

The Parity Pipeline: How High Potential Women Can Get To The Top

Dame Judith Mayhew, a former chair of the City of London Corporation, a former top employment lawyer and cited by the media as one of Europe's most influential businesswomen, talks with IIC Partners Chief Marketing & Communications Officer Polly Stewart on how women can empower themselves to reach c-suite and board level.



"I always describe myself as a shameless opportunist," New Zealander Dame Judith Mayhew gets straight to the point. It's a blustery, wet spring day and we're sitting in the boardroom in Dame Judith's central London home. Yes - she has a boardroom, it doubles as a dining room, in her home.

"Every opportunity I go past I grab and then decide what I want to do with it. In that sense, I have broken out of being self-limiting and it's given me huge opportunity. I do believe you have to grab opportunities because if you don't you might never get a chance to do that thing. Life is not a dress rehearsal and I would like to say that I tried and it didn't work rather than I wish I had tried. I've had an extraordinarily varied career and only because I grabbed opportunities."

Being descended from the indomitable voluntary European migrants who arrived in New Zealand in the mid to late 1800s is another reason Dame Judith cites for her success.

"In the film 'The Piano' [directed by New Zealand Oscar-winning director Jane Campion] the main character arrives [on an isolated beach on the West Coast of NZ's South Island] and she does not know where she is to going to sleep that night. That actually happened. Women broke the land in with the men in New Zealand. New Zealand was the first country in the world to give women the vote. There wasn't gentrification there either. Women's rights and women's empowerment occurred in that colonial society because it wasn't going to flourish unless it used the whole population."

Would there have been a difference if she'd been brought up in the UK, her homeland now?

"There would have been a difference if I had been brought up in the UK.



"My mother was widowed when I was five and so she was the main breadwinner. I went to a very academic all-girl school where we were taught that we could go out and conquer the world. We had a much more 'can-do' attitude.

"Some women are amazing risk takers and more risk taking than males, but I do think that many women like to remain in their comfort zone, like to feel competent and in charge and need to be reminded to step outside of their comfort zone. Women will often apologize unnecessarily and will often self-limit."

I first met Dame Judith when she had just been appointed as the first female to chair the City of London Corporation in 1997. At that time, she was at top law firm Wilde Sapte. Truly inspirational as a role model then, I could not help but mention to her in this interview that she appeared to have changed. She is even more charismatic, more energetic - if possible - than before. I asked her, had she noticed a change in herself. And if she had, what has brought about that change.

"Yes - it was being the Leader of the City for six years and deputy for four. During my first period as Chair we were very involved in the City's European work. It was at a very interesting stage of development of the single market and financial services, and there were opportunities to be taken by the City. I realized I really enjoyed doing policy and strategy work. And I began to realize that yes I could do it, and I could make a difference and achieve things working in a much broader way. I recognized I was changing, and that gave me courage.

"And that gave me a public position. I was the first woman to be the leader of the City [of London], the first to chair the Royal Opera House, the first woman to be Provost of King's College, Cambridge."

Dame Judith is currently chair of London & Partners (the official promotional organization for London), the New West End Company (the management and promotional company for Bond, Oxford and Regent Street in London's West End shopping district) and the Independent School's Council (a non-profit organization which represents the UK's 1,234 independent schools). As well as her six years' leading the City of London Corporation, she has sat as a non-executive director on the board of Merrill Lynch, has been a member of the UK Government Cabinet Office's Equality Review Panel and has had multiple roles on boards and boards of trustees in local government, education and cultural organizations. She began her career as a law lecturer, then employment lawyer.

But despite her credentials, gravitas and abilities, she has, on rare occasions, been subject to discrimination on the basis of her gender.

"The most difficult environment I have had to work in was one containing elements of entrenched sexism."

The sector? "Education.

"I would not say that most people are inherently sexist. But people are happier sitting in groups that are similar to them - how many men join the WI? [the Women's Institute, a British community-based club for women]. It's a question of being limited and not thinking outside the box."

Dame Judith says much of the propagation of male dominated boards is probably determined by the executive search profession.

"Headhunters have a role to play in broadening boards, in fact, headhunting is the biggest key. There are certain headhunters who control virtually all the FTSE 100 appointments and getting



them to increase their contact lists might do more than most other actions."

I ask Dame Judith her views on one of those other actions - the introduction of statutory gender quotas as a number of other countries have done in Europe to varying degrees - and she says that she probably would not support such a step.

"I would always want the best person on a board because they deserve being there, whether they are male or female or come from a particular ethnic group. I have met some of the people from Finland who say it is working, but when you do the analysis, it's the same small group of women who sit on the same boards. A small cadre of women is just replicating the male problem of a small clique."

So what can women do to empower themselves to improve their chances of getting on to boards or into senior roles?

"With my generation, most of us made it through via the voluntary sector, often chairing big arts institutions or big universities with multi-million pound budgets and complex policies in regulated sectors with a need to be commercial.

"Women who want to get to corporate board level should go out and find a voluntary board to sit on - an arts institution, a charity. I'd advise them to follow their passion and go from there - and remember to put it on their CV. A lot of women have been school governors or university governors and they don't see it as the equivalent of being on a board, but it is.

"It's a win-win situation as you may not get paid, but the skill set you pick up is worth its weight in gold. I think women will always be able to come through that route.

"This is where headhunters need to cast the net much wider, see the value of the experience women who do this have they gained

and value it equally with being on a FTSE 350, though often it's much more complicated."

Dame Judith says another route is the actual career path selection.

"When you look at senior management teams and those who are put on boards the HR route is clearly one that women have broken through to become top executive directors. Accountancy is another area with many women breaking through as CEOs or directors of finance.

"In big companies, both of these functions are strategic so a lot of women who go into these areas go in-house rather than into a professional practice, and this gives them the opportunity to move up the corporate ladder.

"Networking is also quite important but for women to break into male networks is quite difficult. There must be untold opportunities that come from the golf course, as an analogy.

"There are separate women's networks and certainly recommending women to headhunters is a very good thing they support and help.

"I informally belong to several women's networks and I find them quite useful and very enjoyable for informal recommendations and mentoring and bouncing ideas off each other. Headhunters and those who appoint need to look beyond their own networks and consciously do that."

By Polly Stewart

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