



**Women on
Boards**
Highlights of
Effective Policies
Across the EU

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Institute on
Gender Equality and
Women's History

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Assignment and delineation

This report was commissioned by the Netherlands' Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Directorate Gender Equality, with the aim of identifying successful and inspirational examples of national policies to increase the number of women on corporate boards, as executive and non-executive board members. We focused on seven countries,¹ looking at the corporate sector, taking into account differences in governance models (one-tiered versus two-tiered boards) and with an eye to the transferability of policies and measures to the context in the Netherlands. As a starting point, we used a typology identified by Machold and Hansen (2013) to distinguish between different types of policies.

<i>No formal approach</i>	<i>Voluntary efforts</i>	<i>Regulation (code, disclosure)</i>	<i>Legislation (quota laws)</i>
Latvia	Denmark (2010)	Denmark (2012)	
		Germany (2010)	Germany (2015)
		Finland (2010)	Finland (2005)
		Sweden (2010)	
	UK (2011)	UK (2010, 2012)	
		France (2011)	France (2011)

Source: Machold & Hansen (2013)

Our literature review of recent sources on the topic of women on boards further informed our focus on the important role of different actors or players in as well as the tone and direction of the national debate (Seierstad et al., 2015; Terjesen & Sealy, 2015), which points to a clear shift from 'why' to 'how' an increase can be achieved.

Approach

After initial desk research (literature, reports, media coverage, internet sources etc., in general and for each country in particular) we interviewed 13 key informers, including academic experts, governmental policymakers and NGO employees, by phone or skype. During the phase of data collection and analysis we employed the method of appreciative inquiry developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), addressing what goes well and what might make it even better. Using these data as well as the literature review, we analysed and charted the current state of affairs.

Country reports

¹ These seven countries were Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

The main findings in our report are listed by country and include the key figures — current and past (see Table 1 for an overview) — the historical development and an overview of previous and current policies, the governance model used in large corporations, some background on the context, results (looking at substantial and symbolic change, Terjesen & Sealy, 2015), inspirational elements, main actors (Seierstad et al., 2015) and changes in the debate on women's representation on boards.

Table 1.

Percentage of women in board positions in large corporations

2014	Total (%)	Non-executives (%)	Executives (%)	Presidents ² (%)	CEOs ³ (%)
EU-28	20	21	13	7	3
Netherlands	25	26	9	0	5
Denmark	24	23	12	0	0
Germany	24	21	7	7	0
Finland	29	29	16	5	0
France	32	33	11	6	0
Latvia	32	32	20	17	3
UK	24	29	17	2	2
Sweden	28	29	23	7	4

Source: European Commission, database Women and Men in Decision Making (EC-WMID)

Inspirational elements

Based on our interviews and desk research we have identified seven inspirational elements to stimulate a more equal representation of women and men on corporate boards. These elements do not stand alone but are interrelated — only in combination will these elements generate results.

“Self-regulation beats quotas”

Self-imposed targets or flexi-quotas promote ownership by companies regarding the realization of gender diversity on boards. Ownership of self-imposed targets, time-frames and measures is crucial and generates a process of change that reinforces and corrects itself, partly due to peer pressure.

The old boys are the change agents

Where men in top positions are involved, the pace of change is faster. As such, the old boys are not only the gatekeepers of the system but can also be the change agents.

High-profile players (f/m)

² Presidents of the Supervisory Board.

³ Chief Executive Officers.

Where high-profile players, especially women, take an active role in the public and political debate on women on boards, they are instrumental in changing the nature of that debate, and insist on keeping the issue on the agenda.

Changing the conversation

Changing the conversation from *why* gender diversity on boards is important to *how* this goal can be actually achieved fosters both symbolic and substantial success. In some countries, all-male boards are simply no longer acceptable. The change in the conversation evidenced by key players and in the media is both cause and consequence, effectively acting as a catalyst.

For all to see

Where monitoring is part of mainstream corporate governance procedures and policies there is more ownership and peer pressure among large companies. Monitoring and presenting progress is harnessed by credible sanctions, as well as habitual and public naming and praising or shaming.

Change does not come about on its own

Setting targets is not enough: systems tend to reinforce and reproduce themselves. To speed up the process, it is necessary to develop targeted interventions into a system that tends to produce almost all-male boards. It is crucial that implicit notions of merit and leadership become transparent. Recruiters and executive searchers must take the lead in a gradual process that will eventually result in a critical mass of women on boards, and the reinforcement and reproduction of gender diversity in the boardroom.

The threat of quota as a 'big stick'

Explicitly and seriously using the threat of quotas as a 'big stick' to force change has had considerable political and practical consequences in a complex landscape with large, established interests. Intensive deliberation and customization might be more effective than the political decision to impose quotas. But it is important that governments not only promote gender diversity on boards with carrots; emphasizing the preparation of legal quotas can add extra pressure.

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- To download this summary and the integral Dutch version of the report, see http://www.atria.nl/atria/nl/actueel/nieuwsoverzicht/_pid/column2_1/ rp_column2_1_elementId/1_374223