

More women at the helm in arts

Leadership is not gender-specific but new crop of women chiefs bodes well for the scene



Culture Vulture

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Gender inequality is not taboo in the progressive art world. Plays, paintings and literature have long been vocal critics of such social bias.

Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, for example, is well-known for subverting traditional gender roles with a female protagonist who triumphs over her husband's repressive control.

The Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous female art group formed in the United States in 1985, is similarly noted for its bold works, among them protest posters that challenge the under-representation of female artists in museums.

In the public sphere, however, discussion of the gender imbalance in arts leadership has been largely, and unnervingly, muted.

Yet there is no running away from history. Men have frequently held the top jobs in official arts and cultural institutions around the world, including the United Kingdom where significant strides have been made in the fight against gender inequality. Singapore is no exception.

In the UK, men outnumber women in

creative and cultural leadership roles by 2.5 to 1. This data is the latest from a 2008 report by the British government-funded Cultural Leadership Programme.

In Singapore, the head honchos of key arts institutions and agencies have mostly been men since their formation.

The previous chairmen of the National Arts Council (NAC), for example, were Professor Tommy Koh, Mr Liu Thai Ker and Mr Edmund Cheng. Its past chief executives were also all men: Mr Foo Meng Liang, Mr Choo Thiam Siew, Mr Lee Suan Hiang and Mr Benson Puah.

So the recent, successive appointment of women to the helm of arts governance is unusual and worth taking notice of.

In the last two months, the National Arts Council named its first female chairman and chief, Professor Chan Heng Chee and Ms Kathy Lai respectively. The Singapore Art Museum also welcomed its first female director, Dr Susie Lingham, in August.

Similarly, the new role of chief executive of the National Art Gallery went to Ms Chong Siak Ching in April. She also heads the newly formed visual arts cluster comprising the National Art Gallery, the Singapore Art Museum and the Singapore Tyler Print Institute.

Other female arts heads announced this year include National Heritage Board chief Rosa Daniel and National Museum of Singapore director Angelita Teo.

Some in the arts community may say it is patronising to draw attention to the rise of females to key positions of power; they are adamant the best candidate was picked solely on capability, not gender.

Others may argue that if male leaders were picked, their gender would not be worth highlighting, so it should not be different for female leaders.

I agree that gender should not get in the way of choosing the best person for the job. But to refuse to acknowledge the statistical consequence of a presumably gender-blind choice smacks of insecurity and a lack of openness about gender and leadership.

Indeed, as I sought the views of arts industry observers and practitioners on the recent gender reversal in arts leadership here, many chose to clam up.

Singapore Dance Theatre's artistic director Janek Schergen, was among the exception.

As he puts it plainly: "To think that there hasn't been a bias towards men would just be foolish, as the past indicates it too strongly."

To spotlight the rise of females in arts governance does not regress the discussion on gender equality nor turn it into pro-gender dogma. Instead, it raises awareness of the need to continue to push for diversity in arts leadership in Singapore and broaden the definition and perception of an arts head.

The lack of diversity at the helm is not unique to the art world. Corporations here suffer from homogeneity too.

The latest data from the Singapore Board Diversity Report 2012 showed that of the 4,799 board positions on Singapore-listed companies in 2011, only 7.3 per cent of them were occupied by women. This is a marginal rise from 6.9 per cent in 2010.

This data has urged the business community to speak out for greater women participation in top management at leadership panels held here this year.

Suggestions to improve the gender mix at the helm of corporations include making the workplace accommodating to different lifestyle needs by offering

flexible work arrangements and paternity leave. Another solution is for women who have smashed the glass ceiling to champion the cause and reject the old boys' network. A push to mentor diverse candidates for future leadership may also prove effective.

Such recommendations could be borrowed and implemented in art institutions and agencies to address the lack of diversity at the top.

Ms Zizi Azah, artistic director of home-grown theatre company Teater Ekamatra, who is an advocate of such suggestions, says women "have been capable leaders for a long time" but society needs to be accepting of it.

"And part of this means that society must evolve to embrace women so that they can excel in their careers and manage their families well at the same time," she says.

Calling attention to top female appointments in the arts also brings into focus the potential for change in the way the arts connect with the masses.

Some in the arts community, such as The Substation's artistic director Noor Effendy Ibrahim, are adamant that gender does not dictate a person's management style.

National Arts Council chairman, Prof Chan, who holds the same view, says: "Arts and cultural leadership is not gender-specific. What matters is whether or not she or he has the artistic vision, drive and wisdom to lead the development of Singapore's diverse arts scene."

Teater Ekamatra's Zizi makes a vehement point: "It would be saying a woman leader must surely be more this, than that, because there are fundamental characteristics of a woman that are unchangeable facts. This is woefully patronising and limiting."

Indeed, the women's appointments should not be interpreted narrowly, trapping them within gender stereotypes they have fought to transcend.

Yet studies on leadership indicate that female leaders have definite strengths. A 2008 Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends survey of more than 2,000 adults for example, showed women ranked better than or equal to men in seven of eight leadership traits measured, including intelligence, honesty, creativity and compassion. Men prevailed over women only in decisiveness.

As Dr Kirpal Singh, Associate Professor of English Literature at the Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences, says: "Women now at the top of (arts organisations here) are going to bring about change... all over the world women have made remarkable strides particularly in the arena of creativity and innovation so it is likely that the same drive will be demonstrated by our own women at the top."

While it would be presumptuous and unfairly restrictive to expect the new crop of female arts leaders to drive arts development in a specific direction and manner, one should not fail to acknowledge that as female leaders, they bring with them a unique flair for management and the potential for change.

The arts landscape will certainly be for the richer if its new leadership builds on past achievements by leveraging on their strengths as female leaders to deepen the connection between the arts and the people, and strengthen relations between policymakers and practitioners. In this way, the benefit of diversity at the helm of arts governance will truly touch the man in the street.

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