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Speech by HRH Prince Constantijn on the occasion of the 2019 Prince Claus Awards at the Royal Palace, Amsterdam on 4 December 2019

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear laureates, partners and friends of the Prince Claus Fund,

The Prince Claus Fund tries to stay on top of global trends. So are we being topical this year with an all female line up? Actually we are not.

The 7 laureates were not selected because they are women. They were the best in their categories. The only topical aspect of this year's awards is that the Awards Committee actually selected them. As many women of equal or even better qualifications than their male counterparts do not get selected due to all kinds of implicit and explicit biases.

I am grateful that the Awards Committee dared to stick out its neck. This line up allows us to acknowledge the role women play in societies, as agents of change as well as of bearers of stability. Not leaving men behind, but opening up a space that's been too narrow for too long.

This year's awards are a testimony to the next emancipation wave. Where employers, policy makers, curators, investors, art directors, and husbands (!), are discovering the persistence of gender inequality. Notwithstanding 100 years of universal suffrage, not withstanding fundamental freedoms, not withstanding the fact that at many universities more women graduate than men and often with higher grades: many implicit and explicit biases remain.

Through choice of words, subtle gestures, habit and culture, education and upbringing, women are still put at a disadvantage compared to men. Still most monuments and street names are dedicated to men. The collections of major contemporary art museums are dominated by male artists; salary gaps remain; women are a minority on boards; whilst globally women are still in charge of running households and education; most men still think they naturally do a better job at governing banks, businesses, governments, cultural institutions, etc. (Of 268 filmmakers who have claimed one of the Cannes festivals 3 top prizes, only 4% are women and only 1 woman has won the Palm d'Or.) People have often asked 'where are the great women poets, painters, writers, composers?' Now we are (re)discovering them across cultures and time: (to name a few).

- Sappho, 5 centuries BC, wrote poetry we still read today;
- Enheduanna, a Sumarian princess who lived 2000 BC was a priestess and writer in Mesopotamia;
- Hildegard von Bingen, a Benedictine Abbess, philosopher and Christian mystic, is one of the best-known composers of 12th century sacred music;
- At the same time in what is now Syria, Fatima al-Samarqandi – was a scholar and personal counsellor for King Nur-al-Din Zangi.
- Painter and poet Guan Daosheng lived in the late 13th, early 14th century in China.
- The Renaissance in Europe produced a number of female artists, like Catharina van Hemessen, the 16th century Flemish painter.

When we start looking, we find a lot. It is just that they have been lost in history.



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Once one is aware of the biases, there is no way back, at least if you are a decent person, institution, company or government. Once you know, there is no excuse not to act and speak up. Not acting amounts to wilful neglect.

I never considered myself a feminist. I always aspired to be a humanist. I believe in the equality of people and their right to exploit their talents and opportunities. I am also deeply convinced that diversity is a force for good. Evidence shows that diversity in general, which includes much more than gender alone, is a force for good. Diverse teams innovate faster, build more sustainable solutions and are more receptive to external factors.

The laureates we celebrate today are exceptional people. They should be role models to us all, and especially to other women. Don't let them be an excuse to assume that their success is proof of gender equality. There is still a long way to go, also here in The Netherlands. Before we admire their brilliant work and celebrate their successes, let us acknowledge their resourcefulness, drive and stamina to establish themselves against many odds.

Kamala Ibrahim Ishag was one of the first women to graduate from the School of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum in the 1960's. She broke out of the traditional Khartoum school and formulated a new philosophy: the Crystallist Manifesto, in which she explores the spiritual lives and experiences of Sudanese women. She overcame family pressures and social expectations, and had to wait for decades to get international recognition.

When Bill Kouélany established Les Ateliers Sahn in 2012, it was the only multi-disciplinary contemporary arts centre in Congo Brazzaville. She has kept it alive and thriving in the male dominated art scene, which she aims to make more egalitarian, by fostering young artists and offering scholarships to women.

Djamila Ribeiro had to experience that the road for an Afro-Brazilian woman is littered with hurdles. However Djamila managed to overcome these and gain recognition, as a prolific essayist, public intellectual, author, television and online columnist and one of the most influential leaders in the movement for Afro-Brazilian women's rights.

As one of only a handful of Thai female filmmakers, Anocha Suwichakornpong became the first woman in 2017 to ever win the Best Director award from the Thailand National Film Association. She set up a film fund committed to promoting underrepresented voices, particularly supporting women filmmakers.

Mónica Ojeda Franco is fearless of taboos and has made the world her oyster. She demonstrates the new opportunities that female writers have and is a role model in redefining boundaries.

Finally, surprisingly, Mariam Kamara doesn't cite gender as the major obstacle for her projects in her native Niger. Rather, the popular belief that all things that come from the West are modern and much better than things African was a barrier she had to overcome.

Let us be aware that women all over the world are still struggling and fighting for their rights. In honouring our laureates we also honour them.



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The Fund supports such role models and change agents, because we believe in people and the power of diversity of mankind. Each of us has at least the potential to change the world. Let us be inspired by this year's laureates and empower others in doing good.