

## Getting more women into the workforce in Africa

The latest survey commissioned by Regus, the global workplace provider, shows a positive trend as the number of businesses reporting that they had no women at all at board level has fallen from 47% two years ago, to just over a third (37%) today.

 By Joanne Bushell 29 May 2014



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There are many signs of "the Gender Agenda: Gaining Momentum" in Africa - from female entrepreneurs which is driving growth in the region,<sup>[1]</sup> to the fact there are female government ministers or heads of state South Africa, Ghana, Liberia, Malawi and Rwanda. In fact, Rwanda, with 56% of seats in its House of Deputies held by women, is currently the *only* government in the world dominated by women, putting the East African country well ahead of the United States, United Kingdom and Japan, which all fall below the 25% mark. <sup>[2]</sup>

However, the results are not wholly comforting as less than half of businesses globally (42%) think that the number of C-suite women is increasing in their industry.

In addition to this, it would seem there are worse and better industries in which to be a woman.

Globally, the pharmaceutical and healthcare sector seems to be a good place for women, with 45% of companies having more than one woman at board level or in senior management. The next best by this measure is the retail and leisure industry, where 37% of organisations have more than one woman on the board or in senior management. In contrast, in the ICT sector a staggering 43% have no women directors at all.

### Breaking through the glass ceiling

The survey also found larger businesses to be better at paving the way to the top for women with more than half having more than one female director. But in small businesses it is most likely that there will be no women at all at the top, and unlikely that there will be more than one. These results suggest that smaller businesses are struggling to provide the conditions necessary for their female employees to break through the glass ceiling.

So, why this dearth of women at C-suite level? Well, complacency is certainly a factor, with too many firms settling for one female director and then neglecting to train and develop new ones. More importantly though even in the developed world, the OECD reports that women are taking on the lion's share of housework, family care and community duties. In a nut-shell, women are expected to be household goddesses within home and single-minded executives at work, putting them under incredible strain.

Greater flexibility in both the number of hours spent in the office and where the work is actually carried out seen as crucial to the increased participation of women in business. Allowing women to work closer to home can help save precious time wasted in commuting, while working closer to their child's school for example means that the routine activity of picking up the children is no longer one that requires forward planning or outside help.

## **Importance of flexible working**

Catalyst, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to improving diversity in workplaces around the world, in June 2013 published a study confirming that flexible working is important to helping women make it to the top rungs of the corporate ladder. The study concluded that women working in companies that didn't currently offer flexi-time were less likely to aspire to executive roles than those working in companies that did.

Finally, if women are to make the contribution to the economy needed to help lift GDP and grow, they need to be able to progress in their careers whether or not they have families and household responsibilities. While changing traditional mentality that still sadly sees women as taking care of more household duties than men requires a lengthy and thorough cultural change, for businesses to fully unlock the potential of their female workers all that is required is greater flexibility in order to allow them to juggle their busy lives as efficiently and as happily as possible.

*[1]"Women entrepreneurs drive growth in Africa", New York Times, 10 October 2012*

*[2]"Women in national parliaments", Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1 February 2013.*

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