

# THE GLASS WALL

We know that significant performance benefits come from having a diverse leadership team. One of the simplest ways of driving that diversity is to promote more women to senior management, according to Sue Unerman, CSO at MediaCom and Kathryn Jacob, CEO of Pearl & Dean and authors of 'The Glass Wall: Success Strategies for Women at Work'.

Consultancy firm Grant Thornton's recent International Business Report, however, continues to highlight that many businesses still have few or even no women at a senior management level, despite the fact that the business case for gender diversity seems clear. The report shows senior roles held by women by country. **Ireland falls firmly into the bottom ten worldwide with just 19%.**



WORDS: SUE UNERMAN & KATHRYN JACOB ↑

When we entered our professions in media, 30 years ago, there was optimism about gender parity in senior management. There was a woman prime minister in the UK then too, and legislation had made the glass ceiling of previous generations illegal. Whilst women CEOs were rare, that was surely set to change. Fast forward to now and the sad truth is that things haven't changed enough, despite several recent studies indicating that mixed gender boards drive company profit.

The Peterson Institute for International Economics published a study in February, which concluded that the correlation between women at the C-Suite level and profitability is demonstrated repeatedly. They state: **"for profitable firms, a move from no female leaders to 30% representation is associated with a 15% increase in the net revenue margin."**

For our book - we interviewed over 100 people worldwide and one thing is clear: women in work are still not getting the same opportunities to reach the top as men. There are more qualified women entering the workplace than ever before.

The only area where they are in a minority is in the boardroom. Instead of a Glass Ceiling there is now a Glass Wall.

Women can see through the Glass Wall to meetings they're excluded from, or the casual conversations that accelerate careers that they aren't participating in. Men and women can see each other through the wall but that doesn't mean they speak the same language or have the same expectations. In our interviews, time and again, senior men expressed their frustration with the failure of women to push through to a promotion when they'd been treated "equally".

### **"It's not women that are at fault — it is the system."**

But as civil rights lawyer Baroness Helena Kennedy writes in our book's foreword, any "equality" is almost always attuned to a male norm. It's not women that are at fault — it is the system. As Grant Thornton's report concludes: "Businesses have talked the talk on diversity in leadership for long enough.... Too many businesses continue to operate with a traditional 'alpha male' approach to leadership, which does not attract or appeal to many talented women."

The Glass Wall needs to be acknowledged and dismantled. Our book contains 41 case studies (all anonymised at the request of our interviewees) and all based on real stories told to us. We give practical and proven solutions to progression for women on the way up and for businesses seeking real change in the diversity of their top management.

One of our interviewees Angela works for a big manufacturer in the finance department. She has risen to a senior position through hard work, but she always feels like an outsider. She is one of two women in the department, and the predominant culture of banter and put-downs is hard to cope with. She feels as if there is fairly constant, very low-level, undermining by the men on her team. It's nothing that she has felt worthy of turning into anything as serious as a formal complaint, but she is feeling stressed - not about the work or her key performance indicators - but by the so-called friendly banter from her colleagues.

She decided to hatch a plan to change the balance of power at the next possible opportunity. It came in the next team meeting, which she chairs. As a result of the training that the team had recently undergone, a male colleague suggested a warm-up. 'Let's go round the table and say what car we have and what it says about us?'

This particular warm-up was interesting because it was of course an opportunity to boast about one's status. Angela was inspired by her latent anger. She responded, leaning forward and looking him directly in the eye: 'Absolutely, we can do that. Or we can get on with the crucial business issues at hand. I suggest that we save comparing cars until we have resolved our more serious discussion.' End of banter, end of low-level challenge. Angela took the balance of power back into her own hands. She forced a re-evaluation of her status within the business. Her anger prompted her bravery, and now there is no holding her back. At the same time she went out of her way to ensure that she was not isolated by forging closer ties with the only other woman in the team.

Angela had had enough. While her colleagues did not cross the line in any outstanding way, not a day went by without someone making a comment that she found mildly embarrassing - until the moment she asserted herself and took back control. She began to think of power as a concrete object in the room, a bit like a talking stick. Only one person could hold it at a time, and she was determined in the future that it would always be hers. Her body language changed at the same time as what she said. No more sidling into a room as if she wasn't sure whether she belonged. She enters rooms now as if she belongs there, and despite being just 5 feet 3 inches tall, she takes up as much space as she can.

**It can be difficult to be assertive.** Women are socially groomed to believe that we're being difficult or arrogant when we stand up and out and declare our differences from the rest of the group. We sometimes confuse being liked with being successful. Good managers need to encourage the women on their teams to be assertive and to say what they really think. This will drive success on multiple levels.





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## SIX STRATEGIES:

Here are some more strategies to give women a fighting chance and for management to ensure a genuinely level playing field:

**ON THE WAY UP** — look at how the men around you behave. Don't let yourself be left behind because they self-promote more aggressively than you do.

**FROM THE TOP** — take the time to spot talent. If you can't see the talent in the quieter, more modest people (and often that means women), then slow down, try harder, look deeper.

**ON THE WAY UP** — speak up. There are many things to fear in life. Failure in a meeting isn't one of them. Expect to fail sometimes, intend to fail sometimes. If you don't you won't learn.

**FROM THE TOP** — encourage everyone in the team to speak up, to consider themselves the creative ones. Don't allow an elite team to dominate.

**ON THE WAY UP** — play the numbers game. If you hear a no the first time you ask for something, don't see that as the end. Keep asking.

**FROM THE TOP** — negotiate. Make sure that you treat your talent as adults. If you have to say no, have a counter offer.

**The Glass Wall: Success Strategies for Women at Work** by Sue Unerman (CSO at MediaCom) & Kathryn Jacob (CEO at Pearl and Dean) is available now.

**Sue Unerman** — When Sue joined her current company, which in 1990 was a small media independent, as an Associate Director, she was the most senior woman they had ever employed. Now at MediaCom, which has grown to become the UK's largest media agency, there have been two women CEOs, there is a woman Chair, a woman MD, and Sue is the business's Chief Strategic Officer. Sue is also a Council Member of the Open University, sits on the University of Oxford Public Affairs Advisory Group, was on the Advisory Board of the Government Digital Service and is on the Corporate Development Board of Women's Aid. [www.sueunerman.com](http://www.sueunerman.com)

**Kathryn Jacob** — Kathryn is CEO of Pearl & Dean, the most well-known player in the UK's cinema advertising industry. She was one of the first women to work in display advertising at The Daily Telegraph and has worked in Virgin Radio and SMG. Kathryn has used her experience to provide advice and mentoring to numerous young women in business, and to inform her role as a member of the Government Expert Group on Body Confidence and as a member of the Advertising Association Council, an ex-President of Women in Advertising and Communications (WACL) and her positions on the Development Boards at RADA and at Women's Aid.