

Women's Leadership Makes a Difference: Enacting Visions of Equity

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Opening:

Good afternoon. I want to first thank Heidi and Barbara for inviting me to speak on this important plenary and also thank Dr. Burke, Representative Kaptur and Ms. Smeal for allowing me to join them today. After spending the past 10 months organizing this incredible conference, putting together the program, and working with the presenters and speakers, I never thought that I would actually find myself on the program itself!

I'm here today to talk about the leadership roles that young women play and how the women's movement is impacted by our work. While I represent an entire generation of women who are in school or newly entering the workforce, I can only speak from my own experiences as a young feminist working in Washington, DC (which, incidentally, is a great place to be a young feminist!) In fact, my presence on this stage alone is indicative of how great a place DC is to be a young feminist.

For example, one year ago I attended my first National Women's Studies Association Conference after graduating college. Ellie Smeal was one of the plenary speakers for the conference and I remember being so psyched that I was going to listen to Ellie-in person-at this gathering of feminist activity and thought. I would have never thought that almost exactly a year later, I would be hearing Ellie speak again. Except this time, I would be sharing the stage with

her! Not only Ellie, but also the President of the National Council of Women's Organizations and a noted Congresswoman as well!

My unique position on this panel has lead me to think carefully about what I wanted to contribute to this dynamic conversation on women's leadership. Besides being a little star-struck, I am also struck by the importance of blending the voices of young women along with those architects of the women's movement in a forum such as this conference.

After talking with several young women and more seasoned women in the movement, I have decided to offer my thoughts on two themes: First, the recognition of young women's leadership and the new forms of activism and feminism that appear today. Second, the areas in which young women need to work harder to contribute to the betterment of the world in which we live and to improve the situation of women worldwide. Finally, I would like to spend a moment thinking of how we can use the privilege that we have as young women in conjunction with the experience of older women in the movement to examine how to best work together and move to a new vision of the world.

Amy Richards and Jennifer Baumgardner, authors of *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, write that "the Third Wave (of feminism) includes young women who've grown up with the ideas of feminism but who are trying to define what it means for them now...Young women today, raised with Title IX and *Free to Be You and Me* like it was fluoride in the water, took certain aspects of liberation for granted, giving them confidence without necessarily a political consciousness." Yet, young women continue to contribute to activism in different and important ways.

(Academic/Written Work)

Although it may appear that, in large numbers, young women shirk the label of feminism, new works by young women continue to add to the litany of feminist thought. Books and Anthologies such as *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, edited by Rebecca Walker; *Blue Jean: What Young Women are Thinking, Saying and Doing*, by Sherry S. Handel; *Talking Up: Young Women's Take on Feminism*; and *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* point to the revitalization of feminism by young women today.

(Activism)

Beyond academic leadership, young women participate in activism in various ways. Groups like the Third Wave Foundation, whose mission is to “provide resources to support the cutting-edge work of young women activists by giving direct financial support to young women activists and the organizations they lead” or Students Take Action for New Directions (STAND), which works “to empower young women to act politically to promote peace, equality, and progressive social change” and Justice for Girls, a non-profit organization promoting justice, equality and support for low income and street-involved teenage girls who have experienced violence” are all active examples of young women’s leadership.

(Higher Education)

Further, young women today enter college at higher rates than ever; A 2000 report by the National Center for Education Statistics entitled *Trends in Educational Equity of Girls & Women* notes that “Since 1970, women have steadily made up an increasing proportion of the total undergraduate population. In 1970, women made up 42 percent of all undergraduate students compared with 56 percent in 1996.” Young women continue to make strides into disciplines and professions as never done before.

Despite the energy captured in the younger generation of feminists, there is a great deal of work yet to be done by all young women. This brings me to my second theme: the recognition of what battles have still not been won.

Although young women are entering college en masse, women's equity in the workforce remains sub-par. After examining the Institute for Women's Policy Research's Status of Women in the States Report for 2002, it is clear that gaps in earnings remain in every state in America. In some cases, the gap is as wide as women earning only 64.4 percent of men's wages. Even at best, women still earn only 89.2 percent of men's earnings.

Real threats loom over rights that seemed once secure. Many young women have had the privilege of access to birth control, safe abortion, and reproductive healthcare. Today, despite Roe v. Wade and other legislation guaranteeing women's health rights, reproductive freedom hangs by a thread. Affirmative Action is another system that has helped tremendous numbers of women enter into post-secondary education and break down barriers in the workplace. Yet today, it is assaulted in our courts, drawing into question the continued progress that has helped women today.

While young women today have experienced a great deal of success and privilege due to the work done by those involved in the women's movement long before us, much more remains to be done. On one hand, many young women shy away from the word feminism because, seemingly, there is no longer the pressing need to subscribe to a political identity through which women's rights will be secured. Erika Jong notes "If the 'f' word, feminism, is out of fashion today, that's because it's associated with the seventies-the mythic decade of our daughters' births. How can anything espoused by their mothers be either radical or real? But note that our daughters nonetheless want everything that feminism stands for: equal pay, egalitarian

marriages, and a place in the White House (without being smuggled in by the president for un-presidential duties). Feminism is the whole climate of their lives, the air they breathe. It hardly needs a name anymore. This is good.”

Yet, feminism, however “last season” as it may seem, offers more than an identity today and remains a necessity; for it is a world-view that works to ensure the rights of all people, regardless of gender or other distinctions. Feminism lives, continuously reinterpreted through young women’s work. I ask the older women, pillars of the women’s movement for so long, to recognize the strength and energy that simmers with the younger generation. Be mentors and listen to the voices around you.

I call on the younger women to begin to harness and channel that energy toward the elimination of all form of inequity that remain. In a world so touched by misunderstanding, it is imperative, now more than ever, to continue the struggle for justice. By recognizing the work that has been done to secure our privilege and using those gifts in turn, it is up to the next generation of young women to continue to lead, in exciting and new ways.