

# Is CEO a gender-based position?

Shattering the gender biases



**Interview with  
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**We often do not see females holding top positions in companies. What reasons contribute to the female under-representation in the top tier in companies, regardless of their educational attainments and enhanced participation at entry-level jobs?**



Although there are no gender-based restrictions for females to enter the corporate sector, the lack of females at middle and top levels is mainly as a result of two reasons. There are cultural underpinnings that contribute to the issue. Predominantly society perceives a leader to be a man. If we ask a child to draw a leader, it will probably be a picture of a man, this shows that from the early days there is a bias. If you visualize a big company's boardroom with a few females, what would be their attire? The women would most often be in suits similar to their male colleagues. From early we are told and led to believe that females are supposed to behave according to a pre-defined framework accepted by society. Similarly, girls who are brought up within this framework sometimes lack the traits of fearlessness, bravery, assertiveness, and risk-taking, which are essential qualities to succeed in any position. Some women are unwilling or reluctant to give up motherhood and family life for their careers. They want to be good moms for their kids. Some women choose a career to make the kids' lives better. Therefore, reaching challenging top-tier jobs is not an easy task for females playing two demanding roles simultaneously.



**Have you experienced challenges because of being a female, and how did you cross through those?**



As is the case of any working mother, my first challenge was to be a good mother for my two kids while doing my job. I have never claimed to have perfectly balanced being a mother and a professional, as I have never done it. It was the perfect imbalance. Some days I chose to spend more time with my kids and vice versa, depending on the situation. I accepted the imbalance and lived with it happily. I was also not ashamed to discuss any problems I had with the company management. I have always told that "I am a single mother, and my two kids are my priority." So, there were times I was able to go off early to spend time with my kids. However, I was very dedicated to my job, so, after spending time with my kids I used to come back and stay until late to finish my work.

There were times I was worried as to how I was going to own my place in male-dominated industries such as logistics and supply chain, which had in place norms and biases favorable for men. For example, the top-level male managers in those industries used to deal with business during evening cocktails and golf-course, which was not something I could do because of my children. My approach was to be who I am when dealing with these situations instead of following the established traditions. Apart from that, there were instances of misinterpretation of my assertiveness as aggressiveness.

Being assertive will be a sign of strong leadership if it is a man, whereas it is not the same for a female. I did not react or worry about such misinterpretations; instead, I focused on adding value to the business with my unique capabilities.



**What background and character traits helped you to become who you are today?**



I was born as the second child of two daughters, but I grew up like a boy spending most of my time outdoors playing, climbing trees, and riding bicycles. Given this background, I was not framed to a set of attributes traditionally perceived for a daughter. I had represented Sri Lanka for about five years in basketball and netball for couple of years, and I captained the team. Sports taught me to understand people, the art of winning as a team, motivating and helping others become their best versions, hard work, perseverance, and bouncing back quickly after falling or failing. These lessons made me confident and contributed to who I am today. I went through many life struggles as a kid, a married woman, a single mom, and a working woman. However, once I went through each struggle, I became stronger than before.

Also, as a person, I am passionate about learning, I am willing to learn whatever, from whoever. For instance, when I took over pharmaceuticals or auditing, I did not know anything, but I learned all the practical aspects that helped me succeed in those fields. I also have an innate passion for doing



whatever I do as best as possible, which helps me succeed.

**Q:**

**How can organizations support females to climb the career ladder?**

**A:**

At present, many companies have realized the value of females and are focusing on gender equality. At Hemas we have always been gender blind, and we believe in giving the task or role to the person who is most suited or qualified for the job. I am now in this position because Hemas allowed me the flexibility to be a good mother for my kids, which is the fundamental need of any working mother. Companies need to walk the talk in setting aside gender biases and look at the job positions in a gender-neutral eye so that anybody can do any job or reach any position based on their unique talents.

**Q:**

**Whats' the legacy that you want to leave behind as the first female CEO of a public quoted conglomerate in Sri Lanka?**

**A:**

I want all the young girls to know “see that a woman took the CEO position of a conglomerate and transformed the company to the next level”. I want to inspire them and let them know that they can also reach this position. It will also help to move away from the established bias that a CEO of a big company has to be a male, and a board room is a place full of men. I always ensure that I have unique and competent people around me and help them to be the best versions and who can do better than me to climb the ladder regardless of gender.



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