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Female power



To mark International Women's Month, top female executives tell  
*Naomi Martig* the advantages women have in shaping business

Photography by Brian Ching

**I**n the old days, few women found their way into the accounting profession. And those who did seldom made it to the top.

Not anymore. Over the past three decades, women have made so much headway that they now make up nearly 60 percent of the profession. They also outnumber men in accounting undergraduate programmes by a ratio of 6:4 and comprise the majority of new hires by most accounting firms.

Increasingly, countries and corporations alike are turning to women to lead them. For example, amid its impending bankruptcy, Iceland picked two women to take over as chief executives of New Landsbanki and New Glintnir, two banks the country nationalized as its foreign debt exploded after years of aggressive international expansion. Icelandic government officials were hoping the women, unlike their young, aggressive male counterparts, could usher in a new

culture and revamp the banking system, according to a *Financial Times* report.

In yet another display of trust in women's ability to turn the country around, Iceland named Johanna Sigurdardottir as its first female prime minister in February.

Elsewhere, women are also breaking through the glass ceiling. In the United States last year, 10 women took over the top financial spots in the largest U.S. companies, replacing men in all but one of the cases, *CFO.com* reported. In

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## Female power

Saudi Arabia, where only six percent of the women work, Samira Al Kuwaiz made history after becoming the country's first female chief financial officer in 2008.

Many believe a more diverse leadership team may help put the brakes on the excessive risk taking that created today's economic troubles and repair the rips and tears of the financial fallout.

"Greater representation of women in senior leadership positions within governments and financial institutions is vital not only to find solutions to the current economic turmoil, but to stave off such crises in future," Klaus Schwab, executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, told the *BBC* late last year.

### The women's advantage

**B**etty Yuen, who oversees 4,000 employees as managing director of CLP Power Hong Kong Ltd., one of the biggest listed companies here, can testify to the benefits of having strong women in charge.

"With the world the way it is now, communication is becoming so much more important," Yuen says. "A big part of my job is to influence people and bring people together, and also resolve differences and bring out the best in each person to make sure they work together as a team. Those are influencing, communication and negotiating skills, and I think women are generally better at communicating."

Yuen started off as a chartered accountant in Canada in the late 1970s, when the accounting field was male-dominated, at 90 percent majority. After working for Price Waterhouse as an auditor upon returning to Hong Kong, she joined oil giant Exxon in

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1986 as a finance manager. Seven years later, she joined the firm's business development division. Her upward trend continued year after year and in 2002, she was promoted to her current position at CLP, becoming the first female appointed to the post.

Yuen says females are often perceived as less aggressive and that can work to their advantage. "I think I was seen to be less threatening. People did not expect me to get a promotion," she says. "They see me as just trying to do a good job for the company. So more opportunities opened up."

Soft skills alone, however, are not enough to get the job done. It is equally important to be decisive and act tough, particularly in a depressed economy where gruelling decisions need to be made constantly.

"I'm decisive, even in comparison with my (male) colleagues. I wasn't afraid to make a judgment, in every level of my career. If I know the path I want to go, within reason, I can articulate this very clearly to my employees and colleagues," she says. "Most of the women executives I've come across are a lot more decisive than men."

Often times, Yuen says when she believed a decision was in the company's best interest, she would insist on it even if it entailed arguing with her boss. "I would try to explain why I think my idea is better than his. Of course I had to handle it tactfully... that quality of mine I think actually got me ahead."

Susanna Chiu, the Institute's first female vice president, agrees with Yuen that being bold enough to speak her mind is one of the traits that propelled her career forward.

"You really have to say what you want and you have to gain the respect of your team. You also have to listen," says Chiu, now the senior vice president of manufacturing firm Li & Fung Trading Ltd. "If you are not pro-active, how can you set yourself up as a leader?"

### Struggling on the way up

The path to success, however, was far from easy. Chiu recalls what a challenge it was being Chinese *and* female training as a chartered accountant in the U.K. in the mid-1980s. "They saw a Chinese woman and wondered if I was capable and competent. I had to prove that to them," she says.

And the struggle continued as she climbed through the ranks, first as an audit supervisor for Grant Thornton in the U.K. to a senior manager at the firm's Hong Kong office and chief operating officer for DVN Holdings Ltd., a local investment holding company, in 2000 before joining Li & Fung in 2006. "The men normally had an easier path going up the corporate ladder. Women had to try three times as hard to climb to the same position," Chiu says.

Another leader in accountancy, Yvonne Law, a tax partner of Deloitte in Hong Kong, remembers that even

women who made it to the top in the mid-1980s faced an obvious salary discrepancy working in one of the Big Eight accounting firms at the time.

“They had different housing packages for the same position for male and female managers. They paid an extra housing allowance for those who were married, but only for the men. For married women, it was zero,” Law says.

Law acknowledges that having to tend to her family and child at the rising stages of her career meant she was unable to go out as much to network with people. “It is hard to measure whether going out for a drink or dinner can improve a working relationship, but I have to admit that there was an element to it,” she says. Law, however, overcame the challenge and rose to

become one of the leading tax advisors in Hong Kong and the mainland.

For Chiu, work was such a priority that she decided to choose career over marriage. “When I was young and first graduated, I had a marriage proposal. But because I wasn’t where I wanted to be professionally, I turned it down. It was too early for me,” she says. “In other relationships, in a way they

## Retaining women

Ten years ago, Ernst & Young’s U.S. firm introduced flexible work arrangements for top managers, where they can personalize their workday so long as they finish their work on time. The programme was geared towards helping employees with children get some balance in their schedules.

It was such a success that the firm began implementing similar measures in its Greater China offices in July last year, according to Bin Wolfe, head of Ernst & Young’s human resources division in that region.

“People struggled with the fact that they didn’t have control over how they worked the often-demanding hours of an accountant,” says Wolfe, who worked in Ernst & Young’s U.S. offices in the mid-1990s when it first began looking at ways to improve work-life balance for women.

“There is a difference between knowing that you are going to be at work until midnight finishing a project, versus knowing that when you have to finish something by 8 a.m. the following morning, you can still take a break to check your children’s homework and put them to bed,” she says.

The U.S. programme allowed an employee to tend to a child’s illness or school activities when needed. “And they recognized, at the same time, that I would be able to get the work done, whether it was remotely or with conference calls,” says Wolfe. “What they cared about was the results.”

With the gender gap in the accounting profession’s top management likely to narrow in the coming years, companies are increasingly looking for ways to retain female leaders who are especially hard put when it comes to juggling the demands of work and family.

KPMG kick-started an official flexible work programme in its Greater China offices this month, says Melissa Wu, human resources partner of KPMG China. “We are proud that over one third of our partners are female and are continuing to look at ways of retaining talented women,” she says.

PricewaterhouseCoopers already offers flexible work hours in the United States, Canada and Sweden, and it’s available on a case-by-case basis in Singapore, but the measure has yet to reach Greater China. Nora Wu, head partner of the firm’s Shanghai

office, however, says they are currently looking at the possibility of introducing it.

PwC set up a gender advisory council in 2006 to address challenges facing female staff. “In Greater China, we have weekend programmes in which people from different levels have dialogue with management to see what things we can do better to help people in their daily lives and profession,” Wu says.

Globally, the firm is also looking into the feasibility of allowing part-time work for senior managers who want more family time.

In Deloitte’s Hong Kong offices, flexible hours are an option, but cases, again, are reviewed individually. Deloitte is heavily investing in upgrading its technology to make its employees more mobile, says July Kong, the firm’s director of human resources in Hong Kong.

“This is an ongoing process for the company in order to retain good employees,” says Kong, who notes that more employees nowadays do not want to be desk bound. “Baby boomers are retiring and we need to retain young and talented employees.”

always wanted me to settle down but I couldn't."

Yuen is an exception in that she thinks having a family works to her advantage, that it enabled her to be more daring with her career. "Socially, we have less of a burden than men. We can stay at home and there is no social stigma. Because of that, we can be bolder in the workplace, at least for me," says Yuen, who has two daughters, aged 18 and 19.

Nevertheless, Yuen acknowledges that for a lot of women, having to choose between career and family can hold them back – would a top job keep them away from family too much? "Right now, choices are still heavily leaning towards not pushing for senior management," she says.

Chiu believes other women might have given up because they have to work so hard to gain recognition in the workplace. "Some women don't want to try as hard," she says. "It's a very tiring process."

### The numbers are rising

Still, Hong Kong is showing a fairly impressive number of female accountants in senior management, compared to even the United States, which has the world's largest accounting profession. Of the more than 482 Institute members who list their positions as CFO, 20 percent are women, which is far higher than the 7.6 percent of female CFOs in the top 500 U.S. listed companies. The figure shrinks when it comes to chief executives registered with the Institute – still, almost one in 10 women made it to the top spot.



And many believe the trend is rising. "Women just became the majority in the last few years. So as far as the number of years of experience is concerned, many of them have not risen up to the stage of senior management yet," says Law.

One accounting firm has long been aware of the advantages of

having more female managers in the workplace. Almost half of the equity partners at BDO McCabe Lo Ltd. are women. Ernst & Young, in comparison, only has 33 percent of women in senior management in Hong Kong, while females make up 26 percent of Deloitte's partners in Greater China.

Albert Au, managing director of BDO and former Institute president, says his firm had recognized the talent and diligence of females even when gender imbalance was more profound in the workplace many years ago.

"That is always the problem that one faces, be it a minority by gender or colour of skin," Au says. "I do find that our female partners are more driven because of these issues. It's not just a perception issue. There is no doubt about that."

Li & Fung's Chiu says it would be foolish for anyone to think that gender discrimination, however subtle, has vanished. "The barrier is still there. A lot of people don't see it because they themselves have risen up the ladder," she says. "But it is there."

"We still have a bit of a stereotype in society that people are more used to working for male bosses. They expect men to be in charge as opposed to women," adds CLP's Yuen.

Au notes, however, that Hong Kong has come a long way in alleviating discrimination against women. "If you look at Hong Kong, female executives are rising quite impressively," he says.

### **Mending financial ways**

And given the precarious state it is in, the global economy probably needs more female leaders than ever before. In late January, Ernst & Young submitted a report to the World Economic Forum calling on struggling economies and corporations to take advantage of more female leaders – an often-untapped resource.

"In the current global financial and economic crisis, it is more vital

than ever that women's economic participation does not shrink, but is in fact seen as an opportunity to make headway," Laura Tyson, a professor of business administration and economics at the University of California, Berkeley, was quoted as saying in the report.

Advancing more women into leadership is a long-term strategy that corporations can use to beat out their competition – and the numbers prove it.

A 2007 study by U.S. research and consultancy firm Catalyst showed that on average, Fortune 500 companies with a greater number of women on their boards of directors turned in better financial performances than those with fewer women.

Similarly, another study published in October last year by the Ceram Business School in France showed that female leaders can provide greater stability during a financial crisis; French-listed firms with more women in management had a smaller drop in its 2008 share prices than those with fewer women in management.

French bank BNP Paribas, which has nearly 40 percent females in management, was best resisting the crisis with a 20 percent decrease in its stock price. Cr dit Agricole, the largest retail banking group in France, by comparison was suffering from a 50 percent plunge in its share price. Only 16 percent of its managers are women, the study showed.

Bin Wolfe, who heads the human resources division in Greater China at Ernst & Young, says although she doesn't believe women are necessarily better than men, the results of these studies do not surprise her. "I think the

true value is diversity, when you have different views converging, that's when you make the best decision," she says.

Nancy Tse, finance director at the Hong Kong Hospital Authority since 2001, believes that women can often help reduce reckless risk-taking behaviour.

"I think at this present moment it would be more useful to take a more conservative approach when it comes to taking risks. I think men, in general, are more optimistic and may sometimes underestimate the risks involved. Women are generally more thorough in looking at various positive and negative aspects before making a major decision." Her own team consists of mainly women, too – six of the eight senior finance executives working under her are female.

Li & Fung's Chiu says female leaders are more likely to look past their own interests to think of their companies and others, a trait that is very important to make it through the current crisis.

She believes the next decade will be a defining era for women. "In the next generation, I would not be surprised to hear men say that if a woman makes more money, then she should work and the husband can stay home. I think they are more ready to accept females as their counterparts rather than their subordinates," she says.

Ernst & Young's Wolfe agrees. "I think we will be in a world of trouble if our profession can't figure out how to have more women at the top of our profession," she says. "When you look at all the talent we have, we have no choice but to get this right." **A+**