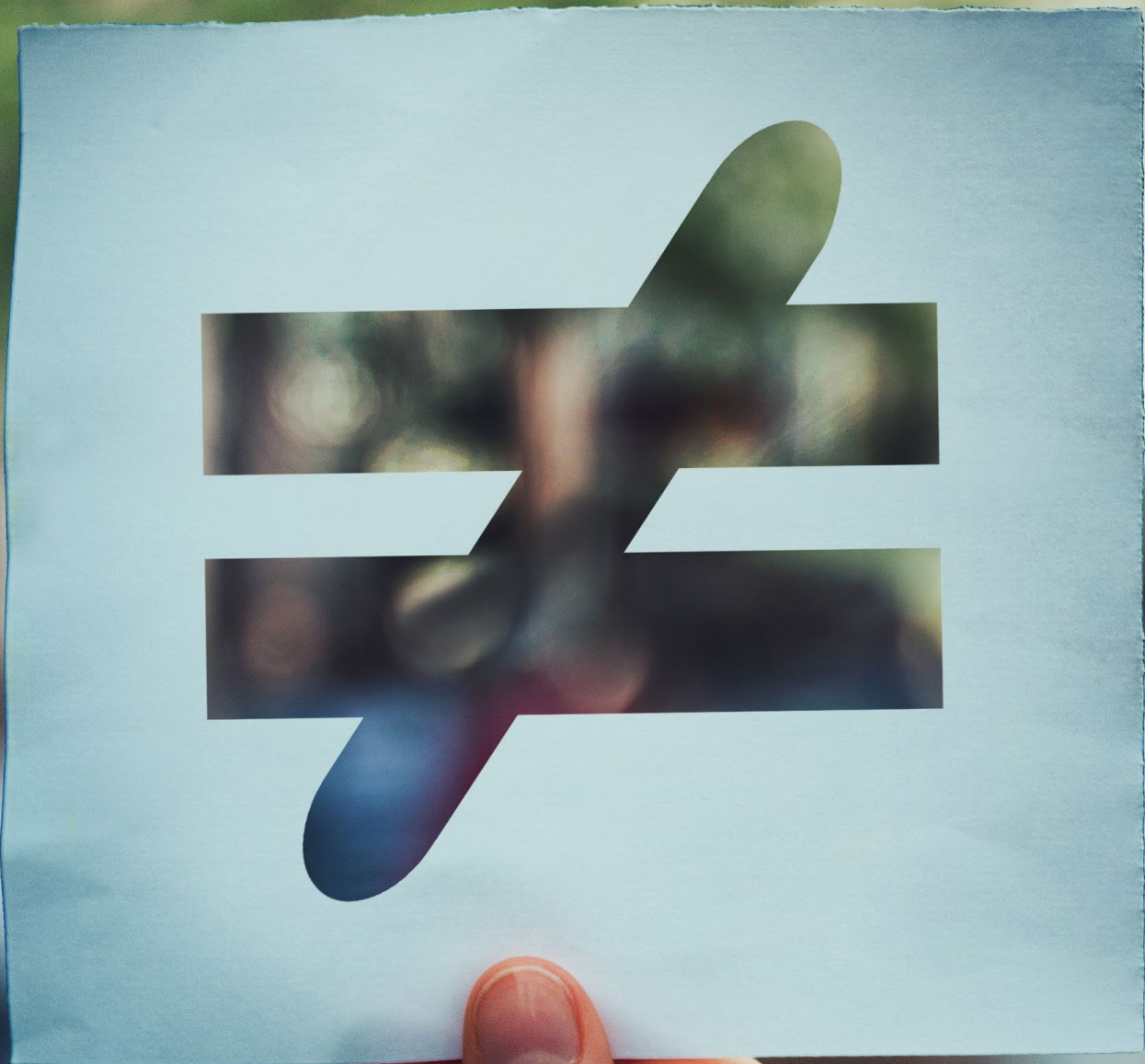


# That “double” glazed ceiling



March brought us International Women's Day... the speeches, the panels, the cookies and the pledges, but despite gender equality as a topic being well publicized, the corporate world remains a notoriously difficult arena for women to advance in, with many struggling to reach senior positions within their organizations. This is especially true for working mothers, as your early 30's (which is typically the time to invest in career advancement) coincides with the age when many women decide to have a family.

While there are many factors at play, including systemic sexism and biases, there are a number of unique issues that can specifically impact a mother's ability to advance, factors which organizations have tried to tackle with policies and dialogue but still need more thinking and more efforts to really change the dial.

#### **The maternity penalty**

Maternity leave can have a significant impact on a woman's career progression. Research suggests that taking a 12-month break can put women almost three years behind their male colleagues in terms of career progression. This often translates to lack of promotion opportunities, less visibility in the workplace, and fewer opportunities to develop new skills. The race to "catch-up" may deter the best of female talent from taking on such a challenge.

More structured efforts are required for returning mothers to not only provide flexible working arrangements, such as part-time work or job sharing, but to also ensure that they have the same opportunities for training and development as their male colleagues and that their career progression is reflective of contributions they are making to the business.

#### **Childcare, all 16 years of it**

Women are still more likely than men to take on the majority of caring

responsibilities for their children, including school runs and taking care of sick children. School hours do not align neatly with the working day, and as children go through the school system, there is a myriad of extra-curricular activities, dress up days, and other responsibilities working parents have to handle. In a job where you have somewhat fixed hours, this is a challenge, but in the organizations where the "9-5" is really an urban myth, these additional responsibilities can limit career progression.

Whilst employers can support working parents by offering flexible working arrangements, we have to go beyond well-meaning policies and really probe into whether or not parents are getting fair access to these arrangements and that there is a careful monitoring of any bias. Mothers should make their family commitments unashamedly clear to juniors and seniors – simple steps such as blocking times on the calendar for a school run can avoid rescheduling meetings or even fair dialogue on sharing the responsibilities with a spouse can make a huge difference.

There is also an opportunity to influence institutions beyond the corporate world. A dialogue with schools over flexible pick up times and after school library sessions for older children may help reduce the stress and anxiety of working parents having to handle staggered school pick up times, which can sometimes lead to hours on the road in the middle of the day.

#### **Travelling overseas and racking up the air miles**

Many senior positions require frequent travel, often overseas, especially in regional offices such as Dubai. This can be particularly challenging for women with caring responsibilities who may have to leave their children behind or arrange additional care while they are away, especially in places where there is little extended family support. This can be seen as a barrier to career progression, as women are perceived to be less suitable for certain roles that require frequent travel.

Since the need for travel has reduced somewhat post-COVID-19, this is not the case for all careers. A slightly longer-term view of a mother's ability to travel should be considered and efforts should be made to ensure that she is getting the right level and mix of experience during a time when she has this constraint. Whilst this point may be seen as "special treatment," we must remind ourselves that according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, it will take another 100 years to achieve gender equality based on the current rate of progress, and therefore, a little bit of "special treatment" could go a long way.

More structured efforts are required for returning mothers to not only provide flexible working arrangements, such as part-time work or job sharing, but to also ensure that they have the same opportunities for training and development as their male colleagues and that their career progression is reflective of contributions they are making to the business

**Agreeableness**

Research has shown that women tend to be more agreeable than men in the workforce, which can impact their willingness to push for salary increases or promotions. Specifically, women may be less likely to negotiate their salary or ask for a promotion, which can limit their career progression.

Employers can address this issue by transparency in pay and ensuring that promotions are based on merit rather than an employee's ability to negotiate. Given it is unlikely that corporate organizations are going to publish pay scales and statistics in the near future, the onus is then on senior leadership and HR to self-regulate and probe where necessary to ensure fairness.

Additionally, if self-promotion, assertiveness, and negotiation are the key to progression in the corporate world, employers should provide training and support to help women build their confidence and develop requisite skills to manage more proactively or factor these personality traits into their performance management processes.

**The emotional quotient**

Women tend to take criticism more personally than men and research shows they may be more likely to dwell on negative experiences. This can impact their confidence and motivation, which in turn can limit their career progression.

In corporate environments where there is a high degree of competition, pyramid structures, and a race to the top, the jostling and elbowing that is needed to succeed can impact women more negatively than men.

Bias associated with the “aggressive” woman who is merely trying to assert her position, often exhibiting the male-like characteristics that she is observing around her, can leave women emotionally exhausted and wanting to just give up.

For the relatively small number of women that make it to senior management, employers must try to filter the bias from the feedback and narrative associated with the “strong woman” and need to support women with coaching to help them develop their skills, confidence, and emotional resilience to navigate inherently male behaviors.

In conclusion, women still face a range of barriers to reach senior positions in the corporate world. Whilst huge progress has been made and every year we see a fresh cohort of ambitious and successful women chipping at that glass ceiling, there is so much more employers and individuals need to do in taking steps to support working mothers in order to create a supportive and inclusive workplace culture.

By addressing these issues, we can create a more equitable and diverse workforce that supports the career progression of all employees, regardless of gender. ●

By **Saima Jalal**, Partner, Value Creation Services, Deloitte Middle East

Whilst huge progress has been made and every year we see a fresh cohort of ambitious and successful women chipping at that glass ceiling, there is so much more employers and individuals need to do in taking steps to support working mothers in order to create a supportive and inclusive workplace culture