



Women on Board – Quality through Diversity

Scottish Government Consultation on the introduction of gender quotas on public boards

July 2014

Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to Scottish and UK Government consultation papers.

SWC Evidence Source

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission paper provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to public appointments.

Purpose of the Consultation

Scottish women make up 52% of the population and, in October 2013, the level of female employment in Scotland reached its highest level since 1992 at 69%. Women also now make up the majority of university graduates. In spite of all this, there is still significant gender inequality on public boards, with women comprising only 36% of board places and 21% of the current board chairs.

Currently the Scottish Parliament does not have legislative powers to address this issue. The Scottish Government have therefore opened up dialogue with the UK Government on transferring powers by way of an Order under section 30 of the Scotland Act 1998. Such powers would give the Scottish Parliament additional levers for change, should it choose to use them, where other mechanisms are not working, or are not delivering change fast enough.

This consultation sets out to gather views from individuals, public bodies and other organisations with an interest in the issue of gender imbalance on public boards, on how mandatory quotas that ensure a minimum of 40% of women's representation on public boards should be introduced.

The SWC fully supports the proposal to introduce gender quotas on public boards. Women continue to be under-represented in too many spheres of political and public life and more needs to be done to address this.

Voluntary and Mandatory Quotas

There are a number of reasons why voluntary measures have not led to the achievement of the 40% Diversity Delivers target. One of the key issues is the idea that quotas are not necessary, or are unfair as appointments should be made solely on merit.

“If that were the case, we would already have women in these positions. The bottom line is this – you can’t get the best person for the job if they’re not given the opportunity to go for it.”

The consultation document asks whether public boards should be given the opportunity to achieve the 40% target on a voluntary basis. It is clear that these targets, which have been in place for some time, have not been met. If nothing mandatory is enforced, then boards may continue to fail to meet targets, which further delay the appointment of women as directors.

The only way to ensure that women are represented at the levels they need to be is if quotas are introduced. It is, however, important to recognise that they are only temporary special measures – that is, they are something which should be put in place in the short-term to achieve a longer term aim. Therefore any proposals that the Scottish Government put forward to the UK Government must make clear that mandatory quotas should only be enforced for a certain length of time.

“The whole point of quotas is surely to get us to a level playing field, which doesn’t exist at the moment. Once we see more women on public boards, you would hope there will be enough momentum to keep us there without the need for specific measures.”

While the SWC supports the introduction the proposals of this consultation which will encourage more diversity and gender equality on public boards, quotas alone are not enough. There are a range of reasons why women do not apply for these positions and these need to be taken into consideration, along with the introduction of quotas, in order to challenge the culture which surrounds public appointments. Boards – whether public, company or voluntary sector – more often than not do not reflect the people they are appointed to represent. This has to change.

Application Processes

One of the biggest barriers for women who want to become involved with public boards is the way in which positions are advertised. Not all appointments are advertised, due in part to the ‘old boys’ network which sadly still exists in Scotland. Business networking is too often carried out in traditionally male dominated activities, which can make it very difficult for women to access.

Men also continue to be put onto public boards because they tend to be at a higher level of employment than women, which can mean they are considered to be more 'committed' or able to do the job. It is well known that due to the glass ceiling, gender streaming and the gender pay gap, caring responsibilities and childbearing, women are unable to progress in the workplace at the same rate as men. This discrimination means they are even less likely to be able to progress to board level in their workplaces.

In order to encourage more gender equality on public boards, positions must be advertised where women will be able to see them. Information should be available in, for example, libraries, health centres and supermarkets. Making the adverts more visible and accessible in these kinds of places would be very beneficial.

"How can I be expected to apply for a position on a board if I don't even know I would find the advert? I don't have time to go looking for this type of information – it would be so much easier if it was put somewhere I'm actually likely to be."

Another barrier to women's appointment on public boards is the language used both in advertising for positions and in the application process. The use of jargon and absence of 'plain speaking' is extremely off-putting.

"Having worked in the NHS for a long time, I felt the time was right for me to become involved on a board as part of the organisation. However the language that was used in the application form was at a level that I'm neither familiar nor comfortable with. The form explained what would be expected of me in such a convoluted way that I didn't even get half way through finishing it."

Another aspect of the application process is the confidence that women have in themselves and their abilities. Too many will underestimate their capabilities and only look at the negative aspects of a position, rather than the positives.

"A man will look at the key skills for a role and say 'I can do three out of five of those so of course I'll go for the position', whereas a woman is more likely to say 'I can only do three out of five so there's no point in going for it'. Confidence is key."

The SWC held an event in 2007 which aimed to build women's confidence, break down the jargon contained in application forms and which encouraged women from all backgrounds to apply for public appointments. This was very successful and made it clear that there is nothing to fear from becoming a member of a public board.

This type of event could be integrated into the application process for women, along with the introduction of quotas. It could include sessions with women who are currently on Boards, those who have been through the application process and those who write the applications. This would be extremely beneficial to those considering applying.

The role of mentors must also be considered. Women have spoken about the importance of having the support of other women across political and public life, employment, trade union involvement etc. The value of having someone who has already been there, who can guide others through the process and give advice, cannot be underestimated.

"It is the duty of women who are currently in these positions to encourage others to join them."

It is vital that all interview panels for appointment on public boards have a 50/50 gender balance. This sends out a clear message that these organisations are serious about creating a gender balance in their governance.

"It would be quite intimidating to go into an interview with only men on the panel. Anything put in place to help women become involved would be made pointless if those making the decisions were all men."

What Being on a Board Involves

There is very little information throughout the application process as to what being a member of a public board involves. The barriers which exist to prevent women from entering, sustaining and progressing in employment - such as access to childcare and public transport, as well as a lack of flexible working - will also exist for public appointments. All of these issues must be taken into account as part of wider measures to encourage a gender balance.

Women also need to know exactly what is expected of them, the level of commitment that is required and how much time they will be expected to devote to the role. Women often comment on how their lack of involvement in political and public life as a whole is not because they do not have the inclination or will to do it. It is because more often than not they have to juggle work, caring responsibilities and running a household.

"I would like to become involved in things at a higher level, but I just don't have the time. It doesn't help when meetings are in the evenings, because there's no childcare at night so I would have to rely on friends and family. I don't know if I can guarantee the level of commitment that would be required of me."

Specific consideration must also be given to women in rural areas, for whom issues such as childcare and public transport are exacerbated due to the geography of their local area.

Employers must be encouraged to support any of their employees who are seeking public appointment. Women who currently are, or who wish to become, board members should be afforded flexibility in order to do so. The knowledge, skills and confidence that women can gain from being this type of appointment can transfer over to, and undoubtedly enhance, the workplace.

Conclusion

The SWC fully supports the Scottish Government's proposals to inform the UK Government on using legislation to achieve gender equality on the boards of public bodies. The voluntary introduction of quotas by individual organisations has, by and large, been unsuccessful. Women continue to be grossly underrepresented. The SWC is pleased that the gender imbalance on most boards is being recognised, and that both the Scottish and UK Governments are seeking to put measures in place in order to address this.

While we support the introduction of quotas as a temporary special measure to get more women into these positions, it must be recognised that quotas alone are not enough. A number of barriers exist that will not be broken down simply by legislating for a mandatory minimum of 40% women on these boards. The Scottish Government must, therefore, recognise the importance of additional measures which will encourage women to become involved.

"There's no point in just having legislation without also taking into account confidence."

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