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**Speech by Prime Minister Mark Rutte at the breakfast session UN Women /
China Global Leaders Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's
Empowerment**

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Esteemed colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Sigrid Kaag is the senior Dutch diplomat at the United Nations.

She led the mission to destroy Syria's chemical weapons and is currently a UN envoy in Lebanon.

Next to her office door is a sign saying: 'men to the left, because women are always right'.

I won't comment on whether she's right about that.

But it's true that all too often, conference rooms and offices like Sigrid Kaag's are occupied by men.

And around the world, far too many women aren't free to make their own decisions about work, attending school, who they marry or even what clothes to wear.

Twenty years ago ministers from all over the world came together in Beijing to talk about this issue.

Since then, some progress has been made, but the ultimate goal – equal rights and opportunities for men and women – is still a long way off.

That's why it's so important that we're here today.

Because in leaving the potential of women and girls untapped, we are missing out on opportunities for development, justice and peace.

That's why the Netherlands remains committed to this agenda – both at home and internationally.

Worldwide, women's participation in the work force has been stuck at fifty-five per cent for two decades.

By comparison, the figure for men is currently eighty per cent.

Not only is this a gross injustice to women and their families, it's also an expensive loss to companies, governments and the world economy.

We have to do better.

Today we're here to tell each other what we're doing to change this and what the current situation is in our own countries.

When it comes to gender equality, the Netherlands ranks among the top 10 in the UN index for 2015.

More women than men follow higher education in the Netherlands.

And they're getting better results.

That's good news.

But we can't afford to rest on our laurels.

Because the fact remains that women in our country still earn sixteen per cent less than men for the same work.

Seventy-seven per cent of women in the Netherlands work part-time.

So many women aren't economically independent.

The Dutch government is therefore committed to increasing women's economic independence and financial self-sufficiency, especially the low-skilled and functionally illiterate.

To this end, we're working with local authorities, businesses and educational institutes to offer opportunities like job interview training.

Equality between women and men is also a guiding principle of our foreign policy and development efforts.

Because we know that gender equality provides a basis for stability and economic prosperity.

We work closely with governments, businesses and civil society organisations around the world to achieve this goal.

We also work with human rights defenders standing up for equal rights for women.

We help protect their freedom of speech, assembly and association so they can advance this cause.

In January 2016, my government is launching a programme called Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women.

Its aim is to support women's economic and political participation and combat violence against women and girls in low-income and low middle-income countries.

It will be the largest fund of its kind in the world.

An important part of our international efforts is advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights.

For women worldwide to have a voice and economic opportunities, they need to be able to make their own choices about sexuality and family planning.

So in 2016 the Netherlands is launching another major fund to advance these rights around the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, we can't afford to waste the potential of half the world's population.

I don't know if women are always right, but they should at least have the same opportunities as men to prove it.

Thank you.