

Speech by Minister Michelle Hooyboer-Winklaar during the session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

13 March 2017, United Nations Headquarters, New York

[Het gesproken woord geldt! / Check against delivery! / Seul le texte prononcé fait foi! / Es gilt das gesprochene Wort!]

Mister / Madam Chair, thank you,

I am honoured to make this statement on behalf of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which exists of four countries: Curacao, Sint Maarten, the Netherlands and my own country Aruba.

Although our countries are geographically far apart, we speak different languages and we have a different climate, there is a lot we have in common. We share a long history, and we share goals towards the future. All of us want to achieve gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

In the past, gender equality sometimes was regarded as a strictly social matter, that exclusively benefits women and girls. Yet we know that nothing could be further from the truth! We know if women participated in the economy equally, the world economy would expand by 25 percent over the next decade.

This is merely one of the reasons why the Kingdom has placed economic empowerment and increasing economic independence of women high on the agenda.

Economic independence is of critical importance for all women. Economic independence provides a woman autonomy and financial security. It makes it possible for a woman to make her own choices. From the freedom to buy herself desired consumer goods to the freedom to leave her partner in case of a violent relationship.

Unfortunately for many of the women in our Kingdom, equality is just a word. They are economically dependent on their partner or on the government for financial support. Even when some women work, they do not earn enough money to ensure economic independence.

A while ago I spoke to a woman named Wendy Gonzalez. Wendy was married to a man for over 20 years who became dependent on drugs and started abusing her. Wendy followed our empowerment program called Breaking the Chains: a program provided by our Women's Development Centre that empowers abused women to regain their strength through intensive group therapy and skills training where Wendy discovered that she could convert her interest and abilities in providing sports massage into earning a decent income. By showing her that she could make use of her talent, she was able to remove herself and her 3 children from a dangerous relationship.

The story of Wendy shows that many factors are involved in making it possible for women to step out of dependent relationships, and

understanding these factors is critical to providing women with the necessary tools to do this.

Increasing labour participation alone is not enough. The number of hours that women work and their pay, also need to increase. Our policies are aimed at employers, but also at women themselves. We address gender stereotypes and we try to create awareness: *'Having a man is not a financial plan'*.

To increase women's economic independence my government seeks to create more opportunities for women to enter the labour market. Among them, the government offers young women who are dependent on government allowances the opportunity to finish school by prolonging their allowances whilst attending school, and will subsidize a GED program to obtain high school equivalency.

Although sometimes overlooked in labour policies, sexual health and family planning are also crucial factors determining the success of women's economic empowerment. The positive role and contribution of civil society organisations in achieving gender equality and economic empowerment of women, can and must not be underestimated. Therefore the Netherlands recently launched a new international initiative called *She Decides* to mobilize public and political support and funding for sexual health and family planning.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mister Chair

If we fully achieve gender equality, it will not only give a boost to our economies, it will also give women the means and opportunity to make their own choices. It will encourage all young girls out there to dream big; but not only dream, to make it happen!

That is what gender equality is all about. Women and men, girls and boys being valued, recognized and one day to be considered equal in our societies.

Thank you.