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# For Women Who Lead, a Forum of Their Own

By STEVEN ERLANGER OCT. 19, 2008

DEAUVILLE, France — Tory Frame, an Irish-born partner in the London office of the consulting group Bain & Company, used to always try to keep gender out of business. “I always thought I had to act like the male partners to get to be a partner,” she said. “I didn’t have many female role models, and I had a very specific view of leadership.”

But in 2005 she attended the first Women’s Forum for the Economy and Society along with about 500 other women, and it changed her, she said this weekend.

“I came here and I heard loads of women speaking in their own way — clear leaders, but without conforming to that male stereotype, and it encouraged me to be myself, to use empathy and humor,” said Ms. Frame, who has an M.B.A. from Harvard. “It had a very big impact on me. I saw that there are ways to be very powerful, but also warm.”

Barbara Ngouyombo is a young entrepreneur, a systems engineer from Réunion, the French island in the Indian Ocean. She has started a company in

London to provide computerized health information for travelers requiring daily care. “Usually I’m not so comfortable just among women,” she said. “But this is different. There’s so much diversity here. We’re all from different backgrounds and places.”

The annual meeting of the Women’s Forum, which ended here on Saturday and included 1,200 women, is modeled on the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the famous global talkathon. The Women’s Forum ([www.womensforum.com](http://www.womensforum.com)) offered three days of lectures, panels, brainstorming sessions and guided conversations on the issues of the moment: the global economic meltdown, the crisis of leadership, the American presidential election, foreign policy, environmental problems, China, Russia, India. Well-known politicians and speakers, both women and men, came from all over the world, with an emphasis on Europe, and included Americans like Jeffrey E. Garten, a Yale economist, and Clyde V. Prestowitz, president of the Economic Strategy Institute.

There were also workshops on specific challenges faced by women, to discuss how women could be most effective in science, politics, education, corporate life and the media. There were panels on how, as Bettina Götzenberger, the manager of a Spanish legal services company, said, “to think bigger, and how to be less modest in asking for money and investment.”

And there were sessions that featured prominent women. They included Ingrid Betancourt, the former Colombian presidential candidate and freed hostage; the designer Diane von Furstenberg; the sailor Ellen MacArthur; the exiled Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin; the venture capitalist Molly F. Ashby; and French cabinet ministers like Fadéla Amara, who is in charge of coordinating plans for the racially mixed and poor Parisian suburbs, and Anne-Marie Idrac, responsible for foreign trade.

As so often is the case in France, earnest talk of global poverty, child abuse and the dangers of the economic crisis for philanthropy was mixed with lavish meals, Champagne and espresso provided by corporate sponsors in the resort setting of Deauville, on the Normandy beaches.

There were the usual mixed messages, with participants given expensive anti-aging cosmetics and offers of makeovers and photographic portraits from corporations seeking to attract successful potential customers. There was Cartier, the French jewelry company, which sponsors a global competition for young female entrepreneurs like Ms. Ngouyombo. Five winners receive \$20,000 each and a year of business coaching from Cartier, management consultants McKinsey & Company, and Insead, the business school with campuses in France and Singapore.

The Women's Forum was the brainchild of Aude Zieseniss de Thuin, 58, a French businesswoman who once applied to go to the Davos economic forum, without success. "They didn't even deign to respond," she said.

Angry, she decided that Davos, with many fewer women than men, should have a more female-friendly analogue, and she created this forum three years ago as a private company. The idea, she said in an interview, was not to create a feminist institution, but "to give a voice to women, half of the population," and help provide role models.

"I've had a lot of satisfaction in watching rising talents," she said, adding that her only regret was not having had the idea a decade earlier. The current economic shock "will probably be terrible for many women around the world," especially in poor countries, she said.

"I think it's the beginning of a new world, a worse one, a more difficult one, especially for women. But I'm also optimistic, because it's a time for women to take responsibility."

Ms. de Thuin usually charges 5,000 euros (about \$6,700) for each participant, not including transportation or accommodation. ("I'm not a hypocrite; I'm an entrepreneur," she said.) But women from small companies, poorer countries or charitable organizations pay half that. This year, the attendees came from 88 countries, with a special emphasis on India.

Ms. de Thuin is a difficult boss, by all accounts, and the forum has yet to

attract Davos's star power. But the concept of the forum seems to transcend its difficulties. As one board member said privately, "The point is to keep the idea alive."

Ms. Ashby, an American, left J.P. Morgan in 2000 to start Solera Capital, a private-equity firm. "This conference is a fascinating mix of business and not-for-profits in a way that's very powerful," she said, adding, "There's a European flair, a candor and forthrightness, a self-awareness that's very attractive."

Women do not attend just for the panels, she said. "We go to be together. We go for the immersion in this incredibly diverse community of women, and we all care. We are all bound by the caring."

Julia Harrison started Blueprint Partners, a public relations and consulting company in Brussels. "Gender is still a big hang-up, especially in business," she said. "Playing to women, it's like admitting a weakness. But when you get here it doesn't seem to matter. There's this huge myth about women that they're nasty to one another. But in fact everyone here is rooting for each other; everyone wants everyone else to succeed."

Valérie Bernard, a French businesswoman who lives in Saint-Denis, a poor suburb to the north of Paris, maintains a blog, [chroniquesmabanlieue.com](http://chroniquesmabanlieue.com). Since the conference began, she wrote, "it's been an emotional electric shock."

She described it as "a kind of coaching seminar driven by a single aim, to boost your personal reserve of confidence and tolerance, within a collective dynamic: women in the service of progress."

The experience made her nearly speechless, she wrote. "The intensity of the exchanges, the meetings, the level of the interventions — how can I possibly tell you everything?"

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