

Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, speaking at the International Business Women's conference organised by Women in Business NI – May 14, 2014

Panel discussion: “The Inclusive Solution”

Last year I spoke at the Commission's Getting a Fair Share? conference on how to maximise economic independence for women. One of the emerging themes was that, in fact, without gender parity in the workplace, it is the economy which is not “getting a fair share”.

I welcome the opportunity today to continue the gender diversity debate and to discuss the opportunities and results which an inclusive solution can bring.

In her best-selling book Sheryl Sandberg invites women to be more confident, to “lean in” and do what they would do if they weren't afraid. She encourages women to address the self-doubt which holds many back and promote a “virtuous circle” where women believe they can juggle work and family, step forward and succeed professionally.

I don't believe it is women's assertiveness or confidence that should be the centre of our debate. It's not a lack of confidence that inhibits career advancement for many women. It's not women “leaning back” but an issue of reaching a tipping point, often when they have children, where managing a reasonable work-family balance is no longer sustainable.

This tends to occur in the middle phase of women's working lives – a time when they should be moving to senior management roles, but instead they may experience a downward shift or sideways move in their career path.

So what is the key to achieving greater gender diversity in the workplace? Perhaps it's not so much about women “leaning in” but business also “leaning in” and exploring the ways they operate, value and manage staff and looking at what they can do differently.

Changing workplace culture is at the heart of the gender diversity debate and for this to happen it is imperative that more men become engaged in the conversation. Sheryl Sandberg stirred up the discussion when she invited more men to talk about gender, arguing that's what it will take to make change at the top.

Judging by the results of a global survey by McKinsey and company, getting the buy-in and support of men is essential. The survey found that male executives are less likely to see value in diversity initiatives, are less aware of the challenges women face and are less likely to support measures that they see as favouring women.

The challenge for us is to change this mindset and to recognise that opening the door to women is ultimately good for men and good for business.

We must also change the cultural expectation that it is women who will sacrifice or interrupt their career for family reasons. In some businesses, it is considered to be career suicide for men if they take advantage of family friendly policies such as paternity leave. The low uptake by men of family friendly rights serves to reinforce women's caring role over career. If the situation is to change, both government and employers need to do more to facilitate men in sharing family and caring responsibilities.

We welcome the Women in Business 30:30 vision initiative which is aiming to get 30 of our top 100 businesses to commit to a gender diversity agenda. It is quite shocking that at present we only have 5% of women leaders in our top 100 companies.

As the majority of businesses in Northern Ireland are led by men, we need to see men proactively championing gender diversity to bring about change.

Women have shown they have the skills and abilities to contribute to the economy. They will push at an open door but those in positions of power must be willing to open the door.

We must convince men that addressing gender imbalance is not just a cause for women to pursue – it's a cause we all must embrace in the interests of economic success for Northern Ireland and for all.