A struggle

seriously

to be taken

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In a bid to boost equality in the workplace, listed companies will be required to reveal the number of women and men they employ. However, experts say female executives still feel under pressure to act, dress and speak like men to succeed, writes

Niki Chesworth

ENDER is continuing to dominate the work agenda. Last week, Equalities Minister Jo Swinson announced that listed companies will be required to unveil the number of women and men they employ. This once again raised the issue of the lack of female executives in senior roles.

However, while there have been some high-profile appointments to the boards of major companies, women are still struggling to be taken seriously. Just one of the executive appointments to top boards since March has been female, with Karen Witts joining Kingfisher as group finance director this month.

Progress is painfully slow and six months into a two-year programme by Cass Business School and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations to get seven of the voluntary sector's leading female chief executives onto private company boards, not one has been offered a role, with one male business leader describing working in the voluntary sector as "just a little bit of charity work".

In science, technology, mathematics and engineering, the lack of recognition of women's work has led to a mass "edit-a-thon" of the Wikipedia profiles of historical figures who have been ignored because of their gender.

"With women being overlooked in the vast majority of organisations in the UK – some of them household names – there needs to be a total culture change," says Denise Keating, CEO of leading diversity campaigner, Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion.

While Helena Morrissey CBE, the CEO of Newton Investment Management and founder of the 30% Club, which is campaigning for 30 per cent of the

board members of major companies to be women, says: "There is clearly strong momentum and progress towards better gender-balanced FTSE-100 boardrooms, with the latest statistics showing 48 per cent of new non-executive director (NED) appointments since March 1 being women – 30 out of 62 – but the lack of female executive director appointments shows

'With women overlooked in the vast majority of UK organisations, there needs to be a total culture change'

there's a lot still to be done to build a sustainable pipeline." So why are women still struggling to be taken seriously?

Executive coach, author and leadership psychologist Averil Leimon of the White Water Group, says: "I have women clients who are told to act like a man, dress like a man and talk like a man – in a dark

suit with a deep voice. If they do not conform, they run the risk of not being taken seriously.

"As there are so few women at the top it is sometimes easier to go along with the view that you need to be like a man to succeed because if you do not, you can be considered a militant.

"Some women can be thought to be making a statement simply because they turn up to work wearing a dress instead of a suit, which is deeply trivial. And in boardrooms and meetings, the men will often wait for the woman to pour the tea.

"To bring about change, women need to be themselves rather than trying to

be smaller versions of men. Yet women are often so grateful to have the job they do not want to rock the boat."

Part of being taken seriously is to sound authoritative.

"We work with a lot of women – and men – to help them establish a presence in the workplace and what

> Momentum: Helena Morrissey CBE, CEO of Newton Investment Management

we find is that women can get shriller and therefore sound less authoritative if they are anxious," continues Leimon.

"So rather than saying they need to talk like a man, we encourage them to change their breathing, to get their shoulders down and to feel more confident and express this in a non-verbal way by taking up space. However, even

'We are starting to see a lot of poaching of women by companies that want to lead the way in diversity'

in 2012 women are still afraid of being judged and while men might be called strong or assertive when they make themselves heard, the same behaviour in women is sometimes seen as aggressive."

Rosalind Adler of Media Skills For Women, which trains women to appear on television programmes such as Question Time as well as to speak in boardrooms or even at their local council meetings, agrees.

"Women think the only way to be a good speaker is to speak like a man,"

she says. "However, authority does not come from how deep your voice is. Women have voices which are fashioned to be accommodating and unthreatening, so the aim is to have a voice full of power, breadth and variety.

"Finding your own voice is important as it sounds more natural, whereas dropping it to a note or two below does not always sound truthful. Your voice is part of who you are and if you are constantly editing how you speak, you stop focusing on what you are saying and instead focus on how you are saying it.

"Surely it's a woman's right not to choose between kitten heels and brilliant oratory, between sensitivity and success, between being funny or sexy, pretty or clever, authoritative or entertaining."

Leimon has a warning for employers who fail to take women seriously.

"We are starting to see a lot of poaching of women by companies that want to lead the way in diversity," she says. "Often we are finding that women are offered extra training, more pay or are going up two grades in these new roles. Yet these same women were struggling to be taken seriously within their previous organisation. So employers that do not recognise their talented women will start to be left behind."

Forget the job — it's the pension that's worrying most employees

OVER half of British employees are worried about their financial future and six in 10 say retirement security has become a higher priority over the last three years, according to the Global Workforce Study of 32,000 employees worldwide by Towers Watson.

Nearly half of employees in the UK now anticipate that they will retire

later than they previously thought, while levels of pessimism are higher here than in the US, France and Germany, says the report.

Over a quarter (26 per cent) of workers said that their employer's retirement benefits do not meet their needs and a fifth (20 per cent) said employers do not do a good job of explaining their benefits programmes – which is worrying as the Government's auto-enrolment into pensions initiative began this month to encourage more people to save for their retirement.

"In our experience, we have never seen such an awareness and concern for retirement provisions from the workforce," says Tess Wishart, pensions and retirement communications lead at Towers Watson.

"People are clearly worried and it is very important for businesses that their employees grasp the value of the total reward package.

"Auto-enrolment means more companies will be investing in retirement provisions for their employees but many companies are going above and beyond the Government requirements for employer contributions.

"However, if they are not communicating this properly, then employees are unlikely to be aware of, or understand, the extra value they are receiving and why they are contributing from their own salaries."