

Press Release

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Chambers rise to the challenge of taking women 'On Board'

Under representation in decision-making bodies, reconciliation of private and professional life, and access to finance: three areas of concern that prevent women from being fully included in the economy. These same issues were addressed by 'On Board*', the latest project of EUROCHAMBRES Women Network, which presented its final results today with a conference in Brussels.

The partners of the project – Chambers from 12 European countries** – have investigated each of the above-mentioned fields and sought for solutions in which they could play a positive role to foster the female business agenda.

Sophia Economacos, President of EUROCHAMBRES Women Network, said: *“What emerges most clearly from this project is that the potential of women is still insufficiently exploited for the EU to achieve long term sustainable economic growth. There is an urgent need to make progress on the gender equality issue, both in terms of involvement in the decision-making process, and as far as the work/life balance is concerned. With ‘On Board’, Chambers have shown that they are ready to rise to the challenge, and that they can contribute in a concrete way to a more woman-friendly business environment.”*

Hereafter the main findings of the three working groups:

1. Women on Chamber boards

According to a survey carried out by group partners, time is as an important factor preventing women from running for board positions. Three quarters of surveyed female entrepreneurs or Chamber representatives are married or live in partnership and have children: an involvement in the Chamber would mean less time for family and/or enterprise. The absence of involvement in relevant networks scored second in the main barriers. Information and networking events are therefore seen as the best ways of raising awareness about and promoting the involvement in Chamber boards.

2. Linking local actors – the question of reconciliation

Different countries are advancing at different speeds in terms of professional/private life reconciliation: parental leave schemes, childcare facilities and flexible working arrangements are in place to varying degrees. It is vital that companies are made aware that offering reconciliation measures means good business to them and is not only a cost factor. Until this is universally recognised, Chambers could encourage 'socially responsible' enterprises by delivering specific awards or labels.

EUROCHAMBRES – The Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry represents over 19 million enterprises in Europe through members in 45 countries and a European network of 2000 regional and local Chambers.

3. Access to finance

According to a survey carried out by group partners, most women rely on their own resources or commercial banks for their financial requirements when starting up their own business. Few had used public schemes, mainly because of a lack of awareness, coupled with complicated and long-winded procedures. Better information about existing finance schemes was therefore indicated as a priority, together with assistance in obtaining public funds and the conclusion of Chamber-Bank agreements. Alternative sources of access to finance, such as business angels networks, should also be promoted.

"All these considerations should be taken into account by the European Commission in its proposal for a Small Business Act," said Mrs Economacos. "By creating better framework conditions for SMEs, we will automatically give a helping hand to many would-be or aspiring woman entrepreneurs."

* 'On Board' was carried out with the support of the European Community Programme relating to the Community framework strategy on gender equality.

** Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Romania and Slovenia.
