



**Speech by the President of the Senate of the Netherlands,
Ms Ankie Broekers-Knol,
at the seminar of the Italian Embassy in The Hague
on Women in Innovation, Science and Industry**

11 April 2018

Your Excellencies, ladies and some gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour to speak to you today at the opening of this seminar and to be in the presence of you all passionate about women in leadership, be it in science, industry, innovation...or in politics.

Traditionally, through the ages women have been taking care of the household and the family, and have taken on supporting roles such as nursing and teaching. But in the past decades, we have noticed that also in medicine, education, and the legal profession women have increasingly taken the lead role. At the moment women make up 42,6% of all PhD-students in the Netherlands, but at the same time only 19.3% actually make it to become professor. This last number is still surprisingly low, as I believe we can all agree on.

Women in top positions are still in a minority, especially in science, industry and innovation. Is it because women are not capable? No, of course not. But in my opinion, men take the lead, because they claim these areas to be their domain, their prerogative. Let me give you an example from my own experience in the Senate, that is in politics. After elections are held, the group of elected senators from a political party has a first meeting. At that meeting the portfolios are discussed. There is no doubt in the mind of the male politician that female politicians will speak on 'soft' subjects, such as care and education. When their female colleagues express their wish to speak on - until now - male dominated areas such as finances and defense they are met with surprised - and often negative - reactions. Don't be so bold as to enter into male territory!

Looking back in history, there have been women who made their mark: Cleopatra, Queen Elizabeth I, Catharina the Great, Veuve Clicquot-Ponsardin, Coco Chanel. One of them was Queen Christina of Sweden who – in the 17th century – followed her own course of life. She took an interest in alchemy and science, but also in religion, poetry and law. She invited Hugo de Groot, the famous Dutch jurist - worldwide known as Grotius -, to become the Swedish ambassador to the French court. Furthermore, she surrounded herself with people from the arts, sciences and religions. Christina was one of the great patrons of her time, a role normally taken on by men in those days.

Of course there always have been exceptions like Christina of Sweden. For instance in science: Madame Curie – with two Nobel prizes in physics and chemistry, Johanna Westerdijk, the first Dutch female professor (biology) in 1917, and of course Italy's own Rita Levi-Montalcini (neurology) who received the Nobel prize for Physiology together with Stanley Baron in 1986.

But not only in science, also in industry we have seen a breakthrough during the Second World War when women took over the places of men in the factories in the United Kingdom and the United States. They started working there out of necessity, because all the men were enrolled in the army. Without their effort, the war could have had a different ending. But all those Rosie the Riveter - well known from the posters - found out that "They could do it!"

Italian Nobel prize winner Rita Levi-Montalcini was raised to become a wife and mother - so her father planned -, but she convinced him - in 1929 - that she would be happier pursuing a career in science. *"At 20, I realized that I could not possibly adjust to a feminine role as conceived by my father and asked him permission to engage in a professional career. In eight months I filled my gaps in Latin, Greek and mathematics, graduated from high school, and entered medical school in Turin.*

For the Rosies the Riveter and Rita, and all the other women who chose to break with traditional roles, the second half of the twentieth century meant a turning point. But let's be fair even today, there is still a long way to go. There is one very positive exception however.

One of the industries where women leadership has been accepted for much longer than in others, is family led businesses. In 55% at least one woman sits on the board and 70% are considering a woman to be their next CEO. Hopefully other industries will look to the family led businesses and learn from them.

And this brings me back to politics: as long as our leaders, my political leader, say that they couldn't find more female candidates to fill a post as minister because they 'went for quality', they in fact let their prejudice about women speak. If only they would have said: "I am trying my best, I have spoken to a few women, etc." It would have made a world of difference and set an example.

Tomorrow, April 12, is 'Girlsday' in the Netherlands. This day is aimed at the women of tomorrow. 11.000 girls from the ages 10 to 15 will join technical and ICT-companies, research organisations and science centers for a day. The aim is to give girls a chance to orientate in a sector they might not consider when thinking about their future. Let's hope and wish that they will not suffer from prejudices about 'quality' when they grow up.

To end with Rita Levi-Montalcini: "Le donne che hanno cambiato il mondo non hanno mai sentito il bisogno di mostrare nulla se non la loro intelligenza."

[Women who have changed the world have never felt the need to show anything but their intelligence]

Thank you for your attention, and - to refer to Rita - I look forward to an "intelligent" discussion.