



European Commission - Speech
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Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Women on Boards' Gender Diversity Award

Brussels, 20 January 2022

Dear Hedwige Nuyens,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

Why diversity? Why women on board?

Because all research and economic studies show that companies that embrace diversity are more successful. This is true in business, politics and society as a whole. Still, too often, and especially when looking at top positions, we hear men say that it is not possible to find women with the right profile ... Well, if you are seriously looking for them, you will find them. I know this well from experience, when I fought to have the first ever gender balanced College of Commissioners.

Look at our societies. Diversity is a fact. But whether diversity is reflected in companies and institutions is an active choice.

It has been ten years since the Commission proposed to set a target of 40 percent for women on boards of publicly listed European firms. For ten years, our efforts to put in place a European legislation have been blocked. Ten years where voluntary measures have not brought the change we need. Your organisation was founded in response. And you made the Gender Diversity Index, to provide an objective European benchmark on gender equality. Among the over 600 companies in your index, thirty-five percent of board members are women. This is a beginning. But we have to get better in the European Union.

First, because two of the best performers in the index are non-EU countries. Norway and the UK. It is good that nearly half of the EU Member States included in your Index already have quotas, like my home country, Germany, or like France, the only EU Member State in the top three of your index. And these are the countries where much has improved in recent years. But the others are lagging behind.

And – as you state – the glass ceiling remains firm in place at the top of European companies. If we look beyond boards, at the top leadership positions, just seven percent of the largest European companies are led by a woman. Boards are one thing; it is the knock-on effect that matters. As more diverse boards hire more diverse CEOs those, in turn, hire more diverse managers.

We are making progress, but not fast enough, not everywhere in the EU, and not nearly enough.

So it is clear that we need to do much more. When change does not happen naturally, regulatory action is needed. The numbers speak for themselves. Legislation works.

I will push, as President of the Commission, to ensure that our proposal on Women on Boards becomes EU law. I have met with Member States and Members of Parliament. And I am confident that soon we will see progress. We cannot afford to lose another ten years.

I count on you and together we will make sure that change happens.

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