

## Women In Work – Unlocking Talent

Remarks prepared for delivery  
Stuart Gulliver  
Group Chief Executive, HSBC Holdings plc

The Women's Foundation  
Hong Kong, 7 November 2013

Thank you, it is a privilege to join you this evening.

Let me start with why I'm here.

I believe that creating a society and a workplace where everyone can fulfil her - or his - potential is more than a "women's issue."

I am a grammar school boy who went to university on a scholarship. Yes, I am white and male and that gave me some advantages. But I also know that opportunity based on merit is life-changing.

The business case for providing opportunity to all is compelling.

In many of HSBC's major markets, women achieve more than men in education.

In Hong Kong, more than half of all university students are women.

In the UK, women represent more than half of new graduates each year.

To discriminate against women is to discriminate against talent.

It's unfair. It's wrong. And it's a really poor business decision.

So being inclusive is the right thing to do. But this is not about being cuddly – it's about competitive advantage.

This competitive advantage applies to gender. It also applies to ethnic background, religious belief, disability or sexual orientation.

For HSBC to thrive, we have to be a place where everyone can achieve their potential.

If we can do this better than our competitors, we will be more successful than our competitors.

But if getting there was easy, we wouldn't be having this discussion tonight.

HSBC was founded in 1865 when attitudes were very different.

For its first 50 years, HSBC barely employed any women.

For the next 50, we employed women in junior roles.

It's only really in the last 10 or 20 years that women at HSBC have been able to put all their talents to use.

It's been a story of gradual change. Now it's time to shift gear and accelerate.

Part of the difficulty is that organisations have their own inertia.

It's easy to do the same thing year after year.

Change takes imagination, energy, and very often courage, too.

For example, when I began my career, HSBC didn't accept women on the fast-track programme for managers.

There was an assumption that women wouldn't want to travel overseas for work or that they wouldn't be taken seriously in some markets.

But women had the courage to challenge those assumptions.

Thanks to them we've benefited enormously from the energy, intelligence and imagination of a generation of female managers.

It is only by questioning assumptions that we can genuinely make the most of everyone's potential.

So at HSBC we continue to challenge ourselves.

We have put in place a worldwide campaign to counter unconscious bias.

Twenty-one thousand managers completed training last year.

We have set a target for women's representation in senior management to reach 25% by 2015.

It rose last year to 22%.

And these efforts have been recognised. For example:

- Our UK programme to support the next generation of female leaders won a national award.
- Here in Hong Kong we were the first financial institution to be named "best company for women."
- In the US, American Banker magazine named three of our colleagues among the "25 most powerful women in banking."

If you benchmark us against the rest of the financial sector we're in reasonable shape on some measures.

Four of the seventeen board members of HSBC Holdings are women, for example.

That places us in the top quarter of FTSE 100 firms.

So on one hand, we're making progress.

But we still have a long way to go.

I asked a group of mid-career female colleagues for their thoughts as I prepared for this speech.

I asked them to be frank.

I got my wish. And then some.

They said the fact we are in reasonable shape compared to other financial institutions shouldn't be a source of pride for HSBC.

It should be embarrassing for the sector.

They said it's fantastic that we have a number of very successful female leaders.

But that shouldn't be taken as a signal that the job is done – because having four women on a board of seventeen people doesn't necessarily tell you very much about the experiences of the 125,000 women in the rest of the organisation.

And they said that they had mixed emotions about targets.

They welcomed a visible commitment to diversity.

But actually they wanted to be valued for their talents and achievements, not their gender.

And targets send an odd message – as if 25% were somehow a ceiling to our, and their, ambitions.

I want to be clear. Our destination is the point where we are making full use of everyone's talents - 25% is just a milestone along the way.

You might know the UK phrase – "pale, male and stale."

We are still too pale and male for our own good.

(And by the way I do appreciate the irony of my telling this to you.)

So we need to make further progress.

Because of the awards we've won, we know we're getting some things right in some places some of the time.

As a global bank, we have a privileged position. We can learn from what works world-wide.

Whether it's a mentoring programme, or helping new parents keep in touch with the office, we can adopt or adapt best practice globally.

When it is relevant and authentic we need to make visible our commitment to diversity.

We hosted a dinner two weeks ago at our Hong Kong headquarters for Out On The Street, a group that represents LGBT people in the finance industry.

We changed the evening light show on our building to rainbow colours to mark the occasion.

The effect was electric. Really - inside and outside HSBC the light show created a real buzz.

That same week Antonio Simoes, CEO of our UK bank, was ranked number one on the 'OUTstanding in Business' power list of gay and lesbian business leaders in the UK.

The real opportunity on diversity is to be more thoughtful.

Over time, we've gradually removed the barriers to women's participation.

Over 148 years we've opened the door wider and wider.

But – like our peers – we have been inviting women into an organisation where the institutional architecture - the rules and expectations, all the norms and hidden assumptions - have been shaped by men.

To take the next steps forward we have to think more fundamentally about the workplace.

Not just opening the door to invite more people into the building– but asking them to help us redesign the building.

Because if women look inside the building and don't see a place where they can feel valued and achieve what they want to achieve, they're not going to want to come in, and we risk missing out on talent.

We have to be prepared to think about some big cultural questions.

Take our idea of "success."

At the start of my career, in many workplaces – including HSBC - there was an unspoken deal.

You could do well. You could go far. But it was all or nothing.

If you ever ventured outside the firm or wanted to take a break you could never come back.

If you gave 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, you could rise.

And that's what success was.

Of course that was a model that automatically made it tough for women who wanted to have children.

Incidentally, I don't think it was always good for men either.

And I'm certainly not convinced it's the best we can come up with now.

Surely it's healthier and more enriching for employees – and for organisations – to take a broader perspective.

Surely a firm benefits from people with different experiences – who have worked in other industries, or public service. Or who have been parents and carers.

And if that's what we think – then it has big implications for the way we help people plan their careers.

Or take the idea of “leadership.”

A colleague said recently that as a woman in a relatively senior role, and with leadership responsibilities, she was constantly being told to “remove the emotion” and be more objective.

But there was a catch. When she was direct, she was told she was being “aggressive.”

She asked the question: what if, somewhere under the surface, our image of a leader is of a man with a loud voice – and we don’t recognise leadership in different forms?

Other businesspeople talk about the confidence gap.

Cheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, wrote her book “Lean In” because she was frustrated by seeing women – including herself – shy away from opportunities because they were less confident in their own abilities than men.

What if our current image of leadership rewards the most confident voice – and not necessarily the best idea?

And what if we place too great an emphasis on leaders who can talk and not enough on leaders who can listen?

Now personally I find some of these discussions about culture challenging.

They invite me to see my own experiences in a new light.

Changing our culture means changing the rules of the game.

It’s the right thing to do.

Finally, I’m not sure we will find a single right answer when it comes to reshaping the workplace. I think there will be more than one right answer.

But starting these conversations is important if we are to make the most of everyone’s potential.

As part of this, we will keep on working closely with our staff networks.

Staff networks play an essential role helping us understand what we can do to make our workplace more inclusive.

And groups such as The Women’s Foundation play a vital role in challenging businesses and society to do better.

Women like you must continue to help us all move forward – by speaking up, asking questions, daring all of us to try harder and make a difference.

I welcome the challenge and I look forward to listening.

Thank you.

ENDS