

To Close the Gender Gap, “ Dare the Difference ” and Speak Out, Women Leaders Say

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- Rather than accept stereotyping and the questioning of their commitment, women should be open and honest about gender differences, especially in the workplace
- Better governance will lead to diversity on corporate boards; better diversity will lead to better governance
- Closing the gender gap requires awareness of the issue among male CEOs and political leadership
- The theme of the 43rd World Economic Forum Annual Meeting is Resilient Dynamism. For more information, visit <http://wef.ch/Davos>

Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, 25 January 2013 – Women should resist pressures to fit in and to not be different, women leaders said in a session on the [gender gap](#) at the highest levels of economic decision-making at the 43rd World Economic Forum Annual Meeting. Women, especially those who made their way in male-dominated households or workplaces, bring a different approach to their interactions, explained Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University. “ It ’ s part of the values and upbringing that women are instilled with. ”

But rather than accept the questioning about commitment to a job should they have children or the inevitable stereotyping, women should be forthright and not stay quiet. “ We are all held back by gender, ” Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer and Member of the Board of Facebook, told participants. “ But how are we able to get women through that frame? We have to talk about gender openly and honestly. We have to start having a much more open conversation. ” Faust called the media to task for perpetuating gender stereotypes. Added Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF): “ We have to dare the difference and speak about it. ”

Lagarde called on women leaders to use their positions to promote an open conversation on gender. Ensuring that women are able to reach the highest levels of leadership and responsibility is important for humanity and economics, she asserted. “ It makes economic sense that women have access to education, jobs, health and financing and that they have equal rights and opportunities. ” Companies should understand that the issue is not that a woman should fill a management position or board seat; the goal is to get the best leadership for the organization, said Kevin Kelly, Chief Executive Officer of the global executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles. “ Better governance will lead to diversity on boards. Better diversity will lead to better governance. ”

To close the gender gap will require awareness among the males who hold a majority of the leadership positions, particularly in certain regions of the world such as the Middle East. “ We have to get the CEOs in major Arab countries to be convinced to hire women and mentor women because that is what we need, ” reckoned Lubna S. Olayan, Deputy Chairperson and Chief Executive Officer of Olayan Financing Company in Saudi Arabia. “ It can only happen when the CEOs, boards and chairmen are focused on it. We need the sponsorship at the top. We need the CEOs to really believe and be truly committed. ”

Policy-makers have responsibilities, too. While quotas may have mixed support, they can be effective tools to spur progress and ensure results. The European Union recently implemented a plan to compel European companies to have at least 40% of board seats occupied by women by 2020. The early impact of the new rules has been encouraging, said Viviane Reding, Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship. “ Sometimes you need political leadership to change the business world. ”

The 43rd World Economic Forum Annual Meeting is taking place from 23 to 27 January under the theme Resilient Dynamism. More than 2,500 participants from over 100 countries are taking part in the Meeting. Participants include nearly 50 heads of state or government and more than 1,500 business leaders from the Forum's 1,000 Member companies, as well as [Social Entrepreneurs](#), [Global Shapers](#), [Young Global Leaders](#) and representatives from civil society, media, academia and the arts.

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Notes to Editors

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