fortunate to have some very good mentors in my career, both male and female. I think it is important to have strong mentors, but I don’t know if it necessarily has to be a woman. It really depends on the environment at your company.”

Janet Katz

Three CEOs specifically mentioned that they had had influential women role models. One talked of the woman who was **“the brain behind the creation of cooperative banks, cooperative insurance and marketing cooperatives in the country and her dedication and commitment to the cause of our farmers and the cooperative sector has motivated me to emulate her works.”**

Another replied:

“I was lucky enough to gain my financial experience in a multinational company where gender is irrelevant – it is the qualities and skills of the staff that count. My supervisor was area director and her excellence and professionalism set her apart from other leaders. I have confidence in myself because I learned from her that it doesn’t matter where you come from, it’s where you want to go, and the key to success is to surround yourself with the best to be the best. I learned from this female role model that family and work can go hand in hand... [I] hope that one day I can be a role model to show women that with effort and dedication, it is possible to get where you want to go.”

When it comes to female role models, two CEOs mentioned the particular role which their mothers had played in encouraging them to realise their ambitions and meet their potential.

One response to this question picked up on another issue, which is the value which can come from peer networking with other women CEOs:

“Sadly there really hasn’t [been] many that have forged the path before me. Today there are more women in these positions of leadership and I very much enjoy talking to them and hearing how they got to their position. It is also fun to share ‘war stories’ and we all have a few.”

Monique F. Leroux, Chair of the Board, President and Chief Executive Officer, Desjardins Group, Canada

“We believe strongly that gender diversity makes the organizations more innovative and profitable. Personally, I am very committed to have a better representation of women in positions of responsibility and authority.”

Monique F. Leroux

Monitoring the gender composition of the workforce

Our next question asked: **“What statistics if any do you record showing the percentages of men and women in key senior and middle management positions in your company? We went on to ask: If so, do these statistics influence your company’s practices (please give examples if appropriate)? If not, have you considered collecting this data?”**

We also asked a closely related question: **“Does your company actively try to support women staff into positions of responsibility and authority?”**

The responses to both these questions suggested that monitoring is standard across most of the companies surveyed (only one reply, from a small company, suggested that formal collection of this data is not taking place). Because our survey did not include a control group of insurers led by male CEOs, it is not possible to know whether this is (as we expect) now normal HR practice for most insurance firms or whether there may be a correlation between the collection of data on gender and the fact that firms have female CEOs.

There was evidence that firms were using monitoring to attempt to ensure better gender equality practices in their organisations. One response stated that **“significant progress has been made for management and executive positions since the processes surrounding talent development, succession planning, and human capital selection have been reviewed to ensure gender equity.”** The firm in question had set up a multidisciplinary gender diversity team, which had a brief to report on performance in this area directly to a sub-committee of the Board.

Another CEO replied:

“We regularly track our success in promoting women. Our Board of Directors has 42 % women and the Chair is a woman, as well as 50% of Committee Chairs are women. Our executive team is 33% women, led by a woman CEO.”

A third reply was as follows:

“We keep stats on women at all levels of management and we work very hard to make sure our human resources practices and development programs support both men and women with balancing family demands with work. Work/life balance is important to us. We gather anonymous feedback on how well we are doing (or not) and we respond to that feedback with enhanced or new practices to ensure we encourage and support everyone with their career planning and development.”

There was clear evidence of several other companies also taking considerable steps to ensure that women were able to progress their careers. One CEO replied: **“Yes, our company actively support women staff into positions of responsibility.”** Another replied that her company, **“is known for constantly motivating its female employees to assume positions of greater responsibility,”** including offering training programmes. A third stated, **“We believe strongly that gender diversity makes the organizations more innovative and profitable. Personally I am very committed to have a better representation of women in positions of responsibility and authority.”**

In this last case, the CEO had ensured, when establishing multidisciplinary task groups to assist in the organisation’s strategic planning, that these groups were set up with 50% male and 50% female representation. **“This sent a clear signal across the company that women have an equal place in helping define the future of the organization,”** she added.

An equal place does not mean preferential treatment, however. A number of respondents were concerned to make the point that the act of monitoring gender distribution in management did not mean that women were preferred for promotion over men. As one CEO put it:

“We are a relatively small organisation with a total of 75+ employees. Women are represented in both middle and upper management positions. In addition our Board of Directors is 33% women (three out of nine). This was not done to fill a specific quota but rather it was just getting the best person for the position. The only caveat I will offer is that while we do not actively seek out a woman for a position, we neither have any predisposition to not consider a woman. Our decisions are all gender neutral.”

Another responded:

“We actively try to move the best people into positions of responsibility and authority regardless of gender.”

And a third replied:

“We believe we should be supporting everyone’s career plans and objectives and we should be providing an environment that supports both men and women. Our human resources practices and policies are geared to supporting both men and women to ensure they are able to realize their career and personal aspirations.”



Janice Abraham, President and CEO,
United Educators (UE), USA

Are obligatory quotas, or targets, necessary to help achieve greater representation by women in management?

As noted in the introduction, there has been considerable debate recently regarding the advisability or otherwise of introducing mandatory quotas to ensure greater representation by women in corporate governance structures.

In the light of these debates, we asked the CEOs the following question: **“Given the current imbalance between male and female leaders in business, is it appropriate to have externally imposed quota systems (as recently proposed, for example, in the EU) for women? Alternatively, should businesses have their own targets? Or are neither quotas nor targets particularly helpful?”**

The question received some robust replies, none more so than this short response: **“I am vehemently and absolutely opposed to quotas!!!”**

Her view was shared by most other respondents. But there were a significant number of minority voices in favour of mandatory quotas. One wrote:

“Until we have more success in opening doors and breaking glass ceilings, I think quotas force boards to look harder and wider for women leaders. Searches often bring individuals that look and have experiences similar to current leadership, blocking out half the population from leadership.”

“Until we have more success in opening doors and breaking glass ceilings, I think quotas force boards to look harder and wider for women leaders. Searches often bring individuals that look and have experiences similar to current leadership, blocking out half of the population from leadership.”

Janice Abraham

From Latin America, one CEO wrote:

“I think it is useful to measure these indicators and impose quotas. If more developed countries have failed to achieve a balance without these quotas, there is even less chance for less developed countries where machismo and cultural issues make it more difficult to face.”

One CEO saw quotas as a necessary short-term measure:

“In my opinion the introduction of the quota system could be effective – at least at the beginning. It is to be hoped that after several years it will be possible [to achieve equality of opportunity] without the quota system”

Another CEO made the point that her country already had a ‘Gender equality and fairness law’, enforcing a requirement for 50% of leadership positions in public bodies to be held by women. Her own view, however, was against quotas: **“I don’t believe these positions should be allocated by law, it should be based on merit, on a shift in paradigms, such as making ourselves visible.”**

If the general consensus was against external enforceable quotas, there was more interest in the idea of setting targets. **“We should have targets but not quotas,”** said one CEO. Another called for companies not only to set themselves targets but to show how they intended to ensure that the targets were met.

There was another strand of opinion, however, which argued against both quotas and targets. This viewpoint was best summed up in the following comment:

“I think neither quotas nor targets are helpful. What needs to change is the attitude and biases of people in business toward women leaders. We need to educate people rather than dictate to them.”

Ann Sommer, CEO,
Länsförsäkringar, Sweden

“It is good for all of us to talk about this issue [women in leadership]. By talking about it we will move forward. We must never let this topic sleep. We must never get tired of trying.”

Ann Sommer

Conclusion

ICMIF's survey of women CEOs, Chairs and Presidents was designed to elicit opinions and views, rather than to be one where quantitative analysis was the focus. In this sense, therefore, our findings are necessarily anecdotal.

Nevertheless, we are aware of very few similar surveys where women CEOs and Board leaders have been specifically invited to comment on the role they are performing and on their assessment of the challenges and issues facing women who have risen to the very top of their companies. What has been striking has been the engagement which respondents showed in the questions we asked, an engagement which emerged not least in the evident care taken by many of those surveyed in their responses.

For the cooperative and mutual insurance sector, an enlightened approach to staff development – for female as well as for male staff – should be a natural part of an approach which seeks to move beyond the single bottom line (a concern solely with maximising short-term profits) towards developing more ethical, sustainable business practices.

Our final question invited respondents to say whether they felt that the issues raised by our survey were relevant to ICMIF's remit as a global organisation representing cooperative and mutual insurers and aiming to help member firms run their own businesses more effectively. The overwhelming consensus was that this was an area which did merit ICMIF's engagement.

One CEO linked this directly to cooperatives' and mutuals' values and principles:

"As a cooperative association with strong values based on equity and democracy, ICMIF can play a key role in promoting gender diversity among its member organizations."

Echoing the passion of many respondents, another CEO declared:

"It is good for all of us to talk about this issue [women in leadership]. By talking about it we will move forward. We must never let this topic sleep. We must never get tired of trying."

Another put it differently, in an observation which will act fittingly as the conclusion to this report:

"Talent development is critical to the success of any organization."

She went on to add:

"To ignore development of over half of the world's population is a mistake and it is definitely worthy of ICMIF's focus."

Appendix

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