

***‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 22 Sept 2015
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Under-representation of women on business boards in NI

Yesterday, the Women’s Inspiration Network WINET was discussing the significant under-representation of women on business boards in Northern Ireland. It is amazing that despite almost 40 years of Equal Opportunities legislation, women continue to be in a minority not just in business boards, but also in the governance of public bodies.

For example, only five of our top 100 businesses are led by women (in Great Britain it is 20%); with almost two-thirds (63%) of the managers, directors and senior staff posts in Northern Ireland firms held by men.

The public sector is no better as, despite having almost twice as many women as men employed, 7 out of 10 executive positions are still held by men, while at board level, although 37% of members are female, only 21% of chairpersons are female.

Demonstrably this is not representative of Northern Ireland society and this should be seen as a challenge to all of us. This answer is not to be found just by tampering with systems or changing structures, although change is probably needed. It is primarily a hearts and minds issue. People either believe in diversity and equality of opportunity for women or they don’t. Law defines our behaviours, including how we interact with one another in certain contexts. It can, and sometimes does change personal attitudes, but that takes a longer time. Addressing gender imbalance is not just something for women to pursue - it is not something to be solved by women simply “leaning in” more. Men need to challenge their own underlying assumptions and everyone engaged in making appointments, of whatever sex, should persistently question whether the arrangements and criteria set for posts provide a genuinely open opportunity for the widest range of applicants to be fairly considered.

The principles are the same, whether we’re talking about sex, disability, ethnicity or any other equality characteristic. No-one has ever claimed that creating a diverse workforce was easy, but surely at leadership and board level we should be encouraging the widest possible variety of people to apply for positions as well as ensuring that a genuinely open unprejudiced consideration is given to all. That means having a conscious focus on the issue of diversity and rigorously examining whether long established systems and processes are still based on stereotypical assumptions about people’s capacity and suitability for leadership.

Under-representation needs to be confronted pro-actively, with encouragement given to all under-represented groups. Longstanding barriers such as a proper work-life balance

at all levels and adequate child-care arrangements need to be addressed. A determined challenge needs to be made to counter persistent attitudes, particularly around pregnancy and maternity leave, which still work to limit the advancement of women to many positions at management and board level.

There is a growing base of evidence which shows that having a better balance of women at executive levels impacts positively on a company's culture and decision making abilities. Getting equality right, in gender as in other equality areas, should be a key target for every successful business or public body.