

**Talk Given On May 14 To Mac Graw Hill's conference of women
(Paris, "Maison des Polytechniciens")**

First of all, let me thank you for your warm welcome, and let me congratulate McGraw Hill for welcoming in its highest ranks women of great quality. I would like to thank in particular Jeanne Françoise de Polignac for having invited me to say a few words before an audience of so many prominent women. I realize that only twenty years ago, this situation would have been unlikely, and it is highly illustrative of the great and irreversible cultural changes occurring in our countries.

A European model of successful women, leadership and career paths

Obviously, with regard to the condition of women in politics as well as in business in our modern democracies, there has been a sea change.

1. Women have access to duties of high responsibility on the political scene: the Chancellor of Germany, the Prime minister of Chile, the President of Finland, the House Speaker in the US...and we are seeing more and more female MPs and ministers...So that the time when women in politics seemed an exception to the rule is definitely gone forever. In brief, there are more and more pioneers – role models - in the field of politics who can share their diverse experience.
2. Even in business where until now, especially in France, but also in other countries in Europe, women owed their high position in the

company to family inheritance, things are changing: there are more and more women exercising a high level of responsibility and there is less and less prejudice regarding their supposed incompetence. Moreover, it's worth noting that they have gone into sectors which were, until now, supposedly reserved for men such as finance and economy. Nevertheless, when I read the Financial Times every day, I can't help observing how few women CEOs there are. What happens is that women reach a high level in the company but, by and large, very rarely achieve CEO status. The glass ceiling remains an obstacle.

3. As a preliminary remark, I would like to stress the differences that exist between Politics and Business. Indeed, nowadays women have become increasingly visible in the realm of politics at very top-level positions. This, however, tends to obscure the fact that political parties remain in the hands of men. Look for example at the situation in both sectors in the US and in France. In politics, despite the fact that Nancy Pelosi is the Speaker of the House, only 10% of Congress is female. Similarly in France the number of female Ministers is usually three times the number of women in Parliament. In business, it is the exact contrary: there are many fewer female CEOs at the very top than males. For example, in France, among the CEOs of companies of the French CAC 40, there is only one woman: Patricia Lucent at Alcatel and she's American. On the other hand, Anne Lauvergeon, a Frenchwoman heads the big public nuclear company (called Areva), but her appointment in the public sector is the result of factors very specific to France that have also to do with a particular educational background (she is a graduate of both Polytechnique and the Ecole

des Mines), which means that she belongs to the cream of the crop of the French elite.

4. Today because of my own background in politics, and more recently in business, I want to discuss with you the transition that we may be undergoing to more or less extent in Europe. Specifically the questions are:
 - a) To what extent Europe helps women to accede to positions of power and to exercise power in their own right;
 - b) What kind of difficulties are women still facing in accessing top decision-making duties – and here I will be referring especially to the French context and to my own experience;
 - c) What are the keys to success and what is the profile of a successful woman in Europe.

a) Europe and the advancement of women

It may be largely unknown, but women's rights have been at the forefront of European policies since the 1970s. Indeed, the pursuit of women's rights responds to two major European goals. On the one hand it enhances democracy: for example, in its 2007-2013 Action Plan, the European Commission emphasizes the essential role of "a balanced participation by women and men in politics" as an integral part of European democracy. On the other hand it is worth noting (according to the same Action Plan) that "the presence of women in the economic decision-making process contributes to a more productive and innovative working environment, to a high-performing economy and increased

competitiveness”. This approach to women’s rights is interesting since it does not refer only to human rights, but also to women’s contribution to Europe’s competitiveness.

Another aspect of European policies in favor of women has to do with the considerable number of laws enacted at European level in favor of women, which is unique on a worldwide level. As everyone knows, France has for a long time promoted women’s social rights through an active pro family policy. France indeed is certainly – along with the Scandinavian countries – the land where women benefit from the most protective social policies: long maternal as well as parental leave, family allowances (starting from the first child, and rising exponentially for families with more than two children, as well as for single mothers), tax deductibility of expenses related to child care services... Women are generally encouraged to combine a family life with a working life. As a result, the participation of women in the labor force is one of the highest in Europe. However, often the French do not know that most of the recent progress in this field is due entirely to European legislation (such as the equal right to parental leave for both parents, equal access to all public sector positions— army, police etc.—, equal pay etc.).

I recently talked with the former Minister of Women’s Rights in France during Mitterrand’s presidency, who readily admitted to me that most of the legislation adopted in favor of women between 1981 and 1986 was due to the mere transposition of European law.

More illustrative still is the fact that over 35% of the members of the European Parliament are women. Also, two women (French) have been

President of the European Parliament (since 1979, the year when it acquired significant legislative powers).

b) Remaining difficulties and keys to success

In relation to difficulties, I will refer to the French example and to my personal experience which is more substantial in politics than in business. As a first remark, I would like to stress that culture is stronger than law. There are very few countries in Europe where the burden-sharing between husband and wife in connection with home duties and children's education is well-balanced. For instance in France, although the activity rate of women is very high, the balance has been unchanged for a couple of decades, and is still 80% / 20%, the 80% being for women, obviously. Consequently, working women have two full-time jobs. In my view, this remains the main obstacle to their reaching the top ranks in their chosen careers.

The second obstacle is prejudice. In certain countries such as Germany, women who do not interrupt their professional life to raise their children are considered something of a disgrace. It may be even worse for working women who do not have any children. Everyone remembers the words of Doris Schröder, who said during the electoral campaign in Germany, about Angela Merkel: "How can you elect a woman who has been unable to raise children?" Likewise, when Ségolène Royal was competing for her party's nomination as presidential candidate, one of the male fixtures of the French Socialist Party wondered "who will raise the children"? I am aware that this kind of prejudice is not expressed in the same way in the world of business; however there is still a lot more

sacrifice to be made by successful women compared to their male counterparts in this world as well.

Another difference between politics and business, especially in the French chauvinistic context, is that women are still accused of incompetence when aiming to access the highest ranks. This was amply demonstrated during the presidential campaign, with regard to Ségolène Royal, who was accused of being incompetent in spite of her diverse and many achievements (she graduated from ENA, was a minister four times, is the only woman to be president of a French region, etc.).

I will not comment extensively on political meanness, which is common in all electoral campaigns. I would only like to quote a renowned French journalist who was also the Minister of Woman's condition under President Giscard d'Estaing: "When incompetent women are appointed to high-level positions, this will mean that equality between men and women is no longer an issue."

c) Keys to success

I have wanted to quote, always with a certain sense of humor, some of the more egregious examples of prejudice, if only for us to remain aware that we still need a lot of ambition and determination to achieve our goals. Although each woman who has reached a top-level position has a specific experience, we do have many things in common. Based on my modest experience, there are several keys to success:

- 1) Try and be skilled in your field. Women cannot afford to do their job in an amateurish way.

2) Self-confidence is essential. It may be more difficult for women whose education is not always focused on aspects such as power or influence, which are sometimes negatively viewed by women themselves.

3) I do not believe that it is appropriate to claim one's femininity as an asset, on the contrary; women should pretend to ignore the prejudice against women. When I was a judge of the French Supreme Court, and the only woman member of that institution, I always wanted to act as if I was not aware of my feminine condition.

4) Communication and networking are even more essential for each woman to assert her top-level position since, in the current transitional period, each woman is, in a way, exemplary, and legitimates other women's ambitions.

In conclusion, in our democracies, and especially in Europe and North America, women's rights are recognized, their legitimacy is widening, and there are more women occupying top-level positions. The issue is to make these rights effective. For that purpose, there is no need to insist on the supposed feminine advantages or particularities.

Things are very different in other parts of the world. We have even seen a decline in women's rights due to the rise of fundamentalisms, and I believe that women like us have a responsibility to continue emphasizing that the condition of women who are deprived of their rights is unacceptable. A French poet said a few decades ago that "Woman is the future of man". I prefer to think that the world belongs to all, men and women, and that each individual should have an equal opportunity to be

judged on the basis of his or her own value, based on actions undertaken and on real accomplishment.

Noëlle Lenoir