
Women in International Business

By Lothar Katz

Someone recently observed that while Saudi Arabia has a reputation for having a difficult business climate for female visitors, U.S. Secretary of State Dr. Condoleezza Rice seemed to be doing just fine when visiting the country.

OK, granted. Nevertheless, let's assume that the authority of Dr. Rice's position makes dealing with men in such a country a *little* bit easier than what most other visiting women would need to come prepared for. In fact, conducting business is a lot harder for women in many countries than it is for men. Two factors tend to get in the way of building and nurturing the strong business relationships that are a critical requirement for success in many countries and cultures:

- **Lack of concepts for business relationship building across genders.** Clear frameworks exist in all societies to determine how relationship building is conducted among men in business. However, such concepts often do not apply to males and females working together, complicating business interactions across genders. Men often behave differently when dealing with women, which tends to make the relationship building process harder and less effective.
- **Traditional expectations of female roles.** Men in several cultures may still hold on to traditional views of the roles women should fill and how women should behave around men. Lacking a framework for dealing with females who hold substantial responsibility and make important decisions, they could behave awkwardly when dealing with women in positions of authority. Chances are that some of them might avoid interactions altogether. Even when they seem a bit more forthcoming, men in many countries may still openly or secretly disapprove of women filling what they view as 'male' roles. Accordingly, businesswomen often remain relative outsiders in these cultures. It can be difficult for them to win the trust and respect of their male counterparts. Paradoxically, relationship building can be particularly challenging for women in many of the cultures whose members value relationships most strongly.

An analysis of these and other factors affecting women in international business shows five different categories of countries. The following summarizes behaviors and practices that female visitors to the respective countries may find useful:

A. Countries where conducting business is often extremely difficult and may even be impossible for women: **Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan**

- Use a male spokesperson and act "behind the scenes."

B. Countries where conducting business is often very difficult for women, since local males may have no concept for relationship building with them: **other Arab countries, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan**

- Travel with male colleagues. Emphasize the importance of your company and your role in it.

- Display confidence and some degree of assertiveness, but be very careful not to appear overly bold or aggressive. Never attempt to be bossy or to “bully” people, even when you outrank them.
- You may be able to catch local males “with their guard down”, obtaining important information or gaining valuable concessions. Try asking very direct questions or making unusual requests. However, back paddle and apologize immediately if you sense that your counterpart may have been offended.
- Excuse yourself from business entertainment and dinners unless you are confident that you will be welcome. When attending, make up an excuse in order to leave at the end of the meal, usually after coffee or tea has been served and/or when the men in the group are starting to consume strong liquors.
- Avoid being alone with a male counterpart.

C. Countries where conducting business is often difficult for women, since local males may strongly prefer to build relationships with males only: **Mexico, Latin America, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Russia, Ukraine, other former Soviet republics, Philippines, China, South Korea, Taiwan, North Africa, Central Africa** (with exceptions)

- Emphasize the importance of your company and your role in it. A letter of introduction from a senior executive may sometimes help.
- Display confidence and some degree of assertiveness, but be careful not to appear overly bold or aggressive. Never attempt to be bossy or to “bully” people, even when you outrank them.
- Join your male counterparts for business meals and celebrations unless you are obviously not invited. However, make up an excuse in order to leave at the end of the meal, usually after coffee or tea has been served and/or when the men in the group are starting to consume strong liquors.
- In some countries, for instance in Russia, be prepared to hear remarks with strong sexual connotations that you may consider highly offensive. Such comments are best ignored. Try to show firmness rather than shock.
- Avoid being alone with a male counterpart.

D. Countries where conducting business can be somewhat difficult for women, because traditional expectations of female roles may still show significant influences: **Argentina, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, India, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Caribbean, Nigeria, South Africa**

- Emphasize the importance of your company and your role in it.
- Display confidence and some degree of assertiveness, but be careful not to appear overly bold or aggressive. Never attempt to be bossy or to “bully” people, even when you outrank them.
- Join your male counterparts for social events unless these involve heavy drinking or you are obviously not invited.
- Graciously accept any chivalric gestures you may receive, while exercising caution and acting professionally in business and social situations.
- Try to ignore humorous remarks and other comments that might be considered inappropriate in your own culture.

E. Countries where conducting business usually does not present any special problems for women: **United States, Canada, Northern Europe, Western Europe, Central Europe, Israel, Australia, New Zealand**

- Remain aware that showing too much assertiveness or competitiveness could turn both males and females against you.

Conclusions

The bottom line: as a woman, unless you happen to be the Secretary of State of a powerful nation, you may want to come prepared to deal with culture-specific expectations and practices in business situations. You might also need to realize that building close business relationships abroad might be much harder for you than for male colleagues. This does not necessarily mean that you will be precluded from doing business in most countries. However, the ways in which you can build relationships and prove yourself as a likeable and trustworthy partner will often need to differ from how males do it.

Lothar Katz is the founder of Leadership Crossroads. He has a wealth of experience in achieving productive cooperation across cultures and driving business success on a global scale.

A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, he regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. These included many parts of Asia, e.g., China, India, and Japan. Originally from Germany, he has lived and worked both in the United States and in Europe.