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A conversation between Sancroft's chief executive Judy Kuszewski (JK) and Teresa Fogelberg (TF), an international affairs leader across the sustainable development, corporate responsibility, transparency and governance fields, to commemorate International Women's Day.

JK: Teresa, in the 15 years we have known each other, International Women's Day (IWD) has become far more prominent. It's a great opportunity to reflect on the role and contribution of women in public life. Yet it's always felt a little strange to me. After all, I don't spend much time thinking about being a 'female leader' or a 'woman in business' on other days of the year, despite manifestly being those things! IWD is one of the few occasions on which I even try to engage with the concept of the 'woman leader'. What do you think?

TF: For me Women's Day has positive and negative connotations. The positive one: it became important when I lived for almost ten years in Africa. In many regions of the world – Africa, Asia, Central Asia – Women's Day is a day of celebrating womanhood. Women get a day off; they are commemorated for their key role to the economy and society.

Another important thing is that around that date women become more visible through research, data, reports, benchmarks and in the political arena. Were it not for this day women would still be even more invisible than they are normally.

JK: Yes, I agree – the very fact that we are talking about IWD, in addition to the many studies, articles, campaigns and parliamentary debates connected to it, lends it value.

TF: On the negative side, it does make me angry that in western European countries like the Netherlands, people can be condescending about Women's Day and women's emancipation. "We don't need that, it's old fashioned and besides, the world is so different now from 100 years ago, women should stop whining about their status." It seems the thing to do in some circles is to deny the issue. That's why I engage with it and openly give testimonials for women's empowerment and women's day. It's really important for me, and whenever I can I give my support to such initiatives.

JK: Your adventures and accomplishments throughout your career make those testimonials meaningful. Do you consider yourself a role model for other women – and do you have any yourself?

TF: One of my problems, being 65, is that I never had role models on the job or in my own life. That's why I really invest in being a role model for other women, young and old. I really had to invent

everything myself, I had to figure out how to deal with work, positioning myself and finding my way in a male dominated work environment in the UN, in diplomatic service, and at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Environment.

At university I was one of the first to study women's role in the economy and society, and I had one professor who I admired. But she was not a role model. I was inspired by women's stories, though. I read a lot of literature by strong women: a story of an African farm by Olive Schreiner, written in the 19th century, Willa Cather in the 1860s etc.

Later, when I became a director and a boss, I happened to sit on a board chaired by Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and founding mother of the Elders. She became a role model. So warm and smart. She made everything look simple.

JK: For me, being 48, I have been lucky enough to have met some truly inspirational women, none more so than Joan Bavaria, a pioneer of the socially responsible investment world in the US, and founder of Ceres, which went on to establish the GRI. She was someone who built her own roads – often through sheer desire – because there weren't any where she wanted to go. And she was so generous in letting me learn from her, and see business success sit alongside personal authenticity, creativity and honest care for the people around her.

But, like you, I am still continuously inspired by new mentors – one of my most recent 'girl crushes' is Connie Lindsey, whose all-round, wide-ranging competence and commitment to service has put her in leadership roles across the business and charitable sectors, including the Girl Scouts of the USA.

TF: Thinking about the special experiences of women in leadership positions, so many women have expressed the sense that as CEO or chair, they had to be doubly excellent, and that they could not make any mistakes. And that is very dangerous, because that would solicit risk-avoiding behaviour. A woman CEO needs to set the stage by creating a work environment that awards taking risks and making mistakes. It is really important for women CEOs to be part of a network of other women in similar positions.

JK: To be honest, I don't have a lot of time for heavily-gendered perceptions of how people think and behave – you know, the notion that 'women are more nurturing' or 'men are more decisive' – I can't really think of any example of this sort of thinking that doesn't just rely on restrictive stereotyping. But I do think it's useful to acknowledge differences in the way men and women are socialised (which

itself can be overly reductive, I admit). These differences can have an impact on how we behave in groups, and what qualities we look for and value in one another, and while they don't necessarily derive from being a woman or a man, they are frequently related to the different experiences we may have as women and men.

TF: I don't spend too much energy on the nature of women and the nature-nurture issue. It's a *mer à boire* as they say in French: it's an eternal discussion. I would say that diversity pays off. That when there are more women (and yes, we need a critical mass, not just the token woman), meetings happen more effectively and efficiently (contrary to the stereotypes, in meetings women talk less, get to the point and get things done); and men restrain themselves from sexist behaviour. And the staff have more role models that they can mirror themselves against.

Women owe it to themselves and to each other to be bold in multiple ways. Fight for an excellent remuneration package and if you are in a leadership position, get excellent support staff around you. That in itself will create respect. Your boldness will neutralise those elements that are toxic to your leadership.

JK: What advice would you give your 18-year-old self?

TF: I have never thought about income and financial planning. I just accepted any salary, because it was an honour to get a job in the field I was passionate about. Two times I was formally offered a top position (once as a top official in Foreign Affairs, and once at an international organisation) and then suddenly a political nominee pushed me aside. Both times I just politely accepted being pushed away. I never fought for my own job position or salary. I regret that now. For young women and girls, it is considered dirty and selfish to struggle for your own interest. Come on! I should have been wiser, having read Virginia Woolf at age 18 and Simone de Beauvoir at 22.

JK: I think we sometimes grow up expecting high standards of ourselves, without necessarily insisting on the same thing from others – it isn't 'ladylike'. Incidentally, this applies to kids, too – maybe one day a young woman like [Greta Thunberg](#) can make her case without us older generations clutching our pearls about respect for her elders. I'd probably encourage myself to be braver, earlier. I think this is additionally important for those of us in mission-driven businesses: we can't achieve a sustainable future if we're worried about getting permission to do it.