

Speech of the chairwoman of Czech Women's Lobby Eliška Kodyšová

Your excellency, ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to have the opportunity to greet you here on the eve of the International Women's Day, and I would like to express my gratitude to His Excellency Roland Galharague for kindly hosting this event.

Coincidentally, today marks the 169th anniversary of the birth of Tomas Garrigue Masaryk (TGM), first President of Czechoslovakia, whose centenary we celebrated last autumn. TGM was not only a cosmopolitan, skilled politician and diplomat. Through the influence of his wife, Charlotte Garrigue, he became an active and very progressive feminist and advocate for women. He supported the women's right to vote and their more active role in society. Therefore we may ask ourselves, how he would assess today's situation of women as well as the public discussion about the women's issues.

I am sure he would appreciate that women today can be found in many areas of public life, and that they can assert their influence and fulfill their dreams and potential. However, what would he think about influential women being frequently deprecated or even compared to witches, as we saw happen to Hillary Clinton in the last US presidential elections? And coming closer to home - what would he think of the recent heated discussion about the Istanbul Convention? What would he think of the argument that a treaty against violence against women will damage traditional families and strip fathers of their rights? TGM himself was a head of a family that can be best described as traditional, and his work didn't leave him much space for household management or childcare. Still, he had a capacity to distinguish rational arguments from those stemming from insecurities of common men and women. This was particularly evident in the disputes related to Manuscripts [they were originally thought to be historic proofs of cultural advancement of Czechs, but Masaryk and a linguist proved they were fakes], or during the Hilsner affair, when Masaryk, as one of very few people in a particularly anti-Semitic atmosphere of that time, defended a Jewish youth accused of murder of a young girl, Anezka Hruzova. He also understood that a small country like Czechoslovakia needs to be actively involved in international treaties and conventions to maintain the respect of and good relations with other countries. We should remember this at a time when pragmatic solutions seem to be a measure of all things.

Let us return to the present. Today we face so many threats - climate change, draught, water shortages and poverty, resulting in problems related to migration, or increasing tensions among large states - that women's issues may seem marginal. However, the opposite is true - for several reasons.

Firstly, we know that the level of education of women has a positive impact on the economic development of countries. In developing countries, women's education has a direct link to decreased birth rates, which is especially relevant when we realize that overpopulation is one of the key problems of our planet.

Secondly, speaking of equal opportunity in society and inequalities among men and women means increasing our sensitivity towards others, opening ourselves to dialogue and focusing on the most vulnerable groups of women in society: homeless women, single mothers, women migrants, or women in prostitution. As recently as 170 years ago - at the time when TGM was born - the majority of US citizens believed that slavery is "natural" or "traditional". Correcting their terrible situation

took a very long time and effort - just like any other change. Nobody today, however, casts doubt on its benefits. And our world needs a change if we want to secure a future for the children of our children.

Which leads me to the third reason: Limiting options for women means limiting the potential we have for carrying out change. We all know the Swedish student Greta Thunberg, who has mobilized thousands of secondary school students and who is to be thanked for the fact that the terrifying results of the UN climate panel are not just yesterday's news.

We all know Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani girl fighting for girls' right to education who received a Nobel Peace Prize several years ago.

This world needs more Gretas and Malalas. We all can contribute - by supporting young women and girls around us, and also by setting an example. By claiming equal rights and dignity for ourselves, we will not only help secure equality for those who will come after us - we will also help to secure the future for the world.