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**Article**

## "Public companies could play a pioneering role": Six questions to Elke Holst

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Dr. Elke Holst, Research Director Gender Studies in the Department of the Executive Board of DIW Berlin

## SIX QUESTIONS TO ELKE HOLST

# »Public Companies Could Play a Pioneering Role«

1. Dr. Holst, DIW Berlin examines the representation of women on executive boards and on the supervisory and administrative boards of the largest companies in Germany every year. Did more women make it to the highest decision-making bodies in 2013 than in previous years? We have seen a moderate upward trend, especially on supervisory boards. Women are still overwhelmingly underrepresented on executive boards.
2. Where has there been the most significant progress? Progress has occurred in small steps so we can't talk about significant progress. The proportion of women on the executive boards of DAX 30 companies has actually declined.
3. What about companies with government-owned shares? Public companies could play a pioneering role. But this has not been part of the coalition agreement so far. Based on our studies, we can say that companies with government-owned shares are still far from playing a pioneering role—let alone being role models.
4. In the coalition agreement, SPD, CDU, and CSU agreed on a binding gender quota for new appointments to the supervisory boards of selected companies. Is this the right way forward? Even the discussions about the gender quota themselves have had an effect in this country, namely raising awareness that women are massively underrepresented in top-level management positions. Regulations on new appointments are intended to achieve a 30-percent proportion of women on supervisory boards from 2016. This is one way to go. But we don't expect it to lead to very rapid progress.
5. You have also examined the proportion of women in the financial sector. What is the situation there? The proportion of women employees in the financial sector is well above 50 percent. Actually, one might expect that women here would be promoted more frequently and there would be exemplary human resource planning. But this doesn't appear to be the case. The proportion of women on the executive boards of public banks is even lower than in the cooperative or private banks. In addition, the proportion of women on the supervisory boards of public banks is declining. Here, and in the financial sector in general, there is a lot of catching up to do.
6. How does Germany fare compared to other European countries when it comes to giving top-level management positions to women? The Nordic countries are at the forefront in Europe. But Germany doesn't look too bad either, because the supervisory boards of the DAX 30 companies are used in the comparison. This means that female employee representatives appointed to these bodies are also counted, which is not the case in many other countries. They have only one corporate board. German companies' executive boards have very low proportions of women. Germany's strong position is also due in part to the codetermination regulations in this country. We also know that there are countries that have made more progress without quotas, Finland, for example. Here, companies have set their own ambitious objectives. The proportion of women on corporate boards rose from seven percent in 2003 to 23 percent in 2013. It would be nice if we could have such a positive development in Germany, too.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg.

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