

Conference on « women and business »

8 octobre 2009

Mr. Le Président de la Chambre de Commerce Franco-Norvégienne,
Monsieur l'Ambassadeur de Norvège en France,
Mmes et Mrs,

I am extremely pleased to participate in the opening of this French Norwegian day, on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Chamber of Commerce.

I am personally extremely happy, as Ambassadrice, that you have chosen as the theme of your conference : “ women and business”. Indeed, it is a theme which is topical both for France and Norway. Exchanges of experiences between our two countries on this theme can only be very productive.

1. There is no doubt that equality between women and men is a goal common to all advanced democracies, and should be in fact universal. Not only is it an obligation deriving from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international conventions, but we have also realised that gender equality contributes to the happiness of our citizens and the prosperity of our nations.

Unfortunately we are still far from having reached the goal of full equality.

In France, the road to legal equality has been a long and difficult one. The revolutionaries of 1789 who wrote the “Declaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen” drafted in fact a declaration of the rights of men, not of women. They had a universal vision of mankind but in which men were the only citizens ! Eventually equality of civil rights between men and women was recognized in 1804. But it was only in 1944 that women obtained the right to vote and be elected, and in 1965 that married women had the right to exercise a commercial activity without their husband's permission.

Several revisions of the French Constitution have reinforced equality. Since the last one, in 2008, the first article of our Constitution now specifically provides that "the law favours equal access for women and men to professional and social responsibilities". It vindicates positive discrimination in favour of the underrepresented gender.

2. Equality in business is only one aspect among many others to consider in order to achieve the overall objective of equality between men and women. But it is an essential aspect, as it concerns so many of our fellow citizens. It is also essential for symbolic reasons, because girls need role models to dare to enter professions which are wrongly perceived as masculine.

Your conference is all the more interesting because our two countries are both characterized by a high female employment rate and, at the same time, the highest birth rates in Europe.

In our two countries, I think the same following observations apply, with of course different amplitudes :

- the level of education of women is higher than that of men ;
- but with equal qualifications, women's salary is still lower;
- the rate of part-time employment for women is about three times higher than for men ;
- the women's jobs are less qualified ;
- positions at the intermediate management level are more often held by men than by women, and they are a minority at the higher level ;
- the sectoral segmentation is clear : more women are working in the public sector, education, health ; more men are in the private sector, industry, information technology, namely the growing economic sectors.

There are many similarities in our situations. But if there is one area where a significant difference emerges between Norway and France, it is the place of women in positions of power. In France, there are quite a few women leading very important companies, but only 8% are found in the boards of the top 500 French companies. In Norway, there are not many women leading large companies, but you find 40% of women in the boards of the public limited companies in Norway. To achieve this latest remarkable result Norway has chosen to create a legal obligation in the form of quotas, with sanctions. But this success is also the result of a substantive effort using training, persuasion and discussion, and involving all interested actors.

It is therefore quite natural that a delegation of the Groups for women's rights and equality of opportunity between men and women of the French National Assembly and the Senate should have come last May to Oslo to learn about the Norwegian model. This visit inspired part of a report commissioned by the Minister of Labour, which was presented to him last July 8th. Its author, Mrs. Brigitte Gresy, denounces the "invisibility of women in governance bodies". She

proposes, among many other things, to make it compulsory for the boards of state-owned companies and public limited companies with more than thousand employees to attain in 6 years a proportion of 40% of the underrepresented gender.

The Minister of Labour reacted quite strongly to this report. He stated that the report described "an alarming situation, one we had to be ashamed of". He added " it is not normal that in a country where girls fare better at school, they are systematically overrepresented in the non qualified jobs, simply because they have been progressively discouraged to choose the most qualified and prestigious trainings".

Discussions, called for by President Sarkozy, and based on the Gresy report, should begin this fall between the social partners. They will focus on professional equality between women and men, on the balance of work time and family time as well as on the compatibility between the work contract and the family needs, through a simplification of family leave.

3. So, for our political authorities it is quite clear that equality is a moral and democratic imperative, an act of justice and a legal obligation. But we also hear more and more opinions underlining that equality is also economically beneficial. The very respected daily Le Monde wrote recently "to perform better, hire women". According to Le Monde, a study of the situation of the 42 largest French companies during the period 2002-2006 shows that the turnover was almost 30% higher in companies hiring more than 35% women, at all levels. Women could even save the world ! Newsweek, recently made its front cover on "the female factor : how the untapped spending power of women could save the world from recession".

I personally do believe that this recognition of the economic interest of equality will be a strong incentive for business leaders to change their policies and open the governance bodies and leading positions to more women, paving the way to equality..

4. I would like to thank again the FN Chamber of commerce for holding this conference. Today's panel is particularly relevant for the French social agenda. The results of your discussion between business actors from France and Norway, who know the cultures of both countries, will be, I am sure, a rich contribution to our reflection.

I wish you an excellent conference, a successful General Assembly this afternoon, and a wonderful 90th anniversary dinner./.