

## SPEAKING POINTS

- Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, dear friends. I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude for the invitation to attend this conference. It is a wonderful opportunity to meet women from different Countries, women sharing a passion for improving their condition.
- Let me introduce myself briefly. My name is Cristina Molinari, I am Italian and currently work as an advisor to Mrs. Bonino, Italy's Minister of International Trade. This work experience with my Country's Government comes after a long career as a management consultant, a job that allowed me to get in touch with many industrial sectors both in Italy and elsewhere.
- Although my career has been rife with satisfactions and fun I had, as many of you, personally experienced how women in career are still a rarity. They are often fettered by stereotypes or practice bordering on prejudice. As a general rule, women face much more difficulties than capable men with equal skills.
- For this reason I was really happy to accept the job Mrs. Bonino offered me. Having known her for long, I was sure that she would not have skipped the opportunity to launch some Italian women-supporting initiatives.
- Before describing what we have done in these 18 months, let me give you a brief account of women's condition in the Italian context.
- In the Seventies, Italy made great strides in civil rights. Divorce was introduced, abortion became legal, family law was overhauled, the concept of the "crime of honour" was abolished. Those changes profoundly altered the Italian reality eliminating discrimination from our legislation. This is a symptom that in today's Italy no job is practically barred from women, with the exception of priesthood and Papacy.
- In northern Italy, women's employment rate is in line with European objectives. Schooling rate is higher than men's and a brisk female entrepreneurship has developed. Women have reached success in every field but not sufficient for meeting set standards.
- In fact a long road is still unravelling before us. The cultural context in every corner of Italy, and even more in the South, is still tied to the traditional woman-wife-mother ideal. The care of children, of house and the elderly weighs almost entirely on Italian women's shoulders. All this is confirmed and emphasised by the female image proposed by media advertisement, by movies (not only Italians to be fair), by television.
- Social services for children and the elderly is not yet uniformly available throughout the territory. The offer is neither flexible enough nor easily accessible.
- In southern Italy women's employment rate is still very low.
- In spite of some improvements, women are underrepresented among decision-makers in politics and economy.

- The scenario, I summarily described, not only represents an ethical challenge about the fairness of opportunities but also a problem of competitiveness and economic development for Italy and as such it is a top priority. To make a comparison it's like a runner who entering a race with other 26 competitors chains one of his legs to the starting blocks and pretends to run using just the free leg.
- To unchain the second leg, that is to free and support women's energy, we launched two different initiatives.
- The first one was for female entrepreneurship. We began to consider that this kind of entrepreneurship is a lively but young phenomenon, characterised by small-to-medium sized businesses that did not participate to missions abroad. Women always accounted for less than 20% of business delegations.
- We thought that this world should be encouraged to develop a first experience in the process of making global their products and activities and to set up a network of international contacts. As a consequence, we tried to organise two women-only Fora.
- The first forum was held in Milan and was centred on the Countries of the southern Mediterranean shore with the inclusion of the Gulf Countries. The second one was held in Bari and was devoted to the Balkan Caspian and Caucasian Countries. For a grand total of 36 Countries.
- The format of both events had not been designed to discuss women's issues but rather to establish business contacts. Most of the time was devoted to B2B meetings pre-organised according to the participants' requests.
- Results exceeded our expectations. A total of more than 900 businesswomen attended, five hundreds of them came from abroad. More than 2000 B2B were held, some of them had a follow-up and have by now become serious business relations.
- We were all the more pleased by what happened next. On the Mediterranean southern shore and the Gulf area, Kuwait presented its candidature to host the 2008 edition and Jordan's the 2009. Bulgaria and Armenia are the candidates for the Balkans and the Caspian region respectively.
- All this confirmed us that women's entrepreneurship is something to bet on by helping businesswomen to rush into building up the experience and contacts that would otherwise need years and substantial investment to create. Our male colleagues are already well equipped with both and have become very good to nurture them.
- An important indirect result of these initiatives has been the papers coverage. Photos of plenary sessions full of women and energy made the news and for once this mostly invisible capital was under everyone's eyes.
- The Fora were thus the first initiative to be undertaken. They highlighted the importance of networking, of international relations as a fundamental component of businesses growth.
- The second initiative has been launched by Minister Bonino in her role of Minister on European Policies, her other governmental post alongside the Ministry of International Trade.

- Every year, the Ministry of European Policies draws a relation on Italy's progresses on the Lisbon's goals. A quick exam of the indicators on women's employment and participation in the economy makes it apparent that Italy seems to need a different pace, a choc therapy exactly for the cultural reasons I described before.
- A task force has been set up with the other Ministries (Labour, Equal Opportunity and Family) involved in women's issues. Largely composed of women of different experiences, the task force has produced an additional specific note to the relation which focuses on women's role in the economy and on the actions needed to give more evidence of this topic. This work has underlined that the understanding of the problem and its solution demanded a comprehensive look at women's life in Italy.
- It is an important step for at least two reasons: for the first time the Italian Government ponders women's condition as an essential leverage of the Country's economic development and admits to a persistent discrimination and segregation of the roles even within family. It is also the first time that the drafting of a programme endeavours to become a binding commitment before the EU.
- The programme envisages a sharp improvement in the availability of social services in order to unburden women from heavy family duties, initiatives to encourage the business world (the "Bollino Rosa " Prize) to take advantage of women's abilities by boosting their presence in the decision-making positions and in the upper tiers of the career ladder, fiscal incentives etc..
- A communication programme is foreseen to involve media in the fight against the stereotyping of women that undermine their ability to achieve successful personal and professional lives. Stereotypes are often so reductive to the point of being insulting and certainly deceptive to young women. The programme aims at providing the new generations, today's baby girls models of femininity more consistent with our reality. Have you ever noticed that in movies successful women are always unpleasant, bad and lonely characters with wrecked families? Or that they– incomprehensibly – seem to be happy only when washing floors with miraculous detergents?
- It is not by chance that this initiative is the brainchild of a Government which is made up of a higher number of women than any other before. This demonstrates how important it is to have women in key positions, sitting around the tables of power.
- The path will certainly be complex and will require women's unflinching support. It is by now clear to everybody that professional empowerment, rights and opportunities have to be conquered by the women themselves since those who currently control them will not give them up easily. Put it bluntly, Charming Princes cannot rescue us from our troubles with just one kiss. They seem to be rarer by the day and to be attached to their privileges. If so, it would be better for us to pull through on our own.
- I would like to conclude summing up the pillars on which we wishto found a new cycle of development for women:
- Obviously the first pillar, often still very hard to attain, is equality in civil rights. In fact it is rather difficult to become a successful manager or entrepreneur if women are not recognised

as citizens and do not get favourable rulings by courts. Which of course is not enough and other rights must follow through.

- To provide for an offer of services enabling to combine professional life, maternity and any other familiar responsibility. To spread a better balance of caring responsibilities between the two genders.
- To create skills and knowledge: increasing training opportunities, encouraging the building up of skills, boosting networking among professionals, providing occasions to share experiences. In this way women, at different stages of their lives, are presented with the possibility to enrich their wealth of knowledge.
- To favour, through targeted actions, a cultural context that goes beyond old and modernity-resistant stereotypes; a framework that sheds light on women's abilities enhancing career opportunities and self-realisation.
- These pillars are "under construction" everywhere in the world although, in no place, works have been completed and pillars have not yet reached their full height and robustness. However, as one may read in airports, "we are working for you", better "we are working for us" since no one else will take our place and do it.
- It will also be advisable to work together and help each other. Putting aside cultural differences, I think, dear friends, that we can agree on a point: A world with freer and more powerful women, a world in which we have greater influence would be a better world.
- A world where every little girl could have the right to pursue her dreams and a fair chance to achieve her objectives