

“Women Head of State feel over-observed”



Mrs. Laura Liswood, manager of Goldman-Sachs, one of the biggest investment groups worldwide, about the role of women, inequalities and the reason why we should admire Michelle Obama.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Mrs. Liswood, there is a great number of studies which demonstrate an increase of economic benefits in firms run by men and women. Why are there still so few women in charge of both enterprises and countries?

Liswood: These studies are still much unknown among people. In brief we will for example know what does it mean for an enterprise to have 40% of women in its board of directors. In Norway this is now obligatory by law. But it will take time for analyzing the concrete differences. Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account that we are asking people to change and that this is always a hard job...

SPIEGEL ONLINE: Why?

Liswood: I don't think that men really want to hinder women to make their occupational career. The dynamic between dominant and non dominant members of a group occurs unconsciously. I wrote a book about this topic, called "The Loudest Duck". It is about the question where do we get the mental pictures about leadership figures, women and other groups: from our parents, our teachers, our religion and our experiences. I remember a conversation that I had with the first female President of Iceland, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. She had been 16 years in office. After at about eight years kids in Iceland thought that only women could become President.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: In the U.S.A they are paying a lot of attention to the First Lady. Does it bother you that Michelle Obama, graduated at the Harvard Law School, now plays the role of the lovely wife and mother?

Liswood: No, I think that Michelle Obama is a great example. Yes, she has adapted herself up to a certain point to her position of First Lady but it is also true that she has quite a lot of power in this position and that she uses it almost as she wants. By the way: I also admire President Barack Obama. He is part of a group of non dominant population and on him fall a lot of expectations. It must be hard to be the first one in such a position.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: But- What can be done for finally increasing the number of women in decision-making positions in politics and the economy?

Liswood: The main problem is that one always feels closer to other people who are similar to oneself. It would be really helpful if more men would be conscious of this dynamic. And it would be helpful too if more women would be even more conscious of

this fact. It is interesting that, for example, men who have daughters are much more conscious of this situation: as they really want their daughters to make a great professional career they look at labor relations in their own job from a different point of view.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: What do you think about women quotas in firms and parliaments?

Liswood: It really depends on the country. In the U.S.A. people are allergic to quotas. In Europe this kind of instruments are better accepted. It is also very interesting that recently reviewed Constitutions such as the Afghan or the Iraqi one establish a minimum of women representatives in decision-making positions.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: The question here is if these women will really have a voice in parliaments...

Liswood: That's true. But the fundamental question is: how can I bring someone in a powerful position to change an existing situation? I think that people in power change their way of acting for mainly three reasons: when they risk a penalty, as in the case of laws providing obligatory quotas; when they get some benefit, this is when their own performance improves when there are women in their team; or when they have a concrete vision of a certain management behavior.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: For one of your bibliographic projects you have interviewed some women heads of state. What have they told you about their job? Have they lived more or less the same experiences?

Liswood: Every country has different problems and therefore a German chancellor will have to face up different problems as Iceland's President. But in any case all the women confirmed one fact: all of them felt much observed. Almost all of them told me that they were being evaluated in a different way than male heads of state. I remember how the ex Prime Minister of Norway, Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, told me that the fact that she was a female had been a central question during her first years of mandate.

SPIEGEL ONLINE: So every woman in the world faces the same problems?

Liswood: The conditions for a woman in Yemen will be clearly worse than in Sweden. But the dynamic is more or less the same one in every place. And full gender equality doesn't exist in any country.