Ladies and gentlemen,

[Minister Verhagen]

Her Royal Highness Princess Máxima and I are grateful for the opportunity to address this conference today. Because women's entrepreneurship makes more than simply business sense; it makes economic sense.

We need entrepreneurs to create jobs and income in Europe.
We need entrepreneurs to strengthen our economies.
We need entrepreneurs to find new solutions to pressing challenges, like demographic ageing and climate change. We need your skills, passion and commitment.

That is why we must not resign ourselves to the fact that only 30 per cent of entrepreneurs in Europe are women. Nor that men are outgrowing their female competitors. Because the larger the company, the less likely it is to be owned by a woman. And so, women entrepreneurs, you need to close this gender gap.

[Princess Máxima]

I couldn’t agree more, Minister, on the importance of women's enterprise. Here in the Netherlands, SMEs employ 56 per cent of our labour force. They are an engine for growth and jobs. Yet 90 per cent of SMEs, whether owned by men or women, are very small, with fewer than ten employees. 32 per cent of Dutch companies are owned by women. And they are underrepresented in programmes aimed at fast-growing companies.

So the question, Minister, is how can we encourage more women to start their own businesses and then keep them growing?

In my work, both for the United Nations and in the Netherlands, I have seen that access to finance is crucial. This is true for all entrepreneurs. Yet women entrepreneurs seem to face particular obstacles.

For instance, they take out fewer loans than men. And when they do, they borrow less.

Is this a good or a bad thing? It’s both.

On the one hand, women are more careful, which is good. But risk-taking is an integral part of entrepreneurship. And women are less prone to taking risks.

As a result, women entrepreneurs make less profit, because their businesses are both smaller and less capital-intensive.

So women entrepreneurs need to be encouraged to take more, calculated risks — and this requires better access to finance.

[Minister]

But how can we help?
The women entrepreneurs I’ve met have everything it takes to succeed. They are innovative, ambitious and highly educated. Yet I rarely meet women leading fast-growing companies.
This is why the Netherlands is participating in the EU's mentoring scheme for women entrepreneurs. Sixteen successful entrepreneurs are now mentoring 30 women to help them grow their businesses. In the Netherlands we've called this programme 'WE keep on growing'. And I was delighted to be able to launch it together with you last January, Your Royal Highness.

[Princess]

To me, the most important thing about this programme is that it recognises that success does not depend only on access to finance. It is equally important that entrepreneurs have good business ideas, healthy business plans and real growth prospects. And that's where a mentor or coach can make all the difference.

A coach can help you write a solid business plan. Ask the right questions. Speak the language of banks. Focus. Set priorities. Think big. And obtain the finance you need.

A coach can also help boost your self-confidence. Confirm that you are on the right path. Challenge you to move forward. And introduce you to other people who can help.

So my message to entrepreneurs is: finance is important. But becoming a successful entrepreneur requires much more. And coaching can play an important role.

[Minister]

I fully agree. A coach can also help women expand their networks. Women entrepreneurs are underrepresented in business networks. And if potential investors don't know you, how likely are they to invest in your company?

That's why I am currently supporting pitch events for a total of 500 entrepreneurs and investors. The concept is simple. Women entrepreneurs practice pitching to potential investors, who then provide feedback and select three winners. Both sides benefit. The investors get to know talented women. And the women improve their presentations and expand their networks. And in doing so they get better access to capital.

And it works! Surgeon Marlies Schijven just won a forty thousand euro prize from Vodafone after winning a pitch event. She can now develop her hospitality mobile app, which helps guide people through their hospital appointments.

[Princess]

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's exciting to hear about initiatives like these. So much is going on! I want to commend the European Commission for organising this conference, and you for taking part. Because by exchanging best practices, and by being open about what works and what doesn't, we can make sure that more women start and grow their own business. And succeed.

Ladies, you can do it!

I hope that today's discussions will inspire you.

You must install Adobe Flash to view this content.