

Lonely at the top

You might think Germany is a politically correct kind of place where women wear the pants – or rather the fetching trouser suits. In politics, that might be the case, partly because many political parties have quotas. But in business, you'd be wrong. A recent study found Germany is at the bottom of the gender diversity league table when it comes to executive boards. By **BEN KNIGHT**

Anke Hoffmann knows about isolation. She's an executive board member and partner at the Berlin office of Kienbaum, a huge management consultancy firm with offices in 20 countries. In her ten years as a senior consultant, she got used to sexual discrimination and sometimes even harassment.

"It's like a film," she says, "Men in top positions think they can extend their power, and they often cross the line. Suddenly you feel hands under the table. You can hardly imagine it."

Judging how to react can be tricky, she says. "You have to distance yourself from it sometimes. If you're sitting at a table with five board members, four division managers and then two or three assistants, you can't just shout, 'What's going on here!' When it happened to me I tried to pull myself away – or whatever you can manage under the table – and then confronted the person afterwards. But that doesn't make you any friends."

Hoffmann says the old adage about women having to work twice as hard to achieve half as much definitely applies to her. She believes that Germany's business culture is saturated with sexism. "It starts with that and goes into intrigue over top management positions," she says. "I haven't just experienced that myself – I've heard it from a lot of women. Where male networks really play a role – information is leaked or suppressed so that you end up running into a wall."

State intervention

It was for women like Hoffmann that Labour Minister Ursula von der Leyen was speaking when she recently proposed a 30-percent female quota in big business. It was vetoed within 48 hours by the ever-conservative chancellor, but the proposal caught the public imagination. By the end of the week there was hardly a businessman, trade unionist or celebrity who hadn't been asked what they thought of it.

The idea would affect relatively few people, as it applies only to top management and executive committees. According to Thomas Tuma, business editor for *Der Spiegel*, that's around 7,000 jobs at most, but influential ones. In Germany's working world as a whole, society is fairly well balanced. Of around 40 million people who work for a living, 46 percent are women.

Yet the higher up the ladder, the more the balance tips. In management positions, only 21.7 percent are women. At Hoffmann's executive board level, it's down to 3.2 percent in the top 200 German companies.

Pressure mounts per baby

Sigrid Nikutta took over the BVG five months ago. She beat 176 other candidates – including 21

women – for the €400,000-per-year job. She's never felt stray hands in the boardroom, but she knows all about sexual discrimination – especially when children enter the picture.

"Of course if you're young and have no children, everyone says, 'Okay, everything is equal,'" Nikutta says. "But with my first child, the expectation was, 'Now she will be much quieter; she will relax and focus on the family.'"

The more kids Nikutta had, the more people assumed she would hang up her career. By the time she had her third child, expectations had intensified. "Everyone said, 'Okay, three children? Now she must stay at home.' When there were business dates in the evening, people would ask my secretary, 'Can she come? What's

with the baby?'"

"Your only choice is to take it humorously or get angry," says Nikutta, "and I decided to take it humorously. But of course no-one asks a man, 'How are you dealing with your children?' Men are always saying, 'Oh I have six children,' and people just say, 'What a virile guy.'"

Quota, for or against

Nikutta is in favour of a state-imposed gender quota, but it's hard to find a male business leader who agrees. In a recent survey, 21 of the 30 DAX companies said they were against them. Eight declined to answer and one was for it – the Munich based insurance giant Allianz, which already has more than 40 percent women in

Sonja Fusati, founder of female lobby *Victress*



SIGRID MALMGREN

leading positions. But small and medium-sized businesses would face serious short-term upheaval and potential legal difficulties if they had to start firing men and hiring women, even over a five-year period.

Mario Ohoven, president of the association for medium-sized German businesses, has all sorts of anti-quota arguments – constitutional (he says it would breach the freedom of contract) and statistical (he says figures from Norway and Finland show that a quota has little effect) – but he has nothing against women.

“I want to be really clear – our association is in favour of women in leading positions. My father died young and my mother took over and managed the company brilliantly,” he says. “I have real respect for women, and there are women who are better at certain things than us men. But to bring in a quota under the motto, ‘It doesn’t matter what she can do, she’s going to be a manager,’ I’m against that. Women don’t need that.”

Two choices

Sonja Fusati (photo) is a more surprising opponent of the quota. She is the founder of Victress, a lobby group that promotes mixed leadership, and head of her own media consultancy firm. She just became a mother and doesn’t intend to give up her job. She is dedicated to exploding gender

stereotypes but thinks a quota would be counter-productive. Though Fusati acknowledges that attitudes towards working mothers are troubling in Germany, she has faith in the market.

“I’m convinced that mixed leadership – be it gender, age or ethnic diversity – is definitely the way to go,” she says. “It’s just a question of how you get there. And if a company doesn’t feel the need itself, and doesn’t feel it’s lagging behind its competitors who have more diversity, then that’s their problem. The market, in my opinion, will develop towards more diversity.”

Ohoven and Fusati think a quota will damage the economy by imposing disadvantageous restrictions on businesses. For Ohoven, the lack of childcare facilities in Germany is the real impediment to women gaining higher positions. He says if the government wants to do something, it should concentrate on making it easier for companies to provide childcare.

A gentlemen’s agreement won’t do

But the idea of a gender quota is catching on throughout Europe. France just passed a 40-per cent female quota in executive committees, to be imposed by 2017. Spain’s 40-per cent quota has to be respected by 2015, and the Netherlands is in the process of formulating a law. The European Commission itself is putting increasing pressure on EU states to address the inequality – either in the form of a quota or else a binding agreement of self-regulation in business.

But getting the old boys boardroom to change its ways is not easy. Carlotta Koster-Bröns, head of the Association of German Businesswomen (VDU), points out that German government and business struck a self-regulation deal 10 years ago, and the ratios in the boardroom have hardly changed. She thinks only a law will do.

“You can see that the voluntary method doesn’t work from the example of France,” she says. “France also had an agreement, and it has a childcare infrastructure that looks amazing next to the German one. Now we see that France is also introducing a quota, because apparently the childcare infrastructure is not enough on its own.”

It’s the experience of the last decade that has changed the minds of many politically conservative women. One factor is age – statistics suggest that the older the woman, the more likely she is to be in favour of a quota. As TV presenter Caren Miosga told *Der Spiegel*, “Life makes you smarter.” Von der Leyen herself, who started the current storm, also changed her mind in the last few years simply because of the stagnant situation.

But Germany’s working women might have more serious concerns: a study that did not start a media debate last September revealed the depth of inequality in German society. The government-affiliated Institute for Employment Research (IAB) found that German women earned an average of €14.90 an hour, while men earned €19.40 – a 23 percent difference. Only four countries in the 27-member European Union had a bigger discrepancy. EU Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding gave Europe’s biggest economy a good ticking off, and called Germany’s result “unacceptable”.

Those 7,000 top jobs targeted by the quota debate could be at best the symptom of a much wider problem. ■



“At this point there’s no alternative to quotas.”

Ines Pohl, the editor-in-chief of Germany’s influential daily *taz* (*Die Tageszeitung*) talks about her job, the quota debate and the loneliness of the female executive. By DANA KIKIC

What are the pros and cons of being a woman at a top job? The con is a pro and the pro a con. Outside the *taz* I am very often one of the few women who have a leading role in the media. That sometimes makes me feel lonely. On the other hand it allows me to create my own style, to free myself from codes and standards I don’t appreciate. Inside the *taz* it helps me a lot that I am not part of one or the other boys’ groups, so I can be the mentor and leader hopefully for everyone.

Your predecessor was also a woman. Did she pave the way or did you have to reinvent it all? As the editor-in-chief for 11 years, Bascha Mika laid the groundwork for a woman leader in and outside the paper. It’s to her credit that it is accepted without any doubts that a woman can run a nationwide paper. As an outsider I brought in my professional experience from various news organisations in and outside Germany where I have worked on both sides, as a reporter and an editor.

What sacrifices does your position demand? It is a job with very long working hours, but it is also a job that can be very fulfilling. There is no better satisfaction than putting your time and energy into something you believe in, and I believe in the *taz*.

Do you see yourself as adding something different, a ‘feminine’ style, to the *taz*? People are defined by many things – their background, race, class, but also their gender. But all this is a mixture, so it’s kind of impossible to extract the influence of gender. I do think that women bring in a different point of view on the world, looking for different topics to report about and different questions to ask. I am a person who loves to discuss, but I’m willing and able to find a conclusion and take the responsibility to fight it through. Maybe the listening part can be identified as something typical for a woman.

Frauenquote, yes or no? At this point we see that there is no alternative to quotas. I think the figures are the best proof. And *Frauenquote* does not mean bringing women to power who are not well enough trained or do not have the skills. It actually means the opposite, to stop men from getting jobs just because they are part of the old boys’ club rather than because of their qualifications.