

Speech by HRH The Countess of Wessex  
Global Ambassador of 100WHF's Next Generation initiative

On the occasion of 100WHF's Annual NYC Gala on November 11, 2015

I can't tell you how thrilled I am to have been asked to take up this new role of Global Ambassador for 100WHF Next Generation initiative.

Like many of you here tonight, I am a rare breed! You are rare because of the imbalance of gender across your industry, which is of course why 100WHF was created. I am rare because I am one of the few ladies in the British royal family who has had a professional business career and their own company. So perhaps I am able, through my own experience, to have a deeper appreciation of the corporate world and what it is like to have to climb the career ladder. So from one rare breed to another, in the immortal words of UK singer Bryan Ferry, Let's Stick Together!

Seriously though, I hope that through my role with 100WHF I will be able to help shine a light on issues for women working in the financial sector while proactively promoting examples of good practice in the hope of inspire others to do more to encourage and support their female employees.

One of my other roles in the UK is as chair of a Women's Network Forum which I started to bring together a group of senior professionals who are responsible for their company's gender balance agendas. What has become clear to me through this work is that regardless of the type of business sitting around that table that the issues for professional women across the corporate world as a whole are pretty much the same.

Therefore by sharing good practice, highlighting the advantages of taking gender balance seriously and supporting the next generation of women coming through we will be helping to effect change across the board.

Talking of the next generation, I was delighted to attend the first Next Generation Breakfast this morning which brought together a number of young women with fewer than 8 years experience in the industry. The idea of this gathering, is to give them a voice and to ensure our activities are in line with their greatest concerns and priorities. To be honest, many of the questions they raised are those of a decade ago, which shows that we still have much to do. However, we do have and are aware of some fabulous examples of companies doing great things to nurture their female work force around each of the issues and over time as we expand this format to other areas of the world we intend to share these best practices and start a global dialogue supportive of young women in the industry.

Therefore it is very appropriate that the proceeds of this evening's Gala will benefit the 100WHF Foundation in support of this year's Celebrating Education - Investing in the Next Generation initiative. We are thrilled to be partnering with a number of groups and associations who all aspire to promote young talent and leadership including Forte Foundation, CAIA Association, Girls Who Invest and Smart Women Securities. We plan during 2016 and 2017 to roll out outreach and access programmes with three main aims including:

- Inspiring young women to choose a career in the financial industry and the broader investor world

- Creating educational opportunities and access points to support those young women who want to join the industry, and thirdly,

- Facilitating an ongoing peer network for young women in the industry

But of course it is all very well encouraging the next generation to aspire to greater things without showing them that it is possible to get ahead, to be successful and not to have to do it at the expense of everything else life has to offer. So what better way to inspire them than to show them shining examples of others who have already done it.

The annual Leadership Awards gives us the perfect opportunity to pay tribute to some very inspirational women who are playing a vital role in keeping public companies accountable to shareholders through their leadership in governance at the firms they work for. In fact they are exactly the kind of women who form my Women's Network Forum in the UK, so I know just how committed they are to supporting and inspiring our young women of the future.

In a minute Mimi will come up to introduce this year's Awardees, so in advance of that I would like to offer them all my congratulations and thanks for all that they do in championing their younger counterparts. For using their success as a way to encourage others to aspire to wanting more, for being great role models of putting something back and paving the way for the new generation and for keeping their companies accountable. Thank you for allowing us to recognise you tonight.

Finally, I would like to thank 100WHF for inviting me to become Global Ambassador, for giving me this opportunity to work with you and your partners to help drive and effect change where one day gender balance will have become a non-issue and we will be coming together to celebrate successful young people regardless of sex.

Thank you.