

Spotlight on...

Ellen Li

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Head of Investor Development, Asia, Actis



Having built a career in the public markets, Ellen Li switched to private equity investor development in 2018 – an opportunity she jumped at when Actis approached her. Here, we talk to Ellen about what it will take to achieve a better gender balance in senior positions and the value of mentors in developing young talent.

What does your role entail?

“As Head of Investor Development for Asia, a large part of what I do revolves around the fundraising process and preparation. I help promote our funds to investors across Asia, handle the queries of our existing investors and help develop products that will serve investors’ needs. I help ensure that Actis has a strong position in the market, based on where the business is now as well as helping it to move forward. I’m also involved in team building.”

How did your career develop before this position?

“The move to Actis was in many ways a significant change for me because previously I’d been working in public markets, albeit in a similar role. I began my career in London working for a stockbroking firm in electronic trading and execution for investment banks and fund managers. I then moved to Singapore where I worked at the Monetary Authority of Singapore. It was a big shift in my career to become a regulator. I had the opportunity to meet a lot of CEOs, dealing with foreign companies which were establishing their operations in Singapore. In another shift in my career, one of the CEOs approached and offered me a role in Institutional Sales at an Asset

Management firm which I was passionate about. It was a rewarding experience where I raised over \$10 billion in 10 years. Joining Actis was another change in my career path from public market investment to private markets. The opportunity is enormous. I am working with the best team of investment professionals in the fastest growth industry where we can and we are making an impact.

What challenges do you think women face in organisations, especially when it comes to reaching senior positions?

“In many organisations, the further you go up, the fewer females there are. I think this is a systemic issue. Men often have the required skill sets because of the opportunities they have had in the past. This goes way back to the expectations around gender from birth onwards. There are traditions, cultures and expectations that women will take on family responsibilities and it’s very hard to be contrarian. That leads to a situation where men are just better equipped to take on certain roles because that is what has been expected of them and they have been prepared for them.

“There are strong women and they have fought to gain respect, but there is no doubt that, from a psychological perspective, you feel less powerful if you are in the minority when you join a group.

“The system clearly needs to change for everyone’s sake. Men benefit from being present to raise a family and women benefit from being able to continue their careers. However, I don’t think quotas are the answer. Until we reach enough of a tipping point where cultures and expectations are different, we as individuals have to do the heavy lifting.”

How can individuals bring about more systemic change?

“We have to make sure we do things right and we do them well. We should keep on reflecting on our performance and ourselves so we keep improving and proving ourselves. We need to share our beliefs and discuss these issues – if you get people to agree with you, that’s one job ticked off the list.

“I also don’t think it’s helpful to complain about the world as it is. Where there are challenges, there are also opportunities and we can learn from this. When I have faced difficulties or comments from male colleagues, I’ve learned not to take this personally because, actually, it’s not about me. I strongly believe that if we each do our part, change will come because it’s far easier to be responsible for your own behaviour than it is to coach others.”

How important do you think mentoring is in building diversity in organisations?

“It’s really important and it’s something I try and do all the time, especially when I see younger people who aspire to working their way up the career ladder. I have made mistakes and I like to share my experience in the hope that it is helpful to others. Mentoring really helps set people on the right path and, while I didn’t have a mentor, I can see from the other side how valuable they can be in encouraging people to achieve their potential. Every person is a precious resource for the world – we shouldn’t waste that.”

Do you have a role model?

“I don’t, but I take pieces from everyone. If I see someone’s mistakes, I’ll try and avoid them, if I see someone being successful, I’ll try and emulate them and if I see someone struggling, I’ll try and help them. I have a wide network of friends and family and we share ideas and issues and agree and disagree with each other. I find this results in a really satisfying exchange of ideas and experience.

What do you wish you’d known earlier in your career?

“In the past I focused only on work that I was interested in. Over time I have learned that the way to ultimately succeed in career and in life is to consciously put yourself out of your comfort zone and stretch your ability beyond what you expect of yourself, not to worry about failure, nor being overly cautious about being judged, setting higher targets, identifying challenges and seeking help along the way. This is a satisfying experience and a rewarding journey.”