***Illusions and Realities: Why the Women’s Revolution is not Over***

Remarks to the Springfield-Annandale (VA) Chapter

of the American Association of University Women

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So many thanks to Terry Graham and the AAUW Chapter, and special thanks and recognition to Trinity’s own Ambassador Susan Burk who invited me to speak to you today. We are so proud of Susan and the great work she is doing for our nation and world to ensure peace through nuclear nonproliferation.

A brief word about Trinity:

Trinity in Washington (historically Trinity College) has been in the forefront of educating women for leadership and economic empowerment for more than a century. Trinity graduates include such well-known leaders as former Speaker of the House and current Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, Class of 1962; Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, Class of 1970; Ambassador Susan Burk, Class of 1976, President Obama’s Special Representative for Nuclear Nonproliferation at the State Department; former Chief of Staff to First Lady Hillary Clinton and Assistant to President Clinton Maggie Williams, Class of 1977; and Chief of Staff to Congressman Chakka Fattah Maisha Leek, Class of 2005.

Trinity today continues its century-long commitment to women’s education and empowerment even as this university has opened its doors broadly to new populations of historically marginalized women in the nation’s capital and surrounding region. Trinity now educates more District of Columbia residents than any private university in the nation. Nearly half of the 1,000 young women in Trinity’s historic women’s college hail from the District of Columbia, with another 30% from Maryland. These students are predominantly African American and Latina; 80% of our freshman class last fall was eligible for Pell Grants. These students overcome awesome challenges to persist in their dream of attaining college degrees so that they can provide better lives for their children and families.

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How did we come to this point, America? After more than 200 years as a free nation --- a nation with the highest levels of wealth and learning in human history, a nation of dazzling innovation and courageous exploration and breathtaking charity extended to the farthest corners of the world --- how did we come to this place where the headlines and airwaves that announce the most urgent public discourse of our times are dominated by a disgraceful word intended to demean a woman... S....

I can’t even say it. I cannot repeat that ugly shameful, misogynist epithet against a person whose only act was the courageous exercise of her freedom of speech in defense of her rights as a woman.

Our small plant suffers in paroxysms of genocidal violence and unfathomable hunger and horrific degradation of human beings left to rot in poverty and war and oppression. (If you don’t already do so, read Nicholas Kristof’s ongoing commentaries on the condition of women and the horror of human trafficking in this country and around the world --- his recent work [“Half the Sky”](http://www.halftheskymovement.org/) is deeply disturbing and essential reading.) Economic crisis and the long shadow of terrorism continue to plague our civilization with indiscriminate impact across all nations and social classes. In our own country, the ongoing social plague of racism continues to destroy human life and maim the souls of its survivors; we don’t hear much from the pro-life movement about the pure evil of shooting down children wearing hoodies.

Shame on us, America!

Bigotry, misogyny, hatred pass for political discourse in this season. We confront the reality of a time when a Congressional committee, convened on a topic with clear impact on women’s health, contemptuously dismisses a woman who sought to be at the table while proceeding with an all-male panel that, among other things, compares women’s rights to a ham sandwich. I am not making this up.

Of all the weird, bizarre, insulting affronts to common sense and freedom of these last few months, few are more detestable than the assaults on women’s hard-won gains in our elusive quest for justice.

We have had the illusion of equality, but now we know the truth:

The revolution is far from over!

Such is the condition of women’s history in the Year 2012.

I’m often asked, Why do women’s colleges still exist? Good heavens, after all this time, haven’t women become equal, isn’t it time to move on from feminism, isn’t the revolution over?

Thank you, Rush Limbaugh, for proving my point: the revolution has hardly begun!

Earlier this week, I was at a roundtable discussion on the Hill at the Senate Democratic Oversight and Steering Committee. About 15 women business leaders met with Senator Harry Reid and a group of other senators to talk about women’s economic empowerment. Executive after executive reeled-off the sobering statistics:

(data also available through the wonderful organization [Catalyst](http://www.catalyst.org/publication/206/women-in-us-management) that has tracked women’s participation on boards and executive suites for years)

* women hold 16.1 percent of board seats at Fortune 500 companies;
* about 30 companies have no women on their boards;
* women of color hold only 3% of board seats; ([Catalyst](http://www.catalyst.org/publication/515/2011-catalyst-census-fortune-500-women-board-directors))
* women are 14.1% of Executive Officer positions at Fortune 500 companies and 7.5 percent of Executive Officer top earner positions;
* 25% of these companies have no women executive officers ([Catalyst](http://www.catalyst.org/publication/516/2011-catalyst-census-fortune-500-women-executive-officers-and-top-earners))
* A [Bloomberg News](http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/jun2011/ca20110620_788661.htm) study revealed that the percentage of women on boards actually dropped from 2010 to 2011, and 29 Fortune 500 companies have no women on their boards or among their top executives.
* Only [3 of the 500 companies](http://www.womenonbusiness.com/29-fortune-500-companies-have-no-women-on-boards/) have more than 40% women on their boards, and why are we not surprised to learn that they are Avon Products, Estee Lauder and Macy’s !!
* Women are [nearly 50% of the labor force](http://www.catalyst.org/publication/206/women-in-us-management) nationally but hold only about 15% of the top executive positions making decisions for the labor force.

Other signs that women’s progress remains slow: only 17% of law firm partners, 20% of medical directors in hospitals, 23% of college presidents, and 12% of editors-in-chief of major newspapers are women.

According to the [Rutgers Center for American Women in Politics](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/Congress-CurrentFacts.php), women hold 90, or 16.8%, of the 535 seats in the 112th US Congress. Women are only 6 of 50 governors, and hold fewer than 25% of all statewide legislative assembly seats among the 50 states.

Equality is an illusion; reality tells us that we must continue to press for justice for women every single day.

Which brings me to my main point --- no surprises here --- education is the best, most certain, and perhaps only way to continue to make progress toward equal justice, economic opportunity and securing real seats at all of those tables --- private corporate boards and executive suites, on the floors of the House and Senate, the major executive agencies, the governor’s mansions and state assemblies --- where decisions get made that affect not only the lives of women, but our children and families for generations.

We do have some good news for women on the education front: women are now 57%, or more than 11 million of all 20 million students enrolled in higher education. Women also now claim the majority of all degrees earned at every level, including doctorates.

Wait! The revolution is far from over. While opportunities for women in higher education appear expansive today, compared to decades ago, we must understand that such opportunities are not available to all women even today. Millions of women in the United States remain on the margins of educational opportunities by virtue of their economic conditions, social class, racial or ethnic prejudices, family responsibilities or other circumstances.

Of the 11 million women in higher education today, fully 45% are over the age of 25, and 39% are over the age of 25 and attending part-time. The participation of Black women in higher education certainly is one of the remarkable features of the increasing share of women in college. Black students are about 14% of all collegiate enrollments today. Black women earn 66% of the bachelors degrees conferred to Black students, 72% of master’s and 57% of doctorates; by comparison, for degrees conferred to White students, white women earn 56% of bachelors, 62% of masters, and 52% of doctorates.

Hispanic students, both male and female, show critical lags in all indicators. Census data shows that only 64% of Hispanic females, and 61% of males, complete high school. Hispanic students are just 14% of collegiate enrollments. Hispanic women far outpace men in degree attainment, with women earning 61% of bachelors, 64% of masters, and 57% of doctoral degrees conferred on Hispanic students. But the low participation rates of all Hispanic students at all levels is of great concern in light of the increasingly large proportion of Hispanic residents in our population. As this nation struggles with issues around immigration status, this educational gap for Hispanic students is one of our nation’s most significant social justice and economic issues for the next several decades. Among other solutions, we must overcome opposition to full implementation of the Dream Act because it makes no economic or social sense to keep students out of school who have been living in this nation since they were infants. The bigotry that opposes educational engagement for undocumented students is extremely short-sighted; the economic and social health of the entire community will improve when all people living here advance educationally.

In many ways, federal financial aid policies are completely inadequate to support the real needs of many women who desire to go to college today, especially those whose family and economic circumstances require them to attend in patterns that are different from the old “traditional” mode. Financial aid policies can actually elongate student time in school rather than supporting acceleration of degree completion. For example, just a few months ago, Congress chose to save some money by eliminating summer Pell Grants, and President Obama agreed with this terrible idea and signed the bill, pulling the rug out from under millions of adult working students, a majority of whom are women, who need their summer credits to get closer to degree attainment.

Our national leadership seems to think that Gidget still goes to college, a place where frivolous coeds pursue the MRS degree while spending long hours pining away for the football captain. This view of college life --- the full-time residential undergraduate living high on mom and dad’s tuition payments, taking the summer off to travel to exotic locations --- went out with the 20th Century. Sure, you can still find a few students like that, fewer than 20% if that. The National Center for Education Statistics paints a very different picture, for more than a decade --- nearly 75% of all college students today are “non-traditional” by some important characteristic, either by age or part-time status or parenting obligations or working while going to college or paying their own tuition bills.

Getting federal and state financial aid and other educational policies aligned with the reality of who really attends college today is one of my top priorities and a priority of all presidents of institutions like Trinity that serve large proportions of women students.

Women’s educational attainment is good news for the economic security of families and communities, and that’s a big reason to support accelerated degree attainment. Census data repeatedly supports the fact that the attainment of college degrees significantly boosts earning power --- average earnings for a high school diploma are $31,000 compared to $58,000 for a bachelor’s degree and $83,000 for an advanced degree.

Beyond the obvious advantages of women’s economic empowerment, advanced education also improves women’s ability to be effective advocates and to have a distinctive impact on other critical public policy issues:

• Improving K-12 education *is* a women’s issue. Supporting and strengthening programs that boost adult literacy, improve enrollment of women in GED and postsecondary education, provide improved childcare support as well as adequate healthcare coverage for women and children, could have a far greater impact on the ability of children to read, compute and succeed in school than all of the “value-added” testing programs ever invented. Teach mothers to read and give them the time and the tools to invest in their kids’ education and we’ll see all of the test scores rise.

• Exploitation and violence against women prevent their successful participation in educational and economic opportunities, thus diminishing their ability to support their families, raise their children well and ensure the future educational and economic success of the next generation. Reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act is essential to promote women’s empowerment. We should also raise our voices more urgently to demand an end to trafficking both in the United States as well as internationally.

• 40 years after the adoption of Title IX, women continue to confront barriers to full equality at all levels of education. From the university president’s office to the science laboratories to economics classrooms to the playing fields and gyms in large urban public school systems, girls and women are often few, their opportunities often unequal. Consider this: in school systems where there are no field sports for girls, their opportunities to earn college scholarships are significantly diminished while the football players are recruited with lavish packages. Didn’t we outlaw that practice with Title IX? Come across the river to D.C. and I’ll show you the fields where only football flourishes. Remaining committed to a strong Title IX is a vital part of ensuring equality of opportunity in education and employment for women.

• Promoting the engagement of women in political affairs, including holding public office and engaging in the processes of lawmaking, should be a distinctive priority for this nation. The Congress of the United States should never indulge the exclusion of women from hearing rooms and opportunities to testify on all matters, and certainly on matters affecting women’s health and security. Congress, of all places, should be a bulwark against those forces that would turn back the clock on women’s progress.

The United States continues to lag behind many other nations when it comes to the official roles of women in lawmaking and politics --- our place on the Global Gender Gap Index for political equality of women is just 39th among the nations of the world, well behind such advanced bastions of women’s equality as Bangladesh, Cuba, Uganda and Tanzania. We have a long way to go.

When more women are at the tables where policy issues are negotiated, the outcomes will be more supportive of and sensitive to the critical issues facing women, children and families today and in the future.

Forty-one years ago, in her Address to the Women of America at the founding of the National Women’s Political Caucus, the mother of the modern women’s liberation movement Gloria Steinem said this about the pursuit of equal rights for women:

“This is no simple reform. It really is a revolution. Sex and race because they are easy and visible differences have been the primary ways of organizing human beings into superior and inferior groups and into the cheap labor on which this system still depends. We are talking about a society in which there will be no roles other than those chosen or those earned. We are really talking about humanism.” (Gloria Steinem)

Let the revolution continue!