

Minister for Women and Equalities Liz Truss speaking at the FT's Women at the Top event

This is an issue that I have been passionate about since I was a girl and I was presented with a 'Junior Air Hostess' badge on the plane by KLM and my brothers were given 'Junior Pilot Badges' and I thought "that is unfair" and that is what radicalised me.

But what I want to talk about today is what I call the cult of female exceptionalism and you may not have read it yet, but in a biography of Margaret Thatcher, that was launched last week, Mrs Thatcher did not consider women to be the equal of men, but their superior. She said women "suffer from fewer illusions, they're closer to reality, more conscientious, and more aware of the human factor, and less likely to be patronising, pompous and jargon-ridden."

Well I don't normally disagree with Mrs Thatcher but I do on this occasion. Because I think it's very important that we reject the idea that women are superior. I don't hold to the cult of female exceptionalism: that women are better than men; that women are more trustworthy, or more empathetic or make better bosses.

I think it's just as bad as the cult of male exceptionalism: the idea that men are more decisive, mentally stronger or better leaders. And I hate the stereotypes of women bosses as being domineering and bitchy, like in Working Girl or The Devil Wears Prada.

Women aren't devils, or angels – we are just real people. And I think if we want to have real conversations about the future and what is holding women back, it's important we don't replace one set of stereotypes with another.

What I believe – and we've just heard from the last speaker – is that more equality, more freedom to pursue our own future, is better for everybody – women, men, gay people, straight people – it's better across the board.

There are some people who still claim that the inequality between sexes is down to biology as much as discrimination.

They claim that there are psychological differences in areas like spatial awareness, mathematical reasoning or verbal skills between women and men. And I'm sure you've all read the prize-winning book *Inferior* by Angela Saini. She shows that these myths are myths. The psychological differences between men and women are statistically insignificant. In terms of mental rotations, spatial visualisation, mathematical ability, or verbal skills. There is no scientific basis to the myth that women are better at multitasking. And the fact that men have on average slightly bigger brains than women does not make them more intelligent. Otherwise, as the public intellectual Helen Hamilton

Gardener put it in the 19th century, "an elephant would be able to out-think all of us".

So my fundamental philosophy is that we should not claim exceptional qualities for either women or men, we should give people the freedom to be the individuals they are. And I think that is what we need to do. We need to challenge our culture and we need to end damaging stereotypes about what women and men should be doing, whether at school, in their careers or in our society.

This means resisting the human urge to put people in boxes, to challenge damaging attitudes that dictate to young girls or young boys what is the right path for them or what's expected of them.

So for example the gap between girls academic achievement in science and technology, engineering and mathematics, and the severe underrepresentation in those fields. A gap which is attributed to the lack of confidence putting women off entering those often well-paying careers. And what we know about this, is we know that gap opens up very early. By age nine girls, despite having the exact same ability, in mathematics as boys, are less confident about their own abilities. And there was a very good programme recently on TV talking about the impact of the way stereotypes in the classroom work, the way that teachers often unconsciously call on boys to answer questions, and make assumptions.

And I've met people who still argue that this is innate. That really there's something about girls and boys, that they like different things, that girls will be girls and boys will be boys and we should just accept that. But first of all there's no scientific basis, and secondly if you look across the world, in East Asia the expectation is all students do maths, and they achieve equally well. So we need to look at what it is in our culture that's driving those decisions.

I'm a big fan of 'Let toys be toys', which is all about making sure that there aren't stereotypes in what kids play with. And some people think this is trivial. But it's the drip, drip, drip that starts in the culture from a very early age, that becomes harder to deal with later on.

And let's talk about later on.

I think it's incredibly important that people have an equal shot at starting their own business. But at the moment women are less than half as likely to start their own businesses as men. Only one in three UK entrepreneurs is female, and this is way behind countries like the US, Canada and Australia. If women started businesses at the same rate as men there would be 1.1 million more female-lead firms.

So how can we tackle this? How can we deal with this? Well first of all, culture is all-powerful, and I think politicians have a role in challenging that culture, I think teachers have a role in challenging that culture, and I think all of us have a role in challenging the culture.

I'm rather a fan of the Everyday Sexism hashtag, which captures culture and what the problem is. And it strikes me that even though we've made huge strides in the workplace, there are still some embedded cultural attitudes that we have to deal with.

When I started my career working for Shell and Cable & Wireless in the 1990s I remember that often I was the only woman around. It wouldn't be unusual to be the only woman in the meeting and I was treated as a bit of a novelty. Whereas now, it's much more common, we have a much wider variety. Although I have to say, as a government minister, I've never had another female minister in my team, apart from now that I'm the Minister for Women and Equalities. So I think it does show that we've got some way to go.

And if you look at the political culture and the government culture, there's an assumption that people will be around to do dinners, and that's the important place for networking and getting things done. There can be assumptions about your availability at weekends. There can be assumptions about the fact that you have somebody at home supporting you so you can go off and do things all hours of the day and night. And those things are not openly stated, but they're assumptions in the culture, and I think all of us have to be more open about putting forward that as being a challenge for us.

And it's always been difficult to be the person that says, 'hands up I don't actually like the way we're working here, I want to do things differently', but I think we all have to be prepared to be brave.

And I think in this battle, new technology is a massive ally. It means that you don't have to be present at work, you can do things outside the normal office environment, it means that people are more valued for what they're actually putting in, rather than their presenteeism, and it means that it's easier to see the contribution people are making in the workplace.

I think it's very interesting that e-commerce firms are twice as likely to be owned by women as bricks and mortar ones, and that the number of women who are self-employed has nearly doubled over the last twenty years. We really are seeing a shake-up in the workplace, and a shake-up in the way we're doing things.

And what I want to do, as the Minister for Women and Equalities, apart from making speeches in London and talking to pipeline executives, but what I also want to do is get out around the country and look at the barriers people are facing in small businesses, in towns, in rural areas across the country, because we are the people with some of the best access to information and the most support, but how do we create a network of support to achieve a real culture change around Britain? And I think that means tackling it at a local level.

It's brilliant to be here at this conference with the FT. I was committed to fulfilling this engagement because I think it's a really, really important area. I feel at the moment in Britain we are under-utilising our talent, and I do think it's poor that in areas like women in entrepreneurship we're not doing as well as some of our competitors.

I also see huge opportunities.

As Trade Secretary I'll be striking the first deals for this country for 46 years. And those are new opportunities for entrepreneurs to get out and about around the world. And one of my focuses will be making sure it benefits entrepreneurs and small and medium sized enterprises, rather than just the big corporations.

I think there are opportunities in the massive wave of technology we're seeing, to do things differently, and change our culture once and for all.

There's absolutely nothing in the scientific evidence that shows that a more equal society isn't possible. As Angela Saini has said: "These arguments matter personally, in terms of how we think about ourselves, but also politically. We cannot afford to be complacent."

So let's not be complacent. Let's not allow these lazy stereotypes, whether it's about male exceptionalism, female exceptionalism, or anything else. Let's finally say we're not going to put people in boxes, we are going to value people for the contribution they make, not all the hours they're there, and I think we together can change society.

Thank you.