

13th Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament (Vienna, 6 September 2021)

Debate on motion 1: "Women working on the front lines during the COVID-19 pandemic are more effective in providing care and services than men in the same field"

Intervention of Ms. Stephanie D'Hose, President of the Belgian Senate

Dear Colleagues,

As we all know, the pandemic has had a huge impact on our societies and it will continue to do so. However, things would have been much worse without the everyday heroics of lots of, mostly, anonymous people. Most of them are women. They are indeed often the true heroines of the fight against the pandemic. This is not merely an activist statement since there is abundant evidence to substantiate it. Unfortunately women are also among the biggest victims of the pandemic. While this is not the topic of the motion that we are currently discussing, restoring the damage done and taking appropriate measures to avoid a similar amount of female casualties in the future is of paramount importance.

But let's get back to our subject... The fact that women were overrepresented on the front lines during the pandemic doesn't necessarily mean that they are better suited to do so. Statements like these carry a risk of confirming gender patterns like "the female nurse". It would be better to ask ourselves why more women are doing these crucial but often underpaid jobs and above all why they are underpaid...

Even the phenomenon of the widely acclaimed female leaders who were said to be doing a much better job than their male colleagues during the pandemic strengthens a stereotype, albeit at another level: the cliché of the "female crisis manager". We are not doing favors to women by pushing them towards the so called glass cliff...

This is why I am very wary of similar stereotypes. Although well-intentioned, they are always carrying risks. There is only one key principle: equality. We should not be discussing about whether women or men are better suited to do job A, B or C, but about how we can guarantee that women have exactly the same opportunities and rewards as men at each stage of their education and their career.

This should be a very rational, evidence-based discussion. Research shows that a lot of factors influence the success of organizations, policies and societies. Gender equality is undeniably one of them. This means that we shouldn't be discussing about the fact whether men or women are better at certain jobs, but about the policies that are necessary to achieve full gender equality.

Thank you for your attention.