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# Domestic goddess or director-general but not both

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Whatever happened to the notion of Lehman Sisters being a safer pair of hands? The latest research from the Bundesbank suggests that a greater proportion of women on bank boards has led to "a more risky conduct of business", before citing "lack of executive level experience" as the cause. It was ever thus. Women take time out to have babies. Similarly, the Norwegian experiment with introducing quotas in 2004 failed because of the time constraint imposed on achieving the 40 per cent target – boards ended up filled with inexperienced heiresses and wives.

In my experience, women are more questioning and less likely to indulge in groupthink. As for men being more riskaverse, that is no more borne out in real life – from the number of road accidents (remember Sheila's Wheel, the women-only car insurer) to calamities in the home – than in the boardroom, where there is a greater inclination to make testosterone-fuelled, value-destroying acquisitions at the wrong time and at the wrong price.

By contrast, a study in the

noughties of the best performing US companies highlighted that the ones with relatively more women on the board produced the best return on capital and total shareholder returns. This could just mean women self-select into better businesses. But it also probably reflects good judgment and the fact that the sexual revolution began in America in the 1970s and as a result experienced American women executives have risen through the ranks.

America is probably a generation ahead of the UK in this. Indeed, of the four female chief executives in the FTSE 100, three are American. Britain might have been ahead of the game in having the first western political leader, but it is trailing behind when it comes to producing female business leaders.

As in the UK, the emerging markets have also produced more female political leaders than business leaders – Golda Meir and Indira Gandhi to name but two – but that is already beginning to change as we see Asian women running multinational businesses. Maybe women simply gravitate where the power is – politics in emerging markets and business in developed countries. After all, in poorer

countries women are making the most of microfinance initiatives, creating small businesses to fend for their families, while research shows many men in similar situations squander the money on gambling and alcohol.

Meanwhile, in Europe we tend to be hooked on quotas, such as all-women shortlists for parliamentary positions and quotas to put more female directors on boards. If we want more female directors, there need to be tax breaks for childcare and for looking after aged parents

still undertake the majority of household tasks; for this, read chores. So most women know that "having it all" means "doing it all" and that is pretty darned difficult. Many women graduates have opted to do one or the other – to be a DG (domestic goddess) at home, or a DG (director-general) at work, but not both. It is hard to serve too many masters without short-changing both, and yourself in the process.

Yet there are some grounds for optimism. More than half the British graduates now going into law, medicine and accountancy are female, so more non-executive directors will come through in time. But as the role is more advisory than supervisory, we need entrepreneurial business builders as well as professional box-tickers. Historically, women have arrived in the boardroom through marketing, accountancy or, increasingly, human resources. But we also need women who have risked their own capital, delivered on a strategy, built a sustainable business model or paid a dividend stream to join boards. As it is, women are more self-sufficient, so when their careers end they have hobbies and homes to focus on while men frequently feel like fish out of

water on retirement and promptly seek to jump back into the boardroom.

That is why some women see boardrooms as old boys' clubs. With about five non-executive directorships each, in many cases they appear to be there primarily to get them out of the house – where the chief executive definitely is a woman. In such instances, it seems that each non-executive directorship provides a different perk: one a personal assistant, one an office, one a chauffeur, one club memberships and the fifth, corporate sponsorship for their favourite sport. Luckily there are five working days in a week...

The fact that companies run by women do well ultimately reflects that to be where they are in the first place in the current environment, they must be very good. When the split between men and women is 50-50, there will be no difference between them. Votes for women have not given us better government.

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