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'My husband does it all. I've never cooked anything for him'; My weekend Dragons' Den star Deborah Meaden talks to Lydia Slater about success, sexism and the secret to her happy marriage

BYLINE: Lydia Slater

Time is famously money for Deborah Meaden, the businesswoman and star of Dragons' Den. Her dismissive catchphrase on the programme is "You're wasting my time", accompanied by a fish-eyed stare. Crushed, the hapless inventors of cardboard beach furniture and pet-burial kits slink off, aware that there is no greater crime.

We meet in the Roundhouse, Camden (she sits on the board), which is around the corner from her London flat. Meaden is a symphony in expensive beige: Max Mara silk top, Armani trousers, Louboutin shoes, topped off with Baccarat jewellery.

Meaden is somewhat allergic to quotas and feminist politics and describes herself as genderless when it comes to business. "It's easy to stand up and shout that women need more this or more that. Stop making it an issue, just get on with it and be good."

At the moment women make up about 14 per cent of FTSE boardrooms, a figure that Meaden says is a shame. "But it's quite complex. There are many reasons for that,

and choice could well be one of them." She is equally hard-nosed on the subject of maternity leave. "It does make a difference to your career, but that's your choice. And it's unfair for a lot of small businesses to carry the burden of it." So would she change the law if she could? "Um," she says, slightly uncomfortable.

"Obviously people need to take time off if they've had a baby. But I've had experience of having to keep a job open when both parties have known they're not coming back - but I still can't legally recruit someone. That's a bit crazy. The law assumes you're not going to treat people fairly. Personally, what I'd rather do is have a sensible conversation."

Meaden admits that she has come up against entrenched sexism - at 19 she had set up a business importing glass and ceramics but found investors hard to find. "When I was younger, funding was quite difficult to get. I just carried on thinking I had quite a good proposition until I found someone who agreed with me."

So what would she say if someone was sexist towards her or asked her to make the tea? "I'd say no. I don't understand. Why is that difficult, Lydia? Why?" For a second that fishy look flickers across her face, then she bursts into hearty laughter. "There are always ways of stopping that kind of thing dead," she says.

Meaden is the second of four sisters. Her flair for business was encouraged by her entrepreneurial mother. "We were brought up not to expect anyone to give us anything. We always knew we had to work." When, aged 7, she set up a flower stall in the neighbour's driveway after realising that it was easier for passing drivers to spot, her mother told her: "That's what it's all about, Deborah: location, location, location."

From the age of 11 she had summer jobs to buy herself a pony and pay for its keep. By the time she was 19 she had set up a business importing glass and ceramics, then took out a Stefanel clothing franchise and eventually moved into her family's holiday park business, Weststar Holidays, buying her parents out in 1999. It was at Weststar that she met her husband, Paul, then a consultant to the leisure industry. They married in 1993 and, in a reversal of traditional roles, he has given up his job to run her domestic life. They don't have any

children. "There was a time when, if we'd had children, it would have been lovely but we haven't. And that's lovely too," she says firmly.

In a typical week Meaden is in London from Tuesday to Thursday, where she works or networks until the small hours. On Fridays she returns home to Paul and their Georgian farm in Somerset, where they grow veg and keep a vast menagerie, including 12 pigs, 11 ducks, several rescued racehorses, chickens, three dogs and a cat. "He looks after that bit and I have the pleasure of stepping back into it. There really wouldn't be any point making the money if I didn't have Paul to organise our lives. I feel very lucky. He's a fabulous cook," she says. "He makes a champagne sorbet that still has the sparkles in it. And his beef sautéed with ginger! I've never cooked anything for him."

What does she eat if he's not there? She giggles guiltily. "He usually makes up food for me," she confesses. "He looked in the fridge the other day and saw I'd made myself a sandwich - two bits of white bread with some chocolate in between." Well, I suppose even Deborah Meaden can't make a success of everything.

The new series of Dragons' Den starts tomorrow, BBC Two, 9pm

The Times (London)

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They say they want women directors, but do they?

BYLINE: Vanda Murray

Until recently, I have been the only female in the boardrooms I have worked in. I got

so fed up of being left out of the football conversations, I got my husband to give

me a quick 'footie briefing' before meetings. It helped but it wasn't my finest hour.

It must be a common problem, in the North West of England, only 9 per cent of leadership positions in the private sector are held by women. The public sector fares better with almost one-third and the boards in the voluntary/community sector are almost half women. The typical landscape is predominantly white, male and middle-aged. Does it matter? Well, all the evidence shows that boards with a broader range of perspectives and backgrounds make better decisions and produce an enhanced financial performance on a whole range of measures. So there is a compelling economic case for getting the right mix of people on the top team.

By the right mix, I mean both men and women drawn together for their abilities, who together have the right skills and experience to make the best possible decisions for the good of the company and its shareholders. Makes good business sense doesn't it? So, why does this situation exist in the private sector? I won't go through all the usual reasons given to explain the lack of women (family

commitments, low ambition and confidence) because in my experience a great number of suitably qualified women do exist - more than enough to meet the target of 25 per cent female representation on FTSE 100 boards by 2015 set out by Government adviser Lord Davies.

I have worked with and for some great male bosses who are also great leaders in every sense. However, I have also come across pockets of real resistance, old-fashioned guys who simply don't feel comfortable unless they are surrounded by men who have similar experiences of business and life and share their passion for football, rugby or cricket.

In the words of a high-profile recruitment consultant, when these guys recruit, they need to "stop looking in the mirror and look through the window". What we really need to change are perceptions, attitudes and workplace culture.

That's why we get group-think, boards of directors who don't challenge each other enough because their backgrounds, perspectives and experiences are just too similar. All too quickly, this can give rise to poor decision-making.