

Conference on Cross-Mentoring 21st January, 2008

Speech given by Madame Marie-Josée Jacobs, Minister for Equal Opportunities

The speech actually given shall prevail

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The new year has just begun, may I take the opportunity to wish you all the best for 2008!

As part of this conference, I would like to express one wish in particular: "Let's stop talking about gaps, divisions, and disparities between men and women. Let's not talk about differences anymore, but about things men and women have in common, let's talk about how they can cooperate, let's focus on their complementarities and let them bring out the best in each other.

For example: I would be delighted to see young male executives seek out advice from high-level female executives on how to promote their careers. I would be delighted to see young women and men speak in exactly the same way to either men or women, and ask for mentoring in order to learn about different approaches and experiences, and understand the differences that stem from our social organisation.

Why haven't we reached this step yet?

Why is mentoring usually provided by men? Why are there so few executive women benefiting from this personal enhancement tool?

Why isn't there more 'female mentoring' among company decision-makers?

Actually, the first mentor cited in literature was a woman. In the Odyssey, Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, agreed to be the mentor for Odysseus' son, Telemachus.

Unfortunately, this famous example of good practice has not been applied in our modern societies. Indeed, it has been observed that mentoring is used very unequally depending on the gender.

How important can mentoring be in a 21st-century economy?

Mentoring aims at sponsoring an individual so that she/he can develop her/his personal and professional potential and thus gain access to a position with responsibilities, particularly an executive position.

Thus, mentoring has an ambitious goal. Obviously, what is important for the person being mentored is the personal advice and support he/she can get so as to make fewer mistakes and spend less time and money.

Yet, we should not forget about the final aim of this strategy, namely: leadership, that is to say working as an executive.

I shall insist on that particular point, because women are usually hired in departments which are less significant for the company, so it is more difficult for them to access positions on the executive level. Women can be offered positions with responsibilities, yet without becoming a member of the executive board. In its report dated December 1997, the International Labour Office described this phenomenon as a "glass wall", in reference to the "glass ceiling".

In this report, named "Promoting women to executive positions", the ILO stated the fact that "*when they are on the middle executive level, women usually end up fulfilling personnel management or*

administrative tasks in non-strategic sectors, instead of being offered specialist positions and executive functions which could lead them to the top.”¹

This fact was observed by the ILO ten years ago, yet it still remains true today. This is why the government has decided to implement a policy aiming at promoting equal opportunities between women and men, notably through the programme for positive actions of the Ministry for Equal Opportunities.

Mentoring is a strategy designed to help women’s and men’s advancement toward executive positions. One of the priority themes of the programme for positive actions is how women can become decision-makers.

The fact that women are under-represented on the decision-making level has been documented many times in various studies published over the last years by the Ministry for Equal Opportunities, the CEPS (Centre for Studies on Population and Society) and STATEC (Central Service for Statistics and Economic Studies).

In 2003, the CEPS observed the following.

- *16% of members in the boards of directors of companies are women, but women represent 35% of the personnel;*
- *in companies with 15 employees or fewer, 22% of executive positions are occupied by women, and the proportion is 11% in companies with more than 15 employees, but women represent 41% and 33% of the personnel, respectively.*

Despite their level of education and the feminization of executive jobs, women are still under-represented at the top of company hierarchies.

Women have gained access to training, acquired skills and entered the job market later than men have. This is probably the reason for the slow pace of their career advancement.

However, there are no more justifications for women and men not to be treated equally when accessing top management positions.

Beyond figures, what is important is how the strategy of mentoring can help achieve the goals of the government’s policy for equal opportunities among women and men.

As a matter of fact, one of the objectives of the mentoring project we are presenting today is to use this project as a tool to support women’s careers by enabling them to build a network of contacts that is essential to their advancement.

But, mentoring as a strategic and personalized tool is not offered to companies as an isolated measure, and it is not subsidised by the Ministry for Equal Opportunities as such.

The programme for positive actions provides for a thorough analysis of the company’s situation, including the analysis of objective data on the salaries, the personnel’s situation, the decision-making positions, the training and career advancement system as well as the company’s internal and external communication.

The second part of the analysis is a qualitative survey on how the personnel perceive their working environment and how satisfied they are professionally.

¹ *Quote from the ILO study, December 1997*

A collaboration agreement between the company and the Luxembourg State determines how such data are exchanged. The political aim is to arise companies' sense of responsibility on the long term, and have them realize that equal opportunities between women and men are a major factor for growth and employment, as expressed in the Lisbon Agenda.

The programme for positive actions has three main themes: equal compensations, decision making and harmony between private and professional life.

As far as decision-making is concerned, mentoring can be adopted as one of the possible measures that help women be better prepared to take on responsibilities in their company and apply for positions as decision makers.

Nonetheless, other measures should also be envisaged, such as organising work appropriately, designing and offering auxiliary services for fathers and mothers to combine private and professional life more easily, or developing internal outreach activities to fight against prejudice and clichés that are deeply rooted in our minds.

The interested company should first present an action plan; then the Ministry for Equal Opportunities shall decide to grant the company a ministerial approval to implement measures designed to foster equal opportunities for women and men. This is when the action is regarded as a positive action.

Thus, equal opportunities between women and men are not secured by one isolated measure, but a thorough study of all the ins and outs of a company, its decision-making processes and all its activities and actions.

Companies have understood the meaning of such positive actions quite well and have realized the advantages of promoting diversity in general, and equal opportunities between women and men in particular:

- Advantages for the companies themselves: respecting equality between women and men means more creativity, innovation, efficiency, and a better brand image; it also enables them to become a first-choice employer for any skilled person looking for a job;
- Advantages for the individuals: respecting equality between women and men means a wider open-mindedness, more exchanges and more flexibility;
- Advantages for society as a whole: respecting equality between women and men means more tolerance, better integration and enhanced social cohesion.

I welcome every company who wishes to communicate with the Ministry for Equal Opportunities to learn more on how to take part in the programme for positive actions and thus go beyond their participation in the cross-mentoring project.

Today's conference shall close the 2007 Cross-mentoring project which gathered mentors and mentees from Luxembourg companies operating in various fields of the economy. The women and men involved in this unique endeavour in Luxembourg will tell us about their personal experience and the advantages drawn from interacting with each other.

As the Minister for Equal Opportunities, I am particularly thrilled that this event has gathered high-level women and men around a project defined by key words such as interaction, learning, success and leadership.

I am also thrilled that, thanks to this conference, the mentoring project has gained international awareness. It is necessary to bring our efforts together and exchange good practices beyond our boundaries.

I hope you will all be very successful in your professional endeavours.