



# Addressing Fashion's Workplace Gender Gap

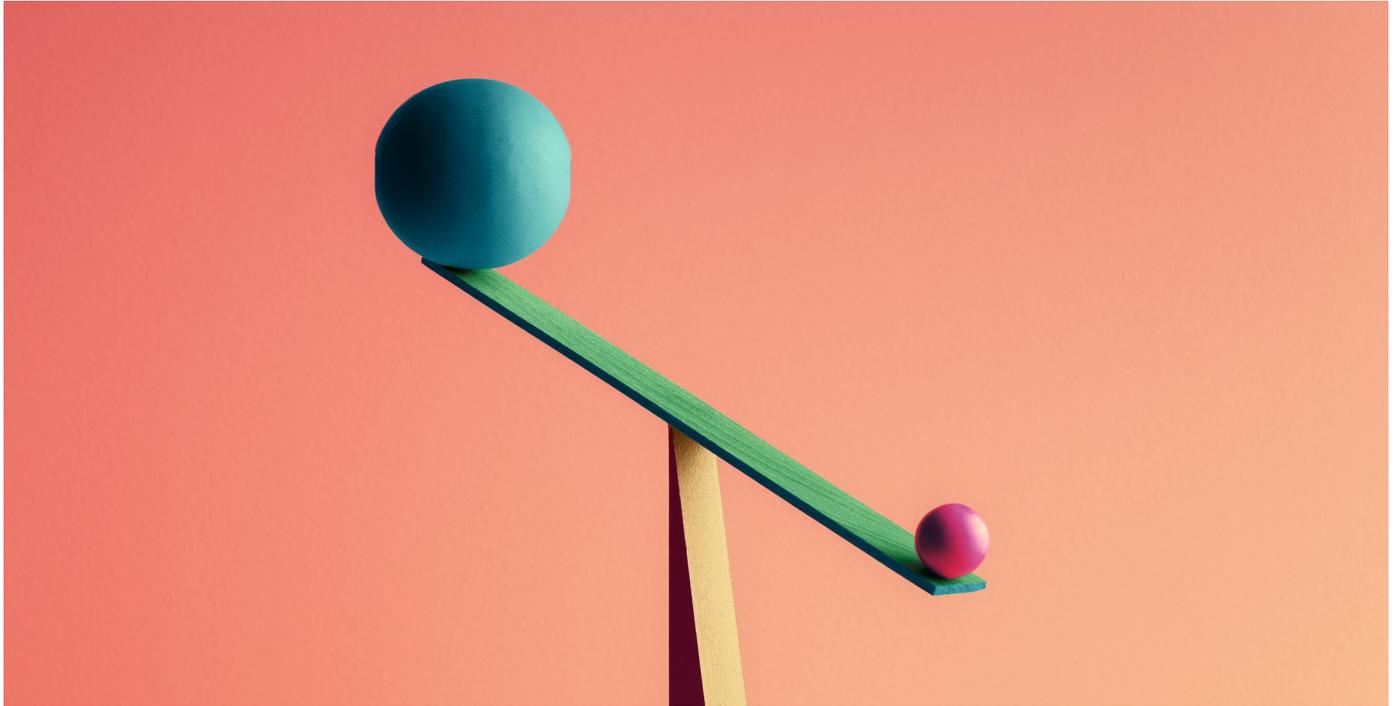
By Robin Mellery-Pratt and Sophie Soar

## White Paper

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In our second **BoF Careers** White Paper, BoF examines how gender discrimination impacts employees' experience in the fashion workplace.

# Addressing Fashion's Workplace Gender Gap



Source: Getty Images

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*“Unconscious bias impacts every decision we make, especially HR practices like hiring and promotion, preventing effective change from taking place.”*

— *Géraldine Vallejo*

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**LONDON, United Kingdom** — Jeanne Lanvin, Elsa Schiaparelli and Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel were among the architects of the luxury fashion industry. Pioneering figures like Diana Vreeland and Anna Wintour loom large in fashion’s media mythology. Yet, a new white paper commissioned by BoF Careers reveals that the industry is still lagging behind in achieving gender parity.

Of course, this challenge is not limited to the fashion industry. In 2018, *The New York Times* pointed out that there are fewer women among chief executives of Fortune 500 companies than there are CEOs named James. According to McKinsey’s *Women in the Workplace 2019* report, in the United States, women continue to be dramatically outnumbered in senior leadership: only one in five C-suite leaders is a woman and only one in 25 is a woman of colour.

Beyond the moral imperative to create gender equality, there are business advantages to fostering diversity. Having a diverse workforce can be a source of measurable competitive advantage and value creation.

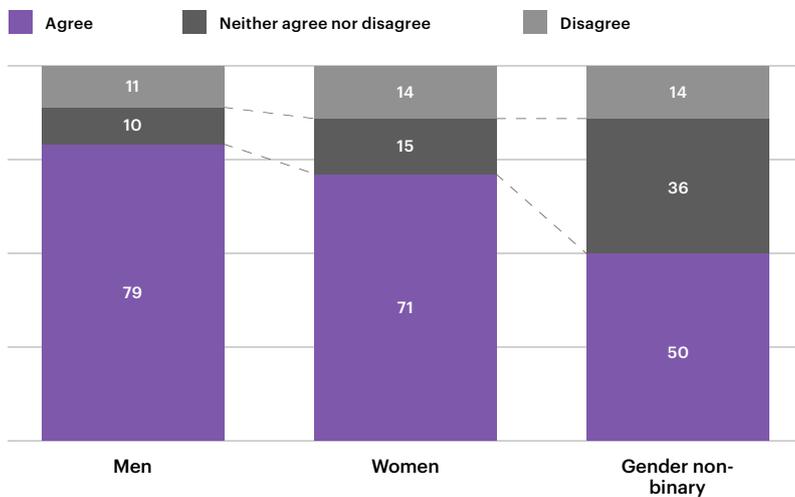
In our second BoF Careers White Paper, we share insights from the workplace experience of over 2,000 fashion industry professionals from the BoF community to examine how to implement fair recruitment and promotion processes, address workplace discrimination and accelerate the path to a gender-diverse senior leadership in fashion.

Focus Area 1

# Create Fair Recruitment and Promotion Processes

**Exhibit 1:** Gender non-binary employees are significantly less likely to agree that recruitment processes are non-discriminatory.

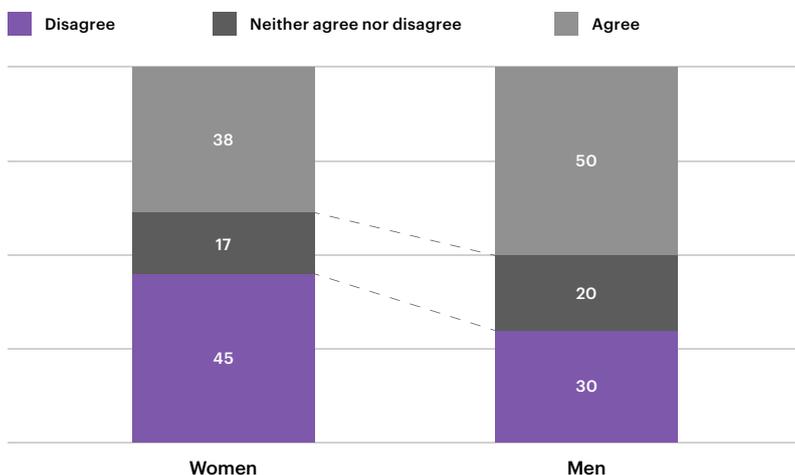
Percent of employee responses to the statement: “My employer’s recruitment process is non-discriminatory against race, gender, sexual orientation, disability and other minorities.”



Source: BoF Fashion Employee Survey 2019

**Exhibit 2:** 45 percent of women do not think they are paid a fair wage compared to 30 percent of men.

Percent of employee responses to the question: “I am paid a fair wage for the work I contribute to my employer’s business.”



Source: BoF Fashion Employee Survey 2019

The two biggest drivers of a gender-diverse workforce at all levels of an organisation are hiring and promotion processes, which must place all candidates on a level playing field.

According to BoF’s survey of industry professionals, 79 percent of men and 71 percent of women believe their companies are non-discriminatory during the recruitment process when it comes to race, gender, sexual orientation and disability.

But this confidence may be misplaced. “Unconscious bias impacts every decision we make, especially HR practices like hiring and promotion, preventing effective change from taking place,” says Géraldine Vallejo, Kering SA’s sustainability programme director, who led an analysis into the experience of women in Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Pomellato and Kering Eyewear’s supply chains in Italy.

According to the Kering analysis, which surveyed more than 800 workers, 70 percent of whom were women, “maternity is seen as an obstacle for getting and sustaining a job.” Vallejo also reports that almost a quarter of the women described inappropriate hiring practices on the grounds of pregnancies or family considerations.

While fashion employers may not be intentionally exclusionary, their failure to reform HR practices perpetuates hidden discriminations and the status quo.

There is also significant disparity in how childcare impacts the career trajectories of employees. In 2019, research published by the *Journal of Applied Psychology* found that “those who noted a longer maternity leave on their résumé were perceived as less desirable.”

According to the BoF survey, 19 percent of respondents felt their companies penalised parents or primary care givers during promotional processes, while 42 percent of women and 33 percent of men do not believe their employer is committed to flexible working arrangements — a particularly important consideration for working parents.

Another area where the BoF survey points to a significant opportunity for urgent action is the recruitment and promotion



**CaSandra Diggs**  
Deputy Director, Council of Fashion  
Designers of America

*Before CaSandra Diggs became deputy director for the Council of Fashion Designers of America, she held roles as chief administrative and financial officer and has worked on awards such as the CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund.*

"I think legislation and industry-wide agreement could help. New York State has the MWBE certification, which encourages companies to expand their supply and value chains, hire women and engage with minority-owned businesses to achieve that. There could be something similar in the fashion industry — a certification by which we encourage businesses to expand their recruitment and promotion processes.

I would like to know more about your talent acquisition process and how you evaluate that; about your promotion process and how you select and identify talent to move forward. I think there's a lot of companies that are probably up to doing it and somehow, we have to create a narrative to help them understand that there's a collective competitive advantage in moving the needle forward on parity and diversity.

For me, men will help change that narrative. We need more male allyship. We need to change the social norms — men can be caregivers and women can be breadwinners. These dialogues need to help change the narrative."

of gender non-binary individuals. Only 50 percent of the small sample set of gender non-binary people in the BoF survey believe their employer's recruitment process is non-discriminatory.

"No matter what your self-narrative is about, how conscious you are, we all inevitably have internalised bias from growing up in this world," says mixed-media artist Alok Vaid-Menon, a leading voice in the movement to de-gender the fashion and beauty industries. "Many people struggle to find access to work because of institutional barriers like lack of access to education and housing instability. Interview culture and professional culture means [gender non-binary] people can't present as themselves while applying for work. So, many of us are policed out of formal work."

Businesses could do much more to redress the imbalance through workplace practices and support groups as well as unconscious bias training. According to BoF data, only 41 percent of women and 45 percent of gender non-binary respondents think their manager is an effective coach who can assist their development.

"People have to be willing to educate themselves and be educated by others when it comes to these unconscious biases that creep into our decision-making for hiring, promoting, interacting or assigning projects," says CFDA Deputy Director CaSandra Diggs. Less than a quarter of survey respondents stated that they had been sufficiently trained to mitigate their own unconscious bias in the workplace.

Additionally, tracking employee gender demographic data and setting targets can create accountability and nurture gender diversity. "We have to create a narrative where we understand there's a collective competitive advantage in moving the needle forward on parity and diversity — and I think men will help change that narrative," says Diggs.

In the United States, a gender gap in pay has stubbornly persisted over the last 15 years. In 2018, women earned 85 percent of what men earned, according to an analysis of median hourly earnings of both full- and part-time workers in the United States by the [Pew Research Center](#). According to [Eurostat](#), the gender pay gap in the EU stands at 84 percent and has changed minimally over the last decade. The data borne out of the BoF survey underscores that this also remains a challenge for the fashion industry. An alarming 45 percent of women responding to our survey do not agree they are paid a fair wage for their work, compared to just 30 percent of men.

Focus Area 2

# Confront Workplace Discrimination

*“The onus always falls on the individual woman or non-binary person, versus institutional changes.”*

— Alok Vaid-Menon

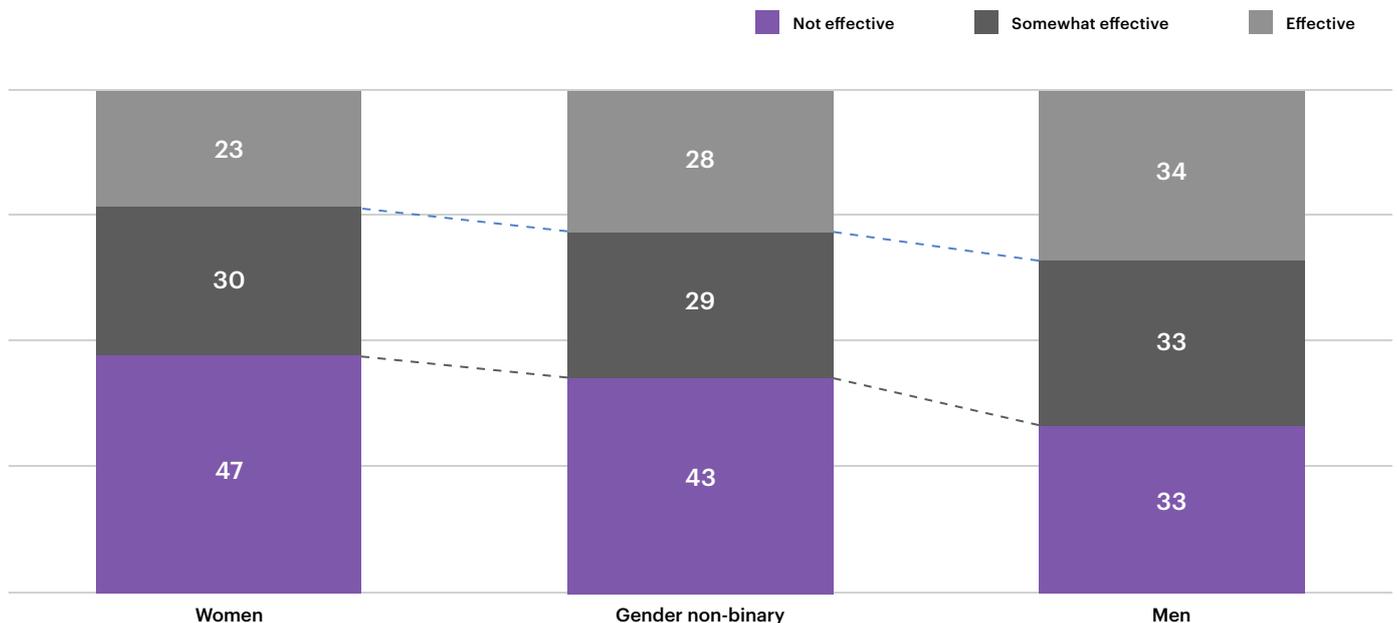
Forty-eight percent of female respondents to the BoF Careers survey have witnessed or experienced bullying in the workplace. Nearly half of all the women surveyed also believe their workplace is ineffective at addressing bullying, compared to one third of men.

Gendered workplace bullying can manifest in many ways, from sexist humour or false work attribution to sexual harassment and the incorrect use of preferred gender pronouns. According to McKinsey’s Women in the Workplace 2018 report, 64 percent of women are still exposed to gender-based microaggressions, with non-white women experiencing them more than anyone else. The BoF survey found that just 54 percent of women believe their company’s employees are treated with dignity and respect. This falls to 47 percent of those who identify as a minority.

Microaggressions can also go unreported by victims. In Italy, where Kering recently conducted its supply chain employee survey, Vallejo noted “a high level of

**Exhibit 3:** Only 23 percent of female employees believe their employers are effective at addressing workplace bullying.

Percent of employee responses to the question: “How effective do you feel your employer is at addressing bullying in the workplace?”



Source: BoF Fashion Employee Survey 2019



**Alok Vaid-Menon**  
Mixed-media artist

Mixed-media artist Alok Vaid-Menon is a leading voice in the movement to de-gender the fashion and beauty industries. They have worked as both a designer and a model, creating three gender-neutral fashion collections.

“We live in a profoundly unequal world and society, and these dynamics are going to manifest in the workplace. Issues of gender, race, class, ability are going to inevitably be there. No matter what your self-narrative is, how conscious you are, we all inevitably have internalised bias from growing up in this world.

The fashion and beauty industries have historically been one of the safer spaces for trans and gender-diverse communities because of the emphasis on creativity and expression. That being said, it’s not necessarily a safe haven and there are particular issues these communities face in these industries.

One is a glass ceiling where, oftentimes, non-binary people’s ideas, aesthetics and criticism is what’s celebrated, but not their leadership. A lot of these people have been involved in these industries for decades, but are compensated unfairly.

The industry is structured in a way that disproportionately affects trans and gender-diverse people. It’s a gate-kept industry where oftentimes people have to have prior financial support from their families before they can actually get into the industry. It’s really hard to make money at first and many non-binary, gender-varying folks are already economically precarious if their income has to go towards supporting their immediate safety and healthcare costs.”

Image source: Getty Images

acceptance and tolerance towards certain behaviours, like jokes and remarks, because there is a limited awareness of what constitutes [as] discrimination [and] sexual harassment.”

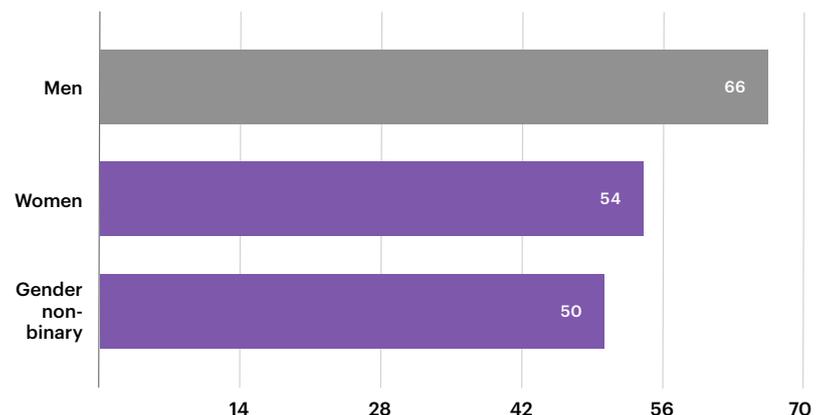
According to the National Centre for Transgender Equality, more than three quarters of transgender people have experienced some form of workplace discrimination.

As Vaid-Menon argues, “we are in a moment in non-binary and trans politics where, if we rock the boat, we fear the repercussions will be much higher for us. People say, ‘I’m the first person like me in my office, so I need to set an example that my community is competent.’ Oftentimes, they silence their criticism.”

Companies need to implement zero tolerance policies – for those using discriminatory language, as well as the victims – and proactive initiatives to educate the workforce on bullying and harassment. “If you address your harassment policies, have mandatory diversity training and sensitise leadership, then I would not be upset at my job,” says Vaid-Menon. “The onus always falls on the individual woman or non-binary person, versus institutional changes.”

**Exhibit 4:** Woman and gender non-binary people are less likely to agree that their employer treats their employees with dignity and respect.

Percent of employee responses who agree the statement: “All employees at my company are treated with dignity and respect.”



Source: BoF Fashion Employee Survey 2019

# Bolster Female Leadership at the Top



Source: Getty Images

“In the US, UK, France and Italy, where all of the big [luxury] *maisons* are based, there are an equal number of men and women who graduate from the best schools. This is a fact. There are an equal number of women at executive level. This is also a fact. So, why has it taken so long to have more gender diversity in executive committees and CEO levels? There is no reason,” says Floriane de Saint Pierre, the founder of the eponymous executive search firm and of Ethics & Boards, the influential international governance data place, whose clients include institutions, funds and listed companies.

According to a [Heidrick & Struggles report in 2018](#), women held 4.9 percent of chief executive positions in 13 countries, across the US, UK and Europe, with female representation ranging from 6.9 percent in the US to zero in Denmark and Italy.

In the UK, that same year, the number of women holding FTSE 100 chief executive positions slipped from seven to six out of 100 companies in total. In France, the January 2018 [appointment of Isabelle Kocher](#) to chief executive of Engie, one the largest European energy companies,

made her the only woman running a company in the CAC 40 – the 40 largest corporations on the Paris stock exchange.

This is a missed opportunity. According to McKinsey, “companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 21 percent more likely to outperform on profitability and 27 percent more likely to have superior value creation.”

According to the [Ethics & Boards Global Fashion & Luxury Index](#), which aggregates governance data of the 40 largest listed companies of this sector, the average representation of women on executive committees is close to 27 percent. According to de Saint Pierre, with 60 percent of women in its executive management team, H&M leads the industry. However, a number of companies have not appointed any women to their executive committees.

Kering has committed to having 60 percent of board seats filled by women – 7 of their 11 seats are held by women. Out of the 13 chief executive positions available at the group, three are filled by women: Francesca Bellettini at Saint Laurent, H el ene Poulit-Duquesne at Boucheron



**Géraldine Vallejo**  
Sustainability programme director,  
Kering

*As the sustainability programme director at Kering, Géraldine Vallejo works across sustainable innovation, responsible sourcing, biodiversity, and carbon and environmental impact management.*

"Maternity is seen as an obstacle for getting and sustaining a job for professional growth. In Italy, parental responsibilities are not shared equally, so it's difficult for a woman to be a working mother. Our survey showed that 87 percent of all workers believe household and care duties should be equally divided, but only one-fourth of women said that such duties are actually equally shared in practice.

There is an unconscious bias that when a woman becomes a mother, they have to take care of the kids and the house. [But is that] from the employer's point of view or from the woman herself? Because that's part of her culture. So, it takes even more energy to break out of this unconscious bias and to make a change.

The vast majority of the workers that we surveyed are happy in their job. There is a high level of acceptance and tolerance towards certain behaviours that are usual discrimination, like jokes and remarks, because there is a limited awareness of what constitutes [as] discrimination and sexual harassment.

In a small number of its brands, Kering has launched an initiative called 'Maternity as a Master' that recognises the transferable skills gained by new parents during the early years of childcare, including stress management, organisation and listening to others, which are a way to survive in your own family, but also useful at work."

Image source: Courtesy

and Sabina Belli at Pomellato, women hold four out of 12 seats on Kering's executive committee.

Female CEOs lead five of LVMH Group's fashion brands: Séverine Merle at Celine, Pascale Lepoivre at Loewe, Robyn Rihanna Fenty at Fenty, Sylvie Colin at Kenzo and Sophie Brocart at Patou. In 2019, the group also appointed three women to CEO positions in its beauty division: Véronique Courtois at Guerlain, Christie Fleischer at Benefit Cosmetics and Gabrielle Rodriguez Saint-Genis at Make-Up Forever.

"I think the most interesting thing is that now large groups have put in place corporate policies to monitor the professional development of their top women talent up to CEO roles. [At Kering], Francesca Bellettini at Saint Laurent; [at LVMH], Véronique Courtois at Guerlain, Séverine Merle at Celine, Sophie Brocart at Patou, to name a few, are all top talent who have come from inside," says de Saint Pierre. Of the 39 chief executives that lead businesses across fashion and leather goods, perfumes and cosmetics, watches and jewellery, and selective retail listed on the LVMH website, 11 are female.

When it comes to board representation, legislation in [France has driven progress](#). In 2011, the country passed a law requiring all companies to have gender-diverse boards, with at least 40 percent of appointees being women. In 2017, all listed companies in the fashion and luxury segments had become compliant with the law. The country beat its target of having women hold 40 percent of CAC 40 directorships, according to a recent report by European Women on Boards and data provider Ethics & Boards.

"Step by step, what has happened since France passed the Copé Zimmermann law in 2011 that required 40 percent of women at board level by 2017, is that women have not only joined the boardroom but have been appointed to nomination committees. Related or not, step by step, we have seen the percentage of women in executive committees increase by 1 percent every year," says de Saint Pierre. Indeed, Europe leads the major markets in cis-female representation, with an average of 24 percent of board seats occupied by women. North America comes in second at 18 percent.

"Now, as we speak, 45.3 percent of board seats of the 120 largest companies listed in France are held by women, compared to 10 percent 10 years ago. However, within the same scope, we still only have an average of 20 percent of women on executive committees and less than 10 [female] CEOs," explains de Saint Pierre.



**Floriane de Saint Pierre**  
Founder, Floriane de Saint Pierre  
et Associés

*Floriane de Saint Pierre is the force behind many appointments of chief executives and C-suite positions in the fashion industry, having placed the likes of Christopher Bailey at Burberry or Marco Bizzarri at Kering. She is also the founder of Ethics & Boards, the influential international governance data place, whose clients include institutions, funds and listed companies.*

“One key sector that has not moved as fast as the fashion and luxury sector is the asset management sector. Asset management is key. The large asset management firms must integrate gender parity metrics for themselves and for their investment assessments to create traction within companies to align with their potential investors. Last year, when we did a big piece of research on the biggest investment funds, such as BlackRock, on average they have much fewer women on their boards and in their executive committees than the fashion and luxury sector.

Step by step, what has happened in France since the Copé Zimmermann law was passed in 2011 that required 40 percent of women at board level by 2017, is that women have not only joined the boardroom but have been appointed to nomination committees. Related or not, step by step, we have seen the percentage of women in executive committees increase by 1 percent every year. So now, as we speak, 45.3 percent of board seats of the 120 largest companies listed in France are held by women, compared to 10 percent 10 years ago. However, within the same scope, we still only have an average of 20 percent of women on executive committees and less than 10 [female] CEOs.”

Moving forward, a better measure for assessing gender parity is looking at the top 100 executive positions in an organisation. Impressively, billion-dollar beauty behemoth L’Oréal has already reached parity among the top 100 executives in the company. The authors of this report are unaware of any regulation or institutional recommendation to improve gender parity, which references quotas for gender non-binary individuals’ appointment to boards or executive committees.

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*“I think appealing to the consumers is our best option.”*

— CaSandra Diggs

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While France demonstrates how national legislation can have a measurable positive impact, and there is undoubted potential in encouraging investment vehicles to factor gender parity metrics into their investment assessments, as de Saint Pierre highlights [sidebar], further progress may only be possible through consumer-generated pressure.

“I see the consumer playing a role in this. I really, really do. I think appealing to the consumers is our best option, helping to make them aware, especially Millennials and Gen-Z [as] they’re highly sensitive. The more they know about how companies operate internally, the more impact that has to have on where they spend their money,” says Diggs.

*Disclosure: LVMH is part of a group of investors who, together, hold a minority interest in The Business of Fashion. All investors have signed shareholder’s documentation guaranteeing BoF’s complete editorial independence.*

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# Additional Reading and Helpful Resources

- [Delivering through Diversity, McKinsey & Company](#)
- [Women in the Workplace 2019, McKinsey & Company](#),
- [The Narrowing, but Persistent, Gender Pay Gap, Pew Research Center](#)
- [The Unintended Consequences of Maternity Leaves, Journal of Applied Psychology](#),
- [Women in the Workplace 2018, McKinsey & Company](#),
- [Employment Issues, National Centre for Transgender Equality](#),
- [Women Hold Fewer Than 5% of CEO Positions in US and Europe, Financial Times](#)
- [French Companies Lead the Way on Gender Diversity, Financial Times](#)
- [Ethics and Boards](#),
- [Gender Pay Gap Situation in the EU, European Commission](#)

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Design: Chelsea Carpenter

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