



Workplace Equality: In It Together

Laura Haynes, Co-Chair of the UN Women's National Committee UK, talks to Mary-Anne Baldwin about the UN's global drive to deliver gender equality and how this can be brought to the workplace

When it comes to gender equality, we may want it, but rarely do we know how to achieve it. After decades of attempts, our biggest lesson is that turning theory into practice is one tough nut to crack. This is why an ambitious campaign by the United Nations aims to deliver defined and achievable steps that everyone can apply to their business.

Under its campaign, HeForShe, UN Women (the UN's entity for gender equality) has called on members of the business, governmental and educational communities to make three basic commitments towards gender equality – and then tell them how it went. UN Women will collate and measure those

findings to produce a global study on the efficacy of diversity initiatives in three to five years' time.

As the Co-Chair of the UN Women's National Committee UK, **Laura Haynes** explains: "We would then have a really good base to understand what works and will be able to create awareness of practical solutions that address the challenges."

A Petition for Change

The HeForShe campaign started in autumn of 2014 as a way to get men involved in the gender debate. "It was based on the recognition that

if we wanted to make real sustainable change, it was not going to be done by excluding 50 per cent of the world. There are a lot of men who believe in diversity and they wanted to make a change but actually there was no place for their voices," says Laura.

In its infancy, HeForShe was a petition for change signed by men – this included heads of state, to your next-door neighbour and was promoted by actress, Emma Watson, the campaign's spokeswoman.

At the time of writing, the register had stretched to over 1.3 billion signatures, but to accelerate progress towards the goal UN Women has engaged businesses, >



educational institutions and governments to identify and implement approaches for addressing gender inequality.

This is so often where businesses come unstuck. With an issue so deep-rooted and systemic, how does one address inequality? Laura explains that the possibilities are as diverse as the problems.

“Most companies are facing problems promoting and keeping women at senior level. In some organisations, particularly in the finance, technology and engineering sectors, there are challenges at entry level too. Through HeForShe, companies have made a number of key commitments, looking at different ways of addressing the challenges. Hopefully we’ll learn from that and find eureka moments that make these things work,” Laura says.

For example, Barclays – which is one of the campaign’s champions of change – has introduced steps that address gender imbalance both within the workplace and beyond.

It aims to increase its representation of women in senior leadership by a percentage point each year and is rolling out cultural initiatives including unconscious bias training. It has also pledged to help 2.5 million women globally by expanding their access to credit and banking, improving financial literacy and removing women’s barriers to business ownership.

Furthermore, the bank has made it the responsibility of every staff member by asking them each to choose their own three steps to tackle the gender inequalities. “They decided it was going



to be part of everyone’s agenda, not just the male employees and not just leadership team – everyone’s,” Laura explains.

Inclusion in Action

Getting everyone in a business to tackle gender parity can build traction and incite cultural change. As Laura reflects: “We know that changing culture is one of the biggest and most challenging things that has to be done, and it has to be done over time. We also know that there are commercial impacts on businesses, and so it’s not as simple as flicking a switch and making things happen.

“One of the things we have to guard against is a backlash,” says Laura. She explains that some men can feel threatened and worried about having to compete harder for jobs as women rise through the ranks.

“That doesn’t do any good for women or for men,” she notes. “So when working with organisations to create change, you have to go well beyond the theory to a deeper understanding including what the barriers are and how to overcome them. This topic cannot just be tackled on a single dimension.”

It’s a complicated task but every business must get a grip of this or risk losing its competitive edge, says Laura.

“The time has come. Of course it’s the right thing to do, but it also builds commercial advantage and a stronger business. Diversity of thought, a deeper understanding of customers, better recruitment and longevity of the workforce are just a few of the benefits.

It will be at least three years before UN Women start to unpick their findings and even that is just the beginning.

“What’s the end plan? This should never end,” warns Laura. “My fear is that people will think ‘Okay, we’ve ticked that box, it’s done, and in reality it’s a long way from being done. Anyone who works in the area of change knows that it is an on-going process, but one worth the ride”. ■

This article was taken from a recent Criticleye [Women in Leadership](#) event. See [here](#) to attend the next event.

Interested in joining the HeForShe campaign? Find out more [here](#). Find out if your company follows the UN’s [Women’s Empowerment Principles](#)



Laura Haynes
Chairman
Appetite

Laura is the founder and Chairman of Appetite. Aside from her role as Co-Chair at the UN Women National Committee UK, Laura is also a Director of FutureLondon Enterprises, a member of the Parliamentary Design Commission, a Fellow at the Royal Society of Arts (UK) and the Marketing Society (UK).

Contact Laura through: www.criticleye.com