

## Beyond gender: Why it's time to stop pigeonholing women in business



Story by  
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🕒 June 5, 2023

ESG MONTH

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**Gender inequality** is a prevalent issue across the UK. Trends towards women in leadership positions are increasing, with companies such as Ocado Retail, The Body Shop and New Look all boasting female CEOs, but even these senior-held positions are in the 'softer' sectors.

The "**Gender equality at every stage: a roadmap for change**," report in 2019 detailed the steps needed to tackle the major issues that women were facing in the workplace. Fast forward 4 years and where are we at?

### Pigeonholing in the workplace hurts everyone

With the push for representation in domestic and global markets, while some gendered jobs are still rooted in stereotypes, like women as teachers and men in finance, things are a-changing.

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Sophie Gilmore, Managing Director at HybridTec notices more female participation in a traditionally male arena;

*“We are seeing increasing numbers of women moving into STEM and this is a welcome development for us in the sector.”*

Anna Berry, Managing Director at EssenceMediacomX, reflects that it can be easy for women to get pigeonholed, and confined to linear career paths, especially if they are particularly talented in one area.

For example, women with great social skills get shoehorned into people management while their male colleagues get steered towards business leadership in the same field. Berry outlines some ways businesses can deal with such obstacles.

*“Fortunately, there are some simple, practical steps businesses can take to actively mitigate this. One is ensuring a 50:50 gender split for any interviews for senior roles, which means women can’t be overlooked during the application stage.”*

*“By adopting inclusive practices such as this, businesses can create a more balanced and diverse workforce, allowing women to break free from stereotypes and reach their full potential in various leadership positions,”* she advises.

## More to be done

*“We have seen a shift away from traditional ideas of ‘jobs for girls,’ and the attitude within the industry is clearly moving to a more inclusive and diverse approach to training and recruitment – however there is still a way to go,”* warns Gilmore.

This is reflected in recent research by PwC. The [Women in Work Index](#) shows progress towards gender equality at work across the OECD has been exceedingly slow over the last decade, with a persistent gender pay gap of 14%, down only 2.5 percentage points since 2011.

*“Despite an evolution in challenges facing today’s younger generation of women, the lack of action across the industry has remained the same as we saw from the latest gender pay gap report,”* according to Sam Smith, Managing Director at Household.

The UK fell five places on the Women in Work Index, from ninth place in 2020, to 14th place in 2021; its Index score decreased by 1.8 points to 69.0. This was predominantly due to a widening gender pay gap and a fall in the female labour force participation rate.

Optimistically, the UK remains 3.5 points above the OECD average (65.5 points), and it ranks the highest among the G7 economies (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the United States).

While Smith acknowledges there have been improvements in inclusivity in education and employment, many companies have not moved with the times to facilitate women in more senior positions.

*“Although there is no longer the standard requirement to be a graduate when starting out, many businesses still follow outdated tick-box standards, failing to recognise the obstacles faced by women and falling foul to showboating the minority of women that do make it to the C-Suite, which I have seen and experienced at some of the larger networks.”*

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“This completely undermines the talented and creative women within our industry and has the effect of pigeonholing female success as looking one particular way, ignoring all other avenues or forms this may take,” she adds.

## The power of energy

Gilmore considers that women are significantly underrepresented in the energy and utilities industry, but more women are feeling confident to explore training and careers in this area.

“The energy and utilities sector is becoming more popular as a career prospect for women and girls, and at HybridTec we make a conscious effort to make our training and environment as welcoming as possible for all. In addition, our senior leadership team and non-executive board have higher ratios of female members than male.

“This means that from the very highest level, our policies and practices are informed by women and take into consideration the challenges that women in all sectors and businesses face, not just the more traditionally male-dominated areas of construction and engineering,” she says.

POWERful Women, a professional initiative to create a gender-balanced, diverse and inclusive UK energy sector, aim for women to be in at least 40% of middle management and leadership roles in the UK energy sector by 2030.

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## Meaningless tokens or tangible change?

According to traditional gendered stereotypes, mothers are the ones expected to predominantly stay at home to provide childcare for babies and young children, with men usually only receiving one or two weeks off.

“Shifting the perception of women as the primary caregivers is also essential for a more gender-balanced senior leadership. By fostering an environment that encourages equal caregiving responsibilities and supports both men and women in their parenting roles, businesses can promote a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture,” advises Berry.



Pigeonholing women into limiting roles due to the ‘hassle’ of companies having to provide flexible working arrangements to enable mothers to meet childcare responsibilities, is just another form of **gender discrimination** and one which will actually hamper most workplaces’ economic progress.

*“I think there is a possibility that women are being added to boards as tokens for diversity and are pigeonholed into other roles such as a secretarial assistant or a soft role.*

*“However, I do not personally pigeonhole myself and I believe that being a woman does not limit my capabilities – my education and life experience might limit it rather than my gender. I actively look to support females coming into our industry and believe there are lots of opportunities,”* says Rebecca Armstrong, Managing Director at Making Energy Greener.

There was no formal paternity leave at all in the UK up until 2 decades ago. Two weeks of statutory paternity leave was brought in in 2003, and in 2015, shared parental leave was introduced, which allows couples to share up to 50 weeks’ leave and 37 weeks’ statutory pay in the year after the birth.

Take-up rates are low – estimated by the government to be between 2% and 8%. Meanwhile, a survey published last year found that 16% of dads still don’t know about shared parental leave.

However, things are changing, and both men and women want that change. According to Sarah Baumann, Managing Director at The Wild by Jungle Creations, there is a big movement with younger generations of men being very vocal in changing policies, taking action and helping to create a different vision of business.

*“For example at Jungle Creations, our parenting ERG proposed redefining maternity and paternity leave into Primary and Secondary caregiver leave – and we have seen an increase in secondary carers accessing their full leave entitlement, which we know has a well-proven benefit to improving gender equity,”* she says.

Berry thinks that the birth of a child often marks a turning point in a woman’s career where progression may stall.

*“Women returning to work can face the barrier of being pigeonholed as mothers rather than being recognised as potential business leaders,”* says Berry, while offering advice.

*“To address this issue, increased support is needed at both Government and company levels to facilitate the integration of family and career responsibilities. This support should be extended to both men and women, as achieving a balanced parenting dynamic is crucial to alleviating the disproportionate pressure placed on women.*

*“The loss of senior female talent due to pigeonholing is detrimental to companies, and the focus should be on striking the right balance to enable women to return to work and maintain meaningful, progressive careers. This is particularly important in industries grappling with talent acquisition and retention, such as the media sector. By fostering a supporting and inclusive environment, businesses can retain valuable female talent and contribute to a more balanced and diverse workforce,”* she says.

## **Male-dominated industries**



*“My business operates in an industry, specifically construction and gas and electrics, that have traditionally been male-dominated. There have been many times I have chaired meetings and been asked what my actual role in the company is, which implies that my position or authority could be questioned due to my gender.*

*“So if this happens to me, then it probably happens to other women in business who could face challenges and assumptions about their roles and abilities,”* says Armstrong.

*“I have noticed that most networking events and board meetings I attend are male-dominated, indicating that men hold the majority of influential positions. In my industry, there is a very low number of female gas engineers, ASHP installers and cavity wall installers, while fewer males apply for HR and customer service roles. So I guess genders do still behave in a way that suggests pigeonholing,”* she adds.

Baumann reflects on the depressing reality in 2023. *“There is still surprise at a female CEO or an all-female leadership team and that can bring discomfort to some groups of men.”*

All is not lost though and there is optimism ahead.

*“But there are many men who equally welcome this because it allows them to be more individual, to express different values and not to succumb to a set of values and behaviours that feels unnatural to them”,* she adds.

Amanda Brock, CEO of OpenUK also believes things are improving, and while we don't currently see enough women in the most senior roles and positions in businesses or communities, this is changing, and there are many fierce women leading groundbreaking organisations.

*“The future is not going to be middle-aged white men leading companies. Of course, they will have a place, but it will be as a part of the picture, by no means the majority of it. For now, we need to be respectful of everyone and encourage people through the system,”* she says.

## **Disrupting tradition**

Pigeonholing in business is one of the most limiting behaviours and can result in minimising or even losing talent. Armstrong reflects on the change afoot, while acknowledging the importance of all sexes.

*“I think the traditional vision of power in the UK business arena, which has been characterised as very male, is being disrupted. There is a shift away from outdated practices like heavy drinking, inappropriate comments, sexism, and racism. Making Energy Greener focuses on honesty, integrity, and building a better future for the planet.*

*“I want to stress the importance of equality between men and women, but I also want to acknowledge the different energies we bring. I believe that society has a desire for a new age of respect, dignity, and equality that challenges the conventional understanding of power and gender roles”,* she concludes.

Last year, 96% of FTSE 350 CEOs were men, meaning just 4% (or 12) companies had female CEOs. This is up by four since 2021. In fact, in the FTSE 250 (where 97% of CEOs are men), there are more CEOs named John than female CEOs.

Smith outlines what we have seen as a positive reaction to disrupt the male-business environment is the rise of the likes of WACL and Chief,



organisations run by women for women with the sole purpose of supporting senior women in business.

*“Great support, coaching and training provided for a broad range of skill sets and levels (albeit with barriers such as seniority and membership fees). Training like this should be the norm.*

*“If all businesses embraced this forward-thinking approach to female talent, the glass ceiling would be shattered. In its wake: a balanced team, culture and workplace. Surely both sides of the gender divide would benefit from this approach,”* she says.

## **A male lens**

Andy Walker, Managing Director at Walker Engineering, is keen to employ more females.

*“We have engaged with a number of local schools and colleges to inform young girls on the benefits of a career in engineering, and we have had some uptake from young female students wanting to pursue a career in engineering and business,”* he says.

However, he recognises the challenges and old-held beliefs that still exist.

*“That said, the built environment sector is a very hard industry to encourage women to get into, but I am keen to recruit more into the business. There is a perception of women in engineering that they can’t weld or fabricate for instance, but over the years I have worked with some good female engineers – so I don’t feel anyone should be pigeonholed.”*

Brock does not believe that power can be given to anyone.

*“You can be given a role but have no power in it. Power is about influence and people believing in you. That belief can take you very far. What has been disrupted is the natural order of the past as an increasingly diverse group wakes up to take its power,”* she says.

## **Is the future female?**

According to Walker, more female engineers and businesswomen in the industry would lead to a more diverse and dynamic workforce. He acknowledges the benefits that both males and females can bring.

*“In the modern society we live in, I don’t think any one sex has the overall power – everyone has different skill sets and this is not dependent on gender,”* he says.

Things may be changing but recognition alone won’t close pay gaps, stop gendered harassment or protect victims of violence.

**Research** shows that companies with more women on their boards outperform those without by a significant margin, and organisations with greater gender diversity among senior leaders are more profitable. As well as being fair and representative, there’s a monetary benefit to improving gender equality. The proof is in the pudding.

*“In a study of California’s largest 400 public companies, the top 25 had the highest percentage of women in leadership positions. The results are remarkable, with these leading companies delivering a 74% higher return on assets and equity than other businesses in the survey,”* says Lauren Coe, Employee



The focus needs to be on action, not talk.

*“Businesses need to ensure they have the right structure in place to support women at the turning points of their careers to retain that talent”, says Berry.*

*“Companies can address this by enhancing parental leave policies and introducing programmes to support women at the point where we start to see a reduction in female representation in the industry,” she adds.*

*“We also support our returning parents to help manage the transition when coming back to work after an extended period. We have a buddy system designed to help them share their experiences of balancing family commitments with work and building their own professional networks for support and advice.”*

## **A place of balance**

Coe makes the important point that it can't just be women fitting into a man's world, it must be about creating a new, improved one.

*“It is important for organisations to focus on inclusion, not just equity. It is not enough to just create space in the existing ways of working for women to step into but to embrace new leadership styles and recognise the value that women leaders bring to the business.*

*“Rather than women stepping into a masculine space, create a new space. Community-driven thinking, increased empathy and ethical decision-making are just a couple of the core leadership skills required in the future,” she says.*

**Collaboration** is an incredibly powerful force. Women and men must work together to create new structures that have everyone's well-being and wealth in mind, offering ideas and expertise on shared tasks. From a business perspective, mixing up staff with projects casts new light on how things are done. Let's leave the holes to the pigeons and allow employees to thrive.

*“Businesses with a more gender-balanced and diverse workforce are reaping the benefits, which include increased innovation, fresh ideas and higher employee engagement. This shift is helping industries move away from the male-centric power structure towards a more equitable and inclusive approach to leadership and decision-making,” says Berry.*

It's not just about pigeonholing females. Stop pigeonholing people, and enjoy a happier, more engaged and productive business.

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