

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have a confession to make: I'm a feminist. In many parts of the world it's an old fashioned word. It's not used so much anymore.

Because we tend to think of gender progress as a straight line. Some countries are lagging behind, but everyone's moving in the right direction. In the end we'll all get there. It's a natural evolution – it's happening by itself.

Well, it's not.

Every step for women's rights, every victory on the status-quo, was hard-fought.

And progress is fragile. Because with no exception, when things take a bad turn – think war, or economic slowdown, or climate change – women and girls are often the more vulnerable, the more exposed.

Others before me have spoken volumes about the living hell that is being a woman under ISIS, Boko Haram, the Taliban.

But even at the very other end of the scale, I never thought that some of the things my mother's generation had fought for, things I'd grown up taking for granted – like the principle of equal pay, reproductive rights, combining family and work –... I never thought that, in my lifetime, we would still have to speak up for them. And I never thought that at my age- I am a father of two boys and two girls- that at this stage of my life, I would still have to worry about the question whether my girls would have the same opportunities as my boys; it's unacceptable!

Something about the Netherlands- I am speaking on behalf of the European Union but I can't help myself-. Still in the Netherlands men and women do not receive equal pay for the same jobs done. It is direct pay, the pensions and other things: it is unacceptable. And I don't want my daughters to have less opportunity than my sons. It's very easy, it's very simple.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The commitments that we made in Beijing twenty years ago are still valid.

I am honoured to commit on behalf of the European Union to take the push for gender equality further in our external action. We want; we need to be a leading force.

The ambitious 2020 gender framework for our external relations will guide our efforts in working with partner countries – to fight any kind of gender violence, empower women economically and socially, and give them a louder voice in public life.

As a large aid donor, the European Union is committing to systematically screen our development funding to ensure that it helps transform the lives of girls and women worldwide.

I want to single out a number of things from our efforts in Europe:

- First, our commitment to promote women's economic independence and the equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men, through a new initiative for working parents. We are working hard to present this next year – and I want it to focus not just on mothers, but on the role of fathers too.

- Second, our commitment to fight violence against women – through prevention, protection and prosecution. We will put the EU's full weight behind the Istanbul Convention; our member states that haven't ratified yet will do so, and if legally possible the EU itself will accede. Violence against girls and women is still a norm in too many parts of our world.

- Thirdly, we want to see more women in top positions, influencing decisions. Breaking the glass ceiling doesn't happen by itself. We are in the final stages of setting a legally-binding objective of 40% of women on listed company boards by 2020, and I hope that we can reach consensus soon.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We can break the status quo. It's a question of social justice. It's a question of morality, frankly.

I'm a very strong believer that on this more than anything else, true political leadership can make the biggest difference – for a world where men and women can lead the lives they want, rather than lives expected of them.

Thank you very much.