

Coalition for the International Criminal Court Commemorates International Women's Day with International Gender Champions

An exclusive interview with Janne E. Nijman, Academic Director and Member of the Board of T.M.C. Asser Instituut

1. What does International Women's Day mean to you?

Every year, International Women's Day reminds me of how much work we still need to do to reach complete gender equality. Growing up in the Netherlands, I was brought up to believe men and women are equal. I decided to study international law, as I was concerned about social injustices, focusing on human rights, but not paying much attention to gender or women's rights in particular. While studying human rights violations, I soon realised that men and women being equals was an ideal, and far from reality. To this day, women around the globe are still far worse off than men.

Women are more prone to become victims of violence and early deaths. Women live longer than men but spend fewer years in good health. Women earn less than men, have less access to healthcare and education, and they are not equally represented in the economic, political and academic realms. Just 30% of the world's researchers are women.

I find it shocking that although women represent half of the world's population - and therefore also half of its potential - we are neglecting this potential. While there has been some progress over the decades, we still have a long way to go. Apart from gender equality being a fundamental human right, I believe gender equality is crucial to achieve peaceful societies, an issue that concerns men and women alike. Empowering women also spurs productivity, economic growth, leads to better governance and helps to establish a sustainable future for us all. International Women's day is the perfect reminder to discuss these things and work on bringing about change.

2. What is the most pressing issue for women in 2019?

It is hard to give a generic answer, as each country has its own pressing issues. But one of the most urgent issues globally, I think, is that women have to get into politics, as they are hugely underrepresented at all levels of government. The UNDP Gender Inequality index 2018 shows revealing figures on women holding seats in parliament (SDG5). The only countries with circa 50% share in parliament are Rwanda (55.7%), Bolivia (51.8%) and Cuba (48.9%). The Netherlands is lagging behind with a meagre 35.6%. And what to think of the Yemenite parliament, where the percentage of the seats held by women is 0.5%? It saddens me when I read these figures.

The word politics comes from Aristotle's book Politics (Πολιτικά, Polis), which roughly translates as "affairs of the cities, or city-state". To achieve gender equality, I believe that women should fully participate in the affairs of the *polis*, where decisions are made and where our futures are determined.

Currently at the Asser Institute, we are doing a research project on Global cities and international law. To give you a practical example: men and women use cities in different ways. But urban and public space planning in cities is largely gender neutral. This has an immediate effect on women's lives, on how long they have to travel to work, how safe they are on the streets at night, how easy it is to reach school or a doctor. To address these issues, and change them for the better, women have to make their voices heard to bring it this gender sensitivity in urban as well as global politics.

So women, on all levels of government, have to step up, enter the power game, and change the rules and culture of the game. I am convinced, though, that women and men need to cooperate in this. I do not believe in segregated campaigns. Both women and men have to work on gender equality, and on shared objectives for a shared future. We can only succeed in shaping this shared future, if we start to understand that the problem of gender inequality is much more complicated and more profound than we might think. We cannot reach gender equality by simply saying to women: 'please join our networks, our boardrooms and our power games'.

The Cambridge classicist Mary Beard helped me to articulate my thoughts on this, with a historical analysis of misogyny in *Women & Power: A Manifesto*. In this must-read, Beard describes how in the classical world women were actively excluded from participating in public lives, and how silencing women was an essential part of growing up as a man. According to Beard, the ancients established the idea of a 'gendered speech'. Up till now we still use words like 'whining' only for women. Beard believes that words matter very much, as they can belittle women and remove the authority from what they have to say.

Through examples from the Classics, Beard shows how deep cultural structures, embedded in our culture, classical stories and the use of language, are still at work 'legitimizing women's exclusion'. Though her argument is quite radical, I think she makes a crucial point when she asks: 'surely it is the power that we need to redefine rather than women?'. To put it simple: power structures and codes are male-oriented. Unless we change these, and change the way we think about power and authority, women will not fit in. Why should a system based on force, and on 'divide and conquer' define power, rather than a system based on respect, compassion and the capacity to connect and collaborate? We should really put some brainpower to work to figure out how to go about redefining power. I would say this is in the hands of at least half of the world's population!

3. Is the gender equality gap narrowing or growing?

This, of course, very much depends on which society you look at and on whom you ask. Last week, the World Bank published its 2019 *Women, Business and the Law* report, which measured gender discrimination in 187 countries. According to this report, we still have a long, long way to close the equality gap. It shows how laws produce gender inequality, how they stand in the way of full and equal participation in the job market and of female entrepreneurship. This is important research, which should help to break down legal barriers.

When I read studies like this, or when we debate the lack of women in boardrooms, for instance, it strikes me that we often look at gender inequality through a capitalist lens. We talk about the need to make sure women are 'equally' available as workforce. And yes, gender equality in the workforce is important. But Mary Beard (a Cambridge classicist) teaches us something else too: we will never reach full equality by simply becoming available

as workforce, if we do not change the way we think about authority, power and leadership as well. Progress requires a fundamental rethink of the nature of spoken authority. I think we should be careful about the commodification of gender equality.

4. As an International Gender Champion, what message would you like to send on International Women's Day?

To my opinion, the active participation of women in politics could help and bring about the political reform we so urgently need. Not only would our participation improve the lives of women themselves but it will also be beneficial for the whole of society. We should try to liberate politics from the short term, zero-sum game paradigms that rule our current political systems. Instead, we should introduce long-term thinking, a perspective that includes responsibility for future generations.

Did you know that when women participate in peace negotiations, this contributes to the quality and durability of peace after the civil war? Also, in countries with higher levels of gender equality and women's political participation, durable peace is more likely. Post-conflict African countries, for instance, enjoy considerably higher rates of female legislative representation, and a faster trajectory of adopting women's rights reforms in comparison to non-post conflict countries on the continent, because African women groups seized the opportunity for political reform.

The message I would like to give to every girl in this world is: seize all the opportunities you get, jump in, don't be shy and learn to use your voice publicly. Have self-confidence, and do realise that we do want to listen to you and want to hear you. Speaking up carries a responsibility too, so use your voice with compassion, and think long-term, taking into account the interests of future generations. My message to everybody else would be: please, listen when women use their voices. Even when they might sound different to yours.