What's with the all-boys board members?

86% of accountants believe that women struggle to become board members in Singapore.

According to a survey by the Institute of Certified Public Accountants of Singapore (ICPAS), accountants recognise that women face various impediments to being appointed as board members but many do not feel a need for legislation on quotas to ensure board seats for women.

75% of respondents think legislation is unnecessary, despite the fact that the majority of respondents (86%) believe women face challenges in being appointed as board members in Singapore.

Ms Lyn Tan, ICPAS Head of Research, said: “This could be due to concerns that legislation may incur the risk of tokenism and reflect views that a quota system for gender balanced boards may not be the long-term solution in the Singapore context.”

On the types of challenges faced by female board members, the perceived key challenges, as indicated by the respondents, are: gender stereotypes that generate positive bias towards men for board appointments (32%), family commitments (29%) and lack of opportunities (23%).

Respondents commented that the “old boys’ network” and the fact that “women spend less time building their network due to family commitments” could be contributing factors to the relative dearth of women board members in Singapore.

In Asia Pacific, it was reported that boards with three or more female directors are rare and boards with three or more female independent directors were almost non-existent. In Singapore, the number of women on boards of directors remains low as indicated in the NUS Business School research that women made up 6.6% of all boardroom positions in listed companies in Singapore in 2010. This is despite increasing emphasis on companies in the Asia Pacific to include more female leaders at the senior level.

When polled on the reasonable quota of women representatives on boards, more than half viewed 11% to 30% as being reasonable. In contrast, many European countries are now looking to emulate Norway’s 40% female quota for the boards of publicly-traded companies.

The profession/skill set (44%) of a board member was perceived as the most important element in board diversity. This was followed by experience (33%) and gender diversity (10%). Interestingly, the group of respondents who perceived gender diversity as the most important element in board diversity indicated no need for legislative quota.

“This may reflect the sentiment that it is not about appointing women directors just for the sake of having women on boards. Rather, the key consideration for boards is how to achieve a competitive edge by tapping on the right mix of skills sets, perspectives and experience,” added Ms Tan.

ICPAS Research launched the Women on Boards Poll with the aim of exploring the views of the CPA Singapore community on the reasons of few women on boards of directors in Singapore. The 291 respondents in this poll were mainly CPAs Singapore from CPA firms (17%), government/public sector (16%), professional services (16%), financial services (14%) and manufacturing (7%).

Tags: Institute of Certified Public Accountants of Singapore, Lyn Tan