



Innovatus

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From Dowry to Peerage in three generations...

***“Innovatus - One of the most important women’s networks”* Baroness Henig**



Historian and politician Baroness Ruth Henig was guest speaker at the latest Innovatus networking event at the Institute of Directors. Her theme ‘women and equality – so near and yet so far’ highlighted the dilemmas and challenges women often continue to experience in the workplace.

Despite much progress in women’s equality, including the fact that girls now regularly outperform boys in schools and universities, some attitudes remain unchanged - and frequently it is girls and women who judge themselves too harshly. According to research by the Girl Guides, for example, over half of 15-16 year old girls are unhappy, with low levels of confidence being a key issue.

Low self-esteem amongst women continues into the workplace. Baroness Henig recounted an anecdote from the Netherlands, where five male and five female local councillors were asked to rate their performance, and were in turn rated by the constituents they serve. One group all judged their own performance higher than their constituents did, the other lower. “No prizes for guessing which was which,” she observed.

This is not to say that real barriers don’t exist. In Baroness Henig’s own early career in academia, there was a clear structural bias in the university that worked against women with young children. She recalled being summoned to account for failing to achieve certain prescribed markers, with little flexibility or understanding of the fact that, like many women, she bore the brunt of domestic responsibilities. A recent survey published in the Times suggests that working practices in many careers continue to act against women with children.

One consequence of this is that a growing number of women are putting off having children until later in their careers, and Ruth pondered whether this new breed of tougher, single women were not unintentionally reinforcing career frameworks that do not easily accommodate women and their responsibilities.

Women’s responses to these imbalances are many and varied, she said. The suffragettes and later feminists tried to wrest power from men, whilst other women are confident they will overcome eventually without struggle or engagement. Yet, for Ruth, the key question remains: why would men share power if they don’t have to?



e: reception@executive-action.com

t: 0844 8044 299

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One effective practical response, she suggested, was mentoring, ideally from a successful, confident senior woman who has 'been there and done that', overcoming similar obstacles along the way.

Another is networking. In Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, women across the political divide got together to organise and act collectively, with great success. Disappointingly, the same thing does not seem to have happened in the UK, where only 22% of MPs are women (a number that has scarcely changed in the last decades). Change, Ruth concluded, doesn't just happen of its own accord.

But things *are* improving, with even traditionally male preserves seeing a higher percentage of women. Categorically, diverse workforces are more productive, and sometimes the results are unexpected. An increasing number of nightclub 'bouncers' are women, for example, and, counterintuitively, they are very successful – it turns out that humour can be a better weapon than big muscles in a tense situation.

Her own family is also an example of how things can change for the better in a relatively short timeframe. Baroness Henig's grandmother was one of five daughters of a rich central European family. Their father was adamant that they would never work, and so they were married off with large dowries. Although, widowed as a young woman, Baroness Henig's grandmother successfully ran her late husband's business, she eventually succumbed to family pressure and remarried, giving up her role as head of the company. But her daughter became a photographer, and Baroness Henig herself became an accomplished academic, a Police Authority chair, and a member of the House of Lords.

Progress, Baroness Henig concluded, will come as women work together to create networks to bring about change. "We owe this to all previous generations and to women currently living in subjugation around the world," she said. There is still much to be done, and as Ruth put it – quoting the words of an American executive – "I'll know when real equality has come when there are just as many incompetent women in top jobs as there are men!"

