

How Women Network



The world is increasingly a global place. But what many people perceive as a threat can certainly also bring opportunity. For the last 75 years, the international "Business and Professional Women" association has been an example of how women around the world have learned to help each other.

Whether in the professional workplace or at universities, women nowadays often find themselves in the majority. Yet many fail to break through to the top positions in the world of business. Why is this? It was this question that the American lawyer Lena Madessin Phillips set out to answer 75 years ago by founding – in Geneva – an organization called Business and Professional Women (BPW). She was joined by around 170 women from 16 countries. Their goal was to help women at all levels of economic, political and social life take on greater responsibility. Skeptics could of course argue that the association has still to achieve this goal even today, pointing to the fact that in so many areas of society women still have little or no voice. Indeed, there may be something in this. But to dismiss all the work done by BPW as useless on this basis would be wrong. Quite the opposite: Those who take women's issues seriously can see that BPW members have come a long way over the many years the organization has existed.

Women in Management

BPW International currently boasts more than 30,000 members in over 100 countries. From 2001 until the end of June 2005 the global organization was headed by a Swiss woman, Zurich's own Antoinette Rüegg. BPW Switzerland has a total of some 2,400 members, organized into 38 regional clubs throughout the country, and is politically neutral. It accepts all women who hold either a middle or senior management function. The association is now the most significant network of professional women in the world, and is gaining ever greater acceptance in the business world. Today the association is generously sponsored by leading companies such as Credit Suisse, Nestlé and Swisscom. The Swiss branch also had the honor to host this year's annual congress to mark the organization's 75th anniversary. Staged in Lucerne, the event took place in June over four days. The event organizers were expecting 800 participants, but more than 1,300 women actually attended from more than 100 countries. The congress was warm, lively and colorful, and it was interesting to note was that the issues that now concern women around the world are much more homogeneous than they were 10 or 20 years ago. A consequence of globalization?

The Problem of Being Torn

So much nowadays is a matter of perception – and how an individual's own talents, powers and opportunities are judged by others. Whether in New York, Nairobi or Nepal, women everywhere have no shortage of high-responsibility job opportunities. But they do not grasp them. They lack self-confidence, they feel torn, plagued by self-doubt and the fear of failing in a male-dominated world. Such is the view of women who have broken the bonds of self-limitation, such as Nelly Wenger or die Thailand's Kobkarn Wattanavrangkul, who is currently the President of the Board of

BPW



Directors of Toshiba Thailand. The American Nancy Barry, President of Women's World Banking, was keen to stress in Lucerne how important it is that women are prepared to shoulder economic responsibility, pointing out that women in third world countries are the ones who ensure that microcredits are used in a targeted and sustainable manner.

Subtle Assistance

In addition to furthering the debate on emancipation, BPW clubs also provide subtle assistance to the advancement of women, be it in South Africa, Pakistan, or Latin America. Good contacts, sympathy, and a clear desire to succeed are prerequisites for the achievement of these goals. What is now known universally as "networking" provides members of this association with an invaluable opportunity for launching new business ideas, winning support for projects, or finding confidantes. In this respect globalization truly has had a positive side. A more open world enables people to get closer to one another, not least via the internet, something that BPW members from the Third World stress again and again. As they see it, we are standing on the threshold of a wonderful opportunity that has to be seized – by enabling as many women as possible to access the net. Projects of this nature are now up and running in a number of different countries. Against this background, the young and upcoming BPW clubs in the emerging markets are displaying a pioneering spirit. Another factor is that members from these regions of the world often have very good access to the upper tiers of government authority – and BPW is after all a UN-recognized organization – and can therefore really get things moving. In this regard members of BPW clubs from industrialized nations almost have good reason to be jealous. But they too face an important task. After all, they possess an invaluable trove of experience and proven institutional instruments that can be used to give women's issues all over the world a better hearing.

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