

“Bridging the gender gap”: HQ forum brings alumna Mariana Gheorghe together with female CEOs from Russia and Northern Africa



Mariana Gheorghe, former EBRD Senior Banker and current CEO and President of OMV Petrom SA, was named as the most influential woman in Romania by [Forbes](#) in 2013 and 19th among the most powerful women of Europe, the Middle East and Africa by [Fortune](#) in September 2014. Two years after Petrom's privatisation, she became the company's CEO. Since then, the company has grown enormously and delivered stellar results.

On September 18, Mariana took part in a panel discussion, hosted by the Bank's women's networking group Connect4Women, entitled “Women and leadership: bridging the gender gap”. Apart from Mariana, the panel included leading female professionals from different sectors in the EBRD's countries of operations: Anna Belova, Chairman of the Board of Directors of JSC “Russian Venture Company”; Wided Bouchamaoui, first female President of the Tunisian business union, “Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat” (UTICA); and Neveen El Tahri, the first woman on the board of the Egyptian Stock Exchange and the Egyptian Financial Supervisory Authority.

President Chakrabarti addressed the panel and audience, and praised the efforts of the Connect4Women team. “Gender equality is essential to the way we do business,” he said. “It is crucial to how the EBRD engages. We have a strategic gender initiative to empower women through the Bank's investments.”

Suma also commented on how, during the time he has been with the Bank, there have been some great achievements in addressing gender imbalances. “When I first arrived at the Bank two years ago, there was only one woman on the Executive Committee. Today, there are three.” However, Suma was clear to stress that gender equality at the Bank goes beyond a numbers game. He acknowledged there are still large gender gaps in our countries of operations and it will be an area of focus going forward.



The leadership journey

Francis Malige, Managing Director EEC, asked each of the panellists when she first realised she was a leader? For Mariana Gheorghe, there was never a specific moment. “It's great to be told you're a leader because as women we often don't believe it,” she remarked. “As a woman you often need to prove yourself more than men do before you are accepted as an equal.”

For Anna Belova, it was when she was put in charge of Russia's national railway system and for Wided Bouchamaoui it was when she was elected as President by men in her organisation. “It's a man's world, but they saw me as an equal,” she said. Neveen El Tahri, oldest of the three sisters, feels she has always been a leader, in one way or

another! “My father brought my sisters and me up as equals,” she explained. “Gender never came into it. I only felt like, and was treated like, a woman when I started working.”



You don't have to be superwoman

Francis asked the panel about the role of mentors in their careers and whether they are important for women wishing to climb the ladder. The answer was a resounding yes. “Looking up to people who embody what you aspire to is a very good thing,” said Mariana.

Neveen believes we have a mentor at every stage of our lives, beginning, if we're lucky, with our parents. “My father instilled hard work and ethics in me,” she remarked. “Then it was my bosses and supervisors.”

The panel felt mentoring is especially important in countries in transition. “There is a big role to play there in terms of educating and mentoring the younger generation,” said Wided.

Refreshingly, the panel didn't focus too much on the question of family versus career, something that's often in the minds of many young women. It was though touched upon with a lot of positivity and focus on leadership. “Family is an important part of balanced career,” said Mariana. “You shouldn't feel guilty about not being superwoman!”

Breaking through the glass ceiling

While there's no doubt that gender equality has made enormous progress in the past few decades, there is still work to be done. How

do we address the remaining issues and inequalities? How do we get more women in the boardroom?

“I believe working with shareholders is key,” remarked Mariana. “We have to educate them. If shareholders are comfortable with women in senior positions, it will work.”

Neveen suggested that it's possible that women overstress their gender at times. “Just concentrate on doing the best job you can,” she advised. “Your output is what really matters in the long run.”

Overall, the panel was emphatic about women believing in themselves and engaging in their work from a position of worth rather than the quest for perfection. “You don't have to be a genius, you are allowed to make mistakes, the world will keep turning,” said Mariana. “Do everything with joy, especially the joy of being yourself. If you do something with passion you will be successful.”

“Keep your ability to be surprised,” was Anna Belova's advice. “Don't be afraid of challenges. Negative experiences often turn into positives.”

ROs get in on the action

In addition to HQ staff members, over 70 people were able to follow the discussion in the Bank's ROs. Belgrade and Zagreb ROs even went one step further, inviting local women's groups to participate in the conversation.

“It was an opportunity to show how the Women in Business programme that's being launched in Western Balkans fits into the EBRD gender strategy,” said Natalia Meylunas, Head of the SBS Regional Programme for Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Bosnia. “Entrepreneurs, local bankers and representatives of women's business associations attending our networking events in Croatia and Serbia commented on the similarity of the challenges they and the panellists in London face.”

Francis thanked the panel for their words of wisdom and their inspiring energy. "What we have heard today is as relevant for men as it is for women," he said.

Connect4Women's objective is to provide networking, mentoring and leadership opportunities that encourage the professional and personal development of its members.

By Philippa Moore