

Women's share of UK board seats stalls

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The share of women on the boards of large UK companies has barely budged in the past two years, rising just 0.1 percentage points to 11.5 per cent, according to a survey by the European Professional Women's Network and the Egon Zehnder recruiting firm.

By contrast, female representation on Scandinavian boards has jumped to 29 per cent from 23 per cent two years ago, led by Norway, where a government mandate has prompted large companies to appoint women to 44 per cent of board seats.

UK companies still have a higher share of female directors than Europe overall, but the average for the FTSE Eurofirst 300 is rising faster. Women now make up 9.7 per cent of directors of FTSE Eurofirst 300 companies, up from 8.5 per cent in 2006, according to the survey that analysed data collected by BoardEx.

The survey highlights widening disparity in Europe. Italian boards remain just 2 per cent female and Portuguese boards are less than 1 per cent female. But boards in the Netherlands have nearly doubled their share of women in the past two years to 12.3 per cent.

On average, European boards have twice as many foreign directors as they have women. The survey found that 23.5 per cent of directors are of a nationality other than the country where their company has its headquarters.

"Overall progress is glacially slow and the divides are increasing," said Mirella Visser, president of the network. "Companies are apparently more interested in international diversity than gender diversity."

Europe lags behind North America. Women hold 14.8 per cent of all board seats in the Fortune 500 and 13 percent of the seats of companies in Canada's FP500, according to the non-profit organisation Catalyst.

In some cases, national differences illustrate government intervention. In Norway, a 2003 law calls for fining companies that do not have 40 per cent female directors by 2010. The Spanish parliament recently set a similar target for 2015, so a similar rise may follow there, where now only 6.6 per cent are women.

"From my observation, the glass ceiling is still a reality," said Dr Geneviève Berger, who has stepped down from the Unilever board to take an executive post. Seeking out women "has to be a real will of the company or it's not going to happen".

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