

Speech by the State Secretary for Kingdom Relations, Alexandra van Huffelen, at the Women Leadership Seminar 'Choose to Challenge', Aruba, Tuesday, 24th of May:

Bon dia!
Danki pa e kaluroso bon biní.
Mi ta hopi kontento di por ta serka boso atrobe.
Un saludo kaluroso na tur e pal'i muhenan den sala!

It is an honour to speak here!
But actually, I should mainly be listening.
Because in terms of female leadership, Aruba and the other islands of the Kingdom have got it more together than the European Netherlands.

The government of Aruba has been led by Evelyn Wever-Croes for five years now.
A female prime minister - we are still waiting for that in The Hague...
Even the former Netherlands Antilles had 5 female Prime Ministers.
Of which, Maria Liberia-Peters served the longest: no less than 7 years.

And what about those other Aruban power women:
Like windsurfer Sarah-Quita Offringa: Aruba's own 'Cabeibusha' .
Or Nydia Ecury - to whom education, theatre and literature in Papiamentu owe so much.
But also Virginia Dementricia - born into a family of enslaved people.
As a teenager she decided to resist her master.
And thanks to those years of courage, we now know her as 'Rebel of Aruba'.

Today, we stand on the shoulders of these strong women.
They are extremely important as examples for all of us.

Personally, I have been greatly inspired all my life by the philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir.
In 1949, she wrote a thick book about the position of women: The Second Sex.
It all started with the question: why is the world of women so different from the world of men?
And why is the male perspective always leading, when it comes to women's lives?
It led to a famous quote in the book:
'You are not born as a woman, but you are made one.'

The extraordinary thing is that I received that book from my own grandmother.
She died when I was eight years old, but she left this book as a gift for me.
And I cherish that gift to this day.

The questions that De Beauvoir raised are still very much relevant today.
We still need that radical freedom and equality.
Even after three feminist waves.
Yes, much has changed for the better.

But the differences - and the inequality - are still there.
In income, in social position, in the opportunities women (don't) get.
Of course it is not equally strong everywhere, but it is there!

I think it is very important to speak out about this.
And I also think it's important that we help and support each other as women.
Because we can do something about it ourselves.
That is why I once made a list of tips with which we can give each other a push.

Such as:

- Speak out in meetings and put on flattering clothes. Be present!
- Go for the job or the project that you are not sure you are going to get. If you do your utmost with sincere intentions, communicate well and ask for help in time, what can go wrong?
- Be open to criticism, but don't take it personally! So watch very carefully who says what. Do not degrade other women. Give criticism one-on-one and praise other women in public! You will see that it works!

As Madeline Albright said, "There is a special place in hell for women who do not help other women."

With small, practical things like that, we help each other to just take our place.
That is important.

But it doesn't change the deep-rooted patterns and systems that we also experience.
And we can't tackle those on our own.

For this we need institutions: legislation and government policy.

With policies to help women be economically independent.

With affordable and accessible childcare.

With good education for all.

But employers can also make policies and be consistent in their recruitment, by consciously giving women more opportunities.

In the Netherlands, there is a quota for women in top positions in business.

It is true that the government established this, but still.

There is also much more equality possible in the corporate culture, for example by giving men and women more space to combine work and private life.

With that perspective, I also look at my relationships within the Kingdom.

Because together, we can strengthen the position of women in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom.

I think it is fantastic that female leadership is so strongly developed here.

Even if it was only because I truly believe that a female way of working also helps to understand each other better in the Kingdom.

And to come closer to each other this way.

But at the same time, there are also many women who have a hard time because they have to bear the burden of life at home too often on their own.

These women have an extra heavy task.

It is crucial that they are supported - so that the radical freedom and equality of De Beauvoir is also for them.

I believe that in every Aruban girl there is a future Nydia Ecury or Sarah-Quita hidden.

A future Evelyn Wever-Croes, Xiomara Maduro, Jane Semeleer or Viola Heutger.

As long as we give them - and each other - the chance to be free and equal to every other human being.

Manera e clásico di maestro Doble R ta bisa:

'Ta muhé ta manda mundu.'

Masha danki!