

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

More women in decision-making fashion positions means more women fashion customers

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Calling out the fashion industry for its lack of women in senior business positions. Image credit: CFDA

By [Pamela N. Danziger](#)

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The Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) recently released an industry briefing calling on the fashion industry to do more than talk-the-talk of diversity and inclusion, but to walk-the-walk as well.

The findings were scathing and on point.

"The fashion industry has so far struggled to reflect the country's diversity in its workforce across all levels," the CFDA reported in its [briefing entitled *Insider/Outsider*](#). "We are calling on our colleagues, peers and consumers to hold American fashion accountable to be inclusive and diverse."

The briefing was prepared in collaboration with PVH Corp., parent company of Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger, among others, and references [earlier research](#) conducted by *Glamour* magazine and McKinsey & Company.

The outsider status of women is particularly troubling in women's fashion.

Women make up half of the population, spend three times more on clothing than men and, at least, in the women's fashion segment, account for virtually 100 percent of customers.

Yet, only 40 percent of womenswear fashion brands are designed by women and only 14 percent of the 50 major fashion brands are run by women, according to a [Business of Fashion survey](#).

Fashion remains a male-dominated business

In the fashion world, women tend to be chosen for supporting rather than starring roles. They find opportunities in traditional female-friendly areas such as marketing, public relations, human resources, journalism and retail buyers.

But the real power in the business continues to be held by men.

"Men's social role has dominated the fashion culture," said [Melissa Wheeler](#), a London-based journalist and consultant in fashion retail marketing for nearly 20 years. "They capitalize on this creative industry and monetize it

ruthlessly, often at the expense of the creativity which gave birth to it in the first place and which appeals to the target audience."

Women represent only about 25 percent of board-level positions at publicly listed fashion companies.

For example, only two women hold seats on LVMH's executive committee, but one is in the traditionally female-skewing human resources area.

Of the eight places at Hermès' executive table, one is held by a woman, but in women-friendly communications. And of Kering's 12-person executive team, just one-third are women, but only one, Francesca Bellettini, manages a fashion brand, Saint Laurent.

"The industry must recognize and prioritize efforts to support greater diversity on the business side: the financier, the chief executives, the heads of fashion houses, the senior level magazine editors and business leaders," said Erica Lovett, manager for inclusion and community at Cond Nast, in the CFDA report.

"It's a systemic issue tied to the homogeneity of industry leadership," she said.

Women know best what women want

Change is coming slowly, with Dior only appointing its first female designer in 2016 and Givenchy in 2017. And by 2020 LVMH has pledged to equal gender representation in its executive positions.

Yet male designers continue to jump to the head of the line, such as the recent appointment of Hedi Slimane, a designer notorious for over-sexualizing women's fashion, to LVMH's Celine, a historically woman-led, female-positive fashion brand.

However, Mr. Slimane's first women's collection shown last fall was **widely met with derision**.

"A brand that was once thoroughly identified with a peerless instinct for what women want in fashion all of a sudden looked like a gust of toxic masculinity," wrote Tim Blanks in *Business of Fashion*.

Women are simply more attuned to what their female customers want.

"The closer you can get to your customers' life experience, the closer you will be to finding solutions," said **Bridget Brennan**, CEO of Female Factor, Forbes.com contributor and author of the upcoming book, "*Winning Her Business*."

"Why it is so powerful for companies that are serving women as customers to bring women into leadership and decision-making positions is they have a perspective that may be missing without them," she said.

By excluding women from the designer and executive ranks, fashion is also excluding women customers that do not measure up.

"For the most part, the fashion industry is not representing what its audience looks like," said **Katie Smith**, retail strategist and former retail analysis and insights director of Edited.

"That results in marginalizing women who fall outside of its archaic definitions around shape, race and age," she said.

Since nearly 70 percent of **American women wear** a size 14 or higher, that means the majority of women are thus marginalized.

Kirsten Philipkoski, a writer, editor and Forbes.com contributor in fashion, has a warning for brands that are out of touch with women.

"Those that don't cater to the diverse world of women will be left behind," she said. "Why would women waste their time and money with brands that don't represent them and that actually disrespect them?"

Women go it alone

As the great women fashion designers did before them Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli, Norma Kamali, Diane von Furstenberg, Tory Burch, Donna Karan, Vera Wang, and many others ambitious female designers have to take the entrepreneurial route, such as Sara Blakely, founder of Spanx, now number 21 on Forbes America's Self-Made Women list.

Following in her footsteps, many notable women fashion entrepreneurs have found traction in underwear, such as Heidi Zac's **ThirdLove**, Michelle Lam's True & Company and Miki Agrawal's Thinx.

Others are prospering serving the ignored plus-size woman, such as Kathryn Retzer with 11 Honor, Zelig For She by

founder Elann Zelig, and Premme founded by plus-sized fashion bloggers Nicolette Mason and Gabi Gregg.

Also catering to that market is Eloquii, which CEO Mariah Chase and designer Jodi Arnold revived after it was closed down by The Limited, only to have it acquired by Walmart last year. It joined Walmart's stable of online brands including Susan Gregg Koger's Modcloth that offers clothing for all sized women.

Women designers know best how women want to dress, and they also are more in tune with how women want to shop. So women entrepreneurs are leveraging their insights to bring women new styles of shopping as well.

For example, women entrepreneurs lead in fashion subscriptions (Gia & Co by Nadia Bourjarwah and Lydia Gilbert); online styling services (Katrina Lake and Stitch Fix); fashion rental services (Rent the Runway, founded by Jennifer Hyman and Jennifer Fleiss, and for high-end fashion rental Tulerie by Merri Smith and Violet Gross).

Then there is the combo subscription-rental model for plus-sized women from Christine Hunsicker's Gwynnie Bee and second-hand, gently-used fashion from Julie Wainwright's TheRealReal for luxury brands, and PoshMark, cofounded by Tracy Sun, for the rest.

But these female fashion entrepreneurs are operating largely on the outside. They have not gotten inside yet to bring their unique understanding of what women want into the major fashion brands and retailers where it can be realized and monetized.

As the CFDA briefing warns: "The important perspectives brought by outsiders, which are often central to creativity and innovation, can be lost."

Let women in

The brightest hope for the fashion industry, in general, and women's fashion, in particular, will be found by letting women outsiders in. It can pay off big time for fashion brands that hear the message.

The *Glamour*/McKinsey study reports that across industries, gender-diverse companies are 22 percent more likely to outperform their peers.

"Female consumers are looking for brands they trust and can connect with, and those that continue to ignore them and worse, offend them will, bottom line, sell fewer clothes," Ms. Philipkoski said.

"There are so many exciting small fashion brands that are making it their mission to be inclusive," she said.

WOMEN HAVE INSIGHTS into what other women want that men can never fully comprehend.

"Fashion can't be bottled into a formula and driven as solely a money-making venture," Ms. Wheeler said.

"Ironically, fashion succeeds and the magic of it is its fluidity," she said. "It is, ultimately, creative, expressive, empathetic and mercurial. Women understand women better."

Ms. Smith concludes similarly.

"While the shift at the grassroots is encouraging, the industry desperately needs more female voices heard at senior and executive positions globally to reflect the women who support the industry, both as customers and the workforce," she said.



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