

When we speak about women in senior leadership positions within organisations, we often speak about numbers, statistics, targets.

I would like to speak about experience: my own, and – I would venture to say – that of many women whom I recognise in similar situations.

And I would begin by saying that reaching the top – or even coming close to it – is not, sadly, just a matter of competence. It is also a matter of how one is seen, a matter of attitudes and expectations.

There are vulnerabilities that do not appear on organisational charts.

There is that initial look that some interlocutors cast when we enter a room – sometimes indulgent; sometimes condescending; at times even inappropriate (more rarely, it must be said, especially as we grow less young, which is also telling...).

And then there is the almost imperceptible, very subtle, but very real shift that takes place when we begin to speak in a meeting or at a conference. When the discourse, so to speak, asserts itself – and, in doing so, asserts us – through substance.

It is a moment that many of us, I am sure, will recognise. And it says a great deal: it says that, despite everything and despite all the evidence already provided – in contexts that are not, generally speaking, favourable to us from the outset – there are still those who, when faced with a woman, do not expect competence until they have heard her speak.

There are also very concrete barriers to career progression. In many organisations, the path exists up to a certain middle level. Beyond that, however, it begins to thin out. Not for lack of talent, but for lack of openness.

The Portuguese case may, in this regard, be illustrative. The trend towards the feminisation of the services is now firmly established: in 2024, at the headquarters of the Court of Auditors, women represented almost 69% of staff, compared with just over 31% men, and women already account for more than 70% of senior technical staff and management. The Presidency held by a woman, however, marks a first, furthermore alongside the institution's first woman Director-General, whom I am pleased to have with me here today.

It is noteworthy that in a few months we will be celebrating the 107th anniversary of the admission of the first woman as a third-class auditor of the Court of Auditors, while today women account for only one third of the Court's Justices.

A PRESIDENTE

An audit of the reporting system for SDG 5 in 2023 revealed shortcomings in coordination mechanisms between entities, as well as in budgetary transparency. At the level of the State Budget, the financial resources required for the implementation of our National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination (ENIND – Portugal + Igual) and SDG 5 are neither clearly identified nor consistently secured, and the overall cost of the Strategy and its action plans has not been calculated. Furthermore, there are no instruments or mechanisms that individually bind the entities concerned by specifying the measures and output indicators for which they are responsible or competent.

ENIND involves the participation of civil society, academia and the private sector; nevertheless, the number of municipal equality plans remains limited when compared with the number of protocols signed between the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) and municipalities. Overall, this is far from an encouraging picture.

It is not that we wish to stand alone at the top. We wish to stand side by side – and for that side by side to reflect equal recognition.

This is not, therefore, about replacing anyone or reversing scenarios of injustice. It is about sharing: sharing responsibilities, sharing decisions, sharing – without fear of the word – power. Because only with power can we truly participate in, and ultimately help to shape, the destiny of the society we belong to and the community we call our own.

It is true that much has changed over the past one hundred years. But collective imaginaries always change more slowly, and perhaps in reaction to how much has already been achieved, one such imaginary stubbornly persists.

It is the Cinderella narrative, as I heard recently from Carmen Lúcia, Judge of the Brazilian Supreme Court of Justice: “beautiful, modest and flawless among the ashes”, highly accomplished in the kitchen, waiting to be rescued by a man who, in the end... places her by another fireside – perhaps a more comfortable one – but still under his authority.

And today, with renewed intensity, discourses are returning that revive the idea that a woman’s place is in the home. As if such regression were, in fact, a return to what is *natural*, after an incomprehensible, misguided, and temporary deviation. As if it were desirable, because indispensable to the restoration of a certain order. Or of *the right order*.

And yet, we know that the children of educated women who work outside the home are, on average, better students and have greater potential for success. This is not ideology; it is evidence.

A PRESIDENTE

What is essential, therefore, is not to remove women from society. It is to give them the conditions to be daughters, partners, mothers – or aunts and stepmothers, as is my case – without that limiting their potential or the relevance of their contribution to society; without that implying a return to the invisibility of the private sphere.

No. We must continue to be able to access and occupy the public sphere; we must continue to be able to access and exercise power – an exercise, undoubtedly, of a different kind.

Gone are the days when a woman, in order to lead an institution or a company, public or private, had to masculinise herself – in the way she dressed, spoke or acted.

The generation before mine will still have very vivid memories of that style, imposed by circumstances rather than truly chosen by all those upon whose shoulders the space we occupy today was built – not without sacrifice.

Thanks to them as well, we moved beyond that: we claimed the right to be women who wish to remain women, because we enjoy being women and because, as women, we bring a different way of leading.

Often more detached, sometimes tougher, but also deeply capable of dialogue.

Not by chance. Our survival in historically male-dominated societies – and I say historically, because I believe that past will not return – depended, for centuries, on the ability to navigate obstacles, to persuade our male interlocutors with diplomacy, subtlety and, when necessary, by resorting even to sheer charm. By resorting, therefore, to what Sophia de Mello Breyner, the distinguished Portuguese poet, called “the age-old oblique method of women”.

That is why so-called female fragility has always seemed to me something of a misconception, for it has never been recognised for what it also is: intelligence. A complex intelligence, woven from reason and emotion, and one that is rich in strategic awareness.

Perhaps that is precisely what we can offer organisations and society today: a specific intelligent exercise of power (because it is more attentive to detail, to the intangible, to nuance), more human (because it is accustomed to considering the position of the other, and to placing itself in the other’s position – particularly when the other is more vulnerable), and, ultimately, more complete (because it is capable of stepping beyond itself).

A PRESIDENTE

We do not want privileges. We want space. The space that is rightfully ours when we stand side by side, in equality.

We want to make these meetings and these exchanges obsolete!

And above all, we want to continue to be who we are – women – without that imposing limits upon us.

Because, as we know so well, being a woman, beyond mere chance, is a fortune, a privilege and a value.

Thank you.