

Competence and will have no gender

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My woman's role in Latvian business? There is none. I only have a role as the head of large Latvian bank. This role does not expect special treatment. I refuse to accept that competence or leadership has a gender and I see that my male colleagues have accepted this very easily. We do not have conversations about it. However, the fact that I refuse to accept a special role of a woman - a leader, does not mean that I am blind and do not see that women's equality and the role of women in Latvia is also a complex issue. In Western economies, women hold fewer leadership positions and are paid less, and still expected to balance household responsibilities equally. It is a fact.

Obstacles to women's full equality remain both institutional and, perhaps, even to a greater extent, social. Therefore, we need two things, which would help women to fulfill their potential, these things are: conditions and will. I had both and this combination gives us full freedom to follow our own individual path to a fulfilling life personally and professionally. However, it is never easy to obtain this combination. I believe that the story of gender equality has always dynamically revolved around these two dimensions: conditions and will. Sometimes there was more of one, sometimes the other. Usually there were no conditions, sometimes there was a lack of will to pursue such a path given the conditions. Currently, we are historically in a unique situation where we can achieve both - that is, to provide both the conditions for the growth of women and to nurture a will that is not refrained by prejudices.

During the Soviet years, when my parents and parents of many readers were growing up, there was a special understanding of women's role - we remember from movies about the rise of communism that the image of a strong woman was always present in the Soviet narrative - whether she was a milkmaid, a scientist, or a factory director. The same narrative was in propaganda posters. During the Soviet years, there were no housewives, and a woman was also a professional unit. But do not idealize this image. Just as well, the same Soviet scientist, apart from her work, went home to raise children and cook for her husband, who was sitting in front of the TV and drinking. During the Soviet years, there were women leaders, but it should be remembered that, for example, the all-powerful Political Bureau was dominated by almost only men - they were the ones who made decisions. Women generally played a secondary role. In short, the conditions and the will were there, but with certain, very clearly drawn boundaries reflecting the constraints of the conditions impacting the will. However, I think that the perception of woman as a professional, if not a leader, was rooted in the post-Soviet space, at least at the level of possibility.

Didn't the restoration of independence of the Republic of Latvia and the market economy actually set back women's equality in society, creating the illusion of the supposedly ideal Western family model from Hollywood movies, where everyone lives in a suburban house with two cars in the garage and where the wife is a housewife, i.e., babysitter and – dependent? Suddenly, Latvia was also flooded with a huge amount of "women's" media, where "feminine fragility", "the true essence of woman" and "a hundred ways to please your man" were glorified. And maybe some women really chose a subordinate role and justified it with "tradition", because it is actually easier, more convenient, and safer. This family model is an illusion, and now its adherents can see the flip side of the coin - the awareness that the

role of a housewife means financial dependence. The early years of independence brought us the conditions for growth, but did they not take away the will? I consider that this time has also passed and now we are in a new stage of development with unprecedented conditions of equality and strong motivation among women and girls.

I also grew up in this historical context. Every day I was looking at my hard-working, smart parents and chose to focus on the exact sciences at school, although, I was also expected to succeed in "housekeeping". I found my path as a leader in a purposeful way, and I did not feel any obstacles - over time, many influential men with strong characters have evaluated me as equal and there is no question of gender on our agenda. I had the conditions, and I had the will.

However, do not trivialize my perspective. At the present moment, not all women have the conditions for their freedom, and the will does not arise by itself - it is nurtured and formed. Sometimes even the strongest will breaks under the influence of circumstances. As members of society, we all need to look at how to build these two dimensions so that there are more female leaders in business and society. First of all, institutional and social obstacles should be removed, where they still remain, for example, it is dangerous to talk about pronounced "male" professions or the division of roles, and we need to see what effect supposedly well-intentioned family policies have on the role of women in the professional space.

However, without compromises, the most important thing is that society must accept and educate that girls have no limits, should have determination and courage decide to everything they see fit. Choice is both our greatest privilege and responsibility in life. Our task is to do it freely - and if we have done it completely freely, without looking back at "what will they say about it" or "it's a tradition, after all", we can and may be anybody - You can run a bank and grow orchids at the same time, cook a meal at home and develop a new vaccine. Our roles in life become more independent, rich and dynamic.