

'The Age of Women: Why Feminism Also Liberates Men'

A breakfast seminar with Alexander De Croo, Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium and Minister of Finance and Development Cooperation

Hosted by the Legal Diversity & Inclusion Alliance (LDIA) on 5 June 2019



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The breakfast seminar was organised by LDIA and focused on the core topics of Minister De Croo's recently published book, 'The Age of Women: Why Feminism Also Liberates Men'. After being introduced by Ruxandra Cana, managing partner of Steptoe & Johnson's office in Belgium, Minister De Croo talked the audience through the main themes of his book and the ideas underpinning them.

Minister De Croo explained that when he first told people he planned to write a book about feminism, he was met with mixed reactions. In particular, many women feared that he would 'mansplain' – the phenomenon whereby men explain things to women that they already know, usually in a patronising tone. Minister De Croo, however, felt these fears were rooted in the mistaken belief that feminism is something only women can talk about. He does not accept this – he argues that if feminism's ultimate goal is equality between men and women, then it is only logical to say that men also have a role to play.

Feminism: An economic imperative

His personal evolution from passive to active feminist began with the realisation that there was more to the movement than the classic rights-based approach. This approach posits that we should support feminism because it is simply the right thing to do, and typically cites examples such as the gender pay gap and high levels of violence against women as evidence that feminism is still very much needed – even in countries such as Belgium where people can be somewhat complacent about women's rights, believing that 'we're past all that now'.

However, the perspective changes when we add in an economic dimension. Feminism, in the view of Minister De Croo, is not only an ideological principle but an economic imperative; women represent an untapped pool of potential and qualifications. The key metric here is the gender pay gap as, in order to achieve something, we must first define and measure it. Minister De Croo pointed out that although equal pay for equal work has mostly been achieved in today's society, at least in Belgium, the average salary of all men remains far higher than the average salary of all women. Three reasons were put forward for this.

Understanding the gender pay gap

First, generally speaking, women and men work in different sectors. Women are over-represented in lower-paying fields such as education and care provision, while men are the clear majority in some of the most lucrative sectors such as tech and ICT.

Secondly, there are far more women than men working part-time. In Belgium, 44% of women work part-time, compared to just 11% of men. This means that either too many women are working part-time, or not enough men – but in either case, it's an issue.

Thirdly and finally, men tend to progress to higher levels in their careers. This is clear at a glance in most offices – while gender balance may be roughly 50/50 at entry level, it tends to get more lopsided as you progress up the organigramme. Minister De Croo noted that in many instances this is linked to the prevalence of part-time work, as once you have worked part-time for a few years it is generally very difficult to come back to full-time work and expect to regain the momentum you had before.

The common counter-argument to this is, of course, that working part-time is a choice that women make. Minister De Croo, however, queries whether the choice is truly a free choice. After all (and assuming a heterosexual couple for the sake of argument), do men generally allow women to make this free choice?

Using policy to tackle societal inequality

The other issue is the fabled glass ceiling – or, as an American acquaintance of Minister De Croo's described it, "just one thick layer of men". This is most visible not at C-1 (as is generally assumed) but rather at the age when people begin having families. Statistics show an average reduction in salary of 7% per child which, of course, primarily impacts women. Given that having children is generally something we decide to do together (or should be!), why is this the case? Why do women almost always pay the heavier price in their careers when it comes to starting a family?

The rules on parental leave also highlight this societal inequality. In Belgium, for example, maternity leave is 15 weeks while paternity leave is a mere 10 days – and new fathers often feel reluctant to take even this much when faced with pressure from friends and colleagues to return to the office earlier. In Scandinavia, men and women receive the same amount of parental leave and the positive impact on society is clear. Equality at home is a fundamental underpinning of equality in the workplace – one cannot exist without the other. The most common response to this is, of course, 'that sounds nice, but how would we pay for it?' Minister De Croo did not see this as a real obstacle, pointing out that most policies worth having cost money and that there are always ways of organising these things.

The cost of childcare is another major hurdle, particularly for single mothers. While access to childcare is generally good in Belgium, it is prohibitively expensive, costing an average of €500-€600 per month. When combined with the cost of renting an apartment, the cost of having children becomes almost unsustainable for anyone doing it on a single salary – and the people facing this challenge are predominantly women. This is an area in which Minister De Croo feels the State should do more to subsidise the cost. These subsidies should not necessarily be available to everyone (as they are in Sweden, for example, where childcare is limited to a maximum of €100 per month) but certainly to those who face particular difficulty in affording the care they need.

Another area where government policies can be helpful is in encouraging more transparency. The recent law that entered into force in the UK requiring all organisations to publish a breakdown of their gender pay gap statistics produced some striking results – as with EasyJet, for example, which admitted to a gender pay gap of 70%. This was blamed on the fact that there are generally more male pilots (who earn more) and more female air stewards (who earn less), but this is not something we should accept at face value. Why is this the case? Neither job requires any particular physical talents that are more suited to one gender or the other. It's common to blame this disparity on education, but Minister De Croo disagrees, pointing out that women are more likely to graduate

from university than men and, furthermore, tend to achieve higher grades while there. Instead, he suggests that time management is the critical factor – that the job of a pilot is simply not structured in a way that can accommodate the familial responsibilities many women have. But this, too, is something we can change.

Confronting inequality in the private sector

The question of quotas is more delicate as they have the potential to be quite stigmatising if misused. Minister De Croo does not suggest imposing these in the private sector, but does encourage the setting of objectives at company level. He noted from his own experience that even when there are plenty of competent women available, it is not always easy to get them onto the shortlist. He attributed this to the fact that men are generally more comfortable with imperfection. A man who meets 60% of the requirements for a promotion will generally go for it, while a woman will wait until she meets 100% of the requirements. The standards by which women are judged are also more stringent, as women are judged on their dress and their personality traits in a way that men usually are not. In the Minister's words, we can say that we have truly made it when there are as many incompetent women in leadership positions as there are incompetent men!

Similarly, women are more likely than men to say no if they are offered a promotion. Minister De Croo believes that this can be combatted by simply asking under what conditions they would say yes – as these conditions are generally far more feasible to achieve than the candidate may think. It is usually possible to adapt certain working conditions to suit the candidate's needs, and it is important to normalise doing so. After all, women are not the only ones who would benefit if we succeeded in establishing a working culture in which late nights and weekends are generally off-limits.

In addition, Minister De Croo indicated that he is not in favour of the women-only offsites which are common in many companies, as this approach excludes men, whose buy-in is necessary if we are to change the prevailing norms and achieve a more feminist society.

The importance of champions

Minister De Croo concluded his presentation with a reminder of why feminism is an imperative for organisations – not only because it is morally right, but because it is a smart business decision. Studies have shown time and time again that companies with diverse leadership perform better on the stock market, are more profitable, and are more adept at risk management. In the words of Christine Lagarde, "If it had been Lehman Sisters instead of Lehman Brothers, we would be living in a different world." The Minister also rejected the idea that you must start by improving yourself before becoming an advocate for change – you can do both at the same time. He freely admitted that he is not a perfect feminist, and that he has a long way to go both personally and professionally. But the idea that you must achieve perfection before you can make your point is killing far too many good intentions and slowing down society's progression towards a better working situation for women and men alike.

As a final remark, addressed to the men in the room, he said that we too often assume the question asked of men is 'Are you against this?'. Instead, the real question feminism asks is 'Will you champion this?' Because without the support of men *as well as* women, there can be no hope of achieving change.

The talk was followed by a short Q&A, during which Minister De Croo clarified that he was not against women having any role models at all – he agreed that it can be helpful to have female role models who have 'made it' as they make the prospect of 'making it' more tangible for women in the lower ranks. However, he suggested that sponsors (male or female) are actually more important for

ambitious women, as they will champion you when you are not there and have more power to change the norms of the company's culture. In response to a question about how to get more male decision-makers into the room (noting that the attendees of this talk were predominantly female), he highlighted the power of the economic argument as a persuasive tool. And finally, in response to a question about the factors women should consider when planning how they will balance a career with having a family, Minister De Croo admitted that perhaps the most important factor – albeit one of the most difficult to control – is choosing the right partner.

LDIA is very grateful to Minister De Croo for agreeing to speak at this event and for providing so much food for thought. The audience left the room both challenged and inspired, and we hope to see several of the suggestions discussed put into practice in LDIA member firms in the near future.

Minister De Croo's book is available in English, Dutch and French and is on sale now in most bookstores.