

I was 30 and the youngest Sales VP GE Capital Aviation Services had ever hired globally. I was also a female working in aviation finance – a sector hardly known for its gender balance. I would often be the only woman in the room and was flying to exotic places to negotiate deals. I closed the first ever aircraft lease in Libyan history, I put the first Boeing 737 aircraft into the Congo, and signed GECAS' first ever deal in Senegal. A customer in Turkey even stuck my name on the side of an aircraft, once.

People form a first impression of you within seconds, so you can imagine what a 60-something male airline CEO would think as this young, Arab woman walked into his office trying to sell him an \$80 million deal. The way I tried to circumvent the inevitable bias was to first build my credibility with them remotely – by email or phone – so that by the time we met in person they would understand my technical ability and respect me as a professional. I developed trust over the airwaves as I listened to their needs, asked a lot of questions and fought for them internally. When we finally met, most were very gracious. Some bullied, some patronised, one even harassed me. In the negative cases, my solution was to set them straight hard and fast, and, where appropriate, smooth it over with a healthy dose of humour – I've found that a valuable tool in developing business.

What I've discovered through my podcast, *When Women Win*, is that others have succeeded differently. I created it to not only highlight women at the top of their game, but also offer global access to female role models. We launched in 2017 and I quit the corporate world two weeks later. It's been an eye-opener.

I learned from the soft-spoken consensus-building manner of people like Beth Comstock – who became a Vice Chairman of the General Electric Company while being an introvert playing an extrovert's game. Then there was a data-driven approach of people such as Prof Iris Bohnet at the Harvard Kennedy School – who advocates drawing the conversation back to the facts. Others, such as Haben Girma, a female lawyer who is deaf, blind and black inspired me deeply when she said that no matter what, "I choose my own narrative".

But if there are lots of winning styles to choose from, why aren't there more women at the top? Why are only 24 percent of politicians globally female, with that number shrinking to just 5 percent when you're talking about CEOs? The hard facts are that the playing field is simply not level.

For instance, studies done separately by Yale and Wharton have found that when a woman speaks up in a meeting she is perceived as 14 percent less competent than her peers; but when a man exhibits exactly the same behaviour he's deemed as 10 percent more competent. When a woman negotiates, she receives worse results than when a man does the same. Even becoming a parent is treated differently: when a woman becomes a parent, she is perceived as less committed and her pay is penalised regardless of her performance – this is called the "Motherhood Penalty". Conversely, when a man becomes a parent he is perceived as more committed and gets a "Fatherhood Bonus". All of this is rooted in cultural norms and biases that begin in early childhood: we teach boys to be brave go-getters, and

Together we Rise

Gender parity may be a work in progress – but some women are winning

we reward girls for being perfect, quiet caregivers. This culture is global and must change if we are going to achieve parity in the workplace.

For me, equality in the workplace must go hand-in-hand with equality in the home. I'm a huge proponent of paternity leave. Parity is parity and I believe that paternity leave should equal maternity leave. Not only would this create the right balance and support at home, it would also significantly reduce gender bias in the workplace. Today's hiring managers routinely reject qualified female candidates simply because they don't want someone who's "going to have a baby and disappear for a few months". If men have equal paternity leave, the stigma will resolve itself. There are numerous other policies that can and should be put in place to get to parity in the C-suite, but paternity leave may be the single most important one. In fact, a study done across 22,000 companies in 91 countries found that the factor most correlated to getting women to senior leadership was the paternity policy. The beauty of this fact is that men and women both win.

Whilst advocates and consultants like me champion policy changes at both government and corporate level, the question is, what can you do at an individual level? Well, plenty.

Be an advocate for change in your organisation. Decades of research have shown unequivocally that gender-diverse teams make better decisions and deliver better financial results than single-gender teams – tell people about it.

Hire more women. Ensure they are more included in all aspects of work, from meetings to informal networks. Create a culture of psychological safety for people of different styles to thrive. Stamp out casual sexism categorically. Give women equal access to resources. Be vigilant for unconscious bias in performance discussions. Promote more women. Pay a fair wage. Mentor women. And – most importantly – sponsor women.

HeForShe is a UN-initiated campaign for advancement in gender equality and is a growing movement where people can sign up as 'agents of change'. It's a great place to start and has already had a fantastic response. Why? Because men have realised that, together, we rise. ■

