

Interview with Ms. Sonja Müller, Chairperson of VICTRESS Initiative e.V.



Stephanie Machoi and Sonja Müller

This month, we chat with Ms. Sonja Müller, Chairperson of VICTRESS Initiative e.V., an association she founded together with friends with the aim of increasing the number of women in leading positions in Germany. This way, the initiative hopes to ensure gender balance above all in business under the motto "Excellence knows no Gender." German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel is among the key frequent guests at events organized by VICTRESS. We met Sonja Müller for a wide ranging chat whose content is a must for both women and men!

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

Ms. Müller, you founded the VICTRESS Initiative in 2005 together with friends. What were the key motives or experiences in this connection or is this an idea that developed gradually over the years?

Sonja Müller:

The idea of founding Victress occurred to me after my return to Germany from Spain where I worked for an international company in marketing. I was very surprised to find that women here in Germany had to choose between following their career or having children, combining

both being characterized by unbelievable hurdles. No colleague in the Spanish company I worked for ever saw that as a choice at the expense of the other alternative. There, women combine motherhood with career as something just normal, so it wasn't anything special there, nothing worth highlighting. For this reason, I got particularly interested in how Germans deal with this issue. I soon realized that there are simply too few women in leading and top management positions in Germany compared to other West European countries. At that time there was just one woman sitting on the management board of a company listed at the German stock exchange index DAX. Now there is none. I thus mulled about what to do to change the situation. The idea was born: creating a lobby for high potential women, a new and indeed unique initiative in Germany.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

Did you run into open doors with ready, willing and sympathetic listeners for the idea once you got into contact with other women, men and companies or did you have to do a lot of convincing for the initiative to be able to take off?

Sonja Müller:

About 10 years ago only women were interested in pushing and lobbying women in the business world, but neither companies nor the media. But in 2005 we ran into open doors and so we didn't have to do a lot of convincing, except in regard to getting sponsorship. The time was optimal for our initiative as many economic facts were clearly in our favour: Basically, women receive excellent education, but work afterwards for just a few years before staying at home to take care of their children. Many of them never return or only work part time. The loss to the economy and to the families affected is obvious. In addition, factors like decreasing birth rates and the insufficient availability of highly qualified professionals in the German economy made our case interesting. Indeed, if the German economy wants to remain globally competitive, it must recognize the untapped potential qualified women have to offer.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

How was the beginning itself?

Sonja Müller:

At the outset, I organized, together with some friends, an event called "Women and Power" to get a feeling whether the time was right or not. The feedback was overwhelming. Women and men, companies and organizations encouraged us to work towards realizing our vision. So we founded Victress e.V. The founders and supporters were women **and** men, among them people with influence in public life, business and media.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

How has the VICTRESS Initiative developed to date and with which actions do you promote your vision of an optimal power balance between women and men in business? What future plans do you have for the VICTRESS Initiative?

Sonja Müller:

There is no way to develop an assistant into a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in a few months. It takes time and the right company culture to encourage and support women on their way up. So Germany needs a multi-channel strategy to push women. Women need a career friendly atmosphere in society as well as family friendly conditions in companies, for example a company Kindergarten and flexible working time models – just to mention a few. So in our first year, we focused on working out a strategy and prioritizing actions to have the highest possible impact we could achieve with the limited resources at our disposal. We set up the profile of Victress e.V. The initiative sees itself as a public relations instrument for women of the generation that wants to be sexy and successful, and at the same want to have children and partners and feel great

about it all. Since these women don't necessarily want to demonstrate for their goals on the streets, they highly appreciate a lobbying partner like Victress as a valuable facilitator for their goals.

From the very beginning, our aim has been to ensure better use of the enormous, untapped female potential from which businesses can really benefit. Funny enough, society itself generally attests women qualities that clearly qualify them for top leadership and management positions: good education and training, emotional intelligence, strong leadership. Of course these qualities alone will not bring a woman to the top management of a company. Whoever wants to be at the very top of an organization must be able to fight for it. In the business world, this means, among others, standing with colleagues at the bar till late in the evening, travelling a lot, and less time for partnership and children.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

In particular, which actions do you initiate and which instruments do you use to support and push women to reach gender balance in the German business world?



Sonja Müller:

Victress consists of three fields of action. First: motivating and inspiring women who have the potential for top positions but actually do not use their potential. We encourage them by featuring successful role models, showing them how things work in other countries, giving them access to tools, for example communication tools and PR instruments.

The second field focusses on companies. We hold awareness workshops for employees in partner companies and talk to the respective management board about possibilities of attracting more high potential women to their company. We provide them with studies and best practise examples of other countries. We are also able to build a business case for gender balance and mixed leadership for their particular situation. Plus, we offer them a forum to present their efforts



on achieving family friendly working conditions for both men and women.

The third area is the one aiming to achieve a paradigm shift in society. For example: If women see Angela Merkel, the German federal chancellor, inspecting a guard of honour, walking or discussing with many male heads of state and government from foreign countries it effectively has more impact in people's mind than 10 national laws for equality. Women and men can see with their own eyes what is already possible! And this awareness of one's own role in society starts with little girls who should stop dreaming of becoming a good mother or a caring wife or a nurse and start dreaming about becoming chairwoman of an international company or head of government. We also have to change the role models in men's minds: they should take more responsibility for raising kids and for

the household without having the feeling that "gender balance" is at their expense.

An interesting hint at this point: in the 1960s women did an average of 35 hours housework per week, men just one. Today women still do 35 hours a week, men sixteen. So what happened? It is because do-it-yourself work is now counted as housework. In the household itself, men still do one hour of housework and 15 hours working in the garage on their hobbies...

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

... that is indeed interesting. Sticking on the instruments at your disposal, how important are your events for PR purposes, be it to create an atmosphere where men do more in household issues?

Sonja Müller:

With our events, we have been able to attract a lot of publicity thanks to the presence of celebrities and politicians like the Federal Chancellor and focusing on issues that are of great interest to magazines like "manager magazin", the German business weekly, "Wirtschaftswoche", also a German business weekly, and even "Bildzeitung", Germany's leading tabloid.

This all enables us to reach many people, which in turn gives us an excellent opportunity to promote the paradigm shift that is our goal. By the way, we have never been featured in a women's magazine like "Brigitte".

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

Do you have specific projects with the media?

Sonja Müller:

We started a panel together with "Wirtschaftswoche", the German weekly business magazine mentioned above, where we invited 200 women to give their opinion on economic matters. In the next step, we invited a panel of 200 men for their opinion on the same economic questions and we are waiting eagerly for the results – will they agree or disagree with the women in the ladies' panel!?

Another project we initiated is "work-life cross mentoring". We team up mentors from companies and coaches who consult on issues related to real life situations. For example on questions like "how do I and my partner deal with the fact that I earn more money than him?" The background here is the question as to whether our society really accepts successful women. It is an open secret that many men are scared of successful women.



Podium discussion moderated by Ulla Kock am Brink

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

Do you also meet women who reject the initiative or where you really have to struggle to convince them of the necessity and potential of the initiative?

Sonja Müller:

Yes, mostly the hardcore feminists eye us suspiciously because unlike them we don't only fight for our mission and vision with facts, studies and facts again. We use the fun and lifestyle factor a lot to bring the subject across. I think that you can't influence anybody if you just hammer your message into him. In our case, we first need to get the point across with men. Here we have to put the economic interest in the foreground. We use the fun / lifestyle factor to keep the door open. So we meet and act in an uncramped way, enjoying our togetherness and femininity without being filled with bitterness or abnormal ambition.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

And how do men generally react to the idea behind the initiative?

Sonja Müller:

Men are attracted to our events because the meetings are different from "normal" business meetings. Our meetings are more relaxed, with a touch of glamour: we have champagne, listen to music, meet unconstrained. Our way to connect and to meet is a new way for men and they feel attracted to join us. Upon being introduced in our initiative and learning about the vision, most of them support us.

I would like to reiterate that the goals of feminists differ from those of Victress as an organization. Whereas feminists want to push all women – fighting among other things for single parents and against sexual harassment and discrimination at work – we concentrate on high potential women with the aim of pushing them into leading positions. All the goals of feminists are very important too, but it is not the focus of Victress.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

How does gender balance in Germany compare to the situation in other European countries and from a wider international perspective?

Sonja Müller:

In most developed countries there is gender mainstreaming in some way. In Western Europe, the challenges are more or less similar, with differentiating factors that can be decisive. Whereas it is for example normal in France for women to return to their job immediately after the birth of their children, the vast majority of French women are still stuck in old role models: they have to take care of sick children, they have to organize how their children are cared for while they are at work, and they carry responsibility for the household with or without career responsibility. In France, too, men still persist on old role models. On the other hand, the Netherlands is a step ahead of most European countries. There, every employee is allowed to take a sabbatical in his working life for training, raising children and for other acceptable reasons. The time spent in sabbatical is added to the end of one's duration of employment after the normal retiring age. This way, neither women nor men have to be afraid that they won't be accepted or lose competitiveness when they return to work. In Scandinavia 80% of all men take paternity leave in some form or other whereas there are only 1,5% in Germany.

In Germany, we certainly need more women in top management positions. In many countries I know, you find female bosses with children and notice that they are able to combine family and job in an exemplary way. Even in middle management, Germany still has a long way to go as far as gender balance is concerned. While the proportion of women in middle management in Germany is about 20%, the proportion in top management is a mere 5%. In the United States, the proportion of women at that level is almost 40%. Suffice to mention that developing countries have a longer way to go than the better, but still unsatisfactory, situation in advanced democracies like Germany.



AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

Are there similar initiatives in other countries and are you networked with them?

Sonja Müller:

I am only aware of some networks, female networks, which also do some lobbying, but they do not involve men. As far as I am informed, Victress remains unique. Against this background, I think it would be advisable to engage ourselves abroad once we have achieved a certain degree of success in Germany. There is still so much to do in Germany itself that we will have to focus on our home country in the foreseeable future.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

What role model can the VICTRESS Initiative play for women in Africa in particular?

Sonja Müller:

Africa is a big continent, with many states that all have different levels of development. So it is not easy to compare Germany to Africa as a whole. All human beings being equal, I see no reason why women in Africa should be treated differently from, say, women in Germany. As Africa has to fight against so many other problems like female circumcision, violence, ethnic conflicts, climate factors and global competition, our fight for gender balance appears like some sort of luxury, however important it is. I think, though, that African women could be encouraged by knowing what is possible in Germany. This way, they will be given evidence that it is worth fighting for their rights.



Indeed, African women should be proud about what they achieve for their countries: they earn money, raise children and take care of the whole family – all at the same time. So they play a key role in developing Africa. They, therefore, deserve appreciation and support for their endeavours.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

From a business management perspective, does it make sense to invest in flexible working hour models, on-site or company-sanctioned child care possibilities and projects for the promotion of women and gender balance? Is the expected output of the beneficiaries, i.e. female employees, measurable in business management terms?

Sonja Müller:

Yes, definitely! Many studies about women who returned to work after maternity leave substantiate the gains. In family friendly companies, women come back after an average of 8 months, while in other companies it takes an average of 19 months. In companies with family friendly working environments and initiatives, the loyalty of women as employees is high. Such women are not only loyal, but also highly motivated, with the fluctuation rate relatively low. With a talent pool of high potentials that has become smaller over the years, successful companies use their family-friendly structures as a marketing instrument to attract high potential employees as they are aware of the returns.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

Taking your vision into account, what do you expect from governments?

Sonja Müller:

Governments should do everything in their power to enable women to have true choices in balancing family life with career opportunities. *True* choice means *true alternatives* between working and, if one so prefers, staying at home to take care of children without being put at a disadvantage. That involves ensuring that government policies provide frameworks that provide an enabling environment to achieve gender balance. France and Sweden provide an excellent illustration. In these countries, career women can trust professional organizations and individuals with child care and get the necessary breathing space for career development and advancement. On top of that, the policy framework in these countries enables willing men to involve themselves more in upbringing their children as opposed to practically leaving it all to women. I think we all have to understand that a situation where women practically throw away their educational capital after forming a family is unacceptable.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

What do you expect from the business community in this regard?

Sonja Müller:

The business community should invest in family friendly structures to make it easier to achieve a more balanced work life for women and men. And they should talk about their achievements as an instrument of bonding high potentials. In practical terms, this means ending practices that stand in the way of gender balance. In many companies, for example, there are still huge differences in career advancement and pay, with women obviously at disadvantage. Much too often, one hears that women have not been given a job because of killer arguments like "she will become pregnant and we will have to fill the position again." Society itself is still prejudiced against women who are successful in their

career. Very often, one hears the assertion, "She slept her way through up to her current position." All these excuses and prejudices are still used to exclude women from interesting career opportunities. On the other hand, there is in addition still a chronic shortage of female role models, especially women who have been able to optimally combine career responsibility and family (with children). Let me also add that it is of paramount importance for companies to also create family friendly conditions for men. Our goal is gender balance, not the advancement of one sex at the expense of the other. A woman should not be "twice as good as a man" to be given a job!

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE:

What do you expect, finally, from women themselves?

Sonja Müller:

Women should go forward and just do it. They should stop having doubts about whether they are qualified enough and whether they can as women reach their goals. They should stop asking themselves questions like "Will I make everybody around me happy in the way I act?" Women should simply be more self-confident. They should have courage to ignore societal prejudices. Excellence knows no gender. Together, we as women have been able to achieve a lot in this regard since the foundation of Victress in 2005.

Saying of the month:

Knowledge management
in the 21st century:
I know somebody
who knows somebody
who knows somebody ...