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MEDIA RELEASE

LANDMARK SURVEY SUPPORTS QUOTAS FOR BOARDS

A landmark survey of female directors has revealed more than 50 percent support legislated gender quotas for public listed (ASX) company boards.

The survey was conducted online in September 2009 by leading advocate for boardroom change, Women on Boards.

Claire Braund, Executive Director of Women on Boards, said the unprecedented level of support shown in the survey for legislated gender quotas was indicative of the high level of frustration among working women in Australia.

"Five years ago I doubt we would have seen this result, but we are seeing more and more women becoming increasingly disillusioned that anything is going to change," Braund said. "They have spent their careers hearing that self-belief, application, merit, education and the pipeline will deliver them positions at the top – only to find it is all a myth."

"Women know the majority of companies don't appoint executives and directors solely on the basis of merit – because if they did 90 per cent would not be men."

The survey revealed overwhelming support (76%) for boards and committees of government entities and public listed companies setting gender targets.

"These findings, along with comments made by leading male and female directors in the media in recent weeks, demonstrate there is a strong push for public companies to set gender targets and be publicly accountable for them," Braund said.

"We are not yet at the stage of countries such as Norway that have legislated for gender quotas on boards, but are long overdue for some serious action and debate on this critical issue."

"With only 58% of women working in Australia – compared with 80% in countries such as Norway - the failure to use all of our productive human capital is a major issue for business, the government and the economy," Braund said.

Women on Boards is acting on the advice of AICD and Origin Energy Chair, Kevin McCann, and from 1 January 2010 will be publicly naming and shaming companies that don't promote women into board roles. The results will be published six monthly on its website and distributed widely across business networks.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The survey was conducted online in September 2009. It canvassed the experience of female directors in the Women on Boards network and their attitudes to setting targets or quotas for gender representation. There were 598 full responses.

- 74% aged 41–60
- 73% senior managers, executives or accomplished in business
- 10% are professional directors
- 5% are on public listed boards • 37% are on local, state or federal government boards
- 70% are on NFP Boards

- 54% on boards with three or fewer female directors

In relation to targets and quotas

- 91 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that balanced gender representation on a board improves organisational performance
- 76 per cent agreed boards/ committees should set targets.
- 85 per cent agreed government boards/ committees should set gender targets
- 78 per cent said public (ASX) boards should set gender targets
- 62 per cent agreed gender targets should be legislated for government boards/committees
- 53 per cent agreed gender targets should be legislated for public listed (ASX) boards

Comments from survey participants

I understand the many limitations and downsides of quotas. However, these must be weighed up against the abysmally slow progress we have made.

Quotas are regrettable but probably the only way to make progress - Australia is too conservative and blokey to make progress otherwise.

I spend part of my year in Scandinavia. What I have noticed is that where women are more involved in public and company decision making there are better outcomes and a more equal society.

I am not generally in favour of legislated targets, but change is so slow and as long as the legislation is sensible, it may be the only way.

As there is real resistance to increasing the number of women in senior executive positions and at board level the only way to get any traction is to engineer this through policy/ reward or legislation and then prove the effectiveness.

I agree with setting quotas for gender representation. However, what I do not want to see are the same women across a number of Boards of the top 200 ASX companies. We need new blood not, not a recycle exercise within a limited pool of talent.

The lack of gender balance is only one aspect of the often dysfunctional lack of diversity on many listed, unlisted and mutual boards. Attention should also be given to diversity of background and skill mix in order to improve decision-making,.

Quotas are important now in order to establish a broader base and demonstrate the value - one day we might get to a point where men are seeking a minimum number!

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For the full survey results go to: www.womenonboards.org.au