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Don't take no for an answer

Check Against Delivery

Seul le texte prononcé fait foi

Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Conference "Women in Science, Innovation and Technology"

Budapest, 7 March 2011

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you in this conference organised under the auspices of the Hungarian Presidency.

Women and ICT have a lot in common. For a start people make assumptions about what we are useful for. And they underestimate us. But as we all know, this is not a new battle.

I would like to start by reading you a poem written in the 1950s. It is called "Yearning Miss":

I had a yearn to be a boy,

To sit around and play with trains,

Such fun, but not girls' games.

A lady now, but still mechanical

(In Computers, and they're satanical)

But when train sets become electronic

Men are in, and that's ironic!

This was for the magazine of the British Tabulating Machine Company. It refers to the "Power Girls" who were the operators of the first computers. It pokes fun at how women tended to be excluded from the fun part of technical work, long before anyone labelled us "technophobic".

Let's have a look what happened then and what happens now. Women joined en masse the labour market from the late 1940s. They were low paid workers who kept the machines ticking, be it real or metaphorical machines. As from the late fifties, as computer machines began to emerge, women ran them well, but were still paid and viewed as typists. They made us use the technology, but we had no input into its design and evolution.

Were women silent victims of this? Not at all! Concerns started as far back as the 1960 UK women Trade Union Congress where they argued that women should not be used as "cheap labour but as trained technicians." But unfortunately employers were not prepared to invest in workers they perceived as unreliable or on the road to marriage and pregnancy.

That was then, but what is happening now? According to the latest statistics women represent more than 50% of students in tertiary education and also hold more than 50% of all PhDs in the 27 EU Member States. But only 20% of the students in engineering and computing are women. I want to know why.

Up to the age of 9 years old there is no difference between boys and girls in the way they perform in mathematics and science. The younger generation has no fear to use computers to get access to the internet, chat-rooms and social networks. So what goes wrong; why do girls shy from following technical careers? Is it the environment in the classroom? Are girls scared to choose science or dissuaded from studying it? Or perhaps they are not aware of the richness and broadness of the ICT sector. My own opinion is that we need to tackle the problem early and from many angles. Girls need to know that science and computing matters, so they do not cut off their options too early. It is not enough to puzzle over why there are too few women ICT executives when we know the problem starts in school. Fixing the real sources of the problem will give a much better platform for industry initiatives and Commission policy.

Let's look at some Commission initiatives and see where more could be done. We have supported the establishment of a code of conduct for companies and set up a "shadowing exercise" inviting girls to follow for a day a female engineer and see what her work consists of. We have used social media and conducted studies. While we observe that things are getting better, the change is too slow. For all our efforts to build a talent pipeline, the pipeline is leaking.

These leaks get back to my point about taking a broader perspective. Getting and keeping women in ICT is about more than the technology or the school system. It's about career progression, equal pay and facilities to reconcile their family and professional life and so on.

So, yes, we need tools like the "Code of Best Practices of Women in ICT." And we need to recognise the 60 signatories to the Code. But the Code is really only an indicator about a wider culture change we need in the sector.

Here is just one measure which shows we need to do more: can anyone name a woman who has set up and runs their own huge ICT company? No, of course not. In that hall of fame, the names you think of are Jobs, Gates, the Google guys, the Skype guys, Zuckerberg and his friends. I want to see a woman on that list. Not because women leaders will fix everything, but because it will be a sign of balance in the sector. It will be a sign that girls have been encouraged to study what they really want. That the world has stopped to see and listen to the talents of women. Maybe one of you, or someone reading this online, is that person. I say go for it. If that is what you really want with your life, don't take no for an answer! Take the front seat, not the back seat.

Some companies have been very active in setting the right example. These companies acknowledge that the most innovative and creative teams are the most diverse ones. Competitive companies know that the talent pool has to include everyone. They also see a full spectrum of diverse trends and consequences. Becoming more diverse helps to win a bigger share of public contracts and it improves the understanding of the needs of a diverse client base. And like I said before, the best companies also take a broad perspective.

For example, Intel has developed networks to support their female staff. These networks range from a global Women's Initiative Portal, which is a launch pad for many ideas and projects, through to the Women's Leadership Exchange - which coaches senior women to get to the very top. Lower down the chain of professional development I came across an interesting example set by IBM. They fund "EXCITE" camps to expose young girls to technology and help them overcome some of the biases against women choosing studies and jobs in ICTs. This is to name just two, but there are many more good examples that could have been mentioned here and I invite you all to come forward and share these.

These are steps in the right direction. Now I want to see all CIOs put their money where their mouths and long term interests are and fill the looming skills gap with the women that can really help them.

But let us not forget. Companies and governments need to do more than run networks and camps - the effort must range from better childcare to a better balance of subjects in the school system.

So my message today is that we need to see ourselves at this conference as a launch pad to a deep cultural change. We have to promote and undertake a long series of actions, and I am doing my very best in that regard: by making the Digital Agenda for Europe a holistic agenda. And we are putting you - not ourselves - at the heart of this Agenda.

In conclusion, as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day, I am frustrated but optimistic. Women have been pioneers in this unbalanced sector-remember that "ENIAC", the first computer, was programmed by six women. But we have rarely been acknowledged or encouraged or broken through into leadership.

From classrooms to boardrooms to garage start-ups: my message is the same. There is no point in getting half of Europe digital. There is no place for macho nonsense in our digital future. Until the whole sector understands this AND acts on it, we will remain at risk of a massive skills gap and we will hold Europe back.

So let us look at these challenges from the broadest perspective. Let us keep pushing forward with acts that deliver the message that ICT is for everyone. That ICT careers are for both sexes. That ambition is a good thing. And if change is slower than we would like, let us remember that change starts with us. It is our responsibility to use our talents - we owe it to ourselves, and to all women. Let's get Every Woman Digital.

Thank you.