

It is extremely difficult for Arab women to break into the business world, and employers need to join the effort

By: Nawa Fahshan-Batshon

Arab women need to break through three significant barriers to sit at the management table • Employers can play a part in breaking some of them and benefit from it.

An ironic joke among educated Arabs talks about their glass ceiling being on the floor level. Now imagine what that means for Arab women. An Arab woman must deal with three barriers: being part of the Arab minority in Israel, being a woman, and finally, being a woman in a traditional Arab society. This triple discrimination has an impact and is reflected in a variety of areas and levels.

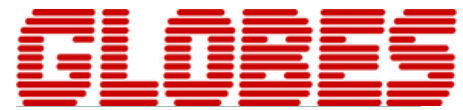
Unlike women from the mainstream society, who need to overcome a "glass ceiling", Arab women deal with a "glass cube". This cube not only has a "glass ceiling" which all women face, but in addition there are "glass walls" that block them from holding certain positions in Israeli companies, especially positions and access to departments that are usually not directly related to Arab society.

This argument is claimed throughout the international literature debating the case of minority groups around the world - companies place glass walls blocking women and minorities from working in certain departments. Regrettably, these departments are the ones that often lead to senior positions in the organization or provide the needed experience to climb to the top.

When I was appointed as CEO of Co-Impact, on one hand I felt self-confident leading a significant organization, on the other hand, while my close family supported me, more distant acquaintances questioned my decision to accept the position - How do I intend to combine this with motherhood? How will I manage? The message I received from people around me was unequivocal - why do you need it? Why invest efforts in it?

These questions reflect the perception towards working woman in Arab society. The Arab society can accept an Arab woman working as a secondary breadwinner, but once she takes on a significant role, questions arise about her decision, because it is clear that she is doing this for her personal development and for herself, and this has a negative connotation in Arab society.

Managing an organization is indeed a very demanding job. It requires a lot of time and total devotion. CEOs in the business or non-profit sector have no time to spare. Beyond the impossibly tight schedule, there is also a relentless sense of responsibility towards employees, the Board, shareholders and donors, company beneficiaries, finances, and so on....



And yet, it is very rare to find a male CEO or even a Jewish woman CEO being asked - Why do you need it? How will you manage? It is practically a given that despite the many challenges, being a CEO is a position to aspire to, as it is gratifying and full of possibilities.

Promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion in the workplace

In the world and in Israel, many companies are promoting an organizational culture of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I), which has proven to raise profits, increase organizational loyalty and engagement among all employees- Arabs and Jews alike. Moreover, companies advancing DE&I agenda discover new talents, expand their target audience, and open new markets.

Even if an Arab woman manages to overcome inner barriers, it doesn't guarantee success. And if we go back to the joke about the glass ceiling - as organizations promote an organizational culture of diversity and inclusion, that glass ceiling moves away from the floor, the glass cube becomes thinner and Arab women have more of a chance to succeed.

In recent years, an increasing number of large companies are promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion and integrating more employees from Arab society. Thus, there is a higher supply of experienced Arab employees, suitable and worthy of promotion and a new cadre of Arab managers gradually building up. This trend will continue to strengthen as the number of Arab academics and especially women, continues to rise.

We must remember that the diversity and inclusion of Arab women in business companies is the key to the success of Israeli society. Business companies can be the pioneers in initiating this change and gain both economic profit and the satisfaction of leading significant change in Arab society, for Arab women and in Israeli society as a whole.

The author is the CEO of Co-Impact, an initiative to promote Arab employment in the business sector in Israel.