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‘Too few women’ at business gathering

By Andrew Bounds



One of the largest gatherings of entrepreneurs in the world has been attacked for featuring only a handful of women, perpetuating a myth that the most successful businesses are built by driven, single men.

The Global Entrepreneurship Congress, held in Liverpool on Tuesday, had only one woman for every eight men speaking, with Sir Richard Branson, the Virgin chairman, headlining.

Tom Cannon, professor of strategic development at the University of Liverpool Management School, told a packed fringe meeting on Wednesday: “I always thought there were more women in the population than that. There are more men than women running businesses,

but it is not 12:1 [the ratio in the pre-lunch session] it is 3:1. The gender balance in entrepreneurship events needs to start reflecting reality.”

Sue Marlow, professor of entrepreneurship at the University of Birmingham, said girls needed role models other than the likes of Katie Price, the model, and Victoria Beckham, who used their bodies or fashion sense to start businesses.

Maternity payments gap

A private bank is offering its female business borrowers interest payment holidays during maternity leave, **writes Jonathan Moules.**

Duncan Lawrie Private Bank said it would suspend interest payments on a loan for up to a year, although the accrued sum would then be added to the total value of the loan for repayment later.

Stephen Buckland, Duncan Lawrie’s senior bank manager, said that male clients could get the same support if they opted to look after the baby. However, others criticised the offer as a gimmick.

Henry Ejdelbaum, managing director of ASC Finance for Business, a broker, said gender was never an issue when applying for finance.

“You can blame the banks for many things but in this case they are 100 per cent innocent,” he said.

Deborah Leary, chairwoman of the British Association of Women Entrepreneurs, who participated in a panel debate at the GEC, said: “It was five hours before we saw a female face. It is something to think about for the future.”

Leary, who runs Forensic Pathways, an international software business based in Tamworth, also said that Sir Richard, while inspirational, had achieved so much his story was as likely to deter people from starting up as encourage them.

Martha Lane Fox, above, co-founder of Lastminute.com, and Katherine Corich, of software house Sysdoc, were among only five women on a roster topped by Sir Terry Leahy, the former Tesco chief executive, and Lord Heseltine, the former cabinet minister and founder of Haymarket publishing group.

Max Steinberg, chief executive of Liverpool Vision, the arm of the city’s council involved in organising the GEC, said: “We presented as diverse a range of speakers as possible during the course of our festival, including the main day of the congress itself.”

UK policymakers want to increase female start-up levels to those of males as a way to boost the economy. Cannon said the difference was partly accounted for by attitude to risk. Some 40 per cent of male business owners surveyed by the university said they had remortgaged their home without telling their spouse or partner, against no women.

Many women also had just a few years after their children had left home before they started caring for elderly parents. Whereas male business owners received an average of seven hours a week business support from their spouse, female business owners received 50 minutes.

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