

1ST ASEM CONFERENCE ON WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Creating Equal Opportunities in the World of Work

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Mykolas Romeris University in Vilnius, Lithuania

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Let me introduce myself. I come from Flanders, Belgium. Small country with a complicated structure. And at the same time it ranks number 4 regarding world's most globalized economies! Flanders is the northern region of Belgium, accounting for 60% of the population of Belgium, 70% of GDP, 83% of the total of Belgian exports, and attracting 63% of all foreign direct investments into Belgium. It is the economic motor of Belgium and a real melting pot of cultures, languages, nationalities and religions.

As since 1992 the Belgian constitution granted export promotion and attracting foreign investors exclusively to the regions of Belgium, my agency is in charge of the economic diplomacy for Flanders, and is present worldwide, with 105 offices all over the world, including one in Vilnius.

My job consist of working with CEO s in Belgium and abroad on the international development of their companies. I work *with* entrepreneurs and *for* entrepreneurs. And every day again I can witness the gender imbalance regarding the presence of women in decision making positions both in management positions and as board members, in Belgian and in foreign companies. As I travel around the world for 40% of the time, I get to see how cultures and countries are different when it comes to gender equality.

Let me share my experience and try to advocate simple solutions to reach our common goals.

So out of my limited knowledge of the scientific research but also out of my day to day personal experiences in what is still considered as a men's world and by the numbers still *is* a men's world, let me try to advocate small steps to make progress today. Some practical solutions to move one little stone in the river...

1. teach and foster entrepreneurial spirit starting in kindergardens. Together with teaching gender equality and breaking the habits or rules established by religion, society or tradition, it will encourage young girls to consider it as normal to be a woman, mother and entrepreneur, and will encourage boys to accept it. Teach them that failure is accepted, they will decide which risks they want to take.

2. if you teach young children, boys and girls alike, that career is normal and that combining it with a family is not at all something to feel guilty about, it will make progress faster and stop any threat coming from misogynistic traditional groups or politics.

3. react when you and with you all women are attacked! After the comments about the ability of women to become board members in larger companies, three women created "straffe madammen" in Belgium, which could be translated on Twitter as "tough cookies". The challenge was to find at least 100 women in 48 hours that were experienced in management and in economics. We were 250 by that time, and now have developed it as an informal network of more than 2.000 women in all fields of interest, promoting them as board members, as experts on national television and radio, training them on communication and assertiveness.

4. Share your experience, as you have broken through the glass ceiling! In Belgium, after the survey I was talking about when I started my speech, we created a group called "inspiring women's leadership", with all women CEO, to discuss how to improve the situation of women's leadership and to attract young people, young women, into business. All of us are coaching young women to choose their path and to encourage them to pursue their goals. I am a strong believer of that kind of informal peer learning.

5. The quota on board members are a fact. The consequence is that a selected number of women that already are more than busy with their own jobs, are asked to join boards of directors in all kind of companies, not because of their specific skills, but just because of their gender. I tended to refuse whenever it didn't match with my job, I wanted them to ask me this for my skills, not because of my gender. I changed my opinion, being convinced that if you want to obtain change,



