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Martine Liautaud is using her clout

Are women entrepreneurs mere blips in the landscape or are we witnessing a real shift in the status of business women? Martine Liautaud, founder and chair of investment bank *Liautaud & Cie.*, and founder of the Women Business Mentoring Initiative (WBMI) association, has announced that the association is setting up an endowment fund to support its philanthropic activity promoting gender parity.

“The main idea is to contribute to economic development by helping young companies to become PMEs and to support women entrepreneurs who only represent 15% of entrepreneurs in France”, declared Martine Liautaud. Founded in 2010, the WBMI (Women Business Mentoring Initiative) association supports women entrepreneurs in business for 3 years, pro bono, helping them to scale up their companies. Four intakes of mentees, over 100 entrepreneurs, have been supported. In parallel, an entrepreneurs’ club was set up to address business challenges in Paris and provincial cities. The particularity on mentoring at WBMI is the rigorous selection process of mentors (both men and women), who are either entrepreneurs or senior executives in blue-chip companies. Entirely made up of volunteers and free for mentees, the program prohibits mentors from taking either a stake in their mentees’ companies or a seat on their boards. WBMI has fostered solid partnerships with global companies such as Engie and BNP Paribas, but also France’s largest employer federation, MEDEF, and BPI, the French public investment bank.

But Liautaud’s stepping up a gear with the Women Initiative Foundation, a fund to promote gender parity at all levels in the world of business. Besides Liautaud & Cie., she has founding partners committed to the financing the fund for several years, such as energy giant Engie (17th largest global company by headcount). Indeed Engie, one of WBMI’s founding partners has been exemplary in promoting the success of its women managers, both through its mentoring program and its WIN network. The network, with over 1800 women worldwide, supports and leverages women leadership. These initiatives have been supported by the company’s leaders for over 10 years, notably by senior executive VP Valerie Bernis who strives to rebalance tomorrow’s energy business.

A range of concrete initiatives: WIF aims to become a think-tank and vocal promoter of gender parity in the business world. WIF notably encourages research on themes around women leadership through studies, Europe-wide reports and specialized publications. The fund will also set up programs in universities, like the one WBMI set up with its partner BNP Paribas in 2015 with the Stanford Graduate Business School. Indeed, WIF aims to extend its reach beyond France by opening offices in major cities starting with New York.