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STATEMENT BY

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**on the occasion of the sixty-sixth session of the General Assembly
Third Committee
agenda item "Advancement of Women"**

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President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Butterfly effect

Are you familiar with the butterfly effect? Basically, it explains how something small can change it all. According to the laws of chaotic dynamics, a butterfly flapping its wings could lead to a hurricane. But then again, it could also prevent it. Being an eternal optimist, I like to focus on the latter. How can something small change it all – for the better?

Last summer, a friend of mine forwarded me an e-mail. “Will you be our woman in New York?” read the subject line. It turned out to be a job announcement from the Netherlands Women's Council, who were looking for the next UN Women's Representative. It had always been my dream to address the General Assembly of the United Nations, so I wrote, had an interview and here I am.

Women's voices

Over the past months, I have met with hundreds of women. Elderly women, girls, doctors, politicians, lawyers, housewives, hairdressers, migrant women, rural women, businesswomen, you name it.

I asked all of those women two simple questions:

-what do you think is the biggest issue for women these days?

And, most importantly:

-what could be a solution to solve that issue?

They mentioned a myriad of issues, including equal pay, women in positions of power, child care, financial literacy, sexual and reproductive health and rights, LGBT rights, access to education and life-long learning, mobility, feminisation of poverty. Some women I met were worried about the lack of solidarity among women, others about the increasing sexualisation of society. Some talked about lack of rolemodels in politics, business and media, others about the need for gender-specific statistical data. One thing they all agreed on: it's still a man's world. “We live in a male pale Yale society” as one of them put it.

Women's participation

And they're right. Women perform 66 percent of the world's work, produce 50 percent of the food, but earn 10 percent of the income and own 1 percent of the property. In other words: there's still a lot to be done! Take my country, the Netherlands. Two years ago, we ranked 9 in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report, but now, we rank 17, right after Sri Lanka. Our current administration only counts 3 female ministers, a mere 10% of all professors are female, and only 8.1% of all corporate board room seats are held by women.

Quite a shame, really. Cause there is a direct link between increased female participation and economic growth: it is estimated that if women's paid employment rates were raised to the same level as men's, America's GDP would be 9 percent higher; the euro-zone's would be 13 percent higher, and Japan's would be boosted by 16 percent.

Diversity works

It's a fact: diversity works. Classes with an equal amount of male and female students achieve better results. Companies with women on their boards and in senior management perform better. Not surprising, in a world where women account for 85% of all consumer purchases. Diversity and inclusion are the key to a win-win situation: more equal participation *and* better results. Who wouldn't sign up for that? Take football for example. Would there be any coach that would keep talented, motivated, skilled players on the bench, while putting eleven left-legged strikers on the field? I don't think so. But like our famous former football player Johan Crujff once said: you only see it when you get it.

New generations, new opportunities

We are at a crossroads in history. The oppressed are calling for freedom, the economy is calling for change. Our current state of affairs may be challenging, but it also offers a unique opportunity to look for new solutions. Solutions in which everyone, no matter their race, gender, class or beliefs, can fully participate and use their talents to the best of their potential. No one on the bench!

The wind of change sweeping through North Africa and the Middle East showed us change can start small and have big consequences, especially once it's accelerated by social media, like Twitter, Youtube and Facebook. It's the butterfly effect 2.0! So when is that butterfly finally flapping its wings for women? Where does the she-volution start? Yes: I'm calling for a she-volution: a drastic change in our attitudes, policies and actions to improve the position of women worldwide.

Shared agenda

The she-volution starts with a shared agenda, endorsed by governments, business, civil society and women's networks. An agenda for change, co-created and carried out by multiple stakeholders, male and female, on a local, national and global level. From public to private, formal to informal, big to small. An agenda that maps the road towards inclusive cooperation through empowered participation. Women's organisations play an important role in the realisation and implementation of this shared agenda. Monitoring progress, sharing best practise and making sure women's voices are heard, at every table around the world.

Role of governments

According to the women I met, governments are still key stakeholders in the advancement of women. They could and should catalyse the she-volution by adopting a broad diversity agenda, which includes policy measures as well as a legal framework to make sure women get equal opportunities and enjoy equal rights, both in the workplace, in the political realm and in their private lives. Though most decision makers in my country (not surprisingly mostly men) don't agree, quota prove to be a successful tool in achieving equal representation of women in politics as well as the corporate world.

Our allies

But governments can not and should not operate alone. The she-volution needs more allies. Public-private partnerships are needed to create sustainable solutions for women, such as diversity procurement, equal pay and equal representation from work floor to board room, but also: mobility, child care, a safe working environment and equal opportunities for training and education. The Women's Empowerment Principles, developed by the UN Global Compact and UN Women, provide an excellent set of tools for companies to become more inclusive.

The power of networks

The women I met mentioned many practical solutions to improve the position of professional women worldwide, such as appointing not one but two women whenever there's a board room seat available. Cannot find suitable candidates? Ask a woman already in a position of power to share her network. Promote telecommuting and flexible working hours. Involve women-owned businesses in the company's supply chain. Small yet effective steps to boost women's participation.

Be the butterfly of change

But most importantly: we need to remember the butterfly effect that shows us change can start with something small. It could be as simple as lending a woman a helping hand. Vote for a woman, ask women to speak at your next event, donate your time, money or expertise to a women's organisation, promote women where possible. Maybe *you* are that butterfly flapping its wings, just like my friend who forwarded me the job announcement that eventually brought me here.

We've come a long way since the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted 32 years ago. My grandmother never had a chance to finish school. My mother did, and inspired me to do the same. But there are still too many women who do not have that chance, who don't have equal access nor equal opportunities. Their voices deserve to be heard!

So what I ask of you today is when you leave this room, please take a few moments to think what YOU can do to be that butterfly flapping its wings for women. Talk about it, tweet about it and most of all: just do it. "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world", said Margaret Mead. I say: Viva la she-volution!

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