

Vote 100 Women in Business Summit – 17 April 2018

HRH The Countess of Wessex GCVO - speech

I am enormously honoured to have been asked to make the opening remarks at The Vote 100 Women in Business Conference.

Some of you may be wondering why I am hogging this particularly privileged spot today, and you are right to question. Well, over the past five years I have been involved with a number of professional organisations focussed on the issue of gender equality. For instance, I chair the Women's Network Forum, which is a cross-industry forum whose purpose it is to raise awareness and influence leaders to take action on improving gender balance and equality, while inspiring the next generation and sharing best practice.

I am also Global Ambassador of 100 Women in Finance's Next Generation initiative focussed on inspiring young women to consider a career in finance and then supporting their success through a global peer network.

And for the last few years I have been involved with the Women of the Future programme and a couple of years ago was invited to become their Global Ambassador.

I hope this demonstrates that like yourselves I am passionate about, and thoroughly engaged with, many of the issues that women are facing across the workplace and I am determined to help support the drive towards creating a more diverse and gender equal workforce.

We all know that one hundred years ago, after a long and brave campaign fought over a number of decades, some women in the UK were given the right to vote, but it was another ten years before that right was extended to all women. Therefore there are still many women alive today who did not start off their lives with that opportunity to influence the political landscape as a right.

It's odd how by relating it to the lifespan of a person it starts to make you realise just how much has changed. If you say '100 years', it sounds such a long time, but if you say 'within a lifetime' it feels far less.

So on the one hand we can say women's rights have come far in a relatively short period of time. However, on the other hand we seem to have come so far only to bump up against a number of walls which are proving to be rather stubborn.

Today women in the UK are equally represented in terms of voting in the democratic process, but this equal representation still does not extend to women in so many areas of our working lives, particularly in politics, business or academia.

So what should we do? Well, I think we all know that there are practical solutions which if implemented greatly improve both gender equality and the representation of women in senior roles across all areas.

But we need enlightened leaders, both male and female to believe in these solutions to make them a reality and part of our every day existence, and we need to start influencing people at a much younger age that having a gender balanced work place is the future, with no losers only winners.

It has been quite alarming reading and hearing recently of the huge pay gaps that exist across so many industries. This is something that has forever been an issue, but more often in the background. I think it is a positive moment for the whole equality agenda that this particular dirty laundry is now being aired because if women are not being recognised as equals then aspirations for a more gender diverse workplace will never be achieved.

I still love the Eurythmics song "Sisters are doing it for themselves". There is so much in that song that encapsulates what our aims are all about...

Yes we've just about made it out of the kitchen, but although we are doing it for ourselves and yes we've got doctors, lawyers, politicians too, we are still not able to make that final push for real equality.

Importantly though that song says something that I believe is crucial to our objectives....and that is 'a man still loves a woman, and a woman still loves a man' because none of this is about pushing men aside, none of this is about taking over... it is purely about creating opportunity for all, both male and female, from which everyone stands to benefit. This is a joint effort.

Today is about exploring many of the issues and discussing ways to move things forward and I hope you will all fully engage with the discussions and leave here inspired by what you have

learned and heard, with renewed conviction of what you can do to influence, change and move this important agenda forward.

To all the speakers who are attending today. Thank you for giving your time and interest to this conference and the importance of its aims. To the organisers thank you too for putting together a day which I believe will be extremely interesting and beneficial for everyone.

I wonder what the Suffragists of 100 years ago and more would make of where we are today. I hope they would be proud of what they achieved on our behalf, but they would also be urging us more than ever to keep going and to create a more balanced workplace.

Certainly many of those suffragists knew though that the only way to make this happen was to engage with our male counterparts. Jeanette Rankin, women's rights advocate and the first woman to hold federal office in the United States was so right when she said "Men and women are like right and left hands: it doesn't make sense not to use both."

May I wish you an enjoyable and successful day. Thank you.