



GEMA International Women's Day Campaign in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Slovenia: Building culture and breaking stereotypes for positive effects on gender equality in business

In the last decades, we have witnessed much progress in **improving gender equality in the European Union**. Female employment rates have increased from 54.8% in 2003 to 58.8% in 2013, and almost 60% of university graduates are female. Yet, women continue to be under-represented in leadership positions. This is especially evident in boardrooms where, on average in large listed companies, women hold only about 20% of board positions. On the other hand research show:

- ✓ more gender-diverse boards are strongly associated with **strategic task performance**, and a higher proportion of females on board is associated with higher levels of **service task performance**,
- ✓ **talented staff can and do progress**,
- ✓ **women constitute** an important **consumer group** thus there's a need to capture their voice in top decision-teams,
- ✓ improving gender diversity is important for **social justice reasons**, but there is also a persuasive business case. Gender diversity in boardrooms and management teams is associated with better team dynamics and team outcomes which ultimately affect companies' financial and social performance.

Striving to promote positive effects of balanced teams on leadership positions, GEMA celebrated International Women's Day with successful campaigns in Slovenia, Bulgaria and Macedonia.

Slovenia: Yin and Jang of a successful team

It is necessary to strengthen the activities in companies focused on **talent management**, while efforts also need to be invested into **building of culture and general awareness**, is the message sent from Slovenian **GEMA conference** on the benefits of balanced teams, **YIN and JANG of a successful team**, which took place on **8th of March 2016**, organized by Employers Association of Slovenia ZDS.





"Discussions about the role of women were exposed at different times in many ways. That fundamental dilemma, the dilemma of male and female principle, still exists. Male and female worlds doesn't exclude each other, but rather go hand in hand. Balance is the first tool to achieve progress on all levels of life. Entrepreneurship is no exception," highlighted **Bojana Muršič**, MSc, Vice President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia in her welcome speech at the conference.

Following the example of European countries, Slovenian Government is preparing a law to introduce quotas for less represented gender in management and supervisory boards of public companies. Encouragement for balanced representation of women and men in decision-making processes in the economy is currently one of the priority themes of the Republic of Slovenia in the field of gender equality, but the opinions on quotas differ between stakeholders and business representatives. "I am often asked whether I support quotas. Despite concerns that may appear, I have to give my support to the idea, since it has so far proven to be a very effective mechanism in societies where equality in working life is not so self-evident. With quotas greater participation of women in economic and political life is gradually achieved," said a supporter of the GEMA project, MEP, **Tanja Fajon**, MSc.

At the round table **Advantages of balanced teams**, which took place in the framework of the conference, the representatives of Slovenian companies **Simobil**, **Steklarna Rogaška**, **Telekom Slovenije**, **Marifarm** and **Ljubljanske lekarnе** agreed that gender balanced teams have positive influence on success of the company, but stressed that the profile of the service or department shall not be ignored.



Speakers were unanimous regarding (un)successful leaders in both genders, thus it is important to pay attention to training, development of leadership skills and competences and awareness rising among the staff, including those involved in recruitment. Management competences are very specific, top specialists in the field are not necessarily the best leaders. Thus it is important to devote a lot of time to development of employees and management of talents. Guests of the round table agreed - changing culture towards more gender-balanced

representation of women in managerial positions is a challenge, an area to build on in the future. It is necessary to create the conditions, to understand the diversity and facilitate equal opportunities. And sometimes even offer an encouragement or two more to women in order to make a step forward.

Bulgaria: By changing the stereotypes, the glass ceiling will break

On 7th of March 2016 the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA) together with the Association of women entrepreneurs in Bulgaria (Selena) held a conference on **Gender balance in business – let’s break the glass ceiling**. The metaphor Glass Ceiling came into popular use following a 1996 Wall Street Journal article by **Carol Hymowitz** and **Timothy Schellhardt**. It described an invisible barrier when women climbed the corporate ladder up to a certain point beyond which they could not progress.

Two major questions provoked temperamental debates between the participants of the conference, **how to empower the rights of women** to take managerial positions and become represented on boards and **weather to make the gender quota** a must for companies or not.



Employers, supported also by BIA, backed the opinion that any quota enforced by law is not good for businesses. The business activities and characteristics of the individual companies should be taken in consideration. Women and men need to show their potential and skills prior to reaching top positions in management teams.

Women’s position in business, in itself, is a challenge and challenges move the society. The opinion of this group was to

let the employer decide alone whether to appoint a man or a woman. The existing written rules should be followed and the entrepreneurs have to prepare an in-house strategy when hiring an employee of whatever gender.

On the other side, trade unions together with women organizations supported the idea that the existing **stereotypes** related to women in work place **need to be changed** and this can be realized by introducing short-term legally-binding quota. Norway, where this legal measure helped avoiding stereotypes and increased the performance of women in company boards, was mentioned as a good example.



Overall, participants of the conference agreed that the glass ceiling will break, when the stereotypes of thinking will be broken and good examples will prevail over the prejudices.

Macedonia: Development of female entrepreneurship requires financial support through governmental programs

Women in Macedonia are emancipated and confident enough to start a business but do **not have sufficient initial capital, managerial skills and competences**. Thus development of female entrepreneurship requires **financial support through governmental programs**, was the key emphasis at the conference **Women in leadership positions: Challenges and strategy to overcome them**, organized on 9th of March 2016 by Business confederation Macedonia



One of three newly established companies in Macedonia are run by women, yet women on leadership positions in large companies are very rare. "Unfortunately only 12 percent of management positions are taken by women and the majority of them are working in institutions such as schools and kindergartens, said **Valentina Disoska, president of the Association of Business Women**.

Yet, in large companies and enterprises listed on stock exchange, women in management positions are extremely under-represented, furthermore women in business world still have substantial problems because of the stereotypes and insufficient start-up capital.



"Other countries in the region and in Europe have developed programs and funds for supporting women in making first steps into the business. In Macedonia this idea is still at basic level, but there are attempts to finance female entrepreneurship at Ministry of Economy," explained **Daniela Arsovska, President of the Macedonian Chambers of Commerce**. Speakers at the conference agreed that **the selection criteria for a managerial or any other position in business, should be set according to the skills and competencies of an individual candidate**, not their gender. Women should be considered equally in all spheres of society.

In April E-NEWSLETTER: Good practices: Slovenia

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