The London offices of global law firm Allen & Overy recently played host to the latest event in the Henley Women in Leadership calendar, with the latest research from Henley providing the prologue for a panel discussion on the subject of championing.

Championing is the proactive support and advocacy that advances a woman’s leadership aspirations with care for them as a person. It can be clearly differentiated from other forms of support such as mentoring and sponsorship. Championing occurs as senior leaders build a relationship that is based on promoting talent but taking into account altruism and recognising specific traits that hold women back.

Dr Shaheena Janjuha-Jivraj, Associate Professor at the Henley Centre for Entrepreneurship, opened the proceedings with an update on her research into women in leadership, which had been undertaken across 53 Commonwealth nations. The survey, which was carried out between August 2014 and January 2015, included 25 case studies and 50 interviews with women from diverse backgrounds and in a range of roles, including a former prime minister and the first woman speaker at the Bangladeshi parliament.

The data collected for the survey highlighted the fact that in so many countries, relevant, accurate data still isn’t available; in fact, only 18 countries were able to produce comprehensive information, and even some of the most developed countries failed (or were reluctant) to provide meaningful information.

But as Dr Janjuha-Jivraj was at pains to point out: ‘It’s absolutely essential that we create the baseline data so that we can provide a basis for future comparison and establish the rate of progress.’

The data covered politics, the civil service, and private and public sectors, and it was from the public sector that it proved particularly difficult to obtain figures, especially – and, perhaps, somewhat surprisingly – from the UK. But time and time again, Dr Janjuha-Jivraj found that ‘governments were suspicious and wanted to know why we wanted them.’

Nevertheless, Dr Janjuha-Jivraj felt that there has been a cultural shift in the past few years. ‘Not so long ago,’ she said, ‘women were seen as the problem, and some people are still making excuses, but it was evident that in some countries where massive barriers exist, huge progress has been made, proving what can be achieved.’

The research looked into the ratio of women at C-level compared to the number who were at board level, and it became clear that while imposing quotas had been doing more harm than good, having clear, measurable targets was working far better.

In the UK, Dr Janjuha-Jivraj reported that board representation has reached 25%, but the same focus needs to apply to women at C-suite level. The UK has demonstrated the most effective way to achieve gender leadership diversity by strong and open collaboration between government with a clear target, businesses who recognise the value of diversity and advocacy groups who can effectively promote the inclusion of women in leadership.

Of the 53 countries surveyed, 17 achieved the 30% critical mass, and in four Caribbean countries, an impressive 68% of deputy permanent secretary roles were taken by women. More women, it seems, tend to join organisations where they see opportunities for progress and championing provides a pivotal intervention that supports women into leadership roles. Research by McKinsey in 2015 demonstrated that gender-diverse companies were 15% more likely to outperform companies that did not have gender diversity.

Dr Janjuha-Jivraj commented that: ‘This is not gender for gender’s sake, but recognising the value of diversity.’


The report authored by Shaheena Janjuha-Jivraj was presented at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, the Women’s Forum held in Malta in November 2015.