**Background**

On the face of it, dividing humankind according to gender is the easiest split of all; it is pretty much 50/50 male/female (50.4/49.6% to be precise according to The World Bank¹). With the focus on equality and the progress of women (especially here in the West), we might assume that, even allowing for history, ‘the pipeline of catch up’ and the non trivial impact of childbirth and consequent choices, gender representation should/would be closer to 50:50 in most realms of society. Only it isn't. We are far from achieving equality for women.

The word ‘diversity’, be it in a gender context or otherwise and although well-intentioned, can be divisive. Even though we know that diversity and the bringing together of differing views, experiences and skills leads to better results, somehow diversity just does not seem to happen naturally; human nature seems to drive us, decision makers, to make choices that we are comfortable with and resonate with us – preferring ‘people like us’. Worse still, some now hear the word ‘diversity’ and immediately think of the negative connotations: preferential treatment, unmeritorious selection, tokenism, perceived discrimination against the traditional ‘in groups’ who have held the reins of power (despite those very own ‘in groups’ own preferential treatment and unmeritorious selection in many cases).

Women are significantly under-represented in the upper echelons of almost all positions of political power, professions, industries and organisations. The progress of gender equality remains slow, with women still lacking many basic equal rights and equal pay, even in what we would class as the ‘developed western world’. As a consequence, women can be called ‘the majority minority’.

**Women in politics**

The representation of women in politics is mixed across the world; for instance, many are shocked to discover which countries have the highest percentage of women in their national parliament. Of course, this does not mean that those countries with the most women representatives are the most advanced, liberated or gender equal; but it is a good reminder for many who may be complacent to look in the mirror first and assess the challenges in their own nations.

I was staggered to learn recently that of the 1,941 national leaders during the 20ᵗʰ century – only 27 were women (that is only 1.4%).² Of course, we are increasingly seeing women make their way to the highest offices in the land – but ,ironically, a disproportionate amount of progress seems to be in the developing world and emerging markets in marked contrast to the developed world and, in particular, the generally accepted global ‘social leaders’ such as the USA, EU and UK.

Of course, the UK had a female Prime Minister in the 20ᵗʰ century (and now we have another female Prime Minister). It is also worth noting (regardless of political preference) that Margaret Thatcher was also the first Prime Minister in the UK to have studied Science at university and come from a less privileged background.

Although the UK has a long history of the championing of women’s rights, many people are surprised to know that it was less than a hundred years ago that women were given the right to vote³ and the right to be elected to Parliament⁴. However, progress has been strong with women accounting for 29.4% of the UK Parliament now. Or has it?

In the UK, from the 1918 General Election to date (Including the 2015 election), there had been 4,895 people elected as MPs, including 451 women (9.2%)⁵ – which is still lower than the current number of male MPs.

Today, the UK is ranked 36th in the world (out of 191 countries) for women in a national parliament’s lower or single representative house; whilst the USA ranks 72ⁿᵈ with 19.4%)⁶. So which countries are above the UK⁷ (and the USA) for female representation in parliament? Well, quite a lot including: Bolivia, Cuba, Seychelles, Senegal, Ecuador, Norway, Germany, Argentina, Uganda, Algeria, New Zealand and Nepal. Top of the list is Rwanda with 63.8% representation of women in parliament. I am sure some of these countries and their progress will come as a surprise to many people.

¹ [http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/1.5](http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/1.5)
³ [http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/](http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/)
⁵ [http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm)
⁶ Source: House of Commons Information Office
⁷ [http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm)
⁸ Post the UK general election, on 8 May 2015, 191 women were elected representing 29.2% which moves the UK up to 37ⁿᵈ.
Above the Parapet

Dr Purna Sen, formerly of the Institute of Public Affairs at The London School of Economics led the ‘Above the Parapet’ project8 (Dr Sen is now Director for Policy – Women at the United Nations). This explored the experiences of high profile women in public life and how the lessons learned can benefit women who follow. The project was focused on four sectors where voices are associated with having authority or influence in public life: politics, diplomacy, academia and civil society. I was privileged to be part of the initial results discussion group. The early insights and findings do provide cause for optimism and I look forward to the full report being published in due course.

A number of visiting fellows delivered presentations containing personal insights and highlighting the issues that women face in progressing through public life. The first presentation featured Dr Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi, speaking on the effect of empowering women. Dr Banda was the first female president of Malawi and only the second female president in the continent of Africa. Her own experience in Malawi reflected the global trends: when women rise in their communities, the communities themselves rise to new heights of health and prosperity. As mentioned previously and highlighted by Dr Joyce Banda, studies have found a direct correlation between women’s empowerment and GDP growth, business growth, environmental sustainability, improved human health and other positive impacts.

Dr Banda stated that one of the key problems for women is that “We have been talking to ourselves for too long.” And so, men must be part of the conversation. This preceded the rather high profile messages from the actress Emma Watson championing the #heforshe campaign. For me, the need for inclusivity in amongst all groups in conversations about equality is about in group and norms being set by the traditional in groups who are the gatekeepers. As a result, ‘out groups’ have to reach out to the ‘in groups’.

However, with humour, Dr Banda objected to being in a minority or an ‘out-group’, as a woman, and robustly stated that “Not only are we 51%, but we also bought the other half into this world!”

The second presentation featured Julia Gillard, former Prime Minister of Australia, speaking about her life experiences and journey (Tuesday 23rd June 2015). She highlighted her mantra of “raising your voice against something you perceive as an injustice” and the importance of starting early – outlining her experiences from primary education through to entering politics.

Julia Gillard addressed the question of quotas in a gender context in a balanced fashion. She stated that the big argument against targets, rules and especially quotas is that “it’s a distortion to merit”. However, she went on to say “To which one wanted to do the simple retort: have you had a look around here lately? Like all of these blokes got here on merit, did they?! But the more profound response, I hope, if you believe that merit is equally distributed equally between the sexes and if you look at any organisation and it is heavily skewed one-way then that means that women of merit, who should have been there, haven’t got there.” Indeed. Why would you not to select from the widest possible pools and find the best people. On the conservative side of politics that argument of ‘distortion’ is still relied on and falsely put to prevent there being a wave of change and maintaining the status quo where traditional gatekeepers still rule – and we do need to see that wave of change.

She concluded on some observations on how we will know that we have reached a time when there is no difference between the way in which we perceive men and women leaders. When we are truly judging men and women leaders on their capabilities, competence on what they are doing and achieving and nothing more. She laid out 5 aspects:

i) When there is not an endless fascination of what women are wearing – so appearance is no longer a primary consideration

ii) When there are not a set of remarks about family structures and family balance is not highlighted as a concern (damned if you have no children damned if you do)

iii) When gendered insults are not part of the political debate

iv) When ‘women, leadership and likeability’ are as easily and equally correlated as ‘men, leadership and likeability’

v) When women routinely lead so that you don’t know the numbers in a quiz!

The final presentation featured Professor Ruth Simmons, Former President of Brown University (Tuesday 30th June 2015). It was a fitting end to the visiting fellows programme by having such a personal and personable presentation. Ruth shared her journey from being the youngest of 12 children born to parents working the cotton fields of Texas during the 1960's when the Jim Crow laws (enforcing racial segregation) were still present to becoming the 18th president and first female president of Brown University and the first black person to be head of an Ivy-League Institution. We were captivated by her insights which were all applicable across the worlds of business and traditional organisational theory.

A theme of her leadership story focused on a dimension that is somewhat emblematic of what many women and

8 http://www.lse.ac.uk/IPA/ResearchAndEngagement/AboveTheParapet/AboutAtP.aspx
minorities confront as they rise and carry out their leadership roles. Ruth Simmons stated: “That is we must not only compete with other high achievers without similar histories of discrimination. We are expected somehow to rise above that history to perform as if that history did not exist. Now that’s something. Early in my life when I was a high school student I was very interested in theatre – debate and theatre. And so, I admit that in our professional lives we are often called on to do some amount of performance, some amount of acting, but that’s a very tall order to pretend that all of the things that one has endured on the way to leadership including discrimination somehow did not exist, to forget it and then to, as people like to say, to move on. My own efforts as a leader sought, at the personal level, to overcome the long-term effects of racial discrimination in the United States while at the very same time nurturing a belief that my experience and understanding of the effects of racism is a potent tool for fighting for human rights. I tried to use that understanding to confront racism rather than to forget it. And then in the meantime also to confront sexism, homophobia and other ills that divide and ravage our communities”

Whilst acknowledging her meritorious appointment to Brown University, she was aware that many would be concerned about her ascension to that post more so as the first Black President of an Ivy League University. She would not have the freedom of some of her fellow presidents in the Ivy League to govern solely in the interests of their university’s mission – but would have to take on additional responsibilities as a role model for women and non-white people and possibly be judged on more strict criteria. She stated: “Their performance would be judged on the basis of their effectiveness and planning, constructing budgets, raising funds creating new programmes and representing the university, I, on the other hand, along with 2 other female Ivy League Presidents, would be greeted inevitably by watchful stakeholders alert to missteps that would be presumed to typify the behaviour of someone of my background.”

Ruth Simmons articulated that her difference was multi-faceted. Many focused on her gender and race; however her background, upbringing and academic experience was also different: “I was so different from what Brown Presidents were supposed to be. I had grown up poor. Brown is a very privileged environment, a very wealthy environment. I had been educated in segregated schools. I had not attended an Ivy League university as an undergraduate. I was a Southerner!”

### Relevant Learnings

Professor Susan Carroll from Rutgers University, USA has previously outlined how the background drivers for potential women officials differ than that for men in politics – especially when viewed against media reporting. This was part of her talk on ‘Women in politics: why women can run’ and can be summarised in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional background in general</td>
<td>Business/Law</td>
<td>Education/Healthcare/Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average level of political experience</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Generally higher having worked on policy or campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of family (partner and children) from media</td>
<td>Family seen as support</td>
<td>Family seen as additional responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive to run for office</td>
<td>Come from self</td>
<td>In general suggested by a third party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prior to Hilary Clinton declaring her intention to run for the USA presidency, there was much media reporting that her daughter Chelsea Clinton was having a baby; this made many in the media question Hilary Clinton’s ability to run for presidential office. How interesting is that... when Mitt Romney was running for office against Obama, Romney had his 23rd grandchild (even tweeting the wrong number 22); yet the media did not think this was an issue for a man.

Looking across the Channel, in 1944 France gave voting rights to women – a good 36 years after the UK. By 1999, there were 22% women in local bodies and 10% in national parliament; this then jumped to 40% and 26% by 2012. The high number of women at a local level gives confidence to greater numbers coming through the pipeline to national level.

There were three drivers that helped achieve this: 1) local level action from 1999; 2) funding deficit action in 2007; and 3) the rise of the left which brought more women to the ‘political front line’. Within these, the action in January 2007 seems to have most addressed inequality, as there was public funding reduction according to the difference between male and female candidates. From being 67th in the list of parliamentary representation in 2007, France jumped to 34th by 2012.

---

9 Professor Susan Carroll, Rutgers University at The LSE 24th November 2014
Recommendations

Here are my recommendations for moving forward:

1) Simple Framework: A clear framework covering language and definition. I prefer the focus to be on ‘access to opportunity’ as it focuses on action to create a level playing field for all women, regardless of social background, ethnicity or any other diversifying factor, to consider a career in politics.

2) Clear Reporting: Ensuring clear, transparent and real reporting covering the pool of potential nominees through the various local party selection stages to final candidate to run. This is simple to view for gender but must cover ‘intersectionality’ and show other diversifying factors to ensure we are not just focused on the same group of privileged women who have similar backgrounds to the current crop of men.

3) Real Targets: If we are to set voluntary targets (NOT quotas) then we must set more appropriate targets that start from the pipeline, local government nominees and MP nominees.

4) More family focused environment. Aside from attraction we need to help retention of female MPs. As a result clearer patterns of working, family friendly policies, a welcoming environment for those who are pregnant/ with young children will help attract and retain more women – but also sends a strong signal to the rest of UK plc.

5) Awareness Training: Ensure all involved in selection/recruitment/nomination undergo ‘Hidden Bias’ awareness and training much like all those working in the Financial Services Sector have to undergo basic compliance training as mandated by the FCA.

6) Transparent Process: We must ensure recruitment processes are transparent and fair so it is evident how the short-list of potential candidates have been drawn together.

So there is a lot to do, especially in our own ‘back yard’, to ensure the progress and representation of women. We may even have to consider measures that are considered ‘interventionalist’ if the market does not provide the mechanisms for progress. Although, I am not a fan of legislating or quotas – I can understand the call to consider them. Some say that if you have legislation, rules and quotas for women in leadership positions then it is a distortion to merit. However, it was Julia Gillard who said of the majority in leadership positions: “Have a look round and do you think all these blokes are here on merit?!” We must ensure that we encourage, hear the voices and draw those, not just from a ‘closed elite’, but from the widest possible open pools – especially the ‘majority minority’ of women that have so often been excluded.

September 2016

Author: Dowshan Humzah, Inspiration for Success

- Dowshan Humzah is a digital strategy and business transformation specialist – having been a senior director of two blue-chip companies. He is known for having delivered increased revenues, innovations and many industry firsts in a range of markets (covering financial services, technology, media, telecoms and FMCG) whilst working full-time for The RSA Insurance Group, Virgin Media, Orange and Procter & Gamble. He has strong credentials in product development, strategy, digital media, classic brand management, emerging markets and board diversity.

- Dowshan’s own highly-different background continues to inform his passion for championing ‘access to opportunity’ for those less-privileged as well as his advocacy for diversity of background, perspective and thought as business imperatives for organisations and government. This is demonstrated by his being an Executive Ambassador for Board Apprentice (improving the quality and diversity of boards) and an Ambassador for Precious (supporting ethnic minority women in the workplace and entrepreneurship). His presentations, panel appearances and writing all substantiate his work in this arena - be it on the theme of ‘social mobility: gatekeepers and gatecrashers’ or ‘business and ethnicity’.

- Dowshan graduated in Accounting & Finance from The LSE and has Executive Education from LBS.

- LinkedIn Profile: http://uk.linkedin.com/in/dowshan