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Embracing gender in leadership

Speech by Ebba Öhlund

Dear Mirella, dear Linda, dear participants,

I am delighted to be here today to talk about gender equality and leadership. In the last years, there has been a growing awareness on the importance of a gender perspective in leadership, management, and policies in the EU. Furthermore, our understanding of gender equality has evolved.

After years of progress in the share of women in leadership positions in the EU, the experience of the Covid pandemic has however shown that setbacks for women are possible again – at all levels. Furthermore, these days are full of examples of a kind of leadership we thought we had overcome.

We are at a time where gender equality is at risk in many areas. This invites us to take a step back and look at where we are. In this respect, I would like to express my gratitude for the important work you are doing with the REWIRING project. You are inviting us to look at gender equality more broadly by tackling the institutional, experiential, and symbolic dimensions of it.

So what is the relationship between leadership and gender equality?

Today, in the EU, as previously mentioned, we can see a great gender gap in leadership position. Based on the observation that gender quotas increased this share in several member states, we at CEC have advocated for a binding gender quota at EU level. The EU will introduce a quota of 40% for women on boards in 2026. This gap is particularly pronounced in some sectors, such as in STEM. Some of our member organisations have been organising initiatives to increase the share of female managers in these sectors.

But it is not only the share of women in leadership position that counts if we look at policies. The gender gap also concerns experiences of violence, harassment, pensions, pay or wealth. For instance, in the US, [a study found](#) that female executives in S&P 500 companies hold only 1% of total shares – although women there make 25% of executives.

Also parents face gendered inequalities. That's why we have early advocated for non-transferrable parental leave arrangements.

The case for gender equality is clear: not only is it key for women's lives and democracy, but it is also a strong economic argument. While evidence seems clear, why are we facing so many hurdles?

That's where I believe the role of leadership becomes crucial. Many men and women have grown up in a world where masculine traits were valued and associated with power. In the worlds of business, media, and politics the archetype of the so-called "strong leader" is often still prevalent. As a woman, it often pays to play the masculine trait card. How can we embrace female qualities instead and promote them as women or as men?

At CEC, we see it as our role to show different ways of being a leader. For instance, during our General Assembly last year in Stockholm, we invited Caroline Farsberger as a keynote speaker. She experienced a gender transition from being a male to a female CEO and very clearly identified the often-invisible rules that govern how we think and act as a leader. How much space is there for listening, for different opinions, or for even looking differently in board rooms? Our reflections on the importance of unconscious bias in leadership brought us to launch a new EU project to address gender and other biases in the workplace.

Lastly, I would like to highlight the leverages we have seen for gender equality in leadership in the experience of our members. In some member organisations, alliances and networks of women have become more important to share experiences, have crucial conversations and support each other. Of course, such conversations need to be taken to the workplace and wider society to be effective. Furthermore, cases like the one of Caroline Farberger highlight the opportunity of shifting the story of what it means to be a leader.

Narration can take people on board around a greater vision, while providing shared meaning. We can ask ourselves how a workplace could look like if we listened to a diversity of perspectives. We can start conversations on what it means to be a leader today in our organisation. We can create communities of practice in which we take the time and space to cultivate female leadership traits – as women and men. This of course requires broader and more diverse alliances and focussing our efforts on where it can make an impact rather than with those that are unable to listen.

The question then is how we can create the right framework conditions in which female leadership qualities can be practiced? How do we design our meetings, which language do we use, and which potential do we aim at when we come together? I believe that there are many questions that deserve further exploration, and I am keen on discovering where they can take us.

Thank you for your attention.