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Continental giants forced to show their hands over women on board

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Vodafone is among a group of Europe's biggest companies that have vowed to respond to calls to break the male dominance of their senior ranks by promoting more women to management.

The telecommunications group has pledged to increase the proportion of women among its senior leadership to 30 per cent within the next few years. In the long run, Vodafone said, it wants at least half of its workforce to be female. At present, 39 per cent of its staff and about a fifth of its senior management worldwide are women.

Vittorio Colao, the chief executive, said: "We are keenly aware of the need to boost the number of women prepared and qualified to serve on supervisory boards and as non-executive directors."

BMW, Deutsche Telekom, Siemens and Telefonica were also among 31 European industrial groups that yesterday published targets for the percentage of women they aim to have in senior positions.

AP Moller-Maersk, the Danish shipping company, said that it wanted to increase the number of women executives from 4 per cent to 10 per cent in the next three years. Total, the French energy group, said it will increase the proportion of female executives from 14 per cent to 22 per cent by 2020.

The companies agreed to release their targets as part of an initiative driven by the European Round Table of Industrialists, a committee of leading chief executives, in conjunction with a group of headhunters. As part of the programme, ERT is gathering a database of up-and-coming businesswomen who could step up to become directors of big companies.

The promotion of more women to senior positions has become a hot issue in European boardrooms after increasing pressure from politicians and regulators.

Viviane Reding, the European Union Justice Commissioner, has called for big companies to raise the proportion of female directors to 30 per cent. She is expected to publish a report on progress next week and has threatened mandatory quotas if companies have not done enough to promote more women.

In Britain, Lord Davies of Abersoch, a former senior banker, last year warned that Britain's top companies would be held back if they did not do more to ensure that their senior ranks reflected the wider workforce.