

**‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 19 June 2018 by Dr Evelyn Collins CBE, Chief Executive, Equality Commission NI**

**Breaking the glass ceiling – the need for more women in the boardroom**

“We have one woman already on the board, so we are done”.

“Most women don’t want the hassle or pressure of sitting on a board”.

“I don’t think women fit comfortably into the board environment”.

Remarkably, these were three of the reasons offered by the Chairs and CEOs of some major UK companies in 2018, when a Government review challenged them on the need to increase the number of women on their Boards.

In 2015, the percentage of women directors on boards in Great Britain was 26% and a Government backed review has set a target of one third, to be reached by 2020. In Northern Ireland, a 2015 study of the top 100 companies found that just 15% of directors were women, though women currently make up 47% of the workforce.

There are plenty of institutional and cultural issues which militate against the appointment of more women to boards. Informal, word of mouth, recruitment for example, or a system of hierarchical advancement, which reinforces any historical gender imbalance in an industry. It is still the case that underlying attitudes, even if unexpressed, are a major factor. That can include, in some cases, a reluctance by women themselves, deterred by an image of the Board as predominantly male and unwelcoming to women. More frequently, it stems from the attitudes of the people – mostly men – who decide upon and appoint board members.

Too often, assumptions are made based on stereotypes - that women do not aspire to directorships; that they lack the necessary skills to sit on boards. Without a conscious focus on broadening and diversifying a board, appointees tend to look very much like those making the appointments. These are the attitudes which can result in Board photographs - which no-one on the Board sees any problem with – of a solid phalanx of men of a certain age in grey suits.

Of course, changing attitudes is never easy at any level and that is certainly true of the very highest levels of business. I think the most telling of the responses quoted above is the third - “I don’t think women fit comfortably into the board environment”.

Telling because it is true. Telling because the problem of “not fitting in” is not primarily with the woman, but with the culture and systems of the boards themselves. And telling because it exposes the expectation that, if people want to be on “our

board”, they will have to conform and fit in with the traditional concept of what a board looks like. There is often a reluctance to accept that the culture of an institution, and even the practical arrangements for meetings, can militate against participation by people from differing backgrounds, experiences and beliefs.

The fact is that Boards can make better decisions when, as well as having the specific knowledge that a business requires, they can draw on a wide range of voices, on people with differing life experiences. That mix of voices must include women.