

GLOBAL BUSINESS | FEMALE FACTOR

# Plenty of Suits and Ties at Annual Women's Business Forum

By KATRIN BENNHOLD OCT. 17, 2010

DEAUVILLE, FRANCE — The stars of this year's women's forum were the men.

As female business and political leaders gathered in this beach resort in Normandy last week for the Women's Forum Global Meeting, an annual conclave that has been dubbed the Davos of women, the number of suits and ties in a sea of colorful female elegance definitely stood out.

Maurice Lévy, chief executive of the advertising company Publicis; Carlos Ghosn, the chief of the carmakers Renault and Nissan; and James Turley, global head of the accounting firm Ernst & Young, were among those who took to the stage to plead the case for more women throughout corporate hierarchies.

Twenty-three chieftains of industry — 13 of them men — committed to six concrete measures to improve the gender balance in their companies over the next 12 months. The measures included pledges to make the advancement of women a top strategic priority at the chief executive level, to require female candidates in every recruitment pool, and to deliver specific targets for more female representation at all levels of their companies.

“This is strategically as important to our businesses as revenue growth or product innovation,” said Mr. Turley, one of the drivers of the initiative. “We need women if we want to remain competitive.”

And women, observed Melanne Verveer, U.S. ambassador-at-large for global women's issues and a regular at Deauville, “need men to be their ambassadors.”

The greater presence of men at this year's forum — the sixth such session since it was first held in 2005 — is emblematic not just of a growing awareness in the business world that looming skills shortages make women a vital pool of talent. It is also indicative of a shift among prominent women toward the idea that men — as sympathetic chief executives, corporate mentors and involved fathers — are crucial to the next stage of women's advancement.

Multinationals like the nuclear giant Areva and the food service company Sodexo have appointed men as diversity officers in order, they say, to communicate more effectively to the male executives running operational units that they should or must promote women.

And European governments are increasingly looking at policies that might nudge fathers to share responsibilities in the family to help relieve the pressure on working mothers.

“We need role models” not just of women in senior positions but of senior men making more time for the family, said Aart de Geus, deputy secretary general of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Chris Viehbacher, chief executive of Sanofi-Aventis, the pharmaceutical company, suggested businesses help alleviate childcare worries of employees by providing nurseries at the corporate level. “What you really want to do is create circumstances in which men and women can do it all,” he said.

Meanwhile, Michel Landel, head of Sodexo, stressed the importance of a visible and audible commitment at the chief executive level: “It's a man's world, and companies have been shaped by men,” he said.

Or as Mr. Turley put it: “In some cases, we are fighting literally centuries of tradition.”

But if there was broad agreement on the need for more concerted action, the views among both women and men here often diverged on the methods. One of the most divisive issues remains that of quotas for women in corporate boardrooms, a major talking point now that a number of European countries are weighing or have passed legislation obliging companies to have a minimum share of female directors.

“I hate quotas,” said Mr. Lévy of Publicis. He said his own company has seven women on its 15-member board, simply because those women were the best candidates. But he conceded that the threat of legislation in France was what had recently impelled the mostly male chief executives of the industry association he heads to adopt a code of good practice committing them to a minimum share of women on boards.

Mr. Landel, by contrast, insisted that without enforceable quotas the numbers would simply not budge. “You need quotas,” he said. “Unless you take very, very aggressive steps, things will not change.”

Viviane Reding, a vice president of the European Commission and the commissioner for justice, told companies that if they wanted to avoid regulation they would have to move quickly in promoting more women.

Threatening Europe-wide quotas as soon as late 2011 — a move that would have to be agreed to by member governments — she said business had “one more chance.”

Ms. Reding, who as telecommunications commissioner responded to a failed effort at self-regulation by the mobile phone industry with rules that forced European roaming charges down by more than half, has convened a chief executive summit in the spring of next year to hear from business leaders on how they plan to address gender balance in their organizations voluntarily.