

CONFERENCE ADDRESS BY MRS. ELKE SLEURS, STATE SECRETARY FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES, FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF BELGIUM

Dear Chairman, Honourable professors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased and grateful to be here, in the University Foundation building, to start off the proceedings of the Ethical Forum. As Secretary of State for Equal Opportunities, as a woman and as a scientist, today's subject "Is Academia a place for women? The strenuous road from PhD student to rector" is one that is close to my heart.

Today, Professor Anne De Paepe and Professor Caroline Pauwels are rectors of the universities of Ghent and Brussels respectively. In Amsterdam, the rector is the Belgian professor Karen Maex.

Just compare that to the situation in 1888, when Marie Popelin at the Université Libre de Bruxelles graduated as the first female doctor of law. When Ms. Popelin submitted her request to enter the profession of lawyer, it was rejected by the Court of Appeal. The court's reasoning referred to "the nature of the woman" and to her "social role".

In those days women were indeed virtually without rights - they were equated with minors. And if they were married, they had no rights at all. A woman's place was at home as a housekeeper, wife, mother and tutor.

It would be a long time before the position of women improved substantially. Belgian women only obtained universal suffrage in 1948. In 1965, Marguerite De Riemaecker-Ligot became the first female government minister. From 2002 onwards, electoral lists in this country have to have as many women as men, and the first two candidates must be of different sexes.

A great deal has also changed in the labour market. For example, the employment rate of highly educated women in this country can now barely get any higher than it already is. Every highly-educated woman who can work (that is, is not affected by illness, handicap or some extreme situation) is in work.

But there is another side to that coin. Among low skilled women, the employment rate is much lower. There are also fewer jobs for them.

Another downside is the glass ceiling: career women reach a certain level and then stop. They rarely or never reach the absolute top in a company or other organisation. There are still too few women in places where decisions are made and where the power lies. It's the same pattern everywhere: not just in large companies and banks, but also in the government, employers' organisations, trade unions, international organisations and, yes,

even universities. No one will deny that diversity in senior positions is lagging behind. Is that due to personnel management? Or is there simply not enough diversity in the candidates?

I have my doubts about the latter. The reason is that even in sectors where women are in the majority, they are under-represented in senior positions, particularly at the top level. Women make up only 17% of board members in the largest publicly-listed companies in the EU and only 5% of those chairing these boards. The percentage of female CEOs is even lower: 2.8%.

The gender ratios for the Flemish universities show that in 2013 56% of the assistants were women. For doctor-assistants this was 47%. Only 39% of the post-docs were women. For lecturers, this was 34%. For ordinary professors that falls to only 9%.

Granted, these figures are all a great improvement on, say, 2000. But despite the apparent positive developments, the academic pipeline still has a major bottleneck that starts at postgraduate level. Although the gap gets smaller with each passing year, it is still very much present, especially at the highest academic levels.

Everywhere you look, there are disproportionately few women at the top. There remains a gap between equal rights and equal treatment, between equal rights and equivalence, between legal equality and actual equality.

I am glad that academia already takes this issue seriously and is not satisfied with the figures I have just cited. Indeed, in 2012, the Flemish Inter-University Council approved an 'Action Plan for Gender Equality in Higher Education'. This sets out a range of possible policy measures for achieving a better flow of women into the ZAP framework to remedy gender imbalance within certain courses and to anchor gender in education.

Staying in 2012, a number of decrees were issued in Flanders that gave an obligatory character to some measures from the action plan, such as the special decrees concerning the administrative organisation of the universities of Ghent, Antwerp and Hasselt.

But even more than legal emancipation, there must also be mental emancipation. Indeed, no 'Equal Opportunities' without 'equal rights'. But it would be wrong to think that the emancipation of women is primarily a matter of political rights or the position of women in the labour market. Rights alone are not enough. Because gender roles and their associated traditions haven't gone away. These can, for example, affect the educational choices made by young men and women. Only one third of the scientists and engineers across Europe are women. Nevertheless, the European labour market has been struggling for many years with a structural shortage of people with technical and scientific qualifications. So it has made me very happy to see that Flanders has already formed a strategy to encourage girls to choose

more STEM subjects, so that their educational profile contains a large portion of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion. We have come a long way. But society is still too much of a man's world, with a strongly present macho culture. When looking at the images associated with the roles of wife and husband, we can see that there is clearly a long way to go. Diversity policy is more than a target group policy and a way of combating disadvantage. It is an environment where diversity is used and recognised as a thing of value in itself. I therefore look forward with great interest to the findings and experiences that the keynote speakers will now be presenting.

Let me conclude on an optimistic note. There is no doubt that serious progress has been made several areas. Today, women in Europe are better educated, more emancipated and are doing better than women in previous generations. In the academic world, the number of women has increased significantly, including in senior positions. I can only encourage all those present to continue on the same path. Because never forget that: "When women thrive, sciences thrive."

Elke Sleurs