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Article

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PD Dr. Elke Holst, Research Director
Gender Studies at DIW Berlin

SIX QUESTIONS TO ELKE HOLST

»It Seems Only Sanctions Will Help«

1. Dr. Holst, has the proportion of women in top-level management increased? The proportion of women on the executive boards of the top 200 companies is three percent—in other words, no higher than in 2010. In 2011, the proportion of women in the DAX 30 companies—which are, after all, in the public eye—was 3.7 percent, an increase of 1.5 percentage points over 2010. Companies with government-owned shares had a somewhat higher proportion at 8.2 percent.
2. Is there a higher percentage of women in top-level management in the public sector? The proportion of women on executive boards is higher in state-owned companies. But that's also because they're not directly comparable in size to other companies. Public-sector banks, however, still have a lower proportion of women than private banks: 2.5 percent compared to 3.3 percent.
3. Where are there positive developments? Things are moving in a positive direction on supervisory boards, for example. The percentage of companies with no women on their supervisory boards has dropped. The percentage of women on these boards is slightly on the rise. However, well over two-thirds of the women on supervisory boards are still employees' representatives. The proportion of women appointed to supervisory boards as shareholder representatives is increasing slightly, but the starting point was extremely low. Shareholders need to take concerted action to change this.
4. Why is it still so difficult for women to get to the top? The upper echelons work according to male norms and everyday realities: what matters here are long working

hours and the skills and personality traits that are normally attributed to men. It is very difficult for women to reach top positions under these circumstances. It is possible, however: for example, in companies where female shareholders themselves are active. But these women are so few and far between that they can hardly be seen as role models. More women on all levels would also make it easier for the next generation to move up. Men have the advantage that they already have a wide range of role models to choose from.

5. Federal Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Ursula von der Leyen is considering threatening companies with government sanctions if they don't achieve a quota of 30 percent women on their supervisory boards by 2018. Do you think this is the right step to take? When I look at the figures, I can fully understand that policy makers would like to actively promote improvements here.
6. How could political pressure be used to increase the proportion of women in top-level management? Demanding legal regulations is one thing, but we also need instruments for implementing these regulations, such as an indicator that very clearly shows where companies stand. This should give a comparative picture of what steps companies are taking to increase the proportion of women in executive management and what changes have been made. This kind of indicator could help the companies, because then they will know where to start. If it's also linked to a regulatory framework, it will of course produce faster results. In view of the figures published here, it doesn't look as if the situation will improve by itself. International comparison shows that progress is faster when rigorous sanctions are imposed.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg.



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