

Welcome Address

Ramona Pidal

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and a very warm welcome to all of you. Let me shortly introduce myself: My name is Ramona Pidal, I am president of the German Women Lawyers Association, in German: Deutscher Juristinnenbund, in short: djb. It is with great joy that I welcome you on behalf of my Association. The djb is coordinator of the project “European Women Shareholders Demand Gender Equality”, funded by the European Union. Our today’s conference on “Gender Balanced Leadership. European Women Shareholders Pave the Way” is the peak and at the same time the closing event of our project which started in April 2014. Under the PROGRESS Programme of the European Union the European Commission awarded a contract to implement this project to a consortium of organisations. It’s a great honor that Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, Věra Jourová is here with us today. Dear Ms Jourová, thank you very much for being here. I welcome you, we’re all looking forward to your speech, and please accept my gratitude for your and your staff’s extensive and ever so friendly support.

“Support” is the keyword which leads directly to the Ministry and especially the Minister for Justice and Gender Equality of Saxony-Anhalt – I bid my welcome to Professor Dr. Angela Kolb-Janssen. Not only is the Ministry for Justice and Equality of Saxony-Anhalt one of our co-funding and also project partners. Minister Professor Dr. Kolb-Janssen has already opened her house generously for the various meetings we had in the course of the project. I would like to thank you very much for your hospitality which allows us to hold our conference today here on the airy premises of the Representation of Saxony-Anhalt to the EU in Brussels. We are happy that you will subsequently speak to us. I’m very curious whether you will tell us something about your active part and personal experience within the project.

Support via co-funding we gratefully experienced once again from the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). Thank you very much for this reliable and long lasting partnership.

djb itself is a co-funding partner and so is FINNCHAM – I give a warm welcome to Leena Linnainmaa, Deputy Chief Executive, Finland Chamber of Commerce and EWLA past president.

Other than djb as the project coordinator the project included the following co-beneficiary partners, the non-governmental organisations:

- The European Women Lawyers Association EWLA – I welcome EWLA’s president Jackie Jones, Associate Professor

of Law at the University of West of England, UWE, a German male Christian name and therefore the only man in the project,

- EWLA Bulgaria – I greet Svetlana Spassova Ganeva, chair of EWLA Bulgaria,
- the French Women Lawyers Association (A.F.F.J.) – I welcome its president Nathalie Leroy,
- the Hungarian Women (Advocate) Lawyers Association – I say welcome to Dr. Katalin Prandler, Vice-President of the Hungarian Women Lawyers Association and EWLA board member Hungary,
- the University of West of England, Bristol, UWE, for coordination purposes. – I salute Jackie again,
- and the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences, responsible for evaluation and dissemination – in place of all the involved very committed students I greet Anne Charlotte Pross,
- not to forget the Ministry for Justice and Gender Equality of Saxony Anhalt as well as FINNCHAM again.

Gender equality and equal opportunities for working women have been on the agenda for a long time, in Germany and other Member States of the European Union as well. The low representation of women on Supervisory and/or Managing Boards illustrates the fact that women and men obviously don’t have equal chances in working life. Over years and decades we’ve heard a lot of promises and explanations and yet we saw very little positive change.

A member of the djb, lawyer Mechthild Düsing, decided not to accept this any longer. She was irritated and annoyed that the Supervisory and Executive Boards of companies she held shares of consisted almost exclusively of men. By then, in 2009, only ten percent of the supervisory board members were women. Only one quarter of these women were sent from the companies’ side, three quarters came from the employees’ representation. Among the 194 CEOs of the 30 biggest companies there was only one woman and she was only the second ever. Being a lawyer, our colleague had a simple, but brilliant idea. Following the German Federal Companies Act (§ 131 Aktiengesetz) it is sufficient to hold one single share and you may execute the shareholder’s right to information on company-related matters in the annual shareholders meeting. She herself started in April 2009 to question several boards of German listed companies on the representation of women in the Supervisory Board and in executive positions in the companies. She also asked about the related measures the companies had taken or would take in order to improve the representation of women on their boards. From these questions a project was born that ran for five years, till 2014, and finally resulted in a European project: European Women Shareholders Demand Gender Equality.

The idea of the EU-project was to visit Annual General Meetings (AGMs) of the EURO STOXX 50 index companies as well as a selection of the BUX, SOFIX and FTSE 100 indices companies during the first half of 2015, submitting a questionnaire to ask the (Supervisory) Boards for detailed information about women's representation in leadership positions of their companies (Executive and/or Supervisory Board, but also other management positions) as well as about the companies' overall activities and achievements in relation to promoting women's careers. Between January and September 2015, about 125 listed companies in 11 Member States were engaged in project-activities. Their AGMs were visited and/or they were asked orally and/or in writing to answer the specific questionnaire developed by the EU-project-team. The visits of the AGMs in the selected member states were prepared by workshops and toolkits. Some 90 activists undertook an impressive number of activities. Responsible for these activities were national coordinators. Most of them are with us today. I'd like to thank them for their hard work – and welcome so far as not mentioned before – our key experts, the National Coordinators from the 12 following countries:

- Belgium, Netherlands, Luxemburg: *Myriam van Varenbergh*, Lawyer at the Brussels' Bar, treasurer EWLA, *Marianne Eisma*, Dutch Board Member EWLA, *Virginie Issumo*, Luxemburgish Board Member EWLA, Dr. *Henriette van Eijl*, Founder BrusselsNV (Dutch women's network in Brussels) (Dr. *Annette Matthias*, Advocate, chair of the djb regional group Brussels).
- Bulgaria: *Svetlana Spassova Ganeva*, Managing Partner/ Legal Expert, chair of EWLA Bulgaria.
- Germany: *Birgit Kersten*, Advocate, Certified Public Accountant, chair of djb regional group Oldenburg, research associate of the djb project "Women Shareholders Demand Gender Equality".
- Spain: *Katharina Miller*, Associate Lawyer, chair of the djb regional group Madrid, EWLA member, initiator of "Paridad en acción".
- Finland: *Leena Linnainmaa*, Deputy Chief Executive, Finland Chamber of Commerce, past EWLA president.
- France: *Nathalie Leroy*, Lawyer, president of A.F.F.J., and *Sylvia Cleff Le Divellec*, Legal Professional, djb and EWLA member, member of A.F.F.J.
- Hungary: Dr. *Katalin Prandler*, Lawyer, Vice-President of the Hungarian Women Lawyers Association.
- Italy: *Antonia Verna*, Lawyer, Member of the Italian Bar, EWLA board member Italy.
- UK and Ireland: *Jackie Jones*, Legal Professional, Associate Professor of Law, University of West of England, EWLA President, EWLA board member UK.

Today we will discuss the results of our activities. What are the next steps for action? Do the results confirm the need for the implementation of European and/or national legislation with regard to women in decision making positions? Just a few words to spotlight the following programme:

We will speak about the low percentage of women in decision making positions in Europe and what to do about it. I welcome Member of French Parliament *Marie-Jo Zimmermann*, who will shed light upon the situation in French companies.

I also welcome *Margarete Hofmann*, vice president EWLA, and *Sabine Overkämping*, Head of Unit in the Ministry for Justice and Equality of Saxony-Anhalt, chair of the djb Commission "European Law and Public International Law" and EWLA board member. They will present the project and its results as well as a set of 15 recommendations on the basis of our main findings. These findings are based on evidence from over a decade of cumulative research, action and revision at least throughout the European Union. This includes results from previous projects in Germany, Spain and France, as well as all of the activities of the EU-project itself over a two-year period. It is equally informed by the Finnish experience, independent national and international literature and good practice across the globe. The recommendations include an ambitious legislation and policies at European and national level. Companies need to act and change their corporate culture. A change of perception in society is needed. You may be curious.

We all know how much work is hidden behind a successful conference. Many thanks especially to the project office team which made this conference work – and the project as well:

- *Sabine Overkämping*, the project's research director. Without her there would not be any EU-project.
- *Anke Gimbal*, Lawyer, General Secretary of djb.
- *Miruna Werkmeister*, project manager.
- *Linda Walczak* and *Rabea Aichelin*, project assistants
- And not to forget Frau Dr. *Henrike Franz*, Director of the Representation and our kind host.

For now I wish us the utmost benefit from our conference! Get involved at our country tables prepared and hosted by the national coordinators. They will discuss results from the project for each country with you. I hope you'll all have lively discussions and inspiring exchange, gain a lot of new insight and have a wonderful time in Brussels.

Thank you very much for your attention.