

Interview

“We are not fighting just to have a percentage of places at the table. We are fighting for a different agenda; we are fighting for a different way of doing business.”

Few people have been as prominently on the frontlines of diversity as **Henryka Bochniarz** – as an entrepreneur, government minister, co-founder of the Congress of Women, head of Poland’s most influential confederation of employers – “Lewiatan”, member of numerous corporate boards, and a candidate for the presidency of her country. She talks to THE FOCUS about her multi-faceted engagement with diversity.

PHOTOS: ROBERT FISCHER





The Focus: You have been a leader in many fields and fought for diversity on the personal level as well as in the realms of public policy and corporate responsibility. If you had to make the case for the value of diversity as succinctly as possible, how would you frame it?

Henryka Bochniarz: Today's global world has made us all acutely aware that there are diverse visions of the world, diverse ways of working, and diverse ideas, all of which may add value in any endeavor, whether it's education, politics, or business. There is simply no single best way of running any human institution, and no single universal standard that supersedes all other perspectives. People and organizations that lack openness to diverse people and diverse ideas will simply be unable to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by this world.

The Focus: With your experience in many fields of endeavor, would you say that some sectors have embraced diversity more than others?

Bochniarz: In terms of gender diversity, there are some sectors, like financial services, that are very much male domi-

nated. Not unreasonably, men have gravitated toward sectors that wield the most power. Just as reasonably, women are now trying to break into those closed circles.

On the other hand, there are definitely some sectors that are dominated by women – although that does not mean they have more power there. For example, in Poland, as in many other countries, the teaching profession at the lower levels is almost completely made up of women. However, the heads of the schools are men. So although the percentage of women far exceeds the percentage of men, the position of women from the standpoint of real power remains unchanged.

The Focus: You are a co-founder of the Congress of Women, created in Poland in 2009. Today the Congress is Poland's largest non-political civic movement, aiming at equality of rights, opportunities, and potential of women and men in both the private and the public spheres. Does its extraordinary growth indicate that the tide running in favor of diversity has become irresistible?

Bochniarz: Diversity is certainly an idea whose time has come, and the Congress has made some impressive gains. We

were able to persuade the Polish Parliament to pass the “Quota Act” establishing a minimum 35 percent quota for each gender among the candidates on electoral lists for elections to the lower house of the Polish Parliament, to the European Parliament, and at local level. But the far more important measure of success is the way that women’s issues are being treated among women and around women. If, years ago, there were people laughing about these issues, they’re not laughing now – they are taking them very seriously.

The Focus: In March the European Parliament reiterated its call for new laws introducing quotas to boost female representation on corporate boards, if national measures fail to do so. What is the position on quotas of the Polish Confederation of Private Employers, Lewiatan, which you head?

Bochniarz: After intense internal discussions of the issue, we supported the European Parliament directive on quotas. However, in this we stand alone, because the other confederations are led by men and there is still a great deal of resistance to the idea.

The Focus: Is the issue ultimately more about changing attitudes and awareness than about achieving the numbers?

Bochniarz: Yes, and the attitude to women and diversity is changing; the awareness of the value of gender diversity, as well as other kinds of diversity, growing; and the language in which these issues are discussed is changing in a way that matches the importance of what is at stake.

The Focus: It’s interesting to consider what the newer members of the EU bring to the table in the way of diversity. Poland, for example, has a relatively high number of women entrepreneurs compared to older members of the EU. How do you account for that?

Bochniarz: You have to consider that at the beginning of Poland’s transformation from planned economy to market economy a lot of women had no other choice than to stand on their own two feet. We had entire sectors like the textile industry collapsing, putting people out of work, forcing many women to find a way to care for their families. The result was a boom in the creation of small companies. Some of these entrepreneurs found it to be a wonderful life – being independent instead of working in a state-owned enterprise. When the transformation began I was working for the Institute for Business Cycles and Prices and led a nice, secure life with a regular paycheck and great stability. But I told myself that this was the perfect time to try something different, and so I set up my own company – one of the first consulting firms in Poland. I had no experience, I had no money, and I had no idea what I would be doing. I had my economics background but that was useless in a market econo-

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RESUMÉ Henryka Bochniarz

One of the most important voices in the European dialogue on diversity and a former candidate for the presidency of Poland, Henryka Bochniarz has had an exceptionally varied career. Since 1999 she has headed the Polish Confederation of Private Employers, Lewiatan, the largest organization of private sector employers in Poland. She is Vice President of **BUSINESSEUROPE**, the largest and most prominent confederation of employers in the European Union, and a member of the European Commission Enterprise and Industry Advisory Group, a consultative committee established by the commissioner Antonio Tajani. Since 2002, she has served as Deputy Chair of the Polish Tripartite Commission for Social and Economic Affairs and has played an active role in the dialogue between the government, employers’ associations, and trade union bodies. She co-founded the Congress of Women and was one of the originators of Poland’s gender parity law. In 2005 she was the Polish Democratic Party’s candidate for President of Poland. In 2006, the Boeing company named her president of Boeing Central and Eastern Europe. Before joining Boeing, she was president and co-owner of Nicom Consulting, one of the first Polish consulting companies, which she created in the 1990s. In 1991, she served as Minister of Industry and Trade in the cabinet of Prime Minister Jan Krzysztof Bielecki. She also spent 18 years as a university professor and researcher for the Foreign Trade Research Institute of Poland. The recipient of many awards, including the Andrzej Bązkowski Award in 2003 for her extraordinary contribution to the development of a social dialogue in Poland, she is deeply involved in the arts, having co-founded the “Nike” Literature Prize for the best book of the year. An author herself, Bochniarz co-wrote *Be Yourself and Win: Ten Hints for an Active Woman* with Jacek Santorski and has written extensively about economics and social issues. She holds a PhD in economics from the School of Planning and Statistics in Warsaw and is a former Fulbright scholar.

my. For the first few months I didn't pay myself a salary and I was working 20-hour days, but it was an exciting time!

Today, 40 percent of our small businesses are owned by women. But when you look at mid-sized companies there are far fewer female owners and with public companies almost none and few women in senior positions. So there is still something stopping them from doing really well in big business. But it seems to me that it is just a problem of time. They need time to learn.

The Focus: Do the women have to learn or does big business have to learn?

Bochniarz: Both. My experience as an employer is that when you ask a man to take on a difficult project, he will often say, "Okay, I'm not prepared, but I'll try." Often a woman will say, "No, it's too difficult." The same gender dynamic happens with senior positions. I understand, too, that some women with young children prefer to remain in less stressful positions – they just don't want to pay the price at that time.

The Focus: Isn't that a Catch-22 situation?

Bochniarz: Yes, but there is a way to change it. We can adjust the way companies are run. In today's world, it doesn't matter whether you are working in an office, your home, or your car, as long as you are doing your job. It is much easier to achieve a work-life balance when you have that kind of flexibility.

Men, too, should seek more balance. When Sweden first introduced paternity leave, only five or six percent of eligible men took advantage of it. Today, anyone who passes it up is seen as completely old-fashioned. And if paternity leave can catch on, then men can also take their share of leave to care for the children when they get sick. And this kind of sharing means that women no longer get passed over for promotion because the boss expects they will be absent at critical times in their family lives.

The Focus: You have been quoted as saying "the market needs in these days are not compatible with the skill sets that men have." What skills do women have that seem to be the right ones?

Bochniarz: In most developed countries, most of the GDP is created by the service sector, not by industry. Services are very much aligned with what are often said to be women's skills: empathy, an ability to listen, teamwork. Meanwhile, in sectors that were completely dominated by men, you have either robots or computer systems that are replacing the need for physical strength – even in the defense sector. I was really shocked once when I saw a war room full of computers and most of the people hunched over the screens were women controlling unmanned drones.

The Focus: You have said that in order to make a real difference, women must achieve a critical mass of at least 30 percent of the places on a team. Why 30 percent?

Bochniarz: First, a great deal of research supports that figure of 30 percent – it's not merely an educated guess. If you have only one or two women on a board, they inevitably have to adjust to a way of doing business that has been designed by men. A woman in that situation may have a different point of view, a different vision of what should be done and how, and she may be sure she is right. But if there is an overwhelming majority of men who have been in the business for years, it is very difficult for women to make themselves heard. They can fight one battle after another, but after a while they adjust to the male majority.

Second, we are not fighting just to have a percentage of places at the table. We are fighting for a different agenda; we are fighting for a different way of doing business. And we have to fight for each other. Madeleine Albright, the former U.S. Secretary of State, says in one of her books that there is a special place in hell reserved for women who do not help other women. It is not enough to attain a lofty position for yourself; you have to help elevate the many other qualified women out there.

The Focus: In the course of your career you have served on many boards. From your perspective, how has the culture of the boardroom evolved?

Bochniarz: The culture of boards differs in different parts of the world of course. In the U.S. you have one-tier boards whereas in many European countries you have two-tier boards – a management board and a supervisory board. In the U.S., the non-executive directors are playing an increasingly important role in corporate governance. And while things are a bit different in Poland, we are moving in that direction as shareholders demand a far greater level of involvement from directors.

Until just a few years ago, much board work was virtually pro forma. Supervisory boards held two or three meetings per year and approved just about everything the management board was doing, without delving into the details. Today the supervisory board is digging deeper, paying far more attention to specifics, and exercising greater oversight. You also see great differences in the gender make-up of boards across Europe. The Scandinavian countries, with at least 30 percent female directors, are leading the way. Italy, which has introduced quotas and ranks second-to-last in female directors, just above Malta, has only six percent. The European average is almost 14 percent, but you really have to look at the numbers country by country.

The Focus: What is the role of the chairman in ensuring diversity on the board – not only of gender, geography,



nationality, background, and the like, but most especially diversity of perspectives in the board's deliberations?

Bochniarz: Certainly, the chairman of a supervisory board should have extensive knowledge of the business of the company. But it is much more important that he or she is able to organize the board's work effectively, to encourage people to be candid, and to make sure that differing points of view are heard and given serious consideration. If you have a board meeting with 25 agenda items and only two hours allotted for them, then something is wrong – there is simply no way that board members can genuinely and meaningfully participate in the deliberations. Also, most of the power remains in the chairman's hands, and we know that investing all of the power in one person is dangerous, be it in business or politics. Only when you have really open discussion and directors who are unafraid to question the chairman or the CEO can you be sure that the chair and the full board are doing their jobs.

The Focus: Many companies profess to be fully committed to ensuring diversity in their workforce and in their executive ranks, but when it comes to delivering on that promise they often fall short. What do you think prevents them from 'walking the talk'?

Bochniarz: No matter what it says in the company handbook or on the website, the truth is that if there are no clear signals coming from the top that the organization genuinely values and practices diversity, then nothing will happen. When a position is open, leaders should say, 'I won't accept any hiring selection unless there are women among the candidates.' They should simply refuse to accept the age-old excuse that HR were unable to find any women who were worthy of consideration. The organization would then be forced to look for women; and if they do look, they will find plenty of qualified female candidates. If there is no clear pledge to this principle of selection and promotion, it will be very hard to achieve diversity. That is why we are pursuing quotas – because not every leader understands the insidious dynamics through which women are excluded. Before European Union Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding proposed setting quotas to increase the number of women on boards in the EU, she asked companies to sign up for a voluntary target of 30 percent women on their boards by 2015 and 40 percent by 2020. In the entire European Union, only 24 companies signed up. I sometimes hear people say that they are strongly in favor of having more women on boards but that we have to choose them on merit and let the change happen in a natural way, not impose obligatory quotas. That's what they call it – "the natural way." But if we do it in the "natural" way, it will take us 40 or 50 years for women to achieve parity with men. The question is whether we can afford to be so wasteful with our resources, and I am pretty sure the answer is no.

The Focus: Can there be such a thing as too much diversity – a situation on a leadership team in which a cacophony of voices, ideas, and opinions can get in the way of coherence and the ability to act decisively?

Bochniarz: I don't think so. I serve as Deputy Chair of the Polish Tripartite Commission for Social and Economic Affairs, which consists of representatives from the government, employers' associations, and trade unions. I can tell you that sometimes the diversity there results in grueling debates. After ten hours of discussion, the various sides may still not accept each other's arguments, but eventually we reach an agreement. It may be a compromise, but it is always based on dialogue and that is far superior to decisions that are simply imposed by a monolithic and homogeneous group.

The Focus: You have often been involved in such many-sided dialogues – as head of the Polish Confederation of Private Employers Lewiatan; as Vice President of BUSINESS-EUROPE, the most prominent confederation of employers in the European Union; and through the European Forum of New Ideas, the international business conference that also attracts scholars, politicians, and representatives of the cultural sector.

Bochniarz: Yes, and though dialogue can sometimes be frustrating and inefficient, we cannot make progress without at least attempting such discussions. There may be many different interests involved and much disagreement, but even if there is agreement on just ten percent of the issues we can still accomplish a great deal. I think that's one of the reasons Poland is performing so well economically right now. When the European crisis began we were able to reach an agreement with the trade unions on an anti-crisis package. They agreed to some new flexibility in the labor code and we compromised as well. But even when agreement



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cannot be reached, I believe it is still advisable to take this approach to “social dialogue,” and the countries that do so are performing better than those that do not.

The Focus: Would you advise young people embarking on their careers to seek varied experience in order to achieve a broader diversity of perspectives on a personal level?

Bochniarz: In Poland, we have a proverb: “Curiosity is the first step to hell.” Seriously, though, I am intensely curious about new experiences, new ideas, new people. But that does not mean moving haphazardly from realm to realm. I have tried to do it in a structured way, to acquire knowledge of different situations, people, and ways of thinking.

When my mother was alive and I would tell her that I was moving to another country or changing my job, she couldn’t understand it. She would say, “But you have such a good job, you have a wonderful family; why not stay in one place and enjoy life?” And when I decided to participate in the presidential election I felt this great pain in her about it. She was dying, and she knew I would be exposed to a lot of stress and a lot of situations that I would hate. She was right, but it was worth the price, as were all of those varied experiences.

The Focus: In 2006, the Boeing Company named you president of Boeing Central and Eastern Europe to represent the company’s business interests in a dozen countries. With no background in aviation, you must have found that another immensely broadening experience.

Bochniarz: Yes, with Boeing I entered a completely different world – one of the largest American corporations, headquartered far away, and in a business I knew nothing about. The learning process was painful; it took me about two years to understand how it really works. But it is incredibly interesting to understand how aircraft – which are among the most expensive projects in the world – are designed and built. To get to know the people who do that, to understand their ideas, and to convince them that there is something worthwhile that we can do in Eastern Europe has not only been broadening but also exhilarating. Joining the board of Unicredit offers me a similar challenge and an opportunity to learn from highly accomplished people.

The Focus: Clearly, gender diversity is extremely important to you, but it is striking how many forms of diversity you have touched on here – diversity of opinions, diversity of perspectives on business, politics, and personal life, as well as the way the wired world is changing the expectations of the younger generation and making sure that more diverse voices are heard.

Bochniarz: Unquestionably, the younger generation is living in a different world. I have nine grandchildren and I spend a lot of time with them. And to connect with them I have to be into the computer games, I have to understand why their perception of things is absolutely different from mine, as when we watch movies together or I play with them. It has opened up a completely new world for me.

The Focus: When the time comes for you to give them advice about their lives and careers, what will you say to them as you reflect on your own experiences?

Bochniarz: That you need to attain a balance between career and family, and understand that this balance will shift at different stages of your life. There may be times when you concentrate more on your children and times when you are more focused on your career. And societies and companies will have to accommodate career trajectories that may plateau for a while and then take off again.

I will also tell them that I think you have to write your own scenario for your life, instead of allowing other people – your parents, your in-laws, your boss – to write the scenario for you. Much of what happens will, of course, be beyond your control. I could never have imagined that the transformation of my country would occur, that I would be self-employed, that I would become a government minister, and a presidential candidate. But the point is to be unafraid of change; to see what you can make of it. Certainly, you have to take into account the interests of other people and of society – you are not absolutely free to do whatever you want. But to the extent that the way in which my life unfolds depends on my decisions, I want to have the freedom to make those decisions.

The interview with Henryka Bochniarz in Warsaw was conducted by Jarosław Bachowski-Ciura, Egon Zehnder International, Warsaw, and Ulrike Mertens, THE FOCUS.