



**Speech by  
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### **Offering opportunities, seizing opportunities**

Your Royal Highness, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by sharing with you a childhood memory that came back to me strongly when I was preparing for this speech. One day, when I was about nine years old, my grandmother, who was born around 1880, advised me strongly against having 14 children, like her. I didn't fully understand what she meant at the time, but I did later on. It wasn't that she didn't love her children. Quite the opposite. My grandmother was a very warm, big-hearted woman, who watched over her family like a lioness. Nor was she unable to cope physically with her large family. She was, in fact, a very strong woman. But, deep down, she regretted never having had the chance to develop personally. This had everything to do with the era and the culture in which she grew up: the Netherlands at the turn of the 20th century. When she was young, it was very unusual for Dutch women to complete an advanced training course. And only a handful of women were in a position to pursue a professional career. All this in a country that already had its first queen in 1898. But Queen Wilhelmina was the only heir to the throne, so her place was secure.

A century later, I am happy to say that a lot has changed for the better. Both in my country and elsewhere, because of course the Netherlands was not exceptional at the time. This being said, women still have a long way to go. This conference is a reflection of that fact. I would therefore like to compliment Zayed University and the organising committee on this initiative. It is a great honour for me to be able to speak here, in the company of so many eminent women from all over the world. In my view, this conference underlines the commitment of the United Arab Emirates to being a modern society. In terms of the economy, in terms of technology, but also in terms of its social structure. I am full of admiration. Not only because of the pace of development. But also because of the way you are shaping it, according to your own cultural and religious traditions.

Ladies and gentlemen. My message today is this: making maximum use of all the untapped potential of women is not a choice, but a necessity. To my way of thinking, giving women a greater role in society is about more than equity – it is common sense too. I'm not saying this because I think that women are, by definition, better leaders. No doubt there is such a thing as the 'woman's touch'. Women are said to be 'more compassionate', have more 'natural empathy' and are 'better listeners'. Be this as it may, reality is that, sometimes, organisations also need a different, more controlling style of leadership. And I know from experience that

men can be good listeners, and not all women are empathetic. As I see it, these are individual qualities. So to me men and women are complementary: equal in all respects, but not the same.

Margaret Thatcher once said *'if you want a speech, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman'*. This is a memorable soundbite, but too much of a generalisation. If you do a search for the word 'leadership' in Google, you get about 500 million hits. This shows that leadership isn't an easy concept to pin down. And there is certainly no single universal definition. I don't think there is a great deal to be gained by pursuing an academic discourse on this subject today. But for me personally, good leadership revolves around three things:

1. First, a leader is someone with vision. You have to know where you've come from, and above all, where you want to go.
2. Second, a leader is someone who acts in the interests of the organisation or community that he or she leads. This means that you have to be able to set your ego aside.
3. Third, a leader knows that goals cannot be achieved without the contribution of others. You have to have the courage to gather people around you who, in certain respects, are stronger than yourself. This is especially important when the time comes to find a successor. All too often, organisations are left like an orphaned child when their leaders depart, because they would not tolerate having strong people around them when they were in charge.

I know both men and women who meet these criteria. So 'female superiority' is not a good reason to argue for a greater role for women in society. My reason for doing so is that if we do not use women's potential to the full, we will be missing opportunities. And that is something we simply cannot afford to do. I believe this applies universally. It applies to many African countries, where the local economy has traditionally been powered by women. In that part of the world, the transition to true sustainable development is inconceivable without a central role for women. It also applies to rapidly emerging economies like China and India, and to the United Arab Emirates, which have an enormous need for highly trained, highly skilled labour. And it applies to many countries in the European Union. Because over the next few decades, the proportion of elderly people in the population as a whole will rise. In the Netherlands we talk about a 'greying' population, but even this euphemism cannot conceal that this process will bring serious economic and social problems that we have to deal with.

So whatever our very real cultural differences, we all share the same need to have more women in important positions. Of course, every community has to go about meeting this need in their own way. But the fact that this need exists in the first place is, to my mind, beyond dispute. We cannot transform societies into strong communities while at the same time excluding half the population. That's what we have in common and that's what this conference is about!

I learned this lesson myself long ago from the late Miss Marga Klompé, the first Dutch woman to become a government minister, precisely fifty years ago. She started her impressive career as a chemistry teacher at a Catholic boarding school. The same school, as it happens, which my sister and I attended. Unfortunately I just missed out on being taught by Miss Klompé, but her spirit still pervaded the school when I was there. The nuns that ran it continually held her up as an example of a woman of real influence who brought about real

change. She was, of course, the woman we were supposed to emulate. I should say that we hardly needed this encouragement, such was the effect that Marga Klompé had on us.

During the Second World War, Marga Klompé played an important role as a Catholic woman in the Dutch resistance. This experience shaped her outlook in two ways. First, she gained an enduring respect for people with a different religion and political background. Second, she became convinced that it was time for women to start playing a full role in Dutch politics, an area where they were traditionally greatly underrepresented. When again only a very few women leaders emerged following liberation in 1945, she did not let matters rest, but set up a special political organisation for women. Not so much to put men under pressure, but as a way of engaging suitable women in public affairs. This was the start of her glittering political career, in the Dutch parliament, the United Nations, a number of European positions, and finally several ministerial posts. Following her retirement she was deservedly appointed a Minister of State – this is a lifelong position and the highest honour a Dutch politician can receive.

To this very day, Marga Klompé is an inspiration to me. She was above all a socially-minded person; firm and decisive when necessary, but also open to everyone and someone who cared deeply about the welfare of ordinary people. I see the same qualities in the new German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. This is a woman of whom I, as a fellow Christian Democrat, am very proud.

So women like Klompé showed us the way a long time ago. And yet, as I said at the start, we still have a long way to go. In my work as a minister, for example, I am often the only woman at the table. By way of illustration, let me give you a few figures from my part of the world. In the countries of the European Union, women's participation in the labour force ranges from 40 to 70 per cent. The Netherlands is certainly not one of the frontrunners in Europe: 54 per cent of Dutch women are in paid employment. But many have only a small part-time job. This means that many Dutch working women are still not economically independent. And among some groups of newcomers to the Netherlands, from Morocco for example, as few as one in three women have a job.

The figures for women in senior positions are equally unimpressive. Women hold top jobs at only five per cent of major Dutch companies. That is a third of their share in Norway, for example, which leads the field in Europe. In the upper echelons of the Dutch civil service, 12 per cent are women. The figures are slightly better in the non-profit sector, where around a quarter of all managers are women. But at the universities, the picture is shameful: only six per cent of Dutch professors are women. This puts us at the bottom of the league in Europe, and maybe even in the world. We do better in politics, at least at national level. Forty per cent of members of parliament are women, and around 45 per cent of ministers and deputy ministers. This compares quite favourably with other European countries. But at local level it's the same old story – the figure for women serving on municipal executives is only 16 per cent.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope your heads are not swimming from all these figures. What it comes down to is that in the Netherlands and the European Union too, the process of improving women's position in the job market is far from complete. This is reflected not just in the figures, but also in the actual value attributed to work performed by women. It is a bad sign that, in the sectors in which women are becoming stronger, levels of pay often start to lag behind. So it is not just that the figures are still out of balance, but there is also a lack of

recognition, socially and financially. This is certainly not due to women's level of education. In the younger generations, in particular, women are often better qualified than men of the same age. But this makes the figures even more painful. So as you can see, we are still hindered by the destruction of social capital in the Netherlands today, 50 years after Marga Klompé first held ministerial office.

The question is: what can we do about it? In the Dutch government, we have made a very clear choice. Essentially, women should be given extra opportunities. Because however much we might take it for granted in the Netherlands, equality between men and women clearly does not come about by itself. Nor is it something we can achieve overnight. That is why, together with the social partners, we have agreed clear but realistic targets for 2010. One such aim is for one in five managers in the private sector, and one in four in the public sector, to be women.

These targets are supported by concrete policy plans and projects at all levels. Aimed, for example, at encouraging women to start businesses. At increasing the proportion of women working in science and technology. At increasing the participation in society of female immigrants in cities. And at improving basic conditions, such as more and better childcare, making it easier for women to work outside the home. Let me stress again that this policy is really a necessity and a matter of common sense. Because in 2040, around a quarter of Dutch population will be over 65, compared with 15 per cent now. So we really do need everyone to play their part.

The key phrase in this Dutch example is: 'offering opportunities'. The very existence of Zayed University proves that the United Arab Emirates is in effect following the same course. In your country, in many respects women nowadays also lead the way in terms of education. And here too, a conscious effort is being made to take the next step: increasing the number of women who actually use their qualifications in a professional career. This is very commendable, but it would be a shame if these efforts were to be limited to our own countries. The Netherlands, the Emirates and the international community as a whole have a duty to give a helping hand to women in the developing world too. For the sake of the women themselves, but also to strengthen the communities in which they live.

Fortunately this is happening. Let me tell you about the inspiring example of our future queen, Princess Máxima. For a number of years now, she has devoted her energies, just like Your Royal Highness, to the issue of microcredit. Microcredit entails offering people opportunities by lending them small amounts of money that they can use to start up some form of economic activity. It involves amounts and businesses that banks are not interested in. But for the people involved, it makes a world of difference. After all, making a start is often the hardest part. Once you can stand on your own two feet, the world becomes a different place.

There are countless examples of successful entrepreneurs who started out in this way. Many have been able to take on employees. So in this respect microcredit is an effective way to change local communities for the better. One of many advantages is that when economic foundations are in place, labour migration is often no longer necessary. This has enormous social benefits for family life and the stability of the environment in which children grow up.

Of course, access to microcredit is not reserved for women. But Dutch policy in the area of international cooperation does have a strong focus on the empowerment of women, and not

just in order to reduce historical gender gaps. We also realise that many changes have to be made from the bottom up. That is to say, starting in households and families. And these are precisely the areas where women across the globe have traditionally shouldered great responsibilities. Traditionally, women's work has often centred on the home; bringing up children and providing food. With microcredit, you can build on that to achieve an economic female leadership role for an entire family or an entire village. Or, in the words of Princess Máxima, *'When you invest in a woman, you invest in her whole family. Her children go to school, the whole family gets better health care and she gets a voice in the community.'*

Ladies and gentlemen,

'Offering opportunities' is, in my view, the responsibility of the current generation of politicians and managers. Everyone who can enhance the position of women in civil society has a duty to do so. But in the end it is up to women themselves to seize the opportunities that come their way. So to the young women who are here today I would say: make sure you grab the opportunities that you get at this stage of your lives. Make maximum use of what you are offered at universities, at home and in other contexts. And above all, put this to full use in building a career. A time will come, maybe sooner than you think, when you yourself – as a leader – will be in a position to offer opportunities to other women. I am counting on you to do just that because I suspect it will still be necessary in the future.

Before I finish, you may have been wondering for the last 20 minutes whether I followed my grandmother's advice about not having 14 children. Well, I did. I am the proud mother of two grown-up children, and the even prouder grandmother of five grandchildren. My strategy has been to have children when I was relatively young, and then to pursue my career in earnest. I can recommend this approach to other women wholeheartedly. But to be honest, my grandmother's advice did not really have a bearing on what I did. Looking back, the decisive factor was that I did get the opportunities that she herself lacked, but would so dearly have wanted. And clearly, I did seize these opportunities. Together with a dose of luck and persistence – which we all need, men and women alike – this brought me today to this podium in Abu Dhabi. It was a great honour and a pleasure to speak to you. I am sure my grandmother would have been proud of me, and perhaps a bit jealous.

I wish you every success in your future careers and the strength to shoulder the associated responsibilities.

Thank you.

