

Non-Verbatim Minutes

APPG Women in Work: Tackling Diversity Issues in Male-Dominated Industries

Monday 15 November 2021, 3-4 pm via Zoom

Chair: **Laura Farris MP**, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG

Guest speakers:

- **Sandi Rhys Jones OBE**, Public Affairs and Mentoring Lead for the Association of Women in Property, Vice President of the Chartered Institute of Building.
- **Prof Ijeoma Uchegbu**, Professor of Pharmaceutical Nanoscience at UCL.
- **Caroline Emch**, Director of Government Affairs EMEA, American Express
- **Jillian Partington**, International Marketing & Communications Manager, Assystem.

Minutes

Laura began the session by commenting that the picture of work is rapidly changing. She stated that when you look at the Building Back Better narrative, thinking about green jobs in construction, housing, HS2 and transport, it does risk not focussing on women. She said that she raised this with the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, and he stated that the top engineers on HS2 were women. She said that analysis in the Treasury had shown an improving picture of female representation in these sectors.

She introduced the first speaker, **Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu**.

Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu began by saying that it's not a question of opinion, we know that ethnically diverse management teams are more innovative. She said that when you look at gender and ethnicity, in actual fact, more of an impact is made if you have an ethnically diverse leadership. She went on to say that in academia, there is good participation when it comes to ethnic diversity, but at senior levels, it is not. She said that at the top level, at professor level, 83% of UK professors are white, 8% are BAME, despite 13% of staff in academia being BAME. She also said that 46% of UK academics are female, just 0.2% are black and female. Female ethnic minority academics are less likely to be promoted and less likely to be making decisions in academia.

One of the structural barriers contributing to this she said, unbelievably starts at primary school. To be a top academic and work in academia, you have to have academic qualifications, which begins in key stage 2. At key stage 2 level, 80% of Chinese pupils reach the standard, 75% of Indian pupils reach the standard, 67% of black pupils reach the standard and 67% of white pupils reach the standard. Moving to A-Levels, this begins to diverge, with 24% of Chinese pupils achieving 3As, 14% of Indian pupils achieving the same, 11% of white pupils achieving the same and just 5% of black pupils achieving this. In the space of 7 years, black pupils have gone from achieving the same standards as white pupils to achieving a lot less. This then continues at degree level and beyond, explaining the structural barriers to black women in academia.

She went on to say that diverse decision-making leads to superior outcomes. At UCL, she said that they have the race equality charter, an annual roadshow where they share the race and gender data, they have candid conversations about race. She said that they found that in examining internal processes, they can increase the number of women in leadership positions over three years.

Laura thanked Ijeoma and said she shared some very stark statistics. Laura shared that diversity in decision making is something she has heard in many stages of her career, including from Baroness Hale at the time she was the only woman in the Supreme Court and she said she found it surprising how the rest of the all-male panel found it difficult to understand why it was important to have more women.

She then introduced **Caroline Emch**.

Caroline Emch spoke about her career background. She said in her experience, she has at many times been the only woman in the room or the only female on a panel. But that she has also experienced male allyship and female mentorship throughout her time in financial services.

She spoke about American Express, where 55% of the company's 6,000 employees are women and 8 out of 11 members of the executive team are also women. She said that many of the steps that have been by AMEX to support women were laid out in the Treasury 2016 women in finance charter. In the financial services industry, she said that AMEX understands that a balanced report is good for business, good for consumers, good for profitability, and workplace culture. She said that increasingly, it's becoming a non-negotiable for investors. In the past 5 years, she said that female representations have improved across financial services. There has been a 60% increase for expos and a 40% increase for boards, but of course this is just a first step.

She spoke about a framework of attracting talent, retaining talent and developing talent. On attracting talent, she said that women are underrepresented in economics degrees, which then creates a smaller pool of candidates. She said there are steps businesses can take, for example with campus diversity strategies. By building relationships with universities, businesses can help encourage and build a larger pool of candidates. She went on to say that another area of concern is job descriptions, she highlighted the importance of language in job descriptions and understanding how phrasing certain job postings may discourage female applicants. She said that AMEX is trialling using AI to analyse job descriptions and identify gaps impacting talent pools.

On retaining talent, she said that flexibility and mental health are two key areas for retaining talent, and priorities not just for women. Flexibility is a key priority to maintain talent at American Express. She said after parental leave, 90% of their workforce, which compares with a national average of 77%, showing how many people leave the workplace at a key juncture in someone's career. On mental health, she said that having a set of tools and support for staff is essential.

On developing talent, she said that businesses should make a conscious step to facilitate female progression in the workplace. She spoke that a hurdle in developing talent is the stigmatisation that being ambitious is vicious. She said that American Express is researching the use of the term 'ambition' and the negative connotations associated with ambitious women. Only 3 in 10 professional women said that they were proud of themselves as ambitious. And so work needs to be done to change perceptions about how we describe ourselves. Part of supporting this is developing women support networks, where colleagues can share career development and mentoring.

She highlighted three areas for improvement: pay equity and closing the gender pay gap. She said that AMEX has achieved 100% equity, but in financial services this remains at 15%. She said that financial services need to work together to achieve the pledge of 50/50 gender balance in senior roles in the UK by September 2024. She also said that making the right investments internally is crucial. At AMEX, 25% of the company's annual volunteering budget is allocated specifically to programmes for girls.

She closed by saying that the framework of attracting, developing and retaining talent is the best starting point for companies who are committed to this journey.

Laura thanked Caroline for her contributions and introduced Sandi Rhys-Jones.

Sandi Rhys-Jones began by saying that she works in the constructions industry where there has been progress. She said that she used to stand in a conference hall amongst those in the built environment, stand up to talk about gender equality, and clear the room. The difference now is that people have moved from ignoring it, to recognising it, but the question is how we are going to achieve it.

She said that most people find themselves in the built environment industry by accident. She said that most jobs in construction are generally found through personal links or falling into it and this is because there isn't much information available on the paths into the industry.

She said that 15% of people working in construction are female and 2% work on site, which believe it or not, this is an improvement. She said that BAME representation is less than 6%, disabled less than 6%. She said that shockingly suicide rates in construction amongst men are 3.7 times the national average, so the industry as a whole need improvement.

She said one of the key areas that needs change is the system of apprenticeships. She said the average age of women who wanted to work in construction schemes is 35, but apprenticeship schemes were not geared towards teaching women of an older age.

She went on to talk about the gender pay gap, describing it as the gender pay chasm. A recent survey showed that the biggest contractors and house builders pay on average 26% less to women than to men. The worst offender pays 50p to a woman for every £1 to men. In the industry, there needs to be another 217,000 people working in construction by 2025, currently 35% of people working in the industry are over 50 and only 10% are between the ages of 19 and 24. So this shows clear gaps for improvement. She said that

making clear the opportunities available is key. She said that many women are concerned with having a job that makes a difference, and construction has the advantage of being able to say that it is working towards being sustainable.

Crucially, she said that workplaces need to identify gaps, and develop a strategy. Importantly, businesses need to create a culture that will address everything from working conditions, to flexible working to transparency. And finally, to be accountable to this. In terms of policy, she said that something needs to be done regarding childcare, in terms of professionalising childcare management.

Laura thanked **Sandi** for her contributions and agreed that modelling female leadership is really important to the success of other women. She then introduced the final speaker, **Jillian Partington**.

Jillian Partington began by saying that as a woman and a working mum she is always outnumbered so personally and professionally committed to changing this. She spoke about Assystem, a global engineering company that focuses on projects to deliver the energy transition, such as to nuclear power.

She said that nuclear is a male-dominated industry: 23% of the workforce are women but are driving towards 40% of women by 2030. Companies in the sector are concerned about this. She said one of the causes of this is the low number of women studying engineering at university, at less than 20%. The other problem is elite graduate entry to the sector limits the number of women in the talent pool. A lack of diversity of thought limits the ability to problem solve and find solutions. And it poses a risk to corporate culture and talent attraction.

She said that one of the things Assystems does is the Incredible Women programme which aims to recruit more women into the sector and engage more women into the sector from school age. She said that the focus of Assystems is engaging with women through the education system, as early as age 8 or 9 to talk about the opportunities in science and technology. She also spoke about a technical graduate scheme, to attract more women to study in the sector by opening the scheme to the 35% of women that are studying STEM subjects. The idea is recognising that women don't come from an engineering background, so providing robust training and technical development to propel their career. Through the scheme they aim to bring in at least 100 women to the company by 2025.

On keeping women in the industry, where businesses must create an environment where they can thrive and have long careers. Part of this is supporting women in their return to work. Assystems have designed a progression plan for each woman in the business to map our progression. So far 15 women have been through the programme with a further 15 starting in January 2022.

Finally, she said that a priority is focusing on technical careers in schools, focusing on this being a fully inclusive right. She said that industries have the resources but it doesn't have the good access to schools to delivery cohesive campaigns, so linking companies with the Department for Education and local authorities could help build exciting campaigns. She

said another requirement is allowing international students who study STEM subjects in the UK greater flexibility to stay after their degree. 35% of women studying STEM at UK universities are women from the international community but visa restrictions mean they are required to return home after studying, impacting the number of women in the sector.

Laura thanked **Jillian** for her talk and said that in Parliament, they call it STEMism, and there are lots of people invested in trying to get more women to choose these courses, but there seemed to be a common thread through all the speakers that choices made young take women down a different pathway.

She opened the **Q&A** and began by asking what more we can do in schools to address this?

Sandi came in to say that there are issues in schools in understanding the opportunities and how to apply to STEM subjects.

Laura asked also if she thought increasing apprenticeships can play a part in improving that?

Sandi said absolutely, and feedback from school pupils is astonishment that you can have a well-paid career without going to university.

Ludo (host) came in to ask a question from the chat box which was do any of the speaker's companies promote talent mobility internally for new roles?

Caroline came in to say that more can definitely be done as an employer to encourage flexibility across teams to help retain women.

Sandi came in to say that increasing understanding of what other women in the business do is crucial.

Jillian added that at Assystems, staff are managed using a leadership model, which recruits based on behaviours and attitudes, so that skills are seen as transferable across a business.

Ludo thanked the speakers for their contributions and all those who attended the session.