

## **SET: To make a difference Conference – 11<sup>th</sup> February 2004**

Good morning and thank you for inviting me here today.

I'm delighted to have the chance to address you in my capacity as the deputy Minister for Women and Equality, but also as the Minister for Industry and the Regions.

The two roles are closely interlinked, although not everyone can see the connection.

Let me explain. Patricia Hewitt tells a story about a question she was asked by a chief executive of a leading company soon after she became the Trade and Industry Secretary and Minister for Women. He wanted to know what trade and industry had to do with women.

Well, with women making up half the workforce, comprising more than half of all full-time undergraduates, and being responsible for the vast majority of consumer decisions, it should have been obvious. But it wasn't - and that's a concern for us in Government.

It is a concern because we believe in equality as a matter of principle and because it's makes business and economic sense. And, we know that, in a world of increasing competition, equality and economic success go hand in hand. We know that good

research, technology and innovation can achieve a range of economic, social and regional benefits for society. We are wealthier, expect to live longer and have a greater variety of leisure interests than previous generations. But our welfare depends heavily on continued investment in the creation of new ideas and developing highly skilled people. We understand that our economy will only be truly successful when it harnesses the skills and talents of all the population – and that includes women.

There are undoubtedly strong links between science, innovation, productivity and subsequent sustainable economic growth and certainly we have an outstanding track record in scientific research - with 1% of the world's population, we fund 4.5% of the world's science, produce 8% of the scientific papers and receive 9% of the citations. And yet we have an innovation gap, and have not been as successful in exploiting new ideas – a key driver for productivity – as we might have been. Overall, the percentage of UK businesses introducing new or improved products or processes compares unfavourably with other EU countries. We can no longer ignore the fact that our future prospects and prosperity depend on **everyone** having the chance to fulfil their potential as individuals and to make their contribution to science and innovation.

We therefore need to give women the same broad range of opportunities, choices and support as men, so that they can make the decisions that will enable them to reach their true potential.

It is for this reason that Patricia Hewitt asked Baroness Greenfield, in 2002, to report on the difficulties faced by women in SET. From the Prime Minister down, we in Government recognise the science base as the bedrock of our economic performance. So, it is absolutely crucial to the UK that women, are able to participate and succeed in this sector. And yet, the low representation of women across all aspects, and at all levels, of SET suggests that there are barriers to their recruitment, retention and progression in both industry and academia. Baroness Greenfield in fact highlights a range of factors that inhibit female involvement and advancement in SET, including gender stereotyping, a lack of role models, isolation in non-traditional areas of work, poor work-life balance policies, and difficulties in returning after a career break, to name but a few. And, despite the excellent work being undertaken by many groups nationwide to support and represent women and girls in these sectors, their work is often under-resourced and conducted in the spare time of some dedicated volunteers. Yet these initiatives deserve the attention and support of those who reap the benefits of women's skills and expertise – that is employers - be it in industry, university or the workshop.

So, I am very excited by the news recently announced by my colleague, Lord Sainsbury, that the contract for a new UK Resource Centre for Women in SET has now been awarded to the JIVE consortium. This marks the beginning of a co-ordinated and strategic UK effort to make sure that the women and girls participating in science, engineering, technology, maths and construction, be it education or employment, are fully supported

and represented. And, to make sure that we can now all start working together, in the best interests of women and business, the resource centre will also be offering guidance to and sharing best practice with you, the employers. I shall be watching the progress of this resource centre with excitement and great personal interest not least because it is an initiative that embraces the range of my ministerial responsibilities – women, industry and the regions – and I'd like to see a UK success for women in SET.

The resource centre was, in fact, one of the recommendations to come out of the Greenfield Report, *SET Fair*, and is now an integral part of the Government's *Strategy for Women in SET*. Dr Gill Samuels, a co-author of *SET Fair*, will be giving her response to the *Strategy* a little later. And, we will also be hearing from Annette Williams, the manager of the new resource centre, on their very exciting plans for this venture, so I will leave them to explain the specifics and instead elaborate a little on some of the broader issues...

Women's employment in the UK is highly concentrated in certain sectors – 60% of working women are in just 10 occupations. Part of the reason for this is gender stereotyping and yet we are facing a skills gap in our SET sectors. We need to tackle the culture that reinforces the belief that engineering is no job for a woman, a culture that restricts the numbers of women rising to professorial level in our universities, that turns women away from gaining skills and expertise in ICT or the manual trades, and that fails to engage women in the scientific and technological professions.

And for those women who (bravely) decide to pursue a non-traditional route, we must make sure that they are able to stay and succeed in their chosen profession. We should be looking for a return on our investment. We cannot afford to lose the valuable knowledge, training, experience - the diverse perspective - that women bring to the workplace, simply because they are disproportionately subject to cultural discomfort or inflexible working practices.

These are not just issues for women, however, and they are not the only ones who will benefit from a more inclusive and flexible culture. Men are as likely, for example, to be parents as women – both have to balance their life and work commitments. I am delighted, therefore, that general Government reform such as the Employment Act 2002 and the Work-life Balance Initiative 2000 and the right to ask for flexible working, will be receiving sector specific focus and attention through the work of the resource centre.

Equally the gender pay gap suggests that women's skills and talents are not being properly used and rewarded. Although the numbers of women with SET degrees is rising, only 25% of female SET graduates are employed in SET occupations. This is not simply bad news for women, but bad news for business and the economy. With such a substantial attrition rate, which increases with seniority, we as a country cannot afford to undervalue the

contribution that women make to our industry and economy, and they deserve to be remunerated accordingly. The resource centre will be working with employers to tackle occupational segregation and the gender pay gap - the fact that women are under-utilised, under-valued and under-retained – as an economic problem that needs to be addressed comprehensively if the UK is to maintain and increase its value-added productivity.

I found it very interesting to note that JIVE's extensive experience and expertise includes the manual trades and built environment, which I hope can help the UK, and women in particular, to plug the skills shortages that characterise the UK employment market.

We need a holistic and comprehensive approach to breaking down barriers to female SET employment. The Resource Centre will work across a breadth of employers, professional bodies, academic scientists, Sector Skills Councils, careers professionals and learning providers. The Centre will provide advice on tackling the stereotyping and visibility problem in schools, education and training and employment. Working at school, vocational, craft, technical and professional levels, we will be able to address the problem of female recruitment, retention and progression throughout the career life cycle.

Any approach must be broad, deep and continuous: it must be inclusive of all women and girls, irrespective of ethnicity, ability and age. It must acknowledge fundamental work-life balance issues

and the problem of childcare. Employers need to offer opportunities to all women, including, for example, those who may be uninspired and underpaid in administrative positions, wishing to up-skill into better paid and value-adding SET trade professions, but who too often are deprived of that opportunity.

We need to understand and break down the barriers that women face in starting a SET career. We need to be sensitive to the sense of isolation and frustration that makes women more likely to drop out of the SET sector, and we need to acknowledge the difficulties faced by those wishing to return to work in the field – a lack of IT skills, for example – or those who re-locate with their partners.

This conference sets a marker in the ground. It is time to stop talking – we all know what the issues are – and time, instead, to take action. I look forward eagerly to seeing in 3 years time a different landscape for women in SET, a workplace in which glass ceilings and sticky floors are really beginning to disappear. As employers you tell us that the under-representation of women at all levels in SET occupation is a problem for you. I believe the will to change is there. Now let's work together to make it happen.