

## **Videoboodschap minister Plasterk bij SER symposium *Balancing the boardroom*, 21 november 2007**

In the debate about women at the top, one runs the risk of the discussion turning into a heated argument about ambition, discrimination and part-time work. For that reason, I would like to begin by quoting some numbers.

Since 1999, British researchers have been publishing the Female FTSE Index. It shows that eighteen of the twenty most successful British companies have at least one woman on the board of directors.

A large-scale survey recently conducted by the McKinsey management consulting firm showed that European companies with more women in senior management, perform better than companies where men are in charge. Diversity produces a wider range of perspectives and ideas, and that is good for innovation and achievements.

I do not think I need to convince any of you here today that failing to use female talent is capital destruction - literally and figuratively. But what can we do to get more women on supervisory boards? Should we introduce codes of conduct, or should we impose quotas?

In Norway, by law 40% of board members in all public organisations must be women. That is not necessarily a bad idea. But it also has disadvantages, as you are aware of, and the key is to come up with a realistic solution that works. And what works in one country might not work in another.

On 30 October I met with several companies, trade unions, government agencies and women in management to talk about breaking through the glass ceiling in the Netherlands. The conclusion then was that imposing strict quota was not the best approach for the Netherlands. Instead, we should focus on promoting joint initiatives. This is what the Social and Economic Council calls the 'soft approach'.

This approach is not free of obligation. It places the responsibility squarely on those who are responsible: companies and public authorities. Many are already convinced of the need to take action and that is where initiatives and good examples should come from. Selection committees should consider it their duty to search a little bit harder to find talented women and not give up too quickly, saying: 'we can not find them'.

To make this a reality, the 'Women to the Top' agreement calls for a charter containing self-imposed targets for companies or sectors. The rationale is that what may be a high ambition level in one sector is too low for others. Denmark is currently preparing a similar charter to increase the number of women in senior positions. I am curious to know what form it will take.

I have high expectations for this approach. And I wholeheartedly agree with the motto of the foundation 'Vrouwen in Beeld' (*Women in the Picture*): 'Stop talking, start acting'. Getting more women to the top is about equal opportunities and equal rights. So this endeavour is indeed about economic obligation and as well as understood self interest of business. But it is really also about social responsibility.