

TODAY'S MANAGER

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MAXIMISING HUMAN CAPITAL



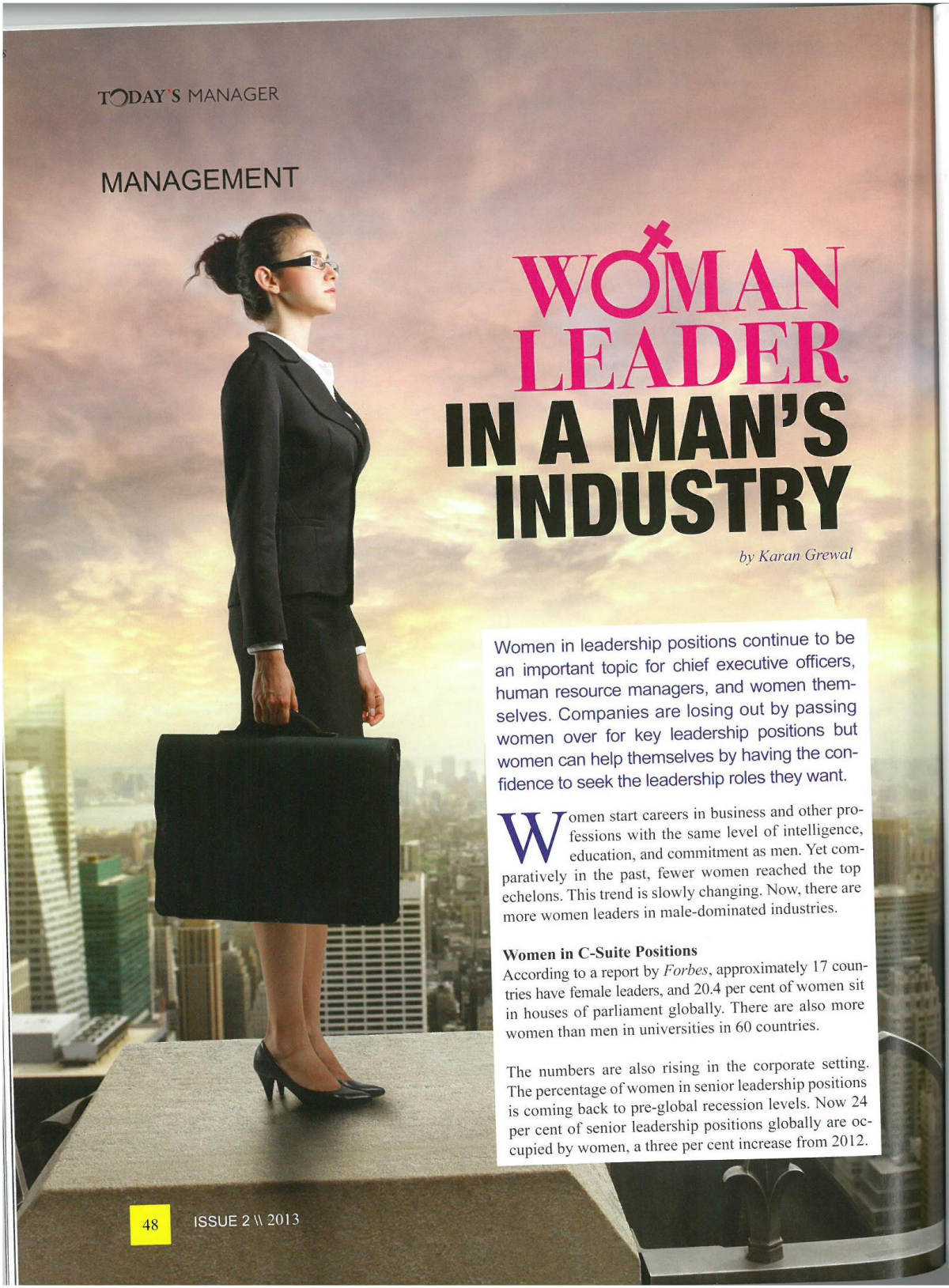
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WOMAN LEADER IN A MAN'S INDUSTRY

by Karan Grewal

Women in leadership positions continue to be an important topic for chief executive officers, human resource managers, and women themselves. Companies are losing out by passing women over for key leadership positions but women can help themselves by having the confidence to seek the leadership roles they want.

Women start careers in business and other professions with the same level of intelligence, education, and commitment as men. Yet comparatively in the past, fewer women reached the top echelons. This trend is slowly changing. Now, there are more women leaders in male-dominated industries.

Women in C-Suite Positions

According to a report by *Forbes*, approximately 17 countries have female leaders, and 20.4 per cent of women sit in houses of parliament globally. There are also more women than men in universities in 60 countries.

The numbers are also rising in the corporate setting. The percentage of women in senior leadership positions is coming back to pre-global recession levels. Now 24 per cent of senior leadership positions globally are occupied by women, a three per cent increase from 2012.

Businesses in China are leading the way with 51 per cent of women holding senior leadership positions. This is part of a larger Asia boom for women in senior roles. The Asia-Pacific region leads with 29 per cent of women in senior leadership positions compared to 25 per cent in the European Union, and 21 per cent in North America.

Overcoming Obstacles

Women leaders can sometimes be held back in their career because of family commitments, but they still possess the mental strength which can serve them well. Ms Selvaa Parimalam (Maya), director of A&B Scaffold Engineering Pte Ltd, is an exemplary example.

The self-made leader, who was the first woman in her village to graduate from college, came to Singapore in 1995 and could not speak a word of English. She overcame the language barrier in a year and managed to gain a decade of work experience in the construction sector before launching her firm in 2009.

“When I started out, I was afraid because of the uncertainty of the future ahead. I had difficulty in getting clients. There was also uncertainty if I could finish my allocated projects. My competitors also doubted me because they saw me as a woman in a man’s industry. They thought I wouldn’t be able to amount to much. Many people also discouraged me and told me I’m not ready for this industry because it’s a field where women cannot succeed,” says Ms Maya.

She adds: “But now I have managed to change everyone’s perspective. My business was quite successful after a year and I managed to break even after two years. My overheads were about S\$18,000 a month but I managed to cover it regularly. It’s all about working hard and being confident at all times.”

Staying Motivated

Young women may face unique challenges in asserting and developing a leadership style while trying to stay motivated. Some struggle with managing others while maintaining a positive image. They do not want to be ignored, but they do not want to be seen as too pushy, either. Ms Maya suggests learning from male leaders and emulating them.

She says: “My father and my previous boss are my greatest source of inspiration. My ex-boss started his construction trading company in the 1980s, when he was 40. He used to hand carry all the materials and went to various construction sites to sell them piece by

piece. He increased his product inventory as the years progressed and improved the business. Even when he was sick he came to the office. When he passed away, the company was a million dollar firm because of his hard work and self-belief. It was huge motivational factor for me and I followed in his footsteps.”

“My dad also believed in me more than I believed in myself. His words always pushed me when I was down. He told me to always think of myself as a man and always encouraged me to do better,” adds Ms Maya.



Ms Selvaa Parimalam (Maya) believes that girls need to start early to ensure that they know they are capable of reaching great heights.

Leadership Strategies

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, experts suggest several leadership strategies for women. If there are not many female leaders at their employer, young women should join professional associations or community organisations to find role models. These non-work settings also offer young women a chance to try out new leadership styles outside the office.

At work, young women should enlist mentors and solicit feedback on leadership techniques. After a meeting, ask a trusted superior about what behaviours worked and what did not.

Creating an environment where women can succeed is vital. Positive public policies and rewarding workplaces can help women become successful and assume key leadership roles. ■