ENABLING CHANGE, THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

THE SECOND MEM SUMMER SUMMIT UNDERSCORED THE IMPORTANT ROLE THE INITIATIVE OF USI CONTINUES TO HAVE IN BRIDGING CONTINENTAL EUROPE WITH THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST, BY ENABLING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN YOUNG CHANGE-MAKERS AND POLITICAL, BUSINESS AND INTELLECTUAL LEADERS FROM THE DIFFERENT AREAS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN. WE CONTINUE THE DIALOGUE THAT TOOK PLACE IN LUGANO WITH TWO INSTITUTIONAL FIGURES WHO SHARE THEIR VIEWS ON THE ESSENTIAL ROLE PLAYED BY WOMEN TO FOSTER CHANGE.

BY DIMITRI LORINGET

At the second Middle East Mediterranean (MEM) Summer Summit organized by USI Università della Svizzera italiana, 100 young change-makers from 25 countries of the Middle East Mediterranean (MEM) region and Europe gathered in Lugano from 15 to 25 August 2019 with the goal to encourage alternative narratives of the MEM, by creating a privileged context for an open dialogue between young change-makers and political authorities, leaders, entrepreneurs and intellectuals.

To continue this open dialogue, we spoke with two leading female figures who describe their role as women in the respective institutional and business contexts and who bring with them a clear message to the young leaders of tomorrow, engaged like them, in enabling change. Maya Tissafi, currently Head of Mission in Abu Dhabi for the Swiss Confederation, from September 1 will head the Middle East and North Africa (MENAD) Division of the Directorate of Political Affairs (FDFA Federal Department of Foreign Affairs) in Bern, a position for which the Federal Council has conferred upon her the title of ambassador.

What are the current and future challenges of being a European diplomat – and a woman – in the Gulf Region?

The UAE has been for decades a pioneer in the region with concerns to the role of women. Among Emirati citizens, for example, women account for 70% of all university graduates, and by law every company must have at least 70% of all the employees. In many fields, including politics, higher education, technology, and entrepreneurship. Would you consider yourself a role model for young women reluctant to approach the subjects of science and technology?

Rather than being a role model, I would hope to prove that prejudices are what lead us to think that science and technology cannot appeal also to women. According to Eurostat, in 2017, 41% of scientists and engineers in the EU were women. Among the countries with the lowest number of women employed in these sectors we find, regrettably, Switzerland, with a percentage of 33%, confirming that legal equality has not yet led to a de facto equality. In addition, the number of girls interested in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines is still significantly low. USI is also no exception: although in the 2018/19 academic year there were 1,465 male undergraduate students, in the Faculty of Informatics there were only 52 women and 308 men.
At the MEM Summer Summit, we welcomed a hundred young leaders of tomorrow, which we call “change-makers”, precisely because of their commitment to fostering change in many areas, including the gender prejudices you have mentioned. In your view, as an entrepreneur, what could be done to improve the advancement of female careers?

“Despite the fact that in Switzerland we find ourselves in a relatively privileged situation and that there is clearly room for increasing the interest of young women in STEM subjects, I insist on the importance of fighting against gender prejudices to promote female careers. But then there is the issue of entrepreneurship, where Switzerland needs to catch up with other Western countries. In the recent report Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2018/19, issued by HEG Fribourg, we see that the Swiss, compared to other countries, are less inclined to engage in entrepreneurship. Only 7% - against 10% in the other countries considered - start a new business, despite the fact that there are many initiatives aimed at encouraging entrepreneurship. I see this as a wake-up call, because without entrepreneurs we would not have enterprises. Despite the high level of education of the population in Switzerland and the good rate of success, there is lack of willingness to get involved. Leonardo Da Vinci said, “He who possesses most must be most afraid of loss”. Why should one take up the challenge of creating his/her own company, when being just an employee can better protect from the risks of failing? We need to change this attitude and therefore I welcome those initiatives like, for example, the CP Start-Up of USI (the university incubator for start-up projects), where assistance is provided to young entrepreneurs who want to turn an innovative idea or a project into an entrepreneurial activity. In this respect, I see great potential for all young entrepreneurs, women and men alike, to make change happen.”

You were recently appointed President of the future holding company of RUAG, the Swiss technology company active in the fields of aerospace and defence. How do you see yourself in this new role, and what are your priorities?

“Clearly, this is a great challenge: the task is to separate the Holding RUAG between the army sector and the other international units. The Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) tasks that RUAG carries out for the Swiss Army will remain under Federal ownership, while the military technology sectors providing services to the market and that are not relevant for national security, will be privatised. My priority - and my role - is to ensure that everything is done in accordance with the regulations of the Federal Council, which has decided on this separation also to increase security and to prevent products from the our armaments industry from ending up in countries with ongoing conflicts.”