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A PRICELESS OPPORTUNITY

When I entered University at a very young age, I signed up for courses that would expose me to areas of life I had never experienced, or had little understanding of. Sociology sounded fascinating, and I soon found myself in the front row of Soc 101.

One of the first Chapters in the textbook was entitled "Family: the Basic Unit of Society." This was presented to us by the professor as though it should be a startling revelation. I was sure everyone knew this, and decided the course would be a breeze, giving me more time to attend football and basketball games. "Who doesn't know what the family is", I wondered.

As the days passed we discussed the roles of the individuals in the family unit – the father is the head, the mother is the heart, and the children are the parts of the body, guided, cared for and tended to by the head and the heart. This was a perfect partnership, we were informed, not a pecking order.

We learned too that if the family unit is sound and structured, it is able to contribute in positive ways to society, bringing its discipline, its caring and its orderliness to community life.

Communities, in turn, are clusters of families. Leaders among the families emerge to guide and develop communities, to educate the young, to care for the vulnerable, to establish order and to promote peace. Towns are clusters of communities, states are clusters of towns, and nations are clusters of states.

In a perfect world the head and the heart of a family have mutual respect for each other, recognizing the dignity of the role each plays in the partnership.

These are simple, perfectly apparent principles. But applying them is challenging, and they don't seem to fit the complex lives we live today.

The realities of today's world have distorted the perfect order, if there ever was one. Families are torn apart by war, by rampant disease, by starvation, by discrimination, by compulsion for power, by greed, by secularism, by lack of education, inadequate health care and by loss of ethical values. This chaos has

led to confusion in the roles of the family unit and a general breakdown in society.

In such a world the role of women has inevitably changed, but our nature must not. In a broken world it is our responsibility to do what we do best – to care, to use our intelligence and the special characteristics of our womanhood to restore values in our families, in our communities, in our towns, states and nations.

Those of us who are delegates to this meeting have chosen to accomplish these objectives working at the Parliamentary level. We have taken our places in high office, having been recognized as women who have value to offer in establishing the laws through which we seek to restore order, dignity, respect for the individual and to provide the environment in which each human being has the opportunity to grow and develop his and her full talents and capacities. It has been a long road getting here.

In the United States, 2008 marked the first time that a woman was seen as a viable candidate for the Presidency. Women fought for and won the right to vote in the US for the first time in 1920. It took 88 years in that highly developed society for its citizens to recognize that there are women capable of leading the nation.

In the United Kingdom, women of 30 years of age were given the right to vote in 1918, but it was not until 1979 that the first woman was chosen to be Prime Minister, a post Margaret Thatcher held for 11 years until she resigned in 1990. She will undoubtedly be remembered as one of the great Prime Ministers of all time, as Betty Boothroyd will be remembered as one of the greatest modern Speakers in the House of Commons.

Women have made some progress in our hemisphere. But it has also been too slow, and has not kept pace with progress made in other parts of the developed world. In 2005 women of Latin America held only 17% of the positions in the Lower Houses of Parliament or in unicameral parliaments, and 13% in the Upper Houses, or Senates. However, in that same year 10 countries in the region had no women in the Upper Houses. Similarly, only 14% of Government Ministers were women.

In 2004, statistics for the Caribbean showed women making some meaningful inroads into Parliamentary positions. In the Bahamas, 26.8% of Parliamentarians were women; Grenada had 28.6%, St. Lucia 20.7%. Barbados 19.6%. But in other Caribbean countries the number of female members of Parliament fell far short of being representative of the population.

Last year 7 of 15 members of my Senate were women, but there have been some resignations and promotions which have recently affected those numbers downward, and now there are merely 5. And in 2007 only 5 women were elected to our Lower Chamber, the House of Assembly, which comprises more than 40 members.

It appears that in an era when women have made tremendous strides in education and in attaining higher positions in business roles, relatively few have made the journey to the pinnacles of corporate leadership or to the political hierarchy.

A recent PEW study taken among approximately 2500 men and women in the United States sought in 2008 to answer the question - WHY? The findings are worthy of note.

An over-arching finding of the PEW study is that people are resistant to change. At every level citizens have been led by males for so long, they have difficulty adjusting to female leadership. A change in mind-set is required, but many are not inclined to make that adjustment.

The PEW study also examined qualities that people think most important in political leadership: these, it developed, are honesty, intelligence, hard work, ambition, decisiveness, compassion, open-ness, and creativity- in that order.

Half of all participants in the study believe that women are more honest than men, and honesty was considered to be the most important trait of all in measuring leadership.

The next most important trait was identified as intelligence. 38% believed that women are smarter, just 14% believed that men were smarter and the balance thought there was no difference.

There was a tie between men and women on hard work and ambition, and men prevailed over women substantially in decisiveness - in fact, this was the men's biggest win among all of the 8 traits of leadership.

In the areas of compassion, openness and creativity, women led men by a substantial majority. This would not be surprising. Nor was it much of a revelation that at the policy level, women were found to be considerably ahead of men in dealing with social issues, such as health care and education, while men edged women out in the public's perception of how they deal with crime, public safety, defense and national security.

As for job performance skills, women were considered better than men when it comes to standing up for one's principles in the face of political pressure, being able to seek compromise, keeping government honest and representing the interests of the common man.

So, as we like to say, what's the problem? Why haven't we achieved higher levels of success?

The Pew Report believes it's a bit like rating a team that statistically has the odds in their favour, but doesn't seem to be able to end the game in the winning column.

In spite of the fact that women make up 57% of all college students, are half of all law and medical students, are almost half of all students who earn Masters degrees, women are just 2% of the CEOs of the US Fortune 500 companies; are just 17% of the US House of Representatives and 16% of the Senators, 16% of state governors, and 24% of state legislators.

And, when asked why, the survey respondents believe that Americans are not yet ready to make that change to female leadership, that women are deliberately held back by their male peers and that discrimination against women is still generally alive and well at high levels of corporate and public office.

It was also thought, however, that women are to some extent responsible for their own lack of success, as we suffer from the pressures of trying to balance work with family life, - and a general conclusion of the study was that this is the main reason more women are not actively seeking leadership in politics.

When I spoke earlier of bring those special qualities we have as women into the decision making process in our countries, I had in mind the qualities identified in the Pew study. **I happen to believe the PEW study is right on. And I believe it helps to clarify exactly where we can contribute our own special talents.**

The theme of the Forum we will be taking part in over the next few days is "Prosperity and Cooperation: A new Agenda". I look forward to the discussion, as it is clear the current agenda is not achieving what we seek, nor what the world needs. And, in discussing and formulating this new agenda, we must ensure a meaningful role for us as women.

First, there is the need for us to gently, and in a sensitive manner, end the era of machismo, of self-serving old boys clubs in parliaments. We cannot achieve this objective if we try to emulate them, in their speech and manner of thinking. Besides, we have something better to offer.

We are capable of bringing a breath of fresh air, as Hernan Andrade put it in his presentation at the Congress “Towards a Gender-Sensitive Legislative Agenda for Development in the Americas” held last year in Bogota, Colombia.

It is also open to us to bring greater dignity to the political arena. As Senator Cecilia Lopez Montano of Colombia said at the same Congress, women are entrusted by society with the task of turning politics into a noble profession.

Think about it. It is we who listen best to the needs of the vulnerable in our societies, and it is we who can empower our citizens so that their needs form part of our legislative agendas.

It is the women of Parliament, who must demonstrate not how feminist we can be – but our ability to reach into our communities and to show caring and compassion. We care, not only for our own children, but for society’s neglected children; we care, not just for our own familial elders, but for society’s elders – the homeless, the impoverished, the sick.

Our role is to understand the needs of our citizens and to try and fulfill them through legislative remedies.

And there is the environment. It is also we who understand best the connectivity of the environment with humanity, connectivity of all living beings to each other and to Mother Earth, the natural home in which we live.

The value we bring to business and to the political arena has no price, is not fully recognized, nor appreciated – even by ourselves.

Yet, in the midst of these extraneous challenges, we must remember that although we are women of the work-place, of the political arena, it is the home where our real work begins and ends.

Also at last year’s Congress, Alma Espino of Uruguay said that “homes were units of savings and consumption that also produced goods and services. Although these products do not enter the market, are not given a price, and are invisible to the economy, today and tomorrow’s workforce and society’s workforce as a whole are born and raised there”.

She, too, clearly believes it is the home where the social values and standards governing the values of society are taught. This is a principal we should live by. It is where the change we seek in our lives as women and in the societies in which we dwell, begins, and reaches fruition.

The world would be a better place if we could restore dignity to marriage and wholesomeness to family life.

“PROSPERITY AND COOPERATION”.

As we seek a new agenda, and although it is not part of our discussion over the next few days, I wish to remind us that high on our own agenda ought to be renewed efforts to legislate greater protection of women and children against violence. This is a sickness throughout our communities that demands our urgent attention.

Rape, incest and all forms of sexual perversion occur in astounding numbers in the most developed of our countries. Legislation to safeguard women and children against such crimes needs to be strengthened, and penalties for the convicted must be increased and levied against sexual perverts.

We should also work and cooperate with each other for cross border identification of those who have been convicted of sex crimes. Such individuals need to be closely monitored as they move into residential communities. Studies show such criminals are never cured; they are only held at bay, until their perverted needs move them to strike again. Too many children have had their lives ruined, if not taken away, by such criminals; too many women have been scarred for life, or abused and murdered.

Lastly, I want to remind us that there already exists a number of agendas we subscribe to; Agenda 21; Latin America and the Caribbean’s document we named “Our Own Agenda”. We have a plethora of conventions, treaties, and protocols covering the rights of women, the rights of the child, human rights, smuggling in persons, refugees, the environment, world heritage. We have the Millennium Development Goals; we have the Convention Against all forms of Discrimination against Women; we have the Earth Charter.

There is unfinished business for all of us as we seek compliance with those valuable instruments we laboured so long to bring into force. Our agenda ought to include the legislation needed to enable us all to be compliant with these international agreements.

As I close, I wish to highlight the message that I bring. It is that women have special talents to bring to our parliaments. They are not just useful talents; they are needed qualities. By using our talents we can make the difference in society that won’t be made without us.

It is a priceless opportunity we have. "Carpe diem" - let us seize the day.