It's a (Wo)Men's World

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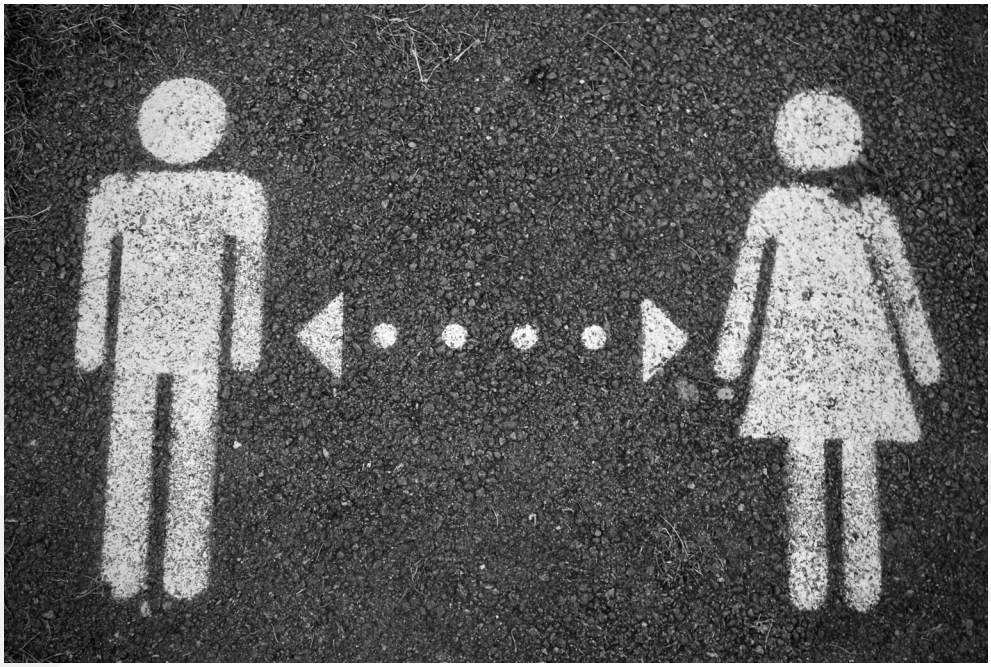


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It's a (Wo)Men's World: Are We Actually Getting Closer to Equality?

Recently I had the pleasure of attending the annual On Think Tanks (OTT) conference, which took place in Rabat, Morocco this year. I am not only leaving with amazing new contacts, but also with major questions that feel more pressing than ever.

During the conference, a special side event was offered called Women in Think Tanks. It presented an honest, at times uncomfortable, and ultimately essential conversation about the reality of women in leading positions, in highly competitive environments, and in a professional world that remains largely male-dominated.

What I learned right at the beginning of that session stopped me in my tracks. We are not only still fighting for equality in terms of leadership roles and career opportunities, in some of the think tanks represented in that room, the numbers of women are actually declining. Not stagnating. Going down.

That is a striking finding. And it demands an honest question: what is driving this? Is it the weight of compounding crises – war, economic instability, social fractures – that creates a heightened sense of insecurity, particularly for women? Does that insecurity push some of us toward roles that feel safer, more predictable, or simply less exhausting to navigate? Are more women quietly stepping back from the arena, not because they want to, but because the cost of staying has become too high?

Or is the dynamic more systemic than that? As women have fought harder and louder for their rightful place at the table, have some men responded not with adaptation, but with resistance? There is a growing body of experience – not just research on topics such as threatened masculinity, but lived reality – suggesting that in certain professional environments, a push for women's advancement has triggered a kind of defensive masculinity. The result: working cultures that become less welcoming, not more. Environments where the unwritten rules tighten rather than loosen.

Let's talk about them. Because they are real, they are widespread, and they are exhausting in their persistence. What made the Women in Think Tanks session so valuable was precisely the safe space it created: a room where women could share their experiences without fear of being dismissed, minimized, or told they were being "too sensitive."

What emerged from those conversations was a familiar, frustrating map of invisible boundaries women navigate daily in professional settings:

These are not complaints. They are patterns. And patterns, unlike individual grievances, point to something structural.

These "little" things, the micro-adjustments, the constant recalibrations, the invisible tax women pay simply to operate in certain spaces, accumulate into something heavy. Something that, over time, shapes decisions: whether to stay or leave, whether to push for that senior role or decide the fight simply isn't worth it that year.

What struck me most in Rabat was not despair, but clarity. The women in that room were not defeated. They were clear-eyed. They named what they saw, shared what they had learned, and refused to pretend that progress is linear or guaranteed.

Because the data, when it shows numbers moving in the wrong direction, reminds us that equality is not inevitable. It has to be actively built, in hiring practices, in organizational culture, in how leadership is defined and who gets to embody it. It has to be defended, too, especially in moments when political winds or social anxieties make it tempting to slide backwards.

Can we truly build a world where men and women are equals, in life and in career? I believe we can. But the conversation in Rabat was a necessary reminder that belief alone is not enough. The unwritten rules need to be written out and then rewritten entirely.

The work continues. And forums like these, uncomfortable, urgent and honest, are exactly where it has to happen.