Cultural Constraints on the Emergence of Women Leaders: How Global Leaders Can Promote Women in Different Cultures

Soo Min Toh, Geoffrey J. Leonardelli

"This is really still a nightmare — a German nightmare," asserted Mechtilde Maier, Deutsche Telekom’s head of diversity. A multinational company with offices in about 50 countries, Deutsche Telekom is struggling at German headquarters to bring women into its leadership ranks. It is a startling result; at headquarters, one might expect the greatest degree of compliance to commands on high. With only 13% of its leadership positions represented by women, the headquarters is lagging far behind its offices outside Germany, which average 24%. Even progress has been glacial, with an improvement of a mere 0.5% since 2010 versus a 4% increase among its foreign subsidiaries.

The phenomenon at Deutsche Telekom reflects a broader pattern, one that manifests in other organizations, in other nations, and in the highest reaches of leadership, including the boardroom. According to the Deloitte Global Centre for Corporate Governance, only about 12% of boardroom seats in the United States are held by women and less than 10% in the United Kingdom (9%), China (8.5%), and India (5%). In stark contrast, these rates are 2–3 times higher in Bulgaria (30%) and Norway (approximately 40%).

Organizations are clearly successful in some nations more than others in promoting women to leadership ranks, but why? Instead of a culture’s wealth, values, or practices, our own research concludes that the emergence of women as leaders can be explained in part by a culture’s tightness. Cultural tightness refers to the degree to which a culture has strong norms and low tolerance for deviance. In a tight culture, people might be arrested for spitting, chewing gum, or jaywalking. In loose cultures, although the same behaviors may be met with disapproving glances or fines, they are not sanctioned to the same degree nor are they necessarily seen as taboo.

We discovered that women are more likely to emerge as leaders in loose than tight cultures, but with an important exception. Women can emerge as leaders in tight cultures too. Our discoveries highlight that, to promote women to leadership positions, global leaders need to employ strategies that are compatible with the culture’s tightness. Before presenting our findings and their implications, we first discuss the process by which leaders tend to emerge.

LEADERSHIP IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: HOW LEADERS EMERGE

Leaders emerge as the result of two simultaneous processes (see Fig. 1). Individuals have to be viewed as leader-like (leader categorization), and see themselves as such and be willing to take on the leadership role (self-categorization). We describe each of these processes in turn.

First, according to leader categorization theory, people have in their minds what they consider an ideal leader to be, what could be called a leader prototype. This prototype consists of characteristics that, although it varies some based on context, typically include qualities such as intelligence, diligence, and charisma. An individual is more likely to emerge as a leader when he or she is seen by followers to have the characteristics that match their followers’ leader prototype. Some of these characteristics may be generally held by others; a recent article on the Wall Street Journal’s web site encouraged people who wished to be leader-like to...
exude what the article termed "executive presence," which included the qualities, among others, of decisiveness, a polished look, good grooming, exhibiting grace under fire, and being willing to make politically unfavorable decisions.

Such prototypes may also contain characteristics specific to that organization. As strange as it may sound, if followers believe that leaders should be intelligent, diligent, and like apples, then executives who eat apples (and exhibit the other traits) will be observed to be more leader-like than those who do not. Such a leader prototype may be embraced by employees at an apple-based product company such as Mott’s.

Second, self-categorization must also occur for an individual to emerge as a leader. Individuals are more likely to emerge as leaders to the extent that they see themselves as one. Without self-categorization, individuals may consciously opt out of leadership pursuits or behave in ways that prevent others from recognizing them as leader-like.

For example, to encourage women to get ahead, Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg created training videos for women, including one on altering the way women sit and talk in order to command more authority. Not only may such postures command more authority, they may also assist women to see themselves as more leader-like. Some research indicates that more expansive poses, such as leaning back in a chair with your feet on a table or standing at a table with your hand pressed against it, lead people to feel more powerful than other positions would. A sense of power, coupled with beliefs that they themselves exhibit other leader-like traits such as diligence and intelligence, may motivate women to pursue leadership positions and be viewed as such.

For women to emerge as leaders, then, people need to view women as leader-like (leader categorization), and simultaneously, women need to be willing to see themselves as leaders and accept leadership roles (self-categorization). However, a singular roadblock tends to disrupt both psychological processes from occurring: people’s beliefs about leadership tend to be incompatible with their beliefs about women. Leader prototypes tend to have more masculine than feminine characteristics.

Some characteristics that clearly favor men are often considered to be attributes of leaders: strength, assertiveness, warrior-like features, and even deep voices, are attributes that both men and women tend to view as more leader-like. Even when possessing and demonstrating leadership behavior superior to others in the group, women sometimes prefer to cede formal leadership roles to men because they too believe that being male or masculine is more leader-like. Competent women in Germany shy away from advancing into executive ranks because they do not see executive life as compatible with family life, fear that their styles of management would not be accepted by the majority, and that being a minority in a male domain would require them to battle against deeply entrenched "male rituals."

Traditional views about leadership appear to be impediments leader categorization and self-categorization processes across nations located in different parts of the world (see Table 1, left column for some examples). Even in countries such as Bulgaria, where women have been somewhat successful in penetrating business and government, the male leader prototype persists. Successful women leaders are referred to as "male women" in the Bulgarian language — as a sign that

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**Table 1** Examples of leader categorization and self-categorization in tight and loose cultures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In tight cultures</th>
<th>In loose cultures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leader categorization</strong></td>
<td><strong>Leader categorization</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Culturally tight countries (China, Japan) display high degrees of</td>
<td>• In the U.S., a moderately loose nation, a significant change was observed in the</td>
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<td>leadership sex-typing, where women leaders should be seen as feminine, and</td>
<td>period of 1976–1999 among men and women managers in their views that a good</td>
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<tr>
<td>male leaders should be seen as masculine.</td>
<td>manager is one who is predominantly masculine.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• In Germany, a tight culture, study respondents evaluated men and women managers</td>
<td>• Men from Australia, a looser culture, were more likely to rate the leadership</td>
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<td>as equally competent, but displayed greater dislike toward women managers relative</td>
<td>styles of women leaders as effective compared to men from Malaysia, a tighter</td>
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<td>to men managers</td>
<td>culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-categorization</strong></td>
<td><strong>Self-categorization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In culturally tight countries such as Germany, women perceive a greater needs</td>
<td>• In the Netherlands, men and women managers tend to exhibit similar leadership</td>
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<td>to conform to gender roles, making them more likely to confine themselves to their</td>
<td>styles.</td>
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<td>domestic responsibilities and child-rearing.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• In Malaysia, a country with a tight culture, women in leadership positions</td>
<td>• American women are more likely to see a resemblance between women and managers</td>
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<td>report that they have to lead as if they were mothers or teachers to their</td>
<td>than in tighter societies like Germany, U.K., China, and Japan, with Japanese</td>
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<td>subordinates so that society and their followers will be more accepting and</td>
<td>women seeing almost no resemblance between women and managers.</td>
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<td>tolerant of their leadership.</td>
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S.M. Toh, G.J. Leonardelli

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**Fig. 1** Leader emergence process

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the woman is someone you can trust — someone serious, proper, and able to govern. In Italy, the way young women have been portrayed in the media and public events for the twenty years under President Berlusconi’s rule has been blamed for having done significant “...damage to the role modeling for women and for men” and having a negative impact on how women in the country see themselves. This negative role modeling is argued to have contributed to Italy’s last place position in the European Union after Malta for the percentage of women working; similarly, women comprise of only 8% of directors sitting on company boards.

Next, we consider how cultural tightness may perpetuate the view that men are more leader-like than women, and that leadership should be the domain of men. We also discuss our research on how cultural tightness affects the extent to which women leaders may emerge.

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL TIGHTNESS: OUR FINDINGS

Recent work has revealed that nations differ in their degree of cultural tightness — the extent to which a society’s norms are clear and pervasive, and whether it tolerates deviance from such norms. In tight cultures, there are strong and clear norms that prescribe expected behavior. Such cultures, for example, might have clear rules on the inappropriateness for chewing gum or showing the bottom of one’s shoes.

Tight cultures also have lower tolerance for deviance and punish deviance more severely than loose cultures. In Singapore, a country with a tight culture, people can be arrested for spitting or jaywalking, and fined for failing to flush public toilets after use. Punishment for marijuana possession is another way that tight and loose cultures differ. In Malaysia, a tight culture, possession of marijuana is punishable by death. In loose cultures such as Israel and the Netherlands, marijuana use has been decriminalized and legalized, respectively.

In our research, we wanted to see whether cultural tightness affected the emergence of women as leaders. We reasoned that tighter cultures would see fewer women promoted to leadership positions because existing norms — norms that favored a traditional male leader — would be more readily reinforced and resistant to extinction in tight than loose cultures.

We investigated this hypothesis on a total of 32 countries that have been differentiated in their level of cultural tightness-looseness. These nations ranged from those considered to quite tight (countries including Pakistan, South Korea, and Turkey) to those quite loose (including Ukraine, Hungary, Israel and New Zealand). Others fell toward the middle of the measure, with the United States as slightly loose, and France, the United Kingdom, and Germany as increasingly tighter cultures. For these countries, we also collected data from the World Bank, available for year 2005, on the representation of women in various leadership positions (legislators, senior officials, and managers).

More Women Leaders Emerge in Loose Cultures

The data revealed that nations with tighter cultures had a lower percentage of women in leadership positions. In loose-culture nations such as New Zealand, Hungary, and the Ukraine, women held 35% or more of the leadership positions held by legislators, senior officials, and managers. By contrast, in tight-culture nations such as Pakistan, South Korea and Turkey, women held less than 10% of such leadership positions. The starkness of the differences in these six nations is highlighted in Fig. 2. Overall, we found a strong negative correlation between a culture’s tightness and the percentage of women leaders. Women held a greater percentage of leadership positions in loose than tight cultures.
We believe that a nation’s tightness was related to a lower percentage of women as leaders because cultural tightness tends to reinforce and perpetuate existing norms that favor male leaders. According to our explanation, in tighter cultures, people may be less likely to see women as leader-like and women should be less likely to see themselves as leader-like (Fig. 1). Some evidence supporting these conclusions can be found in Table 1: what we see here is that people in tighter cultures — men and women — are more likely to view leaders as men. Returning to the example wherein we started, we think the challenge that Germany’s Deutsche Telekom faces may be partly attributed to the tightness of German culture.

Taken together, our findings and those by others suggest that the perception of women as leaders, and their emergence, is more likely to occur organically in loose than tight cultures. But are women in tight cultures doomed to being bound by traditional views of leadership? Our research reveals this not to be so.

Women Leaders Can Emerge in Tight Cultures, Too

Among the tight cultures in our data, there were some important exceptions. Norway, a nation with a tight culture, exhibited a relatively high percentage of women as leaders (33%). Other tight cultures, such as Malaysia and Singapore, also had moderate (23%) and somewhat high (31%) percentages of women leaders, respectively. What could explain this emerging pattern that, among tight nations, some had high and others had low percentages of women leaders?

We found that it has to do with whether the tight culture practiced gender egalitarianism. Gender egalitarianism refers to the belief that biological sex should not determine the roles people play in their homes, business organizations, and communities. Practices that promote gender egalitarianism are often considered to be strategies put in place to achieve parity between men and women in the workplace.

Such practices can run the gamut from equal opportunities for higher education, to equal rights and lengths for parental leave. In Sweden, such practices are extensive: girls and boys are given the same opportunities for education and are taught about gender equality throughout elementary school; parents share 480 days of parental leave and fathers of a newborn get an extra 10 days of leave, if they have twins; and employers are required by law to actively pursue specific gender equality goals. To expose girls and their teachers to careers in science and technology, U.S. technology giant IBM goes as far as making presentations at elementary and secondary schools in some of the countries where they have operations. As part of its annual remuneration review process, Australian retail company Woolworths Limited analyzes pay levels by gender, identifies any differentials, and addresses any differential with appropriate action. Such practices, however, are not universal; a survey of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) from Mauritius found that most were not ready to consider parental leave policies, childcare facilities, flexible working hours, part-time work, and career breaks.

Cultural tightness is related to egalitarian practices in two ways. Loose cultures tended to implement more egalitarian practices than tight cultures do. Organizational leaders are more likely to implement egalitarian practices in loose cultures (such as IBM in the United States and Woolworth’s in Australia), but less likely to do so in tight cultures. However, we found that some tight cultures also practiced gender egalitarianism. Tight cultures that did so also reported a higher percentage of women as leaders than those that did not. In tight cultures, practicing egalitarianism was related to more women emerging as leaders.

Perhaps surprisingly, we also found that egalitarian practices did little to help women emerge as leaders in loose cultures. Women emerged as leaders in loose cultures regardless of whether those cultures had egalitarian practices in place. Although loose cultures are more likely to espouse egalitarian practices, those practices were not associated with more women in leadership positions.

Why might this be? To explain this, we draw parallels between tight and loose cultures with those of “mechanistic” and “organic” organizations. Mechanistic organizations are those high in formalization, standardization, and hierarchy, whereas organic organizations tend to be low in formalization, standardization, and hierarchy. A classic mechanistic organization would be the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), with many chains of command and extensive policies and procedures in place. By contrast, organic organizations such as Gore-Tex makers W.L. Gore & Associates or the design firm IDEO are known to have little if any hierarchy or formal chain of command, set channels of communication, or a fixed organizational structure.

Although organic organizations are often considered more innovative than mechanistic ones, mechanistic organizations tend to be more effective in implementing new technologies than organic ones, once those organizations have committed to the new technologies. Mechanistic organizations have clear channels of authority and formalized procedures, which ensures that adopted technologies are carried out consistently, quickly, and that such changes are sustained within the organization. Without such structure in place, organic organizations tend to be less effective in diffusing and implementing new practices.

We liken tight cultures to mechanistic organizations; with such clearly defined authority and formalized procedures, egalitarian practices can be implemented more quickly and effectively. This implies that loose societies, similar to organic organizations, have less success with the implementation of egalitarian practices because they have less structure in place to implement and reinforce such practices.

Here we see a disconnect: women can emerge as leaders in loose and tight cultures, but do so in different ways. In tight cultures, egalitarian practices can encourage women to emerge as leaders even when leader categorization and self-categorization processes suggest that women are not likely to be perceived as leader-like. For example, both Malaysia and Bulgaria have a relatively high percentage of leaders who are women, even though beliefs about leadership and women remain incompatible.

By contrast, in loose cultures, we speculate that the promotion of women to leadership positions is determined more by shaping peoples’ perceptions of leaders (through leader categorization and self-categorization) than by the implementation of egalitarian practices. Such conclusions indicate that, to promote women to leadership positions, different strategies are needed in loose and tight cultures.
TO PROMOTE WOMEN TO LEADERSHIP ROLES, USE CULTURALLY COMPATIBLE STRATEGIES

Given what we have learned about the role of cultural tightness in the rates at which women leaders emerge, we propose that global leaders wishing to promote more women to leadership positions use strategies most compatible to the culture in which each unit operates. We conclude that gender quotas will work better in tight cultures, but in loose cultures, exposure to successful women leaders — to role models — will be more effective for sustaining and improving the emergence of women as leaders.

In Tight Cultures, Adopt Gender Quotas

We think that tight cultures may be more effective at promoting women to leadership positions with gender quotas. In tight cultures, authorities are expected be more likely to reinforce cultural practices with legal sanctions rather than seek voluntary compliance. Furthermore, members of tight cultures may also be more receptive to changes imposed by authorities and the sanctioning systems used to ensure compliance. As a result, gender quotas will be more effective in tighter cultures because they are more likely to be backed by sanctions and accepted by people used to top-down approaches for implementing change.

Norway is a case in point. In the countries that have considered or adopted a gender quota, Norway, a tight culture, is one of the few that has clear sanctions for non-adherence. In 2003, Norway introduced a law that required publicly traded firms to reach a 40% women board representation by 2007 or face dissolution of the corporation. Months prior to the introduction of the mandatory gender quota, the percentage of women in the boardroom stood at a mere 7%, having risen at a rate of less than 1% per year the decade before. Since the institution of the quota in 2003, the percentage of women in the boardroom made significant leaps and now stands at approximately 40% - the highest level in the world.

In contrast, authorities in loose cultures may be more likely to implement voluntary quotas or mandatory quotas with no major penalties, and the people in loose cultures may be more resistant to complying with quotas. The Netherlands, for example, has mandatory quotas for boardrooms but no major penalties to sanction those companies who fail to comply. Similarly, several other nations including Australia, Spain, the U.S., and Italy have voluntary quotas — recommended practices without any means of enforcement. All of these countries have yet to make significant strides in promoting women into the boardroom.

Take a loose culture such as Canada — even though highly egalitarian, it has seen the proportion of women directors in publicly traded companies (10%) remain virtually unchanged from 2009 to 2011. Perhaps reflecting the difficulty with creating a clear norm, Canadian leaders have failed to agree on how to translate egalitarian ideals into practice. The looseness of these cultures may be preventing the swift and effective implementation of egalitarian practices.

Perhaps more importantly, members in loose cultures may also be more likely to resist approaches by authorities to ensure compliance. In the United States and Canada, quotas are often considered a form of favoritism, and seen by some as giving an unfair advantage to one group over others. For example, the Institute of Corporate Directors found that just 4% of the 550 board directors surveyed considered quotas helpful to encouraging boardroom diversity. Consequently, we think that egalitarian practices instituted by authorities tend to face greater resistance in loose than tight cultures.

Although our empirical evidence and the experience of Norway support our recommendation of using gender quotas in tight cultures, the example of Norway is nevertheless unique. With the exception of France, most countries have resisted mandatory gender quotas and sanctions for non-compliance. France has set an ambitious deadline of 2017 for firms with more than 500 employees or with a yearly turnover of €50 million or more to achieve a 40% female supervisory board representation. Violation will invalidate the supervisory board and members will not be paid for attending board meetings. A country moderate on the tightness-looseness scale, the experience of France will provide another piece of anecdotal evidence to inform us on the effectiveness of the practice. Already, the country has seen a marked 9% increase of women directors between 2009 and 2011 to 16.6%.

Our intent was to discuss the effectiveness of gender quotas in the context of cultural tightness. However, other egalitarian practices may also be implemented more effectively in tight than loose cultures.

In Loose Cultures, Use Examples of Successful Women Leaders

In a recent interview on women in the boardroom, Phyllis Yaffe, a long-time director and chair of the Canadian company Cineplex Entertainment, was asked for her thoughts. She acknowledged that part of the problem in promoting more women to positions on boards is that it is difficult to change deeply held beliefs of those who decide director appointments, many of whom are board chairmen. “You look around the room and you want to see what you’re comfortable with. And what people are comfortable with are the people they know.”

We think this quotation highlights two important points. First, it draws attention to the fact that there are currently fewer women in top leadership positions. This means that of the people that are likely to be known to board chairmen — who will be individuals in top leadership positions — they will tend to be men. As a result, more men will be recruited as boardroom members.

This quotation also highlights another important part of the story; the decision-makers, those with power to appoint leaders, have perceptions (perhaps implicit) of what they think a leader should be. Targeted efforts aimed at changing these perceptions, those of followers who would be led by them, and those of women who could potentially aspire to those positions, is a strategy that can be used in loose cultures.

As noted earlier (see Fig. 1), women leaders may emerge through two processes whereby others must view women as leaders (leader categorization), and women must view themselves as leader-like (self-categorization). In loose cultures, people are more likely to deviate from the view that leadership
is masculine. Women, too, are more likely to be open to their suitability for leadership positions. Backed by research, we propose that women can be promoted to leadership positions by shaping leader and self-categorization processes. Specifically, we propose exposing people to role models that are successful.

By role models, we refer to women in leadership positions. These role models can help to shape people’s perceptions, such that they no longer see leadership as male and help to allow the possibility that women can see themselves as leaders. Prominent CEOs such as Virginia Rometty of IBM, Marissa Mayer of Yahoo, and Brazil’s Maria das Gracas Silver Forst of Petrobas are examples of powerful role models who can begin to alter leader and women stereotypes. Born and raised in India, Indra Nooyi, CEO of PepsiCo, for example, was rated by Forbes as the second most powerful woman in business (after Sheryl Sandberg) and described as “the face of the future.”

But seeing those role models as successful, and responsible for that success, is crucial. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that people in leadership positions are seen as more leader-like when their team or organization succeeds than fails.

Such a coupling of women leadership and success can be powerful. In a test of this idea, a group of women were exposed to 16 examples of women leaders, including former E-Bay and current Hewlett-Packard CEO Meg Whitman, Oprah Winfrey, and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Some women saw photographs of these leaders and a biography of their accomplishments, whereas others read about and saw pictures of flowers. Only when exposed to examples of women leaders and their successes did the women observers perceive greater compatibility between leadership and women. Prominent leaders like Indra Nooyi and Irene Rosenfeld (Kraft) need to be seen as successful in order to effectively fulfill their function as role models.

In sum, increasing exposure of successful women leaders in loose cultures, whether through high-profile leadership positions or frequent contact, we think can reduce beliefs that women and leadership are incompatible. With such a roadblock out of the way, leadership categorization and self-categorization processes will, we argue, allow women to emerge as leaders more spontaneously.

CONCLUSION

Recently, researchers have found that Norwegians’ beliefs about women have become more favorable, and their views about leadership are androgynous, with no clear gender preferences for managerial positions. Not only has gender equality been made an explicit requirement through mandatory gender quotas in Norway, it has since also become an implicit expectation held by both Norwegian women and men. This points to the fact that even though leader categorization and self-categorization processes are less likely to promote significant change in women leader ratios than the institution of egalitarian practices, people in tight cultures can also come to see women and leadership as compatible. Conversely, although quotas and other egalitarian practices may not significantly improve gender ratios in loose cultures, as women increasingly fill the leadership ranks, women leaders may come to be seen as the norm, as people expect women to be as likely as men to hold leadership positions.

Global leaders face significant challenges when endeavoring to improve gender ratios in the leadership ranks of their organizations. As women remain relatively under-represented in leadership, it is hoped that our paper will prompt global leaders to consider more deeply the implications of cultural characteristics, particularly tightness and looseness, in their efforts.

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Although our paper does not review it here, a useful complement to these topics is to consider why men came to dominate leadership positions in the first place. For more information on this topic, we recommend books by Harvard anthropologist Richard Wrangham (Catching fire: How cooking made us human, 2009, New York: Basic Books), Dutch social psychologist Mark van Vugt (co-authored with Ahuja, Selected: Why some people lead, why others follow, and why it matters, 2011, Random House Canada), as well as research by Alice Eagly and others on gender and leadership (see below for more details).


For statistical sources for women leader emergence on corporate boards, see Deloitte Global Centre for Corporate Governance ("Women in the boardroom: A global perspective", November 2011) and Catalyst’s 2011 research report ("Women on boards," http://www.catalyst.org/).

For more information on Deutsche Telekom, see Nicola Clark’s article in the New York Times ("Deutsche Telekom Struggles with Gender Goal!", October 2, 2011). The interview with Phyllis Yaffe and other women executives on the use of gender quotas may be found in Janet McFarland’s article in the Globe and Mail ("Glamour progress of women on Canada’s boards prompts calls for reform", November 26, 2012).

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