

## Talk by Silvoja Seres on “Women in Norwegian Boards: A Career Discussion”

*Humboldt University, October 13th 2010.*

Thank you for inviting me to this award ceremony; I am honored and proud to be a part of it. Promoting and celebrating brilliant women such as Ann is an excellent way to inspire other ambitious women by way of a positive role model.

One of the reasons I am here is to talk about the Norwegian efforts for getting more women into management and board rooms. I am one of the women who have benefited from this new law. I also hope that my and other women’s contribution through these engagements, has helped convince some of the doubting politicians and businessmen that diversity really is positive (and even necessary) for business in these dynamic and global times. Over the past few years the general sentiment in Norway has moved from being evenly split between supporters and critics, to a generally accepted view that positive discrimination was necessary to achieve this level of women’s within a reasonable timeframe. But let me start by giving you some background, both for the Norwegian setting and myself, and then shortly discuss some of our experiences from Norway.

First, a few words about Norway. It is a rich county: we have less than five million people, and the world’s fourteenth largest oil production (the fourth largest per capita, after three gulf countries). This oil, together with other natural resources (natural gas, hydroelectric power, forests, minerals, and seafood), and a long history of shipping and international trade, results in the second wealthiest country in the world (per citizen wealth). At the same time, Norway is a highly egalitarian and kind society, with traditionally strong women and much respect for family life and values. Norway maintains a Scandinavian welfare model with universal health-care, subsidized higher education, and a comprehensive social security system. The Norwegian welfare model is widely regarded as the most generous in the world. Norway is often ranked among the world’s most democratic counties, but the World Economic Forum ranks Norway behind most Western European countries with it comes to competitiveness. This may be a side product of our generous welfare system.

Most women in Norway work and have children at the same time; this is a result of long and concentrated political effort. 80% of women work, and we have 1.8 children on average (compared to 1.4 in Germany). We have 100% kindergarten coverage for children over 1 year. The work culture is also family-friendly: for example, for people with small children (men or women) it is commonly accepted to go home in time to collect children from kindergarten before 5pm (but in some positions it may be expected to work from home for while after children’s bed time). The Norwegian men are used to contribute in the home- and child-related work, and I often joke that the Norwegian men are one of the best export articles of Norway (and I am forgiven for saying this since I married a Norwegian man).

Still, even with all this wealth and equality and work, women were not equally represented in the management or board of Norwegian companies. Women still occupy less than 10% of top management positions. However, since the quota law, they do hold 40% of all board positions in public companies. Is this good or bad? Let us get back to this question in a moment.

Now a few words about me. I am a kind of a nomad, culturally and career-wise. I am 40 years old, married with 3 children. The youngest child is a girl, only two weeks old, so I am now in effect taking a leave from my maternity leave to be here with you. I am originally Hungarian and have grown up in Yugoslavia. I started my life in Norway twenty years ago by studying computer science at the University of Oslo; after a few years of working as an IT consultant in Norway, I have moved to Oxford to do a PhD in mathematical sciences, and I stayed for three more years to teach and work as a fellow at one of the old colleges at Oxford University.

After this I have spent some time doing research in Silicon Valley in the USA with the team that built the Alta Vista search engine, and I worked for a few months as a professor in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, helping to start the first private female university in the kingdom. For a while I also I worked with research in the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing.

Since childhood, I have always thought that I will spend my life in academia, being a professor like my father. Even though I thrived in the academic paradise of Oxford and loved doing technology research and development, during my work in Silicon Valley I gradually became fascinated by the process of commercialization of these great new technologies. Through several projects I learned that the people who create technology products and the people who try to sell them often speak two different languages, and that I would love to work as someone who helps bridge this gap.

This go-between role in technology and business has been my calling since then. In order to become more fluent in the language of business, I first completed an MBA from INSEAD. After this, I went back to Norway together with my husband. I joined then what was one of the most exciting startups in the internet space, a company called Fast Search & Transfer, focusing on enterprise search engines. During the next 7 years we grew from 120 employees to 800, and ended up being bought by Microsoft approximately three years ago. I was responsible for building and managing several groups in this company, among others strategic consulting and product marketing. Currently I am still with the same team, but now working for Microsoft.

Since Fast was a highly visible company in Norway and I was one of the few female leaders in the company, a few years ago I was asked to sit on a couple of boards for other internet technology companies. These companies became also successful, and slowly my board activities broadened into other kinds of businesses. Now I sit on the board of Statkraft, one of the renewable largest energy companies in the world, and Dagbladet, our second largest newspaper.

Now, back to my original question. Was the board quota good or bad? For example, how much of my career path depends on the quota law and general Norwegian business culture?

I think that being in Norway has had an effect on both my management career and my board career. In terms of management, having a husband (or a partner), extended family and a society that supports a woman with ambitions is crucial, otherwise the hours and energy do not add up. Still, I am now in a phase on my life where three small children require so much attention that I have chosen to slow down my work-related career progression. I do not need to give up my job, but I can work in a position that requires less travel and evening work. After a few years, it will be possible to have a more unpredictable work schedule again.

Companies (and societies) that allow women to have such a life-phased approach to career planning have a much greater chance of keeping these women on their workforce for much longer, with greater

loyalty and inspiration to work. Still, this balance of work and family life is by no means easy, and requires hard prioritizations; for example, I have very little time to exercise or see friends. Also, even with this “lighter” version of career progress, some women do not wish to split their focus, and want to focus fully on their children and families for a while. Of course this should be a possible choice; there is now a debate in Norway where some women (and men) claim that we have been forced into this work equality and are searching for alternatives.

Another debate circles around our maternity-paternity leave: we get 10 months paid to stay home with each newborn child, but the father is required by law to take 10 weeks from this time. Some families would prefer to have the liberty to divide this leave as they see best; however, the political argument for introducing the 10-week law is that it makes it more acceptable for the fathers to take this leave, both in eyes of their employers and their environment. I personally agree with this position.

The effect is that the fathers also benefit a lot from an opportunity to be alone with the baby, without the constant supervision and direction of a mother. In my family’s experience this leads to a great relationship between the father and babies from the very start of the children’s lives, developing their own routines, games and communication. The mothers may lose a little, but the family and the society wins more.

I believe that there is no “free lunch”: staying home is great for the children and family, but it is hard to remove the effects it will have on salary and career progressions. We have some great examples of women who have built amazing careers and businesses after several years at home with their children, but perhaps these have been exceptions and exceptional women. Rather than having a complete work stop, I would aim for finding a “reasonable” balance and an understanding employer that appreciates that this kind of a long-term investments leads to a more loyal and productive work force, and a great reputation as a women-friendly workplace – thus providing access to this often underexploited half of the talent pool.

Still, even in Norway many companies still struggle to recruit women to management positions. I believe there are two main reasons. One is the traditional role conflict between being a mother and a career woman, as discussed above. But in some environments there is also a vague general skepticism to women’s competence, and sometimes women themselves lack confidence. In these cases the best antidote is for women themselves to provide hard counter-evidence: strong education and relevant experience.

It also helps a lot if they have a good mentor, male or female, who can help them to see and exploit the right opportunities for further development. In every point in my own life where I have made a significant change and progress, there has always been someone who believed in me and pushed me in the right direction. I think we need to make concentrated efforts, such as the prize you are celebrating today, where we help promote talented and ambitious women, to nurture their talent and ambition, to build positive role models and to create sustainable networks that will scale this growth.

As for board positions, I have no doubt that the quota law has helped some election committees notice me, alongside other women. One of the big arguments against the quota law was that there were not enough qualified female candidates: how could companies fill 40% of their board positions with women, when only 4% of the top management positions in the 100 largest companies were women? The solutions was to find women with less general top management experience, but more education and focused industrial experience, for example in relevant technology or cultural areas. The outcome is that we have more diversity on boards, not just in the male-female dimension, but also in education, work

background, international outlook, and age. This contributes to better discussions: I experience that I often take the role of a strategic challenger, questioning the de-facto directions of the business that have outgrown its historical origin.

Since the introduction of the quota law, there have been several research projects related to its effect on the performance of the related companies. There are some claims that these companies have become more competitive (for example because they speak better to the other half of their customer base), that they have better middle-leadership development (since women often use a different leadership style and this style spreads from the top), that they perform better financially etc. I think that many of these findings are not yet conclusive; the time horizon has been too short for that. Still, we can see that the companies have no problem surviving with 40% women on their boards. For me, the findings are surprising in one dimension only: the lack of worry about women on boards now, only 7 years after all the doomsday-prophecies. It is simply not a topic any longer. And this is how it should be. The moment we stop spending energy on our "being different", we contribute more and better, and the door is open for many other talented individuals with the same background.

I shall try to conclude here. I believe that I have been privileged to work in Norway and that the Norwegian culture and several gender-diversity laws (such as the board quota law) have benefited my career. However, I know that I have been qualified to take on all the roles I have had, and I believe just as strongly that Norway, through these boards and jobs, has benefitted from an increased diversity that I and other women have been able to bring to the play. This diversity may not have emerged without this conscious political effort, simply because traditions do not give way easily. I think also that this diversity should now be extended further to cultural background and other demographic dimensions. We should continue to build, support, promote and celebrate this diversity through events such as today. Congratulations on your prize, Ann, and thank you to all of you for listening.