

Women's Education and Empowerment

Remarks to the St. Mary's Commission on Women
March 22, 2012

President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University

Many thanks to the St. Mary's Commission on Women for your kind invitation to address you on the vitally important topic of "Women's Education – Women's Empowerment."

At Trinity in Washington, we have been committed to women's education and leadership for more than a century. We have quite a few well-known graduates in public life, women like former Speaker of the House and now Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, Class of 1962; former Kansas Governor and now Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, Class of 1970; President Obama's Special Representative for Nuclear Non-Proliferation Susan Burk, Class of 1976; Maggie Williams, Class of 1977, former Chief of Staff to the First Lady Hillary Clinton and Assistant to President Clinton. For all of those, we have thousands of other alumnae who have also worked for the public good as lawyers and judges, teachers and school leaders, writers and journalists and civic activists and mothers leading families in communities around the world.

Trinity today continues to educate women, now primarily from the Washington region, and women who are more diverse than ever before. We have 2,555 students this year, including 1000 young women in our daytime women's college, and women and men in both undergraduate and graduate programs in our three professional schools. We continue to believe that women's education is essential to economic empowerment and the creation of a more peaceful, more creative, more just society.

Why is it important to keep having this conversation? Haven't women arrived at a point where we are free and equal, unbound from cultural, social, legal or political restrictions on our progress?

Well, no. Have you read any headlines lately? Sure, we can point to pockets of progress, which I will touch on in a minute. But the cheap, tawdry, misogynist commentaries and headlines of the last few weeks remind us that women's progress is fragile, at best. We are only one election away from rolling back the clock to a time before before Title IX leveled the playing field in college sports and educational opportunities; before Title VII banned sex discrimination in the workplace; before Lilly Ledbetter's fight for pay equity; before Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman on the Supreme Court; before Drew Faust proved that in spite of Larry Summers, or maybe because of him, a woman could make a very fine president of Harvard University.

Indeed, there are some people in this country who would like to roll the clock back even farther, back to the time before 1920 when the 19th amendment gave women the right to vote. Never forget that there are women still with us today who were alive in this country in a time when women could not vote. Women's power at the polls has brought out the beast in too many candidates and commentators this year who see women as somehow getting in the way....

Our topic tonight is women's education, not politics, but education is absolutely essential to ensure women's rights. Prejudice, bigotry and oppression thrive in a climate of ignorance and fear. The best antidote to the poison that someone like Rush Limbaugh spews forth regularly is a well-educated population of women who will not feel afraid in the face of mindless insults.

Let's consider some of the educational realities.

First, the good news: women really have made a great deal of progress in educational attainment in the United States: (Data cited below from the 2009 Digest of Education Statistics <http://bit.ly/a0vRi6> of the U.S. Department of Education)

- In 1900, women accounted for 36% of college enrollments on a total volume of 237,000 total students in higher education;
- Today, with nearly 20 million students enrolled, women are 57% of all enrollments.

Women also now claim the majority of all degrees earned at each level (as of 2008 data):

- 62% of associate degrees;
- 57% of bachelor's degrees;
- 61% of master's degrees;
- 50% of first professional degrees;
- 51% of doctoral degrees, the first time that women were a majority of doctorates.

So, that's the good news. All of that data seems to support a view that women have "arrived" in higher education. Some might say that we can declare success in the women's revolution, fold our tents and go home.

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.

Moreover, beyond participation in education, women continue to lag in other indicia of social equality, including pay equity and participation in power positions. Additionally, globally, women's educational opportunities and leadership advancement remain limited.

In the United States, the participation of Black women in higher education certainly is one of the remarkable features of the increasing share of women in college. Black women are making

particularly notably strides: 47% of African American women who enroll in college complete their degrees, compared to 36% of African American men. 70% of the master's degrees awarded to African Americans go to women. (See Courtland Milloy, "Teaching by example: African American Women head back to school," The Washington Post, Wednesday, May 12, 2010 at <http://bit.ly/b87but>)

A majority of Black women enrolled in undergraduate programs are over the age of 25. This statistic also illustrates the fact that the enrollment of all women over the age of 25 is a large factor driving the proportionate increase in women's total enrollment. Students over the age of 25 are 38% of all students in college today. Unfortunately, our public policies on financial aid continue to favor the most traditional students while often ignoring the needs of adult learners, who are largely women. Consider the fact that, last year, Congress reduced Pell Grant aid by eliminating the ability of students to receive Pell Grants in summer semesters, a time when many adult working women continue to enroll in school.

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. Only 14% of Hispanic women, 13% of Hispanic men, enroll in college. As this nation struggles with issues around immigration status, this stunning 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 in Maryland and around the nation because it makes no economic or social sense to keep students out of school who have been living in this state and this nation since they were infants.

Women's educational attainment is good news for the economic security of families. Census data repeatedly supports the fact that the attainment of college degrees significantly boosts earning power. 2009 Census data shows that 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.

However, women still do not participate equally in the economic outcomes of educational attainment. Pay discrimination, along with circumstances that keep women out of the workforce or relegated to lesser paying jobs, results in a large pay equity gap at every educational level.

While women in this nation are making great strides educationally, our progress into positions of real power in corporations and governments remains slow. Consider¹:

- 17% of law firm partners are women
- 20% of physician medical directors are women
- 23% of college and university presidents are women
- 13.5% Fortune 500 executive officer positions are women
- 15.2% Fortune 500 board positions are women
- 12% of top 50 newspaper editors are women

¹ These data points are available in many public sources. The author gleaned these through individual searches on each type of position. Similar data appears in the White House Project's benchmarking report cited earlier.

- 17% of the U.S. Senate are women
- 17% of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives are women

Women's relatively low levels of participation at the highest levels of business and politics are not just an American problem. Writing in the International Herald Tribune <http://nyti.ms/d3P3sV> When she was France's minister for the economy, now-IMF Director Christine Lagarde, said:

"The list of women who hold positions of responsibility is growing daily, and a woman in a position of power is no longer the exception that proves the rule. I know, however, that nothing can ever be taken for granted, that the situation remains tenuous, and that constant efforts are required to turn "women's power" into a shared reality.... Through the weight of tradition, too many cultures and many governments even now keep women in a subordinate role. ...the business community is still struggling to give us top positions: the sharing of responsibilities, pay equality, and the balance between professional and personal life are not always experienced in the same way on both sides of the glass ceiling."

Among all of the areas where women's achievement still lags badly, women remain remarkably absent from leadership in science, technology² and related fields.

In "Risk and Opportunity for Women in 21st Century," New York Times, March 5, 2010 <http://nyti.ms/bGc0Va>, the writer Katrin Bennhold observes:

"The number of women who are full science professors at elite universities in the United States has been stuck at 10 percent for the past half century. ...The tug-of-war between encouraging numbers and depressing details is in many ways the story of the advancement of women overall. Women get more degrees and score higher grades than men in industrialized countries. But they are still paid less and are more likely to work part time. ...And the big money in science these days is in computers and engineering — the two fields with the fewest women. ...In the 21st century, perhaps more than ever before, there will be a premium on scientific and technological

² Another recent NYT article <http://nyti.ms/awoFmg> about the dearth of women in Silicon Valley discussed the obvious:

"...research indicates that gender exerts a powerful influence on where the money goes in Silicon Valley. Venture capital firms with senior female investors are more likely to attract and close deals with women-led start-ups, [concluded a](#) Kauffman Foundation report.

"That may be because data show that people are more trusting and comfortable working with people of their own sex, says [Toby Stuart, a](#) Harvard Business School professor who studies the topic.

"He says that some men are reluctant to invest in women's start-ups because "there are enough things that can go wrong with a high-risk, early-stage venture that if you're worried about any interpersonal dynamic issues, why not do a deal that takes that out of the equation?"

"Networks are crucial for fund-raising, because most investors don't look at pitches that come over the transom. Since an overwhelming majority of venture capitalists are men and have gotten to the firms via start-ups or business schools — both places where women are underrepresented — women have a harder time gaining access to the Valley's boys club, analysts say.

"Women tend to network with women, and men tend to network with men," says Sharon Vosmek, C.E.O. of Astia. "It plays out on the golf course, in the boardroom and it's certainly playing out in high-growth entrepreneurship."

knowledge. Science, in effect, will be the last frontier for the women's movement. With humanity poised to tackle pressing challenges — from climate change to complex illness to the fallout from the digital revolution — shortages of people with the right skill sets loom in many countries. ...Therein lie both opportunity and risk for women: In the years to come, the people who master the sciences will change the world — and most likely command the big paychecks.”

Women's colleges have proven to be among the most successful institutions for educating women who persist in the sciences, technology and engineering.

Women's colleges? Are they still around? Didn't they go out with dress codes and chalkboards?

Actually, the political events of the last few months have done something quite wonderful for women's colleges: they have proven our point that the women's revolution is far from over. And, far from being outmoded places removed from the 'real world,' today's women's colleges like Trinity are multi-dimensional institutions, many of us universities with coeducational as well as single-gender programs, that place women's leadership, educational and economic advancement at the center of our work.

This year we observe the 40th Anniversary of one of the greatest pieces of women's rights legislation ever enacted, Title IX, the law that gave women equal opportunity in education. Perhaps the most famous impact of Title IX came in collegiate sports, where women now must have funding, equipment, coaches and playing opportunities equal to men.

But Title IX had other very important impacts, from outlawing discrimination in higher ed employment to requiring elementary and secondary schools to treat boys and girls equally to putting an emphasis on women's right to hold whatever title, office, professorial rank or position on the playing field she could earn with her talent. Title IX has been expanded to protect women against sexual harassment, bullying and assault on college campuses as well.

Yet, in spite of the important gains for women in employment and education that Title IX has fostered, we continue to see efforts to dismantle the law, to roll back the clock to a time when the girls' team could only get into the gym to practice at odd hours when the premier boys' teams were done with their play. We hear complaints from men's wrestling coaches that the need to provide sufficient playing slots for women in lacrosse or field hockey or swimming somehow puts men's sports at risk. This usually comes up at major universities where the football teams spend so much money that Title IX compliance is at risk; but football is rarely targeted as the problem, women are the problem.

Women are, actually, the solution! We must keep the law strong to protect women's right to obtain the best possible education, to lead the nation's advancement economically, socially and politically.

We've surely come a long way, ladies, but we have even farther to go. As the leader of one of the nation's proud women's colleges, I can assure you that the revolution is alive and well, ever-expanding our horizons to understand that our advocacy for women's advancement is truly leadership for our society as a whole. Until such time as we can say with certainty that every

citizen of this earth has the education she or he needs to live a fulfilled and productive life, the revolution will be unfinished, and so our work goes on in the cause of educational justice.