



#InspireInclusion

**International
Women's Day**

8 MARCH 2024

BDO



We all share a common purpose, our WHY
'People helping People'

**Embracing
diversity, equity
and inclusion
will help all
our people:**

01 Maximise
their potential

02 Ignite their passion and
achieve their goals

Foreword

As a global organisation with over 115,000 employees, diversity is our strength - and inclusion is our collective responsibility.

Now in its fifth year, our International Women's Day report explores the importance and power of inclusion through the experiences of BDO women worldwide. The report spotlights their career challenges, recognises their resilience, and celebrates their achievements. Through this lens, we aim to spark conversations and encourage a shared understanding of inclusion as a catalyst for positive change.

One of the key pillars of inclusion is diversity in leadership. This enables organisations to harness the potential of diverse perspectives - leading to better decision-making, heightened productivity, and improved talent retention. I'm proud to see continued progress in this area across our firms and within our own Global Leadership Team.

Inclusion exists when every employee, regardless of background, race, gender, ethnicity, abilities, or other characteristics, feels not just seen, but truly valued. As this report demonstrates, inclusion is not just a moral imperative; it's a strategic business decision that benefits performance, innovation, engagement, and overall competitive advantage.

In line with our WHY '*People helping people*', I encourage everyone to seek out ways to break down barriers, challenge stereotypes and #InspireInclusion. Let's celebrate diversity and empowerment - not only on International Women's Day 2024, but as a key element of our organisation going forward.



Pat Kramer
Global CEO



Inclusion exists when every employee feels not just seen, but truly valued.



International Women's Day

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#InspireInclusion

It's not just something we say.

It's not just something we write about.

It's something we need to think about, know and embrace.

It's what we believe in, unconditionally.

**TOGETHER,
WE CAN
ALL INSPIRE
INCLUSION**



The inclusion imperative

The relation between diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion, while interconnected, are distinct concepts.

Diversity focuses on the WHAT ... encompassing various social groups and characteristics that distinguish individuals.

Inclusion focuses on the HOW – shaping a work environment and a culture that enables all people to participate and thrive, irrespective of their differences.

The inclusion imperative underscores the idea that leaders can leverage diversity and inclusion to enhance performance.

Why is DE&I a strategic imperative?

Workplaces must evolve for numerous reasons, and a significant one is the transformative nature of our world. A global, multi-faceted environment demands a different, diverse workforce. Companies require leaders who embody the changing marketplace. Through diversity in background, thought, skillsets, and experiences, innovative solutions for clients can be developed, along with a broader empathy for addressing challenges.

While companies have made strides in hiring employees from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, many workers of colour still face barriers to advancement. The question is why? What is holding them back?

A key obstacle is attrition. Establishing an inclusive environment isn't just morally right; it's also a tangible way to create an exceptional people experience and the root for innovation

As an example, a 2022 study by Bain & Company¹ revealed that less than 25% of black workers felt fully included at work, indicating a significant risk of them leaving their jobs.

The pandemic triggered substantial talent disruptions for companies across nearly every industry, with especially high attrition rates for underrepresented groups, due to factors like general job dissatisfaction, or caregiving needs. But, just as importantly, a feeling of having to compromise their authenticity if they want to be heard or move up the career ladder. As we transitioned to a hybrid work model, it posed both potential benefits for inclusion and risks of exacerbating inequalities.

A hybrid work model needs to be anchored in inclusion to be successful. The continuous changes to the workplace come with ample challenges. Our changed business world requires an entirely new talent force approach, one which has DE&I at its core.

Business adaptability goes beyond accelerating digital transformation or cultivating robust agility. It is also about adopting ESG – including DE&I – as part of the organisation's business model. Yet, many companies still struggle to fully incorporate it into their operations.

Where must inclusion really start? At the top. To make any workplace truly inviting and inclusive, companies must scrutinise their organisational culture.

Cultivating a more inclusive culture takes time and requires the full commitment of a company's leadership team. True commitment involves humility – acknowledging the need to learn and improve, recognising existing bias and stereotyping, and the fostering of a safe environment.



Inclusivity is not a problem to solve but an ongoing business requirement. When organisations intentionally include diverse voices and welcome different ways of working, a positive impact is inevitable.

Criteria to create an inclusive workplace

Creating a safe and inclusive workplace is a multifaceted task that involves various factors. Here are some key criteria that are important to ensure inclusivity:

01

Inclusive leadership commitment

- Walk the walk, talk the talk. It may sound simple, but it is not. Leaders should set an example by embracing diversity, demonstrating inclusive behaviour, and holding others accountable for doing the same. Addressing taboos around topics such as race, gender, sexuality and bias does not always come easily.
- Leaders must embrace the input of employees whose backgrounds or expertise differs from their own, foster collaboration, prize authenticity over conformity, and understand that a range of styles can succeed in the workplace.

03

Open communication

- Foster an open and transparent communication culture.
- Supported by clear policies and practices, encourage employees to express their thoughts, ideas, and concerns without fear of reprisal.

02

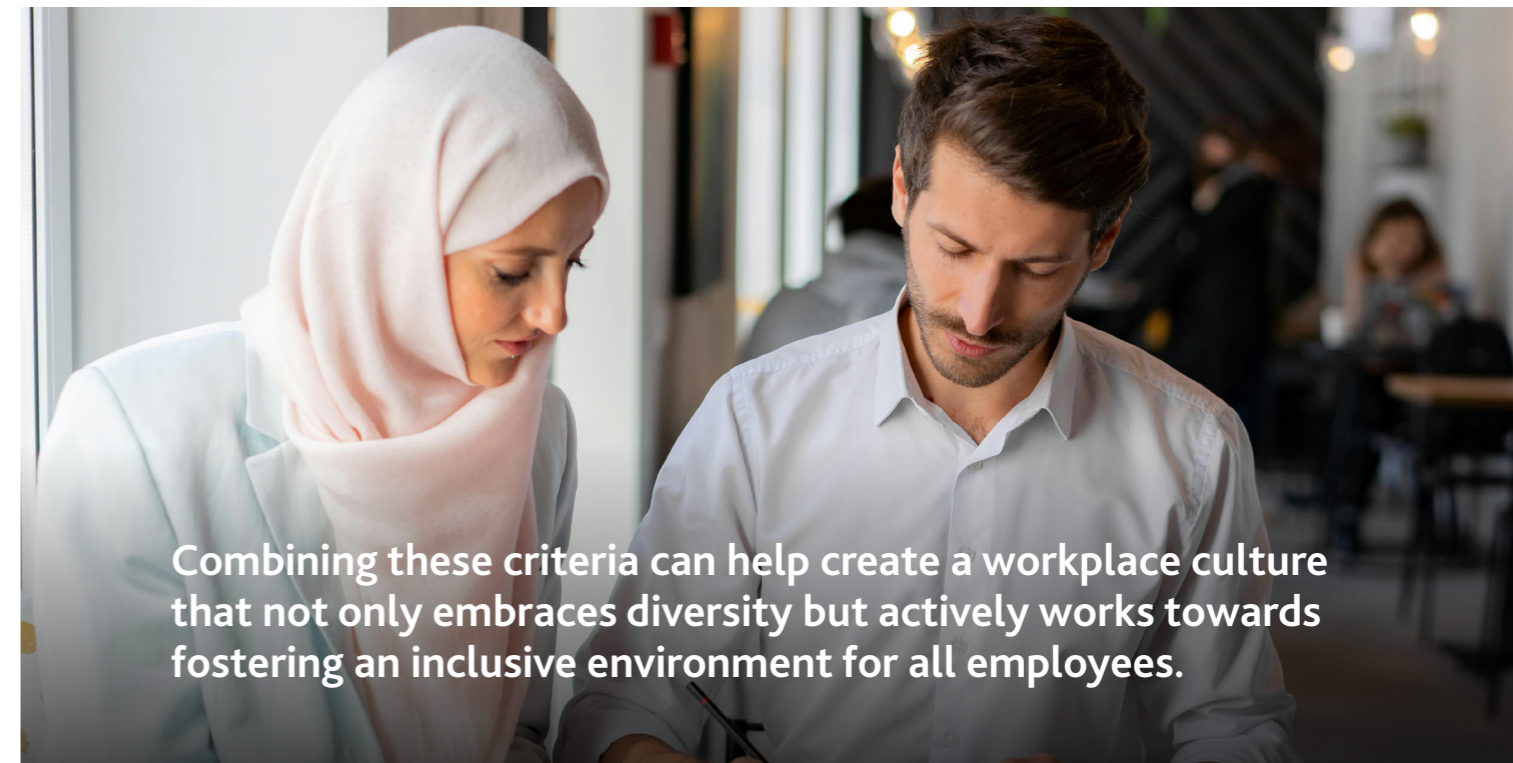
Inclusive policies and practices

- Develop and enforce inclusive policies that address discrimination, harassment, and bias.
- Implement inclusive hiring practices, to attract diverse talent.
- Ensure that policies and practices accommodate diverse needs, such as flexible work schedules, religious observances, and accessibility requirements.

04

Diversity awareness and training

- Stimulate open communication by nurturing awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion.
- Provide training programmes to educate employees on unconscious bias, cultural competence, and the value of diverse perspectives.



Combining these criteria can help create a workplace culture that not only embraces diversity but actively works towards fostering an inclusive environment for all employees.

05

Mentorship and sponsorship programmes

- Implement mentorship programmes that pair employees with mentors from different backgrounds. Equally, ensure talents have access to leaders who they can identify with, to use as a sounding board where needed.
- Consider anti-bias training. Recognise that bias exists and teach leaders to recognise and control their preconceptions.
- Create sponsorship opportunities to help underrepresented employees advance in their careers

07

Regular diversity and inclusion assessments

- Conduct regular assessments to measure the progress of diversity and inclusion efforts.
- Use feedback from employees to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments.

06

Accessible work environment

- Ensure physical and digital accessibility for all employees, including those with disabilities.
- Make necessary adjustments to accommodate diverse needs in the workplace.

08

Fair compensation and recognition

- Ensure that compensation and recognition are fair and free from bias.
- Recognise and reward employees based on their contributions and skills, irrespective of demographic factors.



MEET

Alicia DeFreitas

Global Head of People and Culture

On 1 November 2023, Alicia DeFreitas assumed the role of BDO's Global Head of People and Culture. With more than two decades of experience, Alicia has a strong track record of leadership and innovation in human resources, with a people-first approach. In her most recent role as Chief Human Resources Officer at BDO in Canada, she led a team of 100+ professionals with a focus on developing a culture of learning and growth and the creation of an exceptional people experience.

In her new role, as a member of the Global Leadership Team, Alicia is poised to drive BDO's global talent agenda forward, ensuring alignment with strategic business imperatives. Her mission is clear: to spearhead initiatives that empower employees and cultivate a vibrant organisational culture.

Alicia describes herself as family and career focused. Her parents instilled in her the value of working toward your dreams. Now with children of her own, Alicia seeks to be a similar example for them, showing them that everything is possible with hard work, perseverance, and a positive mindset.

Fortunate to do a job that she loves, Alicia aims to keep a healthy work-life balance. She enjoys spending time with her family and appreciates every opportunity to create special moments with them.

With Alicia's appointment, BDO's ten-strong global leadership team now includes four female leaders.

Let's find out more about Alicia and what drives her.

#InspireInclusion



My vision for BDO is rooted in inclusivity – a commitment to creating an environment where every individual has opportunity to contribute and thrive. This requires us to be mindful of how we interact with others:

- Do we listen?
- Do we have preconceived thoughts of what someone may say?
- Do we dismiss the thoughts of others based on our unconscious bias?

Being inclusive requires us to listen, understand another person's perspective, and consider it. Where there are strong cultures of inclusion, there is incredible impact. Looking at things through a wider lens (rather than our own personal, narrow lens) makes all the difference.

I focus on creating an environment where people can openly share their thoughts and perspectives, look for opportunities to grow in their careers and take on new challenges. I believe by creating an environment where people can be themselves is how we inspire inclusion.

Though still relatively new in my new role, I do believe that globally, BDO is an inclusive organisation and is committed to the experiences of its people. However, it is imperative that we do not assume that we have done all we can. We need to consistently look at what we can be doing to be a more inclusive organisation. We all play an important role in developing a true **culture of belonging**.

*A **culture of belonging** refers to an environment where individuals feel accepted, valued, and included regardless of their background, characteristics or differences. This creates a sense of connection, trust and respect and fosters a positive and supportive community. It makes people feel like a vital part of the team and it encourages them to celebrate collective achievements. When you create a culture of belonging, everyone wins.*

Guidance for aspiring women at BDO

For the past few years, I have volunteered as a mentor to female students in the [Advancing Women's Students Programme](#) at York University in Toronto. The programme is designed for female students in their third or fourth year of study. It matches successful York University women alumnae with women students as they prepare to enter the workforce.

Reflecting on my experience as a mentor, I recognise the challenges that female talent face as they embark on their careers. Therefore, I offer the following advice to aspiring women: be courageous, do not be afraid to try new things and embrace continuous learning – this is where growth happens.

Embrace the power of hard work and chase your dreams. There are no limits; believe in yourself.

Seek out mentors throughout your career; others who inspire you and can provide valuable guidance at different stages of your professional journey.

I heard this quote and it always stuck with me -



Be yourself, everyone else is already taken!

An absolutely perfect sentiment to remind us all that our uniqueness is our power.



Alicia's ambitions

I am very excited to be taking on this new role. As a global network I see many similarities in how our BDO firms lead, putting people and clients first, and truly living our purpose of 'People Helping People'. Working with my global colleagues, I am focused on developing a thriving global team, continually striving for excellence in all we do - through innovation and collaboration.

As part of our ambition to enhance our workplace environment, we recently launched the inaugural BDO Global Engagement Survey for BDO Global Office staff. This survey marks a very important step towards being a workplace of choice. With staff representing over 35 different nationalities and working from various locations around the globe, we aim to understand what truly matters to our workforce, enabling our people to provide candid and honest feedback.



Sinéad Scanlon

DE&I Leader
BDO in CANADA

Catalysing change: The vital role of a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion leader



**DE&I is a living
commitment,
not just words.**

A recent appointment, Sinéad Scanlon stepped into the role of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) Leader at BDO in Canada. With a focus on advancing the firm's DE&I strategy, Sinéad aims to cultivate an environment where people feel empowered to come to work as their authentic selves.

During her 16-year tenure at BDO in Canada, Sinéad has been steadfast in her commitment to fostering an environment where everyone belongs. Leveraging her expertise, she now assumes the role as lead of the firm's national DE&I Advisory Council, where she previously served on the Women's pillar¹.

Championing diversity, equity and inclusion: a personal journey

I am an audit partner by profession. As members of the DE&I Advisory Council, engaging in activities related to our five pillars¹ is a voluntary endeavour for each of us. Personally, I have dedicated my time to the Women's pillar for the past few years, describing it as my "labour of love." This commitment is fuelled by passion and driven by a genuine belief in fostering meaningful change.

I am originally from Ireland, and I initially came to Kelowna, British Columbia, for a 2-year assignment, after obtaining my CPA and doing my training in Ireland. What was intended to be two years' experience in a foreign country, evolved into a lifelong adventure. The country of Canada, and the community of Kelowna has become my home. My career progression at the firm has been fairly typical, progressing through the ranks, and making partner in 2020. Throughout the years, I discovered what type of clients I loved to work most with: non-for-profit organisations and Indigenous clients.

Working with our indigenous clients introduced me to the importance of DE&I. Coming to Canada and working with indigenous peoples within my first month of arrival was one of the most memorable and impactful aspects of my immigration. Not only was it a huge learning experience for me, and one which I am very grateful for, it cemented that these were clients I wanted to work with longer term. I'm really proud that the first Indigenous Nation I worked with as my first audit client when I arrived, is still a client I work for today. My tenure at BDO in Canada has afforded me the opportunity to work with Indigenous communities throughout Canada and motivated me to become involved in as many ways as I can.

For me, inclusion means that every individual feels valued and included in the workplace, regardless of who they are. Each person should feel part of the team. I am proud to have witnessed the increase in diversity within BDO's talent force, particularly in our offices throughout British Columbia, which for the longest time were not as diverse as our offices in the bigger provinces like Ontario and Quebec. From my involvement in the recruitment process, I know for a fact talents are now questioning how we address ESG initiatives. I personally gravitate to those young people, because they show a genuine interest and help advance change.

Empowering women: advice from Sinéad

When I first started, there were no female partners and I initially struggled to find female role models. Born and raised in a family of strong women, I had always surrounded myself with a female support group. My mother raised five children; my grandmother raised 12. Living and working at BDO in Kelowna, which when I started only had male partners, I had to seek both support and allyship from male partners and look further afield for female leadership mentors.

When I looked beyond my own office, it wasn't long before I encountered several female partners, whose leadership styles I really admired. The more I worked with these women, I could see how respected they were. This made me admire them even more, knowing they were excelling in – at that time – a male dominated partner environment. Those women continue to inspire me today.



My advice: dare to ask for support and guidance. Equally, find a role model you look up to, are inspired by and can learn a lot from.



Sinead's ambitions for change

With the appointment of Bruno Suppa as CEO in 2022, BDO in Canada elevated its DE&I strategy, building on the foundations that had already been to embed it further into our culture.

Our team at BDO in Canada have the opportunity to work for an increasingly diverse senior leadership team, which for me was one of the most inspiring parts of being a newer partner in the firm. One of the first actions of each member of the senior leadership team was to volunteer their time to be a sponsor of one of the five DE&I pillars¹ in our Advisory Council. They wanted to deepen their connection and understanding of each pillar so that they could provide all their support at the national level to each pillar member. This dedication is so appreciated by the whole Advisory Council.

My personal ambitions are to build on this important momentum and increase our focus. We still have a lot of work to do, as we really need to consider DE&I in all significant decisions that we are making - from attracting talent, to learning and development programmes, and the way we go to market. We need to fully integrate DE&I considerations into all aspects of decision-making within the organisation.

DE&I cannot just be about the wording you use in your ESG reporting. It's not just a document you create, it should be part of your DNA. And I am proud to say, for BDO in Canada, it really is.

Through my role, I don't only aim to drive organisational change, but I also hope to inspire others to champion diversity, equity and inclusion in their respective spheres of influence.

Fostering inclusivity in the workplace:

A guide for colleagues

Diversity and inclusivity are no longer mere buzzwords.

Having a diverse workforce is a more realistic representation of the world we live in, and embedding diversity and inclusion in the workplace culture have become essential components for success, driving innovation, and fostering a positive work culture.

As a colleague, your role in promoting inclusivity is pivotal, regardless of your position within the hierarchy.

Gone are the days when diversity initiatives were limited to HR policies. Inclusive leadership and behaviour have taken centre stage, emphasising the importance of accountability at all levels. Every individual within the organisation bears the responsibility of creating an environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and connected.

01

Collaborative support

Extend a helping hand to your colleagues. Whether it's sharing insights, resources, or simply lending an ear, supporting each other fosters a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect.

02

Recognition and amplification:

Acknowledge and highlight the contributions of your peers. Giving credit where it's due not only boosts morale but also ensures that everyone's efforts are recognized and valued.

03

Emotional well-being

Show empathy and compassion towards your colleagues. Sometimes, being inclusive means providing a supportive space for individuals to express themselves authentically and offering a listening ear when needed.

04

Diverse engagement

Embrace diversity in team-building activities. Consider the interests and backgrounds of all team members when planning events, ensuring that everyone feels included and represented.

05

Cultural curiosity

Take an interest in learning about your colleagues' backgrounds and experiences. Engage in meaningful conversations that celebrate diversity and promote understanding.

06

Mindful communication

Be mindful of the language you use. Avoid language that may perpetuate stereotypes or exclude certain groups. Simple changes in language can have a significant impact on creating a more inclusive environment.

07

Continuous learning

Educate yourself on issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Stay informed about current events and initiatives aimed at promoting inclusivity in the workplace and beyond.

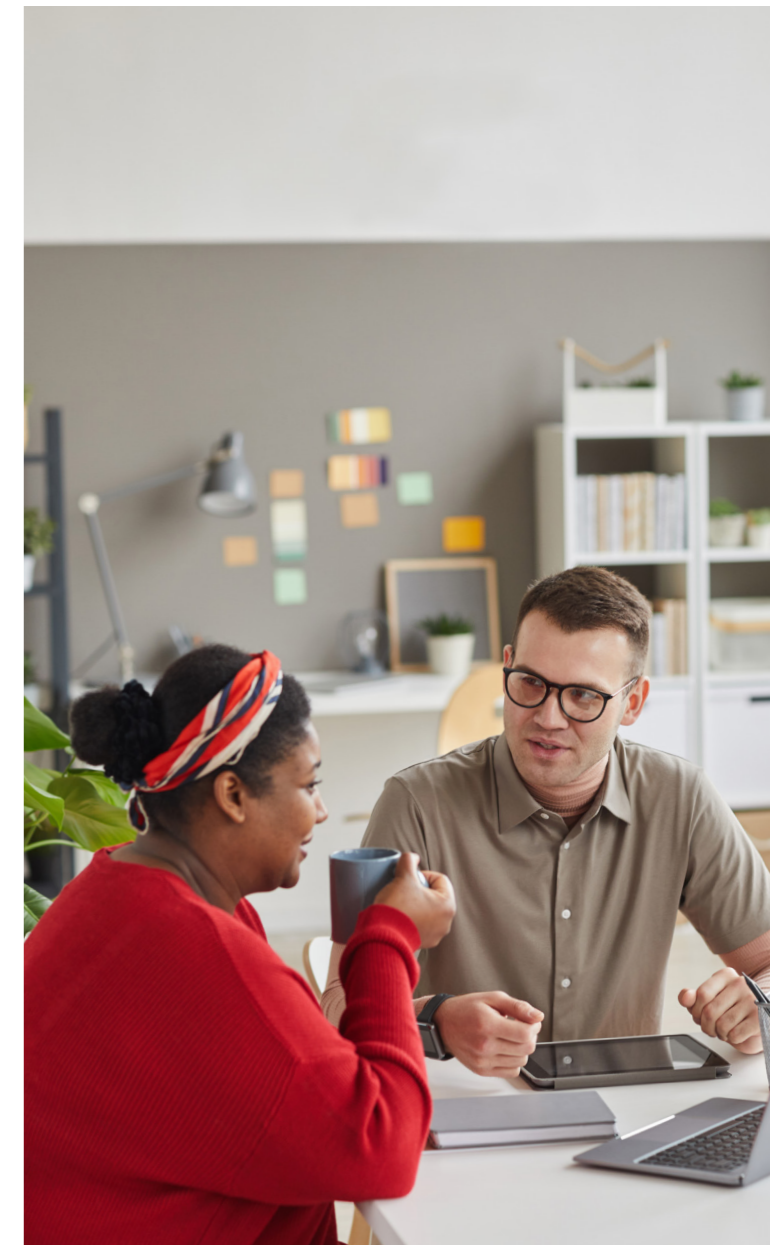
08

Advocacy and allyship

Stand up for your colleagues and support initiatives that promote diversity and inclusivity. Use your voice and influence to advocate for positive change within your organisation.

By actively practicing inclusivity in your daily interactions, you contribute to creating a workplace where everyone feels valued, respected, and empowered to thrive.

Remember, fostering inclusivity is not just a responsibility but a collective journey towards building a brighter and more equitable future for all.



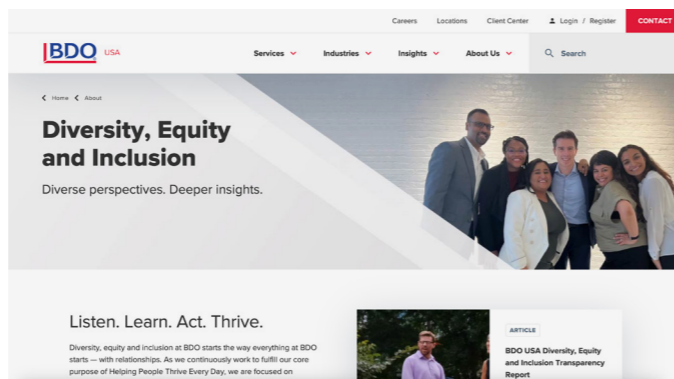
Initiatives by our firms

UK Culture Report



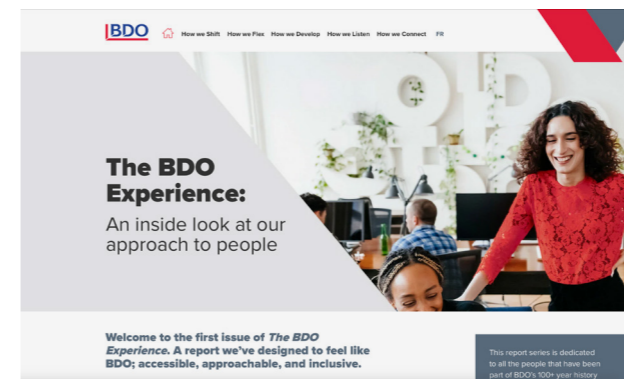
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USA Inclusion Groups



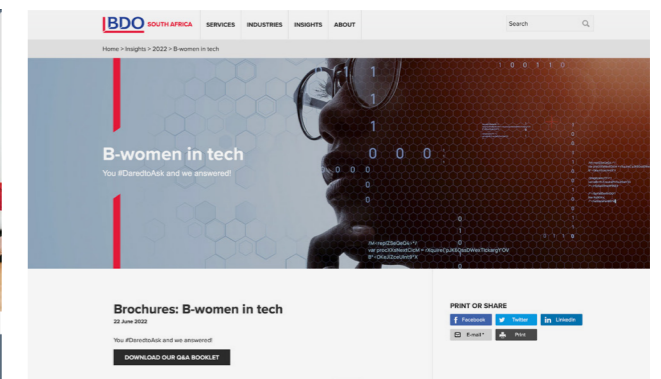
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CANADA Culture Report



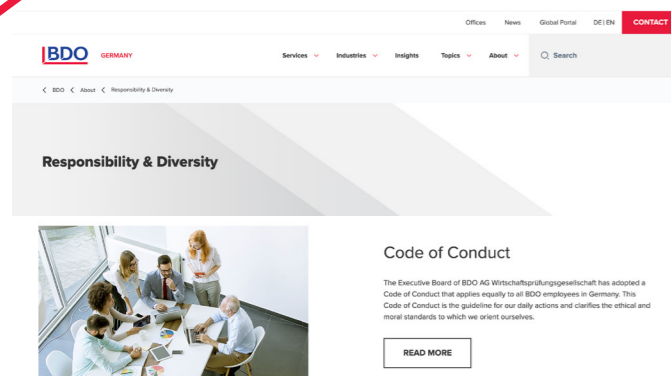
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SOUTH AFRICA Women in Tech



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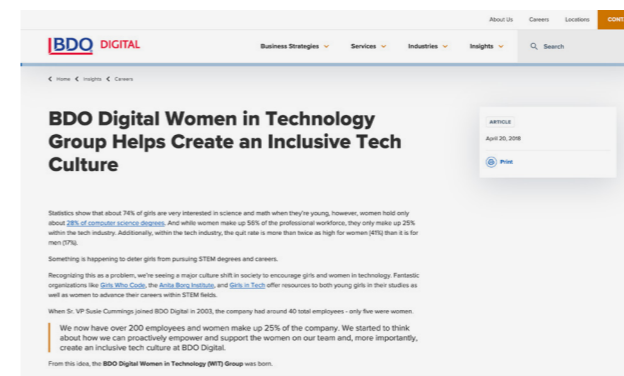
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USA Working Parents of the Year for 2023



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DIGITAL Women in Tech



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The BDO Digital Women in Technology group is designed to elevate female role models and support female employees by offering individual mentorship, career advocacy, and access to resources.

B-Women in Tech

BDO in South Africa

What began as a simple chat group for BDO women in tech in our South African firm has evolved, over the past four years, into a mature and impressive support and awareness programme: B-Women in Tech. What's even more remarkable is that it is entirely managed by our young tech talent, driven by an unstoppable desire to make a difference.

Today, the programme is led by CJ Bergs, Jenna Stone and Emily Thiel - all young and talented tech analysts. The group is comprised of around 20 women in tech who have each actively contributed to various activities over recent years.



Emily Thiel



Jenna Stone



CJ Bergs

How it all started

The IT and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) industries have traditionally been male dominated, with a significant gender imbalance in many roles and leadership positions. Consequently, there have been significant efforts and initiatives globally to address this imbalance, to encourage and support women in pursuing STEM careers through educational opportunities, mentoring programmes, and initiatives to create a more inclusive environment.

Understanding the need to address this crucial imbalance, the 'B-Women in Tech' group allows members to connect with peers, share views, gain more self-confidence within their industry, and be heard.

With passion and determination, the group has evolved beyond serving as a purely internal support system. Today, the project has matured and operates with its own charter. It focuses on three distinct programmes and initiatives:

01

The B-mentored initiative – empowering women and girls through tech

The development of student's skills is essential in a constantly changing society. A dedicated mentorship programme has been created to assist young women as they begin their careers in the world of technology. It connects female college/university students who want to prepare themselves better for their future careers with a BDO mentor. From a long list of applicants, the team selects up to 50 students every year. With the help of their assigned BDO mentor, participants identify their career aspirations, follow courses that provide additional certification, and learn how to structure a CV, to make them job-ready.

The mentoring programme not only benefits young students. By taking up a mentoring role, BDO colleagues expand their own skills, gaining expertise in guiding, supporting and leading others.



A dedicated mentorship programme has been created to assist young women as they begin their careers in the world of technology.

02

A dedicated corporate social initiatives team

This community outreach team plans concrete actions, primarily focusing on rural communities with little finances that are more likely to miss out on education or future career advancement. Last year's initiative was focused on sanitary products, in response to estimates from the anti-poverty NGO *The Borgen Project*¹ that seven million South-African girls cannot afford sanitary products, leading to regular school absenteeism. What may seem like a small project - supplying free sanitary products to young students - has a huge impact. It creates a ripple effect, breaking taboos and uplifting communities to pave the way for a brighter future. Two offices were involved in this year's project. The Cape Town office freed budget for it; in Johannesburg everyone, from juniors to the CEO, rallied to raise he products themselves. Several large boxes of products were delivered to schools in the area.



03

Global events

Based on the understanding that the issues facing women in tech in South-Africa are not standalone, the team decided to organise a global event, open to all BDO women (not just those in tech). The purpose was to allow colleagues from various countries to connect, learn from each other and hear from various leaders in the tech space.

The first event in 2022 was a roundtable, designed to promote discussion around digital literacy and encourage the creation of space for women in technology. Hundreds of colleagues and university students signed up to attend the live event, from more than 20 countries.



[READ MORE](#)

The second roundtable event in 2023 sought to challenge stereotypes. Several BDO leaders shared their inspirational ideas and stories, paving the way for a more diverse and empowering future. This too was a resounding success, with several hundred attendees from all around the world.

The organisation of these events served as a catalyst for further initiatives, including the creation of a 'Women in Tax' team.

2022 event



[WATCH VIDEO](#)

2023 event



[WATCH VIDEO](#)

LinkedIn post by Thuto Masasa, our esteemed host for the 2023 event



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What's next for B-Women in Tech?



What if we could create a true ripple effect, all of us from BDO, to break some of the taboos that still exist?

CJ, Jenna and Emily are incredibly passionate about their project and giving young female talent the opportunity to pursue a career in the tech space. Their commitment and drive has been exceptional, overcoming prejudice and lack of budget to lay an important DE&I foundation.

Their dream? To spread the word, connect with other BDO firms and create an international network - putting a structure in place to support similar initiatives, share inspiring topics and initiate ideas.

South Africa is certainly not the only country where young girls are disadvantaged due to seemingly simple things like lack of access to sanitary products. What if we could create a true ripple effect, all of us from BDO, to break some of the taboos that still exist? We must all acknowledge that - despite the progress being made - we still don't live in an inclusive world. Let's #InspireInclusion together.

Women at BDO

Firms with 25%+ female partners¹



1	Algeria	50%
2	French Polynesia	25%
3	France	29%
4	Luxembourg	25%
5	New Caledonia	33%
6	Reunion & Mayotte	50%
7	Poland	27%
8	Estonia	71%
9	Latvia	33%
10	Lithuania	43%
11	Sweden	28%
12	Portugal	29%
13	Albania	33%
14	Bulgaria	67%
15	Croatia	58%
16	Greece	33%
17	Macedonia	60%
18	Moldova	67%
19	Romania	28%
20	Serbia	30%
21	Slovenia	56%

22	Turkmenistan	25%
23	Azerbaijan	67%
24	Georgia	27%
25	Kazakhstan	45%
26	Ukraine	38%
27	Seychelles	50%
28	South Africa	36%
29	Zambia	33%
30	USA	25%
31	Canada	28%
32	Antigua & Barbados	50%
33	Aruba	33%
34	Dominican Republic	50%
35	Dutch Caribbean	25%
36	Jamaica	80%
37	St. Lucia	100%
38	Suriname	33%
39	Costa Rica	46%
40	El Salvador	33%
41	Colombia	30%
42	Ecuador	36%
43	Argentina	42%
44	Chile	25%
45	Peru	25%
46	Uruguay	33%
47	New Zealand	25%
48	Samoa	33%
49	Fiji	50%
50	China	28%
51	Hong Kong	41%
52	Taiwan	60%
53	Malaysia	32%
54	Singapore	40%
55	Thailand	50%
56	Vietnam	40%
57	Sri Lanka	43%

Global average = 23%

¹Data (excluding alliance firms) for the year ending 30 September 2023

BDO Women

Interviews



#InspireInclusion



If, at whatever moment, we experience a degree of exclusivity, we should have the courage to voice it. To have the audacity to be honest about it and recognise that it still persists.

INTERVIEW WITH

Trine Remin Ankjær

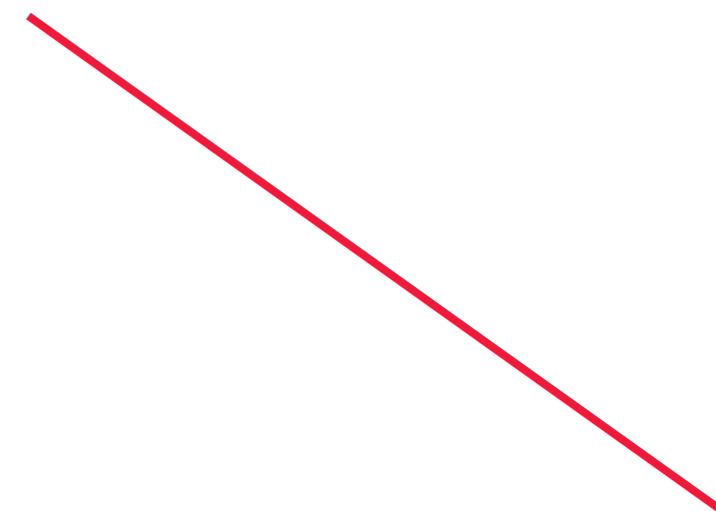
Chief People Officer
BDO in DENMARK

WHERE THERE IS A WILL, THERE IS ALSO A WAY

Who is Trine Remin Ankjær?

"This year, my husband and I will be celebrating our 25-year wedding anniversary," Trine starts, underscoring the paramount importance her family holds in her life. "I do not have children myself, but I am the proud 'bonus mother' to my husband's son. He's an adult now, but being a bonus mother has been an enriching journey, adding immeasurable depth and joy to my life. We have a dog, and we love being outdoors. Whenever we have the opportunity, we go biking or hiking in Denmark, Norway or the Austrian mountains.

I am a very curious person by nature and will always ask a lot of questions. I like to challenge what is considered the set 'modus operandi'. The phrase 'we usually do ...' is a real trigger for me. To evolve, we must consider that what we have always done may no longer be the best way."



My curiosity defined me

"I have a degree in marketing and economics, and I started out thinking that a job in marketing was what I wanted to do. Promoting the new Øresund bridge that was being built between Denmark and the South of Sweden was my entry in the professional world. Engaging in conversations with people forced to leave their homes sparked my early interest in human resources (HR), steering my career in unexpected, yet rewarding directions.

My curiosity brought me to my next employers, each time exploring and expanding my HR-expertise. It also brought me to different countries in different stages of my life. Besides Denmark, I have lived in the United States, Spain, and the UK. It has largely contributed to the way I'm inspired by the differences in culture, in people and to really understanding the benefits of acknowledging those unique differences.

In 2011, I joined BDO as their Chief People Officer. My background in marketing has always been a great help to understand the business, but I felt it necessary to learn more technical HR skills, so I decided to take on another master's degree in leadership psychology. Right now, I'm once again at university, following a dedicated Board education programme, studying basic techniques on how best to support our Board."

What does inclusion mean to you?

“Our Chairman of the Board Frank Lau recently shared a quote from Verna Myers: ‘Diversity is being invited to the party; Inclusion is being asked to dance’.

To me it means that we create an environment where everyone, no matter their colour, religion, sexual preference, feels welcome, embraced and encouraged to bring their true self to the table.

If, at whatever moment, we experience a degree of exclusivity, we should have the courage to voice it. To have the audacity to be honest about it and recognise that it still persists.

During our recent Partner conference, we invited keynote speaker [Caroline Farberger](#), to share her personal story and unique take on diversity and inclusion. To summarise her story, Caroline left the office one day as a man and returned the next day as a woman. With that unique background, Caroline admitted – looking back at the time where she was still a man - the way you experience inclusion or bias as a man is very different. She realised that as a man, she had not always – certainly not consciously – been inclusive or free from bias. She simply had never been aware of it. This reality is something that we all need to be aware of in the workplace.”



We all face some degree of unconscious bias in our career journey. Equally so, we experience perceived bias, when the actual disparities may not exist



Caroline Farberger

Caroline Farberger is a professional chairperson, board member, tech investor, experienced CEO, keynote speaker and author.

[READ MORE](#)

What is important to me as a leader

“My focus extends beyond professional prowess to the well-being of our people. These past few years, I have reflected a lot about the differences in our people, and how we can best allow them to be their authentic selves.”

We all face some degree of unconscious bias in our career journey. Equally so, we experience perceived bias, when the actual disparities may not exist. Sometimes, we are simply too hard on ourselves.

I will share a few of my own experiences: As a woman, I always felt that I had to ‘prove myself’ more than my male counterparts, and be exceptional to be taken seriously. There was no room for error.

More recently, during an interview with Caroline (see above), she unexpectedly asked me “Why are you dressed like a businessman? Why are you wearing a blue suit with a white shirt?” It really took me by surprise and I had to think about it. I realised she was right. I have always been, and still am, extremely considerate of what I wear. I always chose very neutral business attire - conscious that I may be taken less seriously if I do not.

A somewhat different example. As the only woman on the executive team, when we have a short sanitary break, it happens that the men will continue the conversation.

Coming back to the meeting room, they have sometimes already agreed on a topic, and are ready to move ahead, forgetting I was not part of that discussion. That is when you realise, we were not inclusive at that moment. It happens thoughtlessly, but it has an impact on the person that has been overlooked.

These are just a few examples. But they show that we still need to explain better what diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) is all about - and encourage open discussions about the topic. And that is what we are currently doing at BDO in Denmark.

Denmark is ranked the second happiest country in the world¹. People are very open-minded, and everybody gets the same opportunities in education. Yet, it is unsuccessful in appointing women to top leadership positions. If we look at the [Global Gender Gap index 2023](#), Denmark is no longer in the top 10.

For me, it is important to understand how BDO in Denmark is doing in terms of DE&I. As a first step, we established a diversity champions network, including 25 members, both male and female, all with very different roles and responsibilities.

In October 2023, we launched an engagement survey. For the very first time, it included questions specifically focused on inclusion. This allowed us to really measure how inclusive BDO in Denmark really is. I am proud that we had the audacity to take this bold step. It confirmed that men and women – given the exact same questions – respond quite differently. The survey results provided a wealth of information to work with. Today, our diversity champions network is working on four distinct areas, to ensure that we engage with our people on all aspects of DE&I.”

What would your advice be to young women in BDO?

“I live with the mindset ‘Where there is a will, there is also a way!’ The road will not always be straight, but with a positive mindset, you can make a lot happen. Seek out inspiring role models that demonstrate that personal and professional goals are within your reach. Be curious! Be ambitious! But also remember to have fun.”

¹ Denmark the second happiest country in the world – report - The Copenhagen Post – The Copenhagen Post (cphpost.dk)

INTERVIEW WITH

Amy Yau

Audit Assurance Director
BDO in HONG KONG



Inclusion also means leading by example. That is what I aim to do every day.

What motivated me to become a leader

"In a nutshell: a passion for the profession. At 14, I chose accounting as an academic subject, loving it from the start. Determined to pursue a university degree in accounting, I completed my Bachelor's and obtained my CPA soon after, kickstarting my career.

Fortunate to encounter opportunities for growth early on, I dared to accept challenges that would advance my career. I was in the right place at the right time. In the 90's, China was a fast-growing market, bringing with it so many new and challenging opportunities.

Gaining expertise in those early years fuelled my passion for the profession. Inspired by my own mentors, I now share that passion, and my expertise and insights, with our young talent to guide their career journeys."

AVOID BEING JUDGMENTAL!

Who is Amy Yau?

"I am an Audit Assurance Director with almost 30 years of experience in providing audit services to clients across a range of industries, including the Technology, Media and Telecom sector.

Commencing my career in 1994 at KPMG, I was fortunate to work on significant Initial Public Offerings (IPOs) for businesses based in China, gaining invaluable experience. During my initial professional tenure, I was one of the partners overseeing telecom and the negotiating director with the Chinese Office. As I joined BDO, this exposure allowed me to continue focusing on the Chinese market, managing enterprise audits and supporting listed companies.

I consider myself to be a true job enthusiast, drawing energy and motivation from what I do. During my downtime, I unwind by watching TV dramas. I clear my head by reflecting on work and by planning for the upcoming days. It's a routine pattern for me, and one I need to find a good balance. During weekends, I also like to sing. Karaoke really allows me to let go!"

What does inclusion mean to you?



Inclusion, to me, is giving everyone a voice and having the willingness to listen - regardless of your own opinions.

"To be inclusive, avoid being judgmental! This is crucial. There is a clear distinction between being judgmental and making a judgement*. As auditors, we make judgements in each audit, but we should always refrain from being judgmental. Open-mindedness, reflection, and analysis are essential in every workplace situation, whether interacting with colleagues or with clients.

Making a judgement involves assessing a situation, behaviour, or choices based on our values, beliefs, and other relevant information. Constructive judgements help us to navigate life, make informed decisions and learn from our experiences.

Being judgmental goes beyond making assessments. It implies a negative perception or harshness towards others. It often involves moral intolerance, labelling people or situations based on limited information.

Inclusion also means leading by example. That is what I aim to do every day. With my team, we brainstorm topics, considering if things can be done differently. We share experiences and foster a friendly and warm environment where feedback is welcomed and respected. This creates an inclusive and effective team."



What hurdles have you experienced in your career?

"In Hong Kong, equal access to academic education exists for men and women. The same applies to remuneration. There is no material pay gap between genders. Everyone can pursue a professional career. Most families have household help to take care of the day-to-day chores, including child and elderly care.

BDO in Hong Kong has always been quite progressive, with a diverse workforce and a high percentage of female leaders - 40% of our director¹ population is female.

However, promotion to director at a relatively young age (around 35) did present some challenges. In Asia, women tend to look significantly younger than their age, so clients didn't always respect me or take me seriously. Building client relationships based on trust took time and determination.

We also spend long hours at work, but because our households are well organised, most female talents find it easy to progress their careers. Spending so much time at the office makes having the right culture even more important. We regularly organise social events to foster camaraderie among our various teams."

What would your advice be to young women in BDO?

"Build self-confidence by becoming an expert in your skills. Engaging in conversation with more senior peers will aid your progress.

Challenge yourself and embrace opportunities outside your comfort zone.

Plan your career journey: identify your aspirations, your passion, and ideal business environment. Having a clear plan will increase the likelihood of achieving your goals."



Plan your career journey: identify your aspirations, your passion, and ideal business environment. Having a clear plan will increase the likelihood of achieving your goals.



INTERVIEW WITH

Paula Giraldo Cuellar

Lead Partner Advisory – Corporate Sustainability
BDO in COLOMBIA

NEVER STOP BEING A WOMAN!

Who is Paula Giraldo Cuellar?

"I am a woman, and I take great pride in it. I have been happily married for 21 years and have been blessed with two wonderful sons, Samuel and Emilio. My family is my cornerstone. As a lawyer with several specialisations, with masters' degrees in corporate social responsibility and sustainable leadership, and in neurolinguistic programming, and as an executive coach, I am continually engaged in lifelong learning, fuelling my curiosity and passion for acquiring new knowledge.

However, education alone does not define who I am as a person. It's the diverse roles I embrace, the way I interact with others, and the values I hold close."

My family is what defined me...

"Indeed, my entire life has been profoundly shaped by the nurturing environment that I grew up in. Raised in a family that acknowledged, celebrated, and valued women's contributions, I owe much of this ethos to my grandfather, who played a pivotal role in instilling these values within our family.

My mother, a remarkable influence, demonstrated that success knows no gender or age boundaries. Even as a small child, she taught us to be independent and confident - and that we could achieve whatever we set our minds too. Even at 73, she thrives as an entrepreneur, and her unwavering determination and commitment is a perpetual source of inspiration for me and my sons."

...and what motivated me to become a leader

"Over two decades ago, I embarked on my career journey with BDO, to do my legal internship. Joining as the only female lawyer, I had much to learn, but BDO embraced my authenticity and supported my professional growth from the outset. Today, I am a partner leading the Advisory and Sustainability practice, and a member of the Inter-Americas Cluster Board, and the Colombia Board. Although in my current job I am still mostly surrounded by men, I have always had the chance to show who I am as a person and a professional.

In the realm of DE&I, my leadership philosophy aligns with a saying lawyers have: "Justice is not giving everyone the same. Justice is about giving each their own and treating everyone fairly." It means providing equal rights, resources, and opportunities, whilst respecting individual differences. As a leader, this is where I believe I can make the difference.



Organisations like BDO can be a fundamental driver of societal change by implementing diversity, equality and inclusion policies and educating our people about its significance.

As sustainability and ESG take centre stage, DE&I has rightfully earned a place at the board table. Investors, suppliers, and clients scrutinise staff composition data and carefully observe how many women are part of boards and steering committees. Many studies recognise the economic benefits of a truly diverse and inclusive workforce. To date, the Inter-Americas cluster has more than 1,400 employees, 65% of which are women and of those, 45% are in management positions."

What does inclusion mean to you?

"Inclusion, for me, is to ensure that everyone, regardless of who they are or what they do in the organisation, feels equally involved, heard, understood and supported."

Leading by example is the most powerful way to inspire others and break prejudices and paradigms."

What would your advice be to young women in BDO?

"Embrace your womanhood! Embrace it unapologetically. Women bring unique characteristics to the table, along with determination and discipline. I consistently see these traits in women, and they help us succeed."

Believe in yourself, seize every opportunity, and you'll achieve your personal goals. And yet, you will still face challenges. For me, balancing work and life has been a significant one. It's not easy, but it is crucial at any career stage. Recognise that you can be a wife, a mother, a professional and a friend, without sacrificing any of these roles. We don't have to change who we are. We have a lot of value to bring."



DE&I in Colombia

"Despite advancements in promoting DE&I in the workplace in Colombia, significant challenges remain that need to be addressed to achieve a fairer and more equal society."

In recent years, there have been significant advances in raising awareness and promoting gender equality, but there are still substantial challenges to overcome. Regarding gender equality, policies and programmes have been implemented to promote equal opportunities in the workplace and society. Laws have been enacted to combat gender discrimination and ensure equal pay for men and women. However, gender pay gaps and gender inequalities persist in various sectors.

According to a National Survey presented by the National Association of Entrepreneurs of Colombia in March of this year, there have been significant advances in implementing diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) policies in Colombian companies. According to the results, approximately 63.6% of companies in the country already have DEI workplace policies. This reflects a growing recognition among Colombian businesses of the importance of fostering diversity and inclusion in corporate culture.

One notable data point from this survey is the progressive increase in budget allocated for implementing actions related to diversity and inclusion in Colombian companies. In 2021, 21.3% of companies allocated resources for this purpose, which rose to 25.7% in 2022 and reached an impressive 44% in 2023. This increase in investment reflects a growing commitment to creating more inclusive and diverse work environments.

However, despite these advancements, significant challenges concerning gender equality and diversity persist in Colombia. For example, the gender gap in unemployment is notable, with an unemployment rate of 12.9% for women in March 2023, compared to 7.9% for men, representing a gender gap of 5.0%. This disparity in unemployment rates underscores the need to continue working on gender equality in the workplace. Another area where significant differences are evident is the gender pay gap. According to data from the National Administrative Department of Statistics in urban areas of Colombia, there is an 11% gender pay gap between men and women. This means

that, on average, women earn only 89% of what men earn in monthly labour income. These differences emphasise the importance of addressing gender wage inequality in the country.

Promoting workforce inclusion is essential for companies today, due to its numerous benefits."



By fostering an environment where differences are valued and respected, companies can access a broader range of perspectives and experiences. This can drive innovation and more effective decision-making, contribute to a positive corporate culture, increase talent retention, and strengthen relationships with customers and communities.



From the first day I started working, I pledged to advocate for equity and inclusion...

INTERVIEW WITH

Smriti Saluja

Chief Marketing & Communications Officer
BDO in INDIA

STAY TRUE TO YOUR VALUES

Who is Smriti Saluja?

"An avid reader, a quick learner, methodical in thought and approach, measured in response and reaction. I am a driven individual finding inspiration in doing meaningful work, and fulfilment in collaborating with others.

I'm the Chief Marketing and Communications Officer at BDO India, with a decade of my total 18-year experience, spent with the firm and the BDO brand. Growing up with books, I've always loved storytelling and believed in the power of Expression!

My husband and I reside in Mumbai - a vibrant Indian city of opportunities, whilst my parents and grandmother continue to live in my hometown away from the city, surrounded by nature. My brother works and lives in the US. Despite the distance, what keeps us together is the strength we derive from each other, shared experiences and the warmth of family ties."

The hurdles faced by women building a career

"Most Indian homes are patriarchal, and coming from a non-metropolitan city, my first challenge was convincing my own father that I would be ok moving away from the security of home, to pursue a professional career. Parental safeguards aside, that was the first time I felt a gender stereotype working to my disadvantage.

I understood my father's concerns, and it took more than my good grades to convince him. Speaking to other parents, my mother & grandmother, he conducted his own research and did a full risk-analysis! I also felt that the fear of 'change' induced by social mobility influenced the decision-making process.

I moved to Mumbai, confident in myself and my abilities. The biggest change that I had to adapt to, was the city itself. Living in a shared apartment,

traveling in the financial capital of the country, finding for myself wasn't as simple as I'd imagined. But the cosmopolitanism of the city grew on me; I found rhythm with the pace and the more I immersed myself the more fulfilling rewarding the journey became.

From the first day I started working, I pledged to advocate equity and inclusion not just in the realm of gender, background, or ability, but as a way of free-living where risks & rewards, opportunities and sacrifices, diversity of ideas and receiving them with equal enthusiasm, would be, baseline. I've always followed my heart when doing everything - whether personal or professional, and this has always worked for me.

In my journey thence, I've encountered subtle challenges that were gender inclined. The occasional biases I faced were opportunities to redefine preconceived notions, making me a stronger peer in my diverse fraternity. At BDO in India, I'm privileged to collaborate with progressive, growth-oriented, ambitious colleagues, where supportive leadership fosters a culture that helps everyone thrive.

But behind all your stories is always your mother's story, because hers is where yours begins" Mitch Albom¹ captures it all. And so, my learnings begin from my mother - my mentor, who has been an academic for life - earning a Bachelors in Science & Education, Masters in English Literature, Ph.D in American Literature and a Master's in Business Administration. She is also an Arizona State University certified TESOL professional, having worked for over three decades in the field of women's education and now leading a multi-disciplinary university."



What does inclusion mean to you?

"To me, it means being authentic. Being who you are and being able to speak out freely without the fear of being judged. Inclusion means a place where confluence of ideas is welcome, and concurrence or disagreements only translate into richer discussions.

It transcends gender, race, ethnicity, and background, to respect everyone's point of view with empathy. Inclusion is making everyone felt adequately represented, irrespective of decisions or business outcomes. This fosters a spirit of trust, being heard and valued, and leads to learning for mutual development.

At BDO in India, there is an appreciation for lateral thinking, and a focus on building a community beyond work – through sports, marathon running groups, celebrating all festivals from different religious sects with equal fervour. Making our organisation culturally different from our larger competitors, helps us in turn encourage more like-minded and talented people to join us."



At BDO in India, there is an appreciation for lateral thinking, and a focus on building a community beyond work

How I lead

"I consciously strive to cultivate an environment of encouragement and equity, empowering my team to excel while embracing diverse perspectives.

Regardless of age or gender - be it young aspirants, dotting parents, or senior professionals, I encourage inputs beyond their own scope of work, making time and opportunity for out-of-the-box thinking, offbeat concepts and creative suggestions, allowing us all to tap into a wealth of free-spirited ideas.

My team is 62% women and is a place where everyone brings their individuality to work. This creates bonds that transcend the boundaries of just being colleagues.

In my role as Presiding Officer of the PoSH (Prevention Of Sexual Harassment in the workplace) Committee, I contribute to ensuring a safe and respectful workplace environment – an agenda cause that is close to my heart.

Milind Kothari, BDO in India's Managing Partner, has truly steered the growth of both the organisation and its people, with profound vision and a simple objective of building a people-centric organisation.

He has always championed inclusion and has been a strong advocate of having opinionated people, inviting them to constructive discussions.



Traditionally, the professional services industry as a whole has undeniably been male dominated, but our experience at BDO in India has been different

This has always fostered transparency-based trust, and created an open culture, that permeates throughout the organisation.

BDO in India has 36% women in the employee & leadership mix (13% in Partnership) and employs 30-40% people from Tier-II & III cities, in an endeavour to extend the opportunity of working with a global brand, to smaller cities & towns giving talent in those pockets, a fair & equitable platform to work, compete and win!

India, as a country, is demonstrating a steady decline in non-inclusive behaviours, and is making efforts in the right direction to make workplaces and communities more inclusive. Increasing employee sensitisation, resource groups, gender identity expression, and mentorship programmes are each making a difference. The country still has much ground to cover, but with the right intent, increasing awareness and progressive public and corporate policies, a paradigm shift for the better is underway.

Traditionally, the professional services industry as a whole has undeniably been male dominated, but our experience at BDO in India has been different, primarily because of the tone at the top and the culture driven by our leadership. I can proudly say that equal focus is given to priorities of business, people, and culture during our boardroom meetings."

What would your advice be to young women in BDO?

"Stay relevant and adapt to change but stay true to your principles. Seek excellence in everything you do, and success will follow. Be comfortable in your being - professionally and personally – don't allow yourself to be taken for granted. And finally, be inquisitive, challenge stereotypes, and remember – your contributions will be measured as the sum total of intent, competence and effort, and not your age, gender, or background."



Inclusion transcends gender, race or beliefs; it's about valuing the individual

INTERVIEW WITH

Katharine Byrne

Head of Advisory
BDO in IRELAND

YOU DON'T NEED TO BE SUPERWOMAN!

Who is Katharine Byrne?

"I have been with BDO for 25 years now, and I became a partner in 2010. My focus is primarily on corporate finance and deal-making, inherently transactional. The job is very intense, yet profoundly rewarding. Value-driven work is what motivates me most, experiencing the sense of achievement that comes with delivering results, and celebrating success together with our clients.

I am a mother of four, ranging from 13 to 19 years old. Seeing them evolve into sociable and independent young adults, finding their own purpose in life, brings immense pride to my husband and I. Our family is very important to us.

Helping others succeed encapsulates who I am best. It all boils down to purpose."

Purpose has defined me from a young age

"As a girl I had great aspirations, wanting to change the world. I initially pursued a law degree with the ambition of becoming a human rights lawyer. After obtaining my honours degree, I started to train as a barrister, but quickly realised that wasn't my true calling. I embarked on a soul-searching journey, travelling around the world for a year, starting in India and concluding in New Zealand. This experience was life changing. It was there I discovered my very own purpose ... helping others be the best they can be.

It led me to the world of accountancy. Choosing BDO over any other firm for my graduate programme was my first conscious decision. My initial interview with one of BDO's founders in Ireland left a lasting impression, particularly his people-centric focus. I knew it was the kind of organisation I wanted to be part of."

What does inclusion mean to you?

"Inclusion transcends gender, race or beliefs; it's about valuing the individual. It entails recognising and leveraging the unique contributions of each person, whether they are team members or clients. To best serve a client, we must actively listen, probe and understand their needs. Similarly, to unlock the full potential of our people, we must comprehend their background, education, skill set and their purpose. Though time-consuming, it yields tremendous rewards.

Looking at the differences in gender, I firmly believe that certain roles may naturally appeal more to men or women, owing to their distinct working and leadership styles. Ultimately, each person must discover their own motivation and life objectives."



Helping others succeed encapsulates who I am best. It all boils down to purpose.



As a leader, my priority is to ensure that every individual, irrespective of gender, race or belief, can contribute to the best of their abilities.

What inspired me to become a leader

"I never really set out to become the Head of Advisory; however, I always set out the next target in my career. For me, it's about delivering the best outcomes for my clients, my firm and myself. I have been open to assuming roles where I could make an impact. Initially, I focused on serving my clients and developing my team, later I became more involved in the operational aspects of the firm.

I have been fortunate to have had exceptional mentors and supportive male partners, who encouraged me, even as a mother of 4! I was promoted quickly, demonstrating the firm's openness to merit-based advancement rather than age. This trust is important, but it also instilled a sense of urgency.

One of my mentors once advised: "Take your time to develop relationships and skills; it's a marathon, not a sprint." Careers don't happen overnight, it's a lesson I periodically remind myself of. While the drive to advance and achieve more is essential, it's equally crucial to take your time and enjoy the journey!

As a leader, my priority is to ensure that every individual, irrespective of gender, race or beliefs, can contribute to the best of their abilities. I lead by actions; they speak so much louder than words. I will always try to include everyone in the group, from the trainees to the partners. It's very much about trying to set a good example for them and making sure they are heard.

In Ireland, particularly at BDO, I am proud to say we have come a long way. Historically, Ireland lacked multiculturalism, but over the past decade, there has been a notable shift, allowing businesses to embrace greater diversity. At BDO, we now boast a workforce comprising 38 different nationalities, fostering a richly diverse environment.

In recent years, we have launched several DE&I related initiatives, including female mentoring, career conversations and firmwide training on unconscious bias. This community has evolved to address a range of DE&I topics, ensuring that everyone within our organisation recognises its significance and actively participates."

Challenges

"It hasn't always been smooth. During those early career-building years, I became a mother, having four children in succession. I never took long breaks though. I loved my job and the thrill of deal making. I was lucky to have a great support network and a very supportive husband, who enabled me to jump straight back into my corporate role I was – and still am – so passionate about. Juggling work with family was certainly my biggest challenge.

I do believe it's not so much what work has imposed on you, it's what you impose on yourself. We set ourselves expectations and believe we can do it all. There is no need to be super woman! Looking back, perhaps I should have allowed myself more time with my newborns. Returning to work sooner was a personal choice, not an obligation imposed by BDO.

Recognising that it's OK to ask for help, and leaning on your support system makes all the difference. We shouldn't hesitate to ask for help when needed."

What would your advice be to young women in BDO?

"Learn how to ask for help and seek guidance from peers or mentors. Embrace vulnerability and share your views, even if they differ from others. While it may be challenging, but it will ultimately make you stronger.

Discover your purpose early on. The sooner you identify what truly matters to you, the sooner you will find and love the career journey that suits you. Above all, have fun in everything you do."



Recognising that it's OK to ask for help, and leaning on your support system makes all the difference.





INTERVIEW WITH

Binita Pradhan

Market Managing Partner TPA Practice
BDO in the USA

BE YOU!

Who is Binita Pradhan?

"I was born and raised in Nepal. As a young girl, I was determined to become a doctor. Graduating from high school, I immediately embarked on my undergraduate studies in biology. However, it didn't take me long to realise that the medical field wasn't my calling. I can't stand the sight of blood and yet, there I was, dissecting. With that in mind, I completed my first undergrad whilst contemplating what I really wanted to become. Opting for something as far away from science as I could, I decided on accounting.

This decision led me to the United States, where I embarked on my next academic journey – a move that ultimately shaped my career. Today, with over 20 years of experience in public accounting, I lead BDO USA's West Geography Third-Party Attestation (TPA) practice. I am a member of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) System and Organization Controls (SOC) 2 Task Force, which authors SOC 2 guides, and the AICPA SOC for Supply Chain Task Force, which authors SOC for supply chain guides.

I also chaired the Technology Committee for the California Society of CPAs. I am a frequent speaker and have been quoted in and published many TPA-related articles. I have also been recognised as one of the most influential businesswomen in the Bay Area by San Francisco Business Times and as a high-impact leader by Ascend.

I am a daughter, a wife and a proud mother of two – a son and a daughter. Although I never expected it as a career-driven young woman, parenthood quickly became the cornerstone of my life.

My jar of life

"There is nothing more important than knowing yourself and understanding what really matters to you in life.

During my accounting studies in the US, engaging with software for class assignments sparked my early interest in computers and led me to pursue a dual major in accounting and computers. The combination between accounting and technology turned out to be a perfect fit for me. Specialising in TPA, I conduct audits that scrutinise people, processes and technology.

After my first professional career, I consciously selected BDO as my employer. You choose the company that aligns with your values and your 'jar of life'. I knew quickly that I had found my people. Eighteen years later, I am still proud to be part of the BDO family.



There is nothing more important than knowing yourself and understanding what really matters to you in life.

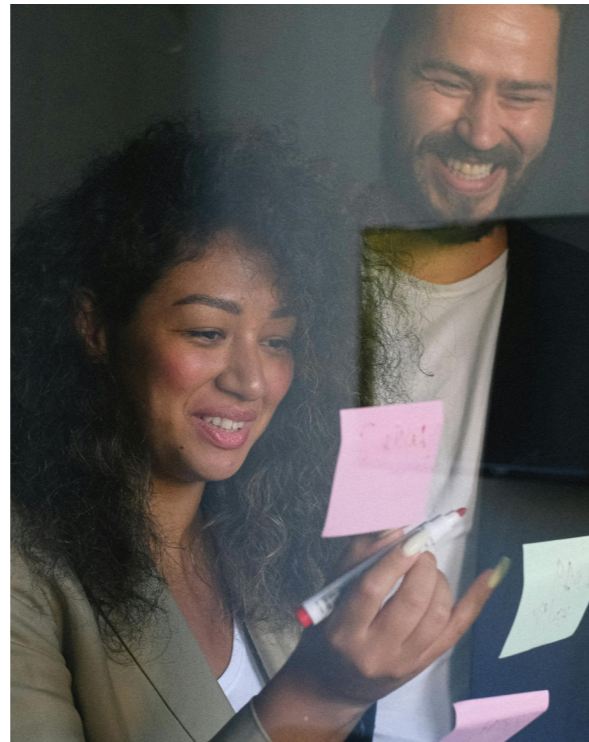
What constitutes your 'jar of life'? It encapsulates all that is significant to you. Fill your 'jar of life' with your top priorities – the big rocks – first. Next, fill in with lesser priorities – the smaller rocks – then the pebbles and the sand. If one fills one's jar with lesser priorities, the pebbles and sand first, the big rocks won't fit. Never lose track of what is important to you.

I am drawn to people and what drives them. In addition to my professional career, it was essential for me to be engaged in workplace culture. Over the years, I took up several Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) roles inside and outside our organisation. To name a few: since 2008, I have served in various leadership roles with [Ascend](#), the largest non-profit Pan-Asian organisation for business professionals in the US, including a period as Chapter President of Ascend Northern California for 2019-2020. Today, I serve as a chapter advisor. For a few years at BDO in the USA, I had the privilege of serving on the nominating committee for its board of directors. In 2020, I took up the role as co-leader for the Multicultural Alliance within BDO in the USA, which is focused on DE&I both internally and within its communities, and currently serve as its national leader.

We did not anticipate the tumultuous events of 2020. The onslaught of COVID and the tragic murder of George Floyd profoundly impacted our people and our communities. Our Multicultural Alliance at BDO provided a platform for candid dialogue, enabling us to empathise with the diverse experiences of our colleagues.

While this was a difficult time for many, I am grateful that I was in that role at that exact moment and was able to connect with our people in a different way, actively listening and really understanding what it means to be a Black or Asian professional in America; or what it means to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community; or what it means to be a single parent during a global pandemic.

Listening with the intent to understand. What does it really mean to be unheard? How does it really feel to be treated differently? What makes a person decide they cannot be their authentic self? These very personal stories, from people opening their souls and showing their vulnerability, were sometimes shocking and eye opening. I cannot emphasise enough how much respect I have for each person I had the privilege to speak with."



What does inclusion mean to you?

"Inclusion is not confined to the workplace; it permeates every facet of life, encompassing acceptance to welcome and embrace all - irrespective, of differences. Embedded within my own core values, DE&I drive my actions.

By nature, as a CPA, I am drawn to data and what kind of story data tells us. Looking at gender diversity, it is clear that corporate America still loses a lot of women at senior levels. The data is even more abysmal when you look at the rate of progress for people of colour. Research and data mining is something Ascend spends a lot of time on, and they tell a striking story.

The tragic demise of George Floyd¹ really turbocharged DE&I efforts. While commendable progress has been made, corporate America has yet to achieve true parity. Unconscious bias, inequality and exclusion still persist. We need to remain vigilant and open and willing to address these issues."

The challenges I faced

"I am a very optimistic person. Apart from illness, I believe that you can turn any hurdle into an opportunity.

Every setback presents an opportunity for growth. You can move oceans if you set your mind to it. Moving to the US as a young woman and building a new life in a new country was not always easy, but each hurdle made me stronger.

We are not defined by our failures but by our response to them. It's about what one learns from it. It helps if you have your priorities straight, and my top priority has always been family. Why do we do what we do? My family is what grounds me and helps me get through the challenges I face. They help me see and explore the forest rather than focusing on one single tree."



We are not defined by our failures but by our response to them.

What would your advice be to young women in BDO in the USA?

"I am where I am today because of the many people that helped me along the way. My mentors, sponsors, cheerleaders, my excellent team, and my amazing husband and kids who all support me every day. They are the ones who lift me up.

We all need – and have – allies. There are a lot of great people who will help you overcome the hurdles in life and lift you on their shoulders so you can climb that next mountain and succeed. Don't be afraid to ask for support and state what you need. Build your network and allyships.

Something I have learned from reading Steven Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*², is to have a win-win mindset. In any relationship, personal or business, do not just think about what you want to get out of it, but also consider what you can give back in return. Ultimately, it will create the most rewarding relationships.

Finally, dare to trust. Trust is key to any relationship – and authenticity of intent, of who you are and what you bring to the table, is essential to building trust."



INTERVIEW WITH

Michelle Bennett

Partner, Indirect Tax
BDO in AUSTRALIA

ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE VULNERABLE!

Who is Michelle Bennett?

"I am a human being - so I am inherently flawed. Why do I start there? Because many of us try very hard to appear perfect - or at least keep the extent of our struggles hidden. Where does this come from and why do we perpetuate it?"

By image managing, we don't always help others (or ourselves). We don't teach those who come after us that it is 'ok' if things don't always look natural and easy.

When I applied for this role about two and a half years ago, I thought I'd try to put a little bit of who I am in my CV. I described myself as a terrible singer, a competent baker, and a farmer in training (I would now add amateur woodworker). That is who I am outside of work. The reason I did that is because I'm a very private person by nature, but I also wanted to be open and start to share a bit more of who I am. And I am a REALLY terrible singer!

I am a lawyer by training and started my career in a law firm. Tax is something that happens to you - you don't grow up wanting to be a tax adviser! But, right at the start of my career, Australia introduced GST (Goods and Service Tax), so I got to be at the forefront of something and soon realised that tax was something I really enjoyed."



The impact I have on the people around me has become increasingly important to me

"I want those I work with to have a positive experience, to help my team and my clients. It has taken a while to appreciate this doesn't mean being perfect. Or flawless.

I don't always get it right, but I keep making progress. Fascinated about psychology, I read and listen to podcasts about human behaviour. Each day, I try to bring some of those learnings into what I do in my work-life and how I move in the world. But of course, it can't all be too intense - because I also believe laughter is one of the most important things in life.

I work with a wide range of people at BDO, but I have also been working with a human rights organisation, [Liberty Victoria](#), for the past five years. We have a very legalistic approach, looking at current or proposed laws and making submissions primarily focused on aspects such as how human rights and civil liberties may be compromised. I find many of the people I work with in that group are quite awe inspiring: at the coal face of the daily challenges of the criminal justice system or working with asylum seekers or other disadvantaged groups.

That work is a constant reminder of how fortunate I am, and if we are honest, most of us in corporate roles are very privileged. I believe our celebration of International Women's Day has to be seen against that broader global context, the extraordinary challenge many women (and men) in the world experience in their daily existence. However, even with that awareness, understanding the relative position of women in our organisation speaks to my sense of justice - my belief we should continue to strive to have a fair and equitable workplace and society. So while I always try to keep that healthy perspective of understanding privilege, it doesn't detract from the belief we should continue to be more inclusive and supportive, which we all benefit from."

Challenges

"Perhaps it's a certain degree of naivety that was my biggest hurdle early in my career - thinking there were no barriers at all for women. And in a way there weren't many roadblocks. The disadvantages were more subtle. I did come to realise that as women, most of us moved and spoke in a way that was comfortable for the men around us - very different to the way we spoke and behaved when we were among a group of female colleagues. I compare it to going overseas and trying to speak a foreign language. You cannot speak with the same comfort as you would do in your own mother tongue and it takes more energy. Realising that men and women do think, talk and act differently, it never really occurred to me until then that I would be adapting my behaviour to fit in.

I recently listened to an interesting podcast on 'pluralistic ignorance'. It's a social phenomenon, and one aspect is that people wrongly assume that others in the group share a particular view, leading to a false consensus, where everyone will conform to the perceived majority opinion, even if most people actually don't agree. They simply adhere to what they believe everyone else wants to hear. Societal expectations and gender norms may influence how people express themselves. Women will sometimes be particularly careful in voicing their opinions. Remember you are allowed to use your voice, to be heard.

What does inclusion mean to you?

"To me, inclusion means that everyone gets a chance to be their authentic self, to be the best version they can be, without anyone trying to fit someone else's view onto them or who they should be. It allows everyone to reorient that wasted effort of trying to conform and use that energy for something that matters to them."

It's probably only in the last few years that I have become very conscious of my privilege, increasingly aware that I have been fortunate in so many ways, including the opportunities to share my experiences and perspective on important questions like diversity.

Admitting you find things challenging, that you have flaws, and daring to show a vulnerable side of yourself is scary, especially at the start of your career journey. Yet, it is so important to learn ways to do it that work for you and those around you - for your own equilibrium and giving permission for others to do the same."

How I lead

"I accept leadership when I believe I can bring something of value. I never really liked to be labelled a leader until I learned the phrase 'servant leader'. The concept of a servant leader is typically someone who is focussed on the needs of their team rather than their own objectives, whose role is to help the team grow and perform for a common goal. A servant leader will share power and involve others in decisions.

I feel at my best when I can see my role as helping us all succeed as a team. I believe I am a better person because of it, more self-critical and reflective on the one hand, but also kinder (and more generous) to myself, because the pressure is not only on me. I don't need to have all the answers, we will come up with the best answers as a team.

As a testament to the above, I recently read a great study about 'collective intelligence'. Pose a question, and even if most people get it wrong as an individual, as a group, they will almost always come up with a better answer.

Having someone you can really trust to work things through is invaluable. My partner works in a similar environment so she can both support and constructively challenge how and why I am responding to situations and we both constantly learn from each other's different approach.

There are also challenges understanding your role as a leader. As partners, we don't always see the dynamic happening throughout the firm. You only really understand the geography or group that you spend significant time in, so you have to be aware of that and dig a bit deeper to really get a full picture.



That is one of the reasons I am so proud to be part of BDO Australia's culture council. We are a new initiative, established in 2022 and are responsible for leading and championing the evolution of our culture so all BDO team members can be their best, no matter who or where they are.

Looking at our stats, it would be easy to conclude we can still do better. Today, BDO in Australia has just under 25% female partners. We are an accounting firm, so we love to measure. I believe we should have a more diverse and representative partnership, but measuring gender diversity solely from an economic standpoint would be an incomplete approach. While economic metrics like gender representation in leadership roles or gender pay gap provide valuable insight, they don't capture the full spectrum of experiences and values within the workforce. Men and women may not always have the same ambitions in life - and any two individuals will differ. We do ourselves a huge disservice, when we create barriers to women's ambitions, and also if we push them to pursue their career in a way that is not fulfilling to them. On the contrary, we need to listen to each individual, and understand where they add the most value, and where they will be happiest in the organisation. Not every woman will want to become the next CEO. I know I don't. But that doesn't mean that all the great women who aspire to, shouldn't have every opportunity to make that choice and be rewarded in a way that is commensurate with the value they bring.

What would your advice be to young women in BDO?

Seeking a mentor is important. But just as important, try to start mentoring others at the first chance you get. Think hard before you give advice to others and whether you would be giving that advice to yourself. It will help you gain valuable insight.

Apart from finding the right mentors throughout your career journey, also find champions - people who believe in you and will cheer you on as you grow.

Finally, dare to bring your true self to work, be courageous and allow yourself to be vulnerable. It can become a real advantage and create a space for others to be themselves too."



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Resources

BBC 100 Women in 2023

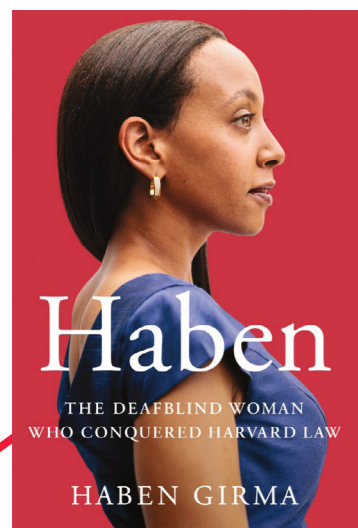
Who is on the list and more importantly why? How have these women made a difference?



[READ THE ARTICLE](#)

Haben – The deaf-blind woman who conquered Harvard law

An inspirational book, the incredible life story of Haben Girma, the first deafblind graduate of Harvard Law School, and her amazing journey from isolation to the world stage. Haben defines disability as an opportunity for innovation. Nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it.



[READ BOOK](#)

Interview with Simon Sinek – What diversity and inclusion is really about

We all have blind-spots. We can only see things from our own perspective. How can you bring D&I to live through perspective?



[WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

TED Talk with Caroline Farberger – Living as your true self

Caroline Farberger talks about her journey in finding her identity and living authentically to those findings. Do you really live true to yourself? Caroline Farberger has undergone a gender correction and is the first CEO in Sweden to publicly tell her story.



[WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

Why being vulnerable at work can be your biggest advantage, according to Brené Brown

Brené Brown is a research professor, bestselling author and TED Talks professional. In a presentation on vulnerability and courage, she was questioned by one of 150 hedge fund managers in the room, who stated that vulnerability isn't an option in their profession. But is it?

[READ THE BLOG](#)

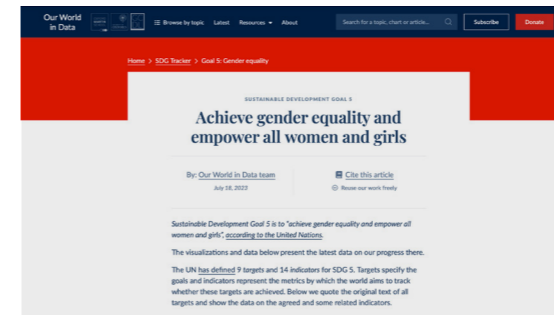
Harvard business review share several women at work podcasts

Conversations about where women are at and how they can move forward.

[LISTEN TO THE PODCAST](#)

Our world in data (Interactive tool)

Using a global data tool to track and measure the current status and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals on gender equality.



[VIEW THE TOOL](#)

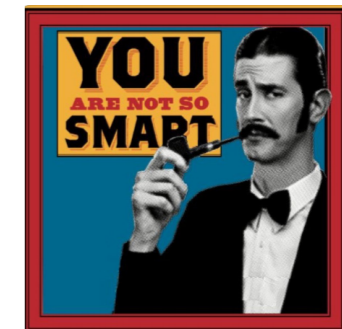
How language shapes the way we think, by Lera Boroditsky

There are about 7,000 languages spoken around the world. But do they shape the way we think? Cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky shares examples of language that suggest the answer is a resounding yes.

[WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

Pluralistic Ignorance – You are not so smart

Pluralistic ignorance refers to a situation where individuals privately reject a norm or belief but incorrectly assume that most others accept it, leading to a perpetuation of the norm or belief due to a false consensus. By recognising and addressing pluralistic ignorance, organisations can promote inclusion by amplifying marginalised voices, fostering empathy and understanding, and creating psychologically safe environments where all individuals feel valued and respected.



[LISTEN TO THE PODCAST](#)



Note from the editor

Five years ago, we embarked on an initiative to spotlight gender diversity in the workplace, in honour of International Women's Day. Since then, it has blossomed into an annual report filled with insightful content, covering a spectrum of DE&I-related topics.

Every year, I am privileged to engage in conversations with remarkable female colleagues from around the globe, spanning the globe. Their willingness to share their personal journeys never fails to inspire me. Each story is as unique as the individuals themselves.

This year's theme, #InspireInclusion, has once again provided a platform for profound insight.

The messaging is loud and clear. By acknowledging our differences and being open to listen, we effect meaningful change and cultivate an environment fit for growth and progress.

Ann Celis
Director, Network Marketing Operations

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