

Men and Women on Boards –Yes but how!!

The challenge of gender balance on corporate boards in EU member states was addressed at a Public Dialogue organised by the National Council of Women in collaboration with the European Parliamentary Information Office, Europa House, Valletta on Friday 13 September 2013.

The event brought together a wide range of stakeholders that packed the hall including representatives of business, current and prospective MEPs, PN members of Parliament as well as young female entrepreneurs and representatives of women's NGOs

Dr Peter Agius welcomed the participants with a brief overview of the debate on the proposed directive for a 40% target of non-executive directors on the largest stock exchange listed companies and the steps taken so far to address the gender imbalance which since 2010 has gathered more momentum as a result of two key Commission initiatives: the voluntary signing of a **Women on Board Pledge** in 2011 which was welcomed by the EU Parliament, the Council of Ministers and social partners who committed themselves to take action.

Regrettably little if anything was done by member states as revealed by the Eurobarometer where a mere 5% increase was registered between 2003 and 2012 that is in just over 8 years! This therefore resulted in the second Commission initiative : a legislative proposal.

The first session, which was animated by journalist Kim Dalli from the Times of Malta introduced Malta Business Bureau researcher, Dr Mariella Scicluna who presented the findings of a study carried out on local businesses in order to gauge their perceptions on family-friendly measures at the workplace, and their impact on the company. The results (see MBB website for details) revealed strong positive positions in favour of more women on corporate boards, with however a possible negative impact including costs and lack of flexibility structures for both mothers and fathers. The research study also contained a number of examples of good practice that can be adopted at local level

NCW President, May Gaerty made a very interesting presentation in which she traced the cultural developments and changes over the past 30-40 years in Malta. She commented on school books and books for children way back and other means of 'entertainment' for young people that were heavily male dominated presenting young girls as submissive to and dependent on a dominant male. As manager and director of a business company herself, she gave detailed accounts of female entrepreneurs and their success stories in SMEs

This was followed by reactions to challenging questions put by the animator to the first group of panelists. Ms Antoinette Caruana currently HR Manager at Simonds Fasons Cisk made a number of reflections on aspects of what she termed '**The Culture of Motherhood**' which tended to exclude the role of fathers. In spite of this, over the last 15 years, Malta has seen an increase to 43% of women in the workforce, which however is still a long way from the 75% target for 2020! Leadership positions are often being over glamourised; they are positions of hard work and dedication and women **and men**, who have to make life choices and prioritise before taking any decisions. Successful role models are important to give a realistic view of what the post entails. As far as quotas are concerned, one must be careful that we do not go for numbers ignoring leadership skills, managerial and organisational skills among others, which are necessary for women **and men** who are to be appointed/elected to these posts

Malta Business Bureau, Mr J. Tanti strongly emphasised the importance of education at all levels starting from the very young, to bring about a change towards more gender-balanced

attitudes and respect for equality. There is a need for a shift in professional career guidance offering career choices that address the labour market needs, the need for flexibility to address family needs – to allow space for better work/life balance for both mothers and fathers who are committed to care for children and the elderly. Government should make better use of the European Structural Funds to address these issues

Malta Institute of Management (MIM) President, Mr Reuben Buttigieg, stated that anti-discrimination was the basic principle of the Institute. Like previous speakers he pointed out the importance of education – cultural change takes long! He also spoke about the many benefits of flexibility measures which a company can provide versus costs. Women need to be more visible, to network more, to make more use of the social media and to lobby more. Today the Financial Services Sector is witnessing an increasingly high rate of female participation. Addressing the skills mismatch in particular in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) he said these should be opened up to encourage the participation of young women in their career choices as future jobs depend heavily on qualifications in these subjects

Dr Carmen Sammut, Head Fondazzjoni Idejat stated that change of culture is not enough. We are dealing with a long process where political and economic structures need to change. As commissioner Vivian Reding stated '*change needs to come from the top*'. The proposed directive is in fact a watered down version of the Commission's first draft.

The second session took off with a strong and vibrant delivery by key speaker Madi Sharma, a representative of the Employers Group in the European Economic and Social Committee, (EESC). She called for more men to be present in these debates as they have a key role to play, as we are not dealing simply with gender issues but with economic, social and political issues that affect all citizens; we should be talking about equity, values and democracy – the core elements of the European Union. The '*no blame*' culture which is becoming more prevalent in society is no excuse. It is everybody's responsibility and we all have a role to play. Ms Sharma went through the different phases proposed by the directive. As far as recruiting is concerned, what makes a suitable leader is not just academic qualifications, but creativity, management and organisational skills and the ability to forge ahead - qualities that are essential for economic leadership. The directive makes provision for transparent, democratic, comparative criteria for the selection and recruiting process to be established, irrespective of gender and that therefore apply equally to both women and men. Only by setting up an independent recruiting committee can we guarantee that this is achieved

The first speaker on the second panel was Dr David Curmi, President of the Malta Chamber of Commerce who referred to his vast experience in the business sector. While emphasising the importance of education he spoke about educating the general public and access to lifelong learning. He stated that the potential of women that make up over 50% of the population cannot be ignored if we really want economic growth. Supportive of women in decision-making, he stated that the issue cannot be treated in a one-size-fits-all manner. Each business sector has its own specificities that need to be addressed individually and therefore in a more focused manner to reach consensus among all stakeholders and avoid negative consequences

The next speaker, Dr Charlotte Grech gave her views on questions and comments from the floor. She stated that representing MEA, she was against the proposed directive, saying that it was not a matter of gender

Responding to the question of the strength of shareholders' voting rights, in the election of an independent non-executive director, Grace Attard, EESC, NCW said that the directive does not interfere with how shareholders vote. However, the process of recruiting by an independent recruiting committee, and the subsequent list of the most suitable, will guide voters in their voting preferences, ensuring the election of those who are the most suitable for the post irrespective of whether they are women or men

Focusing on the business community, Grace Attard asked how many companies in Malta had put in practice voluntary measures as proposed by the *Women on Boards Pledge 2010*. She also asked why there is so much resistance to the directive when the directive itself makes two types of proposals: legislative and voluntary. The directive in fact, states that if voluntary initiatives are in place and are effective in reaching a 30% target, before the coming into force of the directive, member states need not be bound to take legislative measures. It is important to get the facts right about what the directive is proposing and to access the vast range of examples of good practice other countries are putting in place, the latest during the month of July. Self-regulation, Charters, training, mentoring, networking programmes can all be effective measures. There is a choice that can be taken, but doing nothing is not a choice. We should not wait for what member states will decide, we should not tow the line! We should go ahead and take action

Bringing the panel discussion to an end, MEP Marlene Mizzi gave her views on comments made by previous speaker. She also spoke about instances in her experience as MEP stating that the process of taking decisions has many phases, not least when it comes to voting for amendments; it is not simply a 'yes' or a 'no' as each step requires thought and judgment when taking decisions

Comments and questions from the floor and sharing of personal experience added to the lively debate from different perspectives. Participants were actively engaged in the discussion. It was clear that there was an overall consensus that all stakeholders should strive to reach agreement on the best way forward not least in the interest of women and the economic development of Malta

Grace Attard, EESC, NCW