

Speaking notes for ULB Graduation Ceremony

13 October 2018

Bonjour à tous et a toutes.

C'est un vrai honneur d'être parmi vous ce matin en tant que première « fellow » de Sciences Po à l'ULB. Je suis heureuse de pouvoir vous féliciter lors de cette cérémonie de proclamation !

On m'a demandé de vous adresser brièvement sur mon parcours professionnel, donc j'ai été pousse a réfléchir a l'importance dans ma vie d'aujourd'hui de mes études à Liverpool ou j'ai graduée en sciences politique et économique européen. C'était en 1992 : une année qui semble aujourd'hui très lointain...

When I went to university, no woman in my family had ever been to university: and this was fairly typical of my generation. In fact, at Liverpool the majority of students I met were the first people in their family to go into further education. Hardly any of our professors at university were women.

The study of politics and economics was a study of mainly grand white men, books by white men, orthodox views on politics and economics that took no account of the power, unpaid care or contribution of women. Only one rare programme of social history focused on the lives and voices of working class women in 20th century Britain. It was a revelation.

Perhaps what is more striking is when we as young women started to think about careers and looking for work, we didn't have much clue what to do: there were so few role models of women in professional life and careers. The only women around me growing up that had careers were either nurses or teachers. Everyone else had jobs or work but not interesting professional careers. There were less than 7% women in the House of Commons, just 9% in the Belgian Parliament. There were vanishingly few women ministers, judges, ambassadors, CEOs, Commissioners, Directors, heads of administrations, rock stars, DJs, film directors, university professors...

In addition to the academic grounding I received at University, I formed other precious lifelong habits that have sustained and nurtured me during the past 25 years: the essential importance of friendship and community; the joy of live music (Liverpool, like Brussels is alive with music); and the importance of women's groups, and of protest and campaigning for the world we wanted to build.

(FR) J'ai déménagé à Bruxelles immédiatement après l'université en 1992, par hasard et parce que l'idée de vivre et de travailler dans une autre partie de l'Europe me passionnait. Le mur de Berlin venait de tomber et la perspective d'une Union européenne élargie: un espace pour la démocratie, les droits de l'homme, la paix et l'égalité était passionnante et pleine d'espoir. Je dois admettre que l'idée de contribuer à la construction de l'UE en tant qu'espace social, égal et pacifique était également séduisante. Il semblait qu'un progrès vers un monde plus égalitaire était inévitable...

(FR) Au cours des prochaines années, j'ai travaillé pour l'Organisation internationale pour les migrations (OIM) en mettant l'accent sur les droits des femmes migrantes et des femmes victimes de la traite.

De là, je suis allé travailler pour ActionAid International: une ONG mondiale travaillant à l'élimination de la pauvreté globale. J'ai eu l'occasion de mener des campagnes pour la justice en matière de commerce, pour que l'aide au développement soit centrée sur des plus pauvres et investisse dans le leadership de ce peuple. J'y ai aussi dirigé les processus de changement organisationnel à l'échelle mondiale

(EN) I moved to Brussels straight after university in 1992, by chance and because I was excited by the idea of living and working in another part of Europe. The Berlin wall had just fallen and the prospect of an enlarged European Union: a space for democracy, human rights, peace and equality was exciting and filled with hope. I must admit that the idea of contributing to the construction and building of the EU as a social, equal and peaceful place was tantalizing too. It seemed like progress towards a more gender equal world was inevitable ...

Over the next few years, I worked for the International Organisation for Migration focusing on the rights of migrant women and women victims of trafficking. From there I went to work for ActionAid International : a global NGO working on eradicating poverty and inequality internationally. I had the opportunity to lobbying and campaigning for trade justice, for aid to focus on and invest in the leadership of the poorest people in the world. In leading organisational change processes globally.

I had the opportunity to travel throughout Asia and Africa, working with the most inspiring and powerful feminists from Africa and Asia who showed me the importance of recognising and giving space to women's leadership and women's voices. Together we put the fight for women's rights at the centre of our global programmes and campaigns. It was here that I met women that inspired and mentored me, role models who showed me a different way of leading was possible ... We explored and advanced concepts and practice of feminist leadership : leadership that is diverse, inclusive, distributed, authentic; built on empathy, and listening. Leadership that actively tackles discrimination and stereotypes.

Aujourd'hui, en tant que Secrétaire générale du Lobby européen des femmes, je dirige une organisation de plus de 2000 organisations féminines de tous les coins de l'Union européenne, réunies dans notre diversité et notre solidarité pour faire campagne pour une Europe féministe. Bien que nous ayons fait beaucoup de chemin au cours des 30 dernières années, cela semble avoir en quelque sorte masqué le fait que les progrès en matière d'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes se sont arrêtés dans l'Union européenne: à la suite de

la complaisance, de l'austérité et de l'égalité des sexes. stéréotypes, et
backlash actif.

Avec des populistes à la hausse sur tout le continent; leur rhétorique raciste et anti-féministe menant à des attaques actives contre les droits des femmes, les droits des LGBT et les droits des minorités, il peut parfois sembler inutile et vain de rêver d'une Europe féministe. On nous a trop souvent rappelé les paroles de Simone de Beauvoir : « N'oubliez jamais qu'il suffira d'une crise politique économique ou religieuse pour que les droits des femmes soient remis en question. Ces droits ne sont jamais acquis. Vous devez rester vigilantes votre vie durant. »

(EN) Today, as Secretary General of the European Women's Lobby, I lead an organisation of more than 2000 women's organisations from every corner of the European Union, coming together in our diversity and solidarity to campaign for a feminist Europe. While we have come far in the past 30 years, that seems in some ways to have masked the fact that the last decade has seen progress on gender equality come to a standstill in the European Union : as a result of complacency, austerity, entrenched gender stereotypes, and active backlash.

With populists on the rise throughout the continent; their racist and anti feminist rhetoric leading to active attacks on women's rights, on LGBT rights and on minority rights, it can sometimes feel hopeless and futile to dream of a feminist Europe. We have been reminded all too often of Simone de Beauvoir's words

At the EWL, we do not feel hopeless, we are inspired that the visible face of opposition to populism across the world is female. From the women's marches, to the strikes in Spain to the black protests in Poland, to the massive global conversation sparked by #MeToo we are seeing women leading the resistance – many young women, women from across boundaries of class, nationality, ethnicity, and age. Women will save Europe from the forces of darkness.

We remember that we are part of a great feminist experiment in what the feminist essayist Rebecca Solnit calls “remaking the world by challenging who has the right to break silence has been wildly successful and remains extremely incomplete... it is not the work of a generation or a few decades, but a process of creation and destruction that is epic in scope and embattled in execution.

At EWL our members have had to bring out our banners, out megaphones our acts of protest and resistance over and over again. We continue to engage in acts of campaigning, painstaking lobbying, self care and sisterhood and solidarity.

I wish you all the best of luck in the world that you are setting out to build. I look forward to learning from you, of seeing the political progress you make towards a more equal and sustainable world. Be patient but be impatient too please. Let the acute sense of moment we are living through lead you to action not inertia. Hope not fear. Good luck!