

Herausgeber: Deutscher Juristinnenbund e. V.**Präsidium:** Ramona Pisal, Vorsitzende Richterin am Oberlandesgericht, Brandenburg a.d.H. (Präsidentin);
Rechtsanwältin Oriana Corzilius, Brüssel; **Dr. Afra Waterkamp**, Präsidentin des Finanzgerichts des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt,
Dessau-Roßlau (Vizepräsidentinnen); **Petra Lorenz**, Regierungsdirektorin i.R., Baden-Baden (Schatzmeisterin);
Schriftleitung: Anke Gimbal, Rechtsassessorin, Geschäftsführerin Deutscher Juristinnenbund, Berlin.

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Das Projekt "European Women Shareholders Demand Gender Equality" (EWSDGE)

EWSDGE-Projektbüro, Berlin¹

Project coordinator:



Project partners:



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EUROPEAN WOMEN SHAREHOLDERS DEMAND GENDER EQUALITY (EWSDGE)

The main objective of the project "European Women Shareholders Demand Gender Equality" (EWSDGE project, <http://www.ewsdge.eu/>) was to develop public awareness, strategies and measurements to promote women in economic decision-making positions in the EU Member States (MS).

The project took an innovative and practical approach to pursuing this objective: From January to September 2015, EWSDGE teams – one female lawyer speaker and one note-taker – visited Annual General Meetings (AGMs) of EURO STOXX 50 index companies as well as those of a selection of BUX, SOFIX and FTSE 100 indices companies. Using a questionnaire, the teams asked (Supervisory) Boards for detailed information about women's representation in leadership positions at their companies (Executive and/or Supervisory Board, but also other management positions). They also asked about the companies' overall activities and achievements with regard to promoting women's careers (accelerated women's

management programmes, for example). The questionnaire was developed mainly by the EWSDGE coordinators, with assistance from the EWSDGE project partners and project office team.

One hundred twenty-five of the companies listed in the mentioned indices – including further DAX- and IBEX companies in 11 Member States – participated in EWSDGE activities. One hundred five activists tackled an impressive number of roles: they created and maintained the EWSDGE website, contacted company representatives, drafted the national toolkits, prepared AGM visits, wrote press releases, organised preparatory national workshops, spoke at AGMs, took minutes at AGMs, held national meetings, organised press conferences, implemented national conferences, developed analyses and disseminated the EWSDGE project idea, held meetings with Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), and produced the EWSDGE Short Film.

As women lawyers, the EWSDGE activists were very much focussed on the legal and legislative framework surrounding women in decision-making positions. The EWSDGE project monitored the respective, legislative progress of the Women on Boards Directive at the European level. National Coordinators also submitted proposals for the transposition of the CSR Directive.

The EWSDGE activities clearly showed that there is no level playing field in Europe, no harmonised legislation on gender balance in decision-making positions that would enable women (or men) to enforce equal rights or strive for more diversity. The EWSDGE project demonstrated that, in addition to appropriate and necessary legislation, more attention should be paid to

¹ Sabine Overkämping (research director), Anke Gimbal (managing director), Miruna Werkmeister (project manager), Linda Walczak (project assistant), EWSDGE-Projektbüro 2014-2016, Berlin.

the career “pipeline” as a key factor in advancing women into leadership positions, including Boards.

As for the impact of the project: there have been numerous indications that the action should continue, including positive feedback from the target groups, in particular company representatives, representatives and members of legislative bodies on European and national levels. This was also confirmed by the evaluation team at the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences.

The road to gender-balanced leadership is long, and pro-active activities like these need further support so that they can hold companies accountable, increase transparency and finally achieve gender-balanced management at all levels.

The EWSGDGE documentation – available in German, English, French, and Spanish – gives detailed information about the results and the way forward, including country reports and EWSGDGE recommendations. The documentation and the EWSGDGE film are available on the EWSGDGE website.

The EWSGDGE project achieved very practical and tangible results in terms of greater awareness of the issue and concrete measures taken by companies.

On the corporate side, companies were in contact with our representatives before, during, and after the AGM visits. This shows that the presence of these women lawyers at the meetings did make companies more aware of the issue of gender-balanced leadership. After the meetings, our coordinators were often invited to consult and influence the process of changing corporate standards (in the UK, France, or Hungary, for example). Many company representatives were very interested in attending the EWSGDGE final conference (especially those from Spain, France, and Hungary) – where a forum-style format provided the opportunity to discuss national and transnational results of the EWSGDGE project (see the agenda and country forum report tables: <http://www.ewsdge.eu/forum-tables/>). Moreover, in 2016, certain companies invited EWSGDGE coordinators to return to the AGMs and ask their questions about women in decision-making positions again (e.g. Hungary). The EWSGDGE coordinators established official contacts that seem sustainable for the future.

On the EWSGDGE activist side, the project has succeeded in strengthening the overall position of women lawyers’ associations in Europe. It would not have been possible to attend the AGMs without EWLA and national women lawyers’ associations to identify the appropriate speakers and note-takers for our teams. This network of women lawyers throughout Europe was made stronger by the EWSGDGE project and led to more activities supporting women’s rights in general. The EWSGDGE project was even able to support the founding of a Croatian Women Lawyers’ Association.

In terms of publicity and dissemination, a mass media campaign was launched in order to improve knowledge and raise awareness. Information was spread in two ways, first through online formats such as the website, film, materials, and social media channels such Facebook, and second through our presence at public events.

The Progress Programme’s objectives for this grant were to improve gender balance in economic decision-making positions

at all levels of the hierarchy. The European Commission specifically encouraged key stakeholders to establish transnational partnerships and to work together to help improve the situation. The partnerships created during the EWSGDGE project (see above) demonstrated that raising awareness and improving knowledge is only possible through transnational work and cooperation.

The EWSGDGE project made an important contribution to changing corporate culture throughout Europe. Using the voices of women shareholders, the EWSGDGE project drew attention to women’s representation in the specific companies at all management levels. Companies in the participating countries had different reactions to the project, as did the other shareholders attending the AGMs.

Regarding the long-term socio-economic consequences, there are obvious differences between the countries that participated in the EWSGDGE project. Some countries already have (extensive) respective (quota) legislation in place (France, Germany, Spain, Italy). In other countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, the UK, Ireland and Benelux, the EWSGDGE project was a pioneer. The transnational exchanges organised over the course of the EWSGDGE project have helped to strengthen the action in all participating countries. Moreover, the fact that EWSGDGE coordinators have been invited to ask their questions again in the next session of AGMs in 2016 shows that the EWSGDGE action had a lasting impact on the companies beyond the lifetime of the EWSGDGE project. The EWSGDGE action will continue at the national level on a volunteer basis. It also had a positive impact on the overall development and activities of the EWLA and national women lawyers’ associations.

Regarding long-term impact at a European level: Continuing EWSGDGE activities is an important part of the push for change, also considering that the Women on Boards Directive is currently blocked at the level of the Council of Ministers.

Finally, we also managed to bring a few other countries on board (Croatia, Russia), which plan to implement the EWSGDGE project idea on a national level. This also demonstrates the persuasive power of the EWSGDGE project idea.

The selected MS have different levels of quota legislation and different corporate systems. Some are (very) advanced on this issue (e.g. France, Spain) and some less so (UK, Ireland, Bulgaria, Hungary). Therefore, the exchanges have been very fruitful. Networking and learning from one another has created awareness and triggered concrete actions.

It was particularly important for the EWSGDGE project to support and comment on the ongoing European legislation (proposal for a Women on Boards directive) and on the transposition of European legislation (CSR directive) concerning women in decision-making positions, to ensure and indeed achieve effective measures with regard to gender-balanced leadership.

The EWSGDGE project concept can easily be adopted by other Member States. The documentation, available online in English, French, German and Spanish, is a good handbook on how to implement the EWSGDGE project idea. The Croatian example proves that this works.