

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

**Painting the Impossible,
Women in Leadership Conference**

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Friends. The theme of this Conference is women in leadership, and it is called "Painting the Impossible". My question is, "Why is it impossible?" I believe it is because society's perception has always relegated leadership roles to men. This is why we are gathered here today for this conference. Recently, when I attended the Global Summit of Women in Hong Kong, a journalist asked me why I thought it was necessary for us to have summits or conferences organized especially for women. My answer was, and still is, that we need to empower each other because we have a lot of catching up to do. It's not necessary to have "global summits of men" because society has traditionally allotted power to men.

So, much of what women have accomplished up to today comes as a result of imagining the impossible into being. Many of us must have heard in the past, 'Women Prime Minister?' 'Impossible' 'Women astronaut?' 'Impossible!' Those who have made it possible are the exceptions, and not the rule. I believe that we must strive for a level playing field on which every woman and man has an equal opportunity to succeed.

As women, we've made some progress towards this goal during the last century. At the beginning of the 20th century, women in Canada dreamt of having a more active role in a democratic state. Thanks to the tireless lobbying of the suffragettes, just over eighty-three years ago, in May, 1918, women, that is, white women, obtained the right to vote in federal elections.

It wasn't until 1921 that the first woman candidate was elected to the House of Commons. Her name was Agnes Campbell Macphail, and she was one of four women candidates in that election. Just think of the status of women then; Macphail was not just an exception, she stood alone in the legislature. She said she was only able to be an M.P. because she did not marry.

The struggle for equality was just beginning. In 1928, a group of five women, better known to Canadians as the “Famous Five” (Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, Irene Parlby, Louise McKinney, Henrietta Muir Edwards), appealed to the Privy Council in England, because 5 justices of the Supreme Court of Canada ruled unanimously that women were not eligible for appointment to the Senate, as they were only considered ‘persons’, in the BNA Act, in matters of pain and punishment, and not in rights and privileges. The Privy Council in England handed down their ruling on October 18, 1929, that, both men and women had the same definition as ‘persons’ in the BNA Act. Lord Sankey, in pronouncing his decision, declared that “the exclusion of women from all public offices is a relic of days more barbarous than ours...” And so, for the first time in Canada, women were eligible for appointments to the highest offices. It’s very amusing today to learn Prime Minister King’s reasons for appointing Cairine Wilson as the first female Senator. Her qualifications were that she was bilingual, a Liberal, and a lady. He refused to appoint Emily Murphy of the Famous 5 because she was “a little too masculine, and probably a bit too sensational.”

As a result of Canadian women’s efforts in the past, we now make up 21% of the House of Commons and 34% of the Senate. While much more effort is needed to ensure equal representation of women in politics, these numbers are far better than the global average. And yet, for the upper chamber, we ranked below Belize at 37.5%. We also do not compare favourably to New Zealand where the Governor General, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Prime Minister, and the leader of the Opposition are all women. However, we can boast about our achievements to our neighbours to the south where women make up just 13% of the Senate and 14% of the House of Representatives.

Canadian women’s achievements have not been limited to the political realm. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many individuals as well as women’s organizations lobbied to extend the rights of women throughout the legal system, the workplace, the home, and most importantly, over our own bodies. As a result of their concerted efforts, women’s rights were formally enshrined in Article 28 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) which states that “notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons”.

The guarantee of equality in the Charter was an acknowledgement of a change in women's status within Canadian society, most notably, within the workplace. In 1961, very few women worked in the so-called non-traditional occupations. Only 0.25% of engineers, 3% of lawyers, and 7% of physicians were women. By 1987, women represented 10% of engineering students, 50% of law students, and 33% of medical students.

These statistics are the results of the courage and determination of women leaders and role models who paved the way for the younger generation. I want to tell you a few of their stories because they often don't get the credit they deserve.

Everyone knows that engineering was a profession traditionally dominated by men. Dr. Elsie MacGill, who was born in Vancouver in 1905, didn't accept this. She was the first woman in Canada to graduate with a degree in electrical engineering, and, despite being struck with polio shortly after graduation, she became the first woman aeronautical engineer in North America, and the first woman aircraft designer in the world. During WWII, she had a staff of 4500, producing more than 2,000 Hawker Hurricane fighter aircraft for Canada's war effort! "I'm no hero, MacGill said, "I was lucky. I got a good education. So, my mother was a judge; so what? I didn't think it was any more remarkable for a woman being a judge than it was for me to be an engineer."

Another leader in her field, who has helped to transform science education, is Professor Ursula Franklin. In 1984, Professor Franklin became the first woman to attain the title of University Professor at the University of Toronto. Franklin believes that women use science to ask different questions than men, and that they take a more holistic approach to scientific research, looking at the effects science has on communities, rather than just at the economic impacts. Franklin has used her prominence in the field of science to encourage women to study science, and to advocate for the peaceful use of technology.

This year, I read about another trailblazer, Professor Daphne Schiff, who annually dons her pilot suit to lead an all-female convoy from France to Africa for Air Solidarité, a Paris-based, non-governmental organization. The group brings much needed medicine, school supplies, and other necessities to Air Solidarité's remote projects spread throughout the African

continent in the Western Sahara, Mali, Ghana, and Burkina Faso. To participate in the mission, Schiff takes leave from her job as a professor at York University where she teaches meteorology.

At 77, Schiff exemplifies the spirit of the feminist movement. When she decided to study science in the 1940s, a professor at the University of Toronto told her, “You don’t want to go into science. Don’t you want to get married?” But like many other women of her time who defied the accepted norms, she is stubborn, determined, and not easily dissuaded.

Today, thanks to these outstanding women leaders, and many others like them, female students have unprecedented opportunities, and can choose any career. The term “non-traditional” occupation has begun to lose its meaning. However, despite our many achievements, we still have a long way to go.

For example, a few weeks ago, Sue O’Sullivan was promoted to deputy chief of the Ottawa police service, becoming the highest-ranking female officer in the force’s 138-year history. She received a thunderous ovation from her fellow officers. While O’Sullivan and her colleagues noted her abilities, the media focused on her gender because, in 2001, her promotion was still considered extraordinary. This would never happen if the officer promoted had been a man.

This pattern is also being played out in the current leadership race for the Conservative Party here in Ontario. Just three days ago, the headline in the Ottawa Citizen read “Ontario Tories may not be ready for a female premier”. It makes you wonder doesn’t it!

In comparison, in New Zealand when a man was appointed as solicitor-general in September, 2000, the press announced this with the headline “It’s a Boy!”. This is like a breath of fresh air!

Nevertheless, we have made some progress towards our goal of equality over the last few decades. Much of the credit for our change in status can be attributed to our increasing economic clout. It might surprise you to know how important women are to the Canadian economy. In 1996, the Bank of Montreal produced a report about female entrepreneurs which found that women-led firms created some 1.7 million jobs in Canada, which is more than the *Canadian Business* Top 100 companies combined. Some

46% of new small businesses are led by women, making up nearly one-third of all the companies in Canada.

This trend is not just limited to Canada. At the Global Summit of Women in Hong Kong, which I referred to earlier, I met an exceptional group of women entrepreneurs, as well as leaders in government in their respective countries.

There were women who started and owned banks, shipping companies, and companies that manufacture products like watches and toys. A woman from Nepal was the largest exporter of vegetable seeds to her neighbouring countries. Another woman, the head of a security company, said she was inspired to start her company in the 1970s when a baby was kidnapped from a hospital in Hong Kong. Her global company now manufactures computer systems to monitor homes and businesses at a great distance, from one side of the world to the other.

I also met government leaders from around the world who gave me a sense of the current global status of women. Can you imagine that in South Africa, more than 30% of the Cabinet is made up of women? And that, as of June, 2000, at least half of the candidates for municipal, legislative and European offices in France must now be women? In both cases, the governments are working towards parity for women.

Participation of women in government and in business, on a large scale, makes good financial, as well as political, sense. A recent World Bank report concluded that countries that focus on narrowing the gender gap progress more rapidly economically, and have less corruption in public life.

You may then ask, why are there so few women leaders in the world? Because it is still not easy to be a prominent woman in public life or in business.

In Canada today, it is expensive for women to participate in the political process. One woman candidate recently estimated that the federal nomination process costs between \$25,000 and \$100,000. Women often have fewer financial networks to draw on. If a woman is elected to federal office, she will spend large periods of time away from her family. In view of the large size of our country, and the distances MPs have to travel, until there is some provision for parental leave, being an M.P. will be very

stressful for women. The day nurseries for small children available to women MPs in Nordic countries are only a dream for most women parliamentarians in the world.

The former Inter-Parliamentary Union Chair, my colleague Senator Sheila Finestone, found that the issues facing women in politics are similar around the world. “there is a tremendous commonality of issues and problems that face women whether it’s at the nomination level – so they have access to get elected – or once elected have aspirations of leadership. Whether you get elected is only the first step.”

Still, getting elected is an important step. Lately, there have been calls by some political parties, and policy analysts for a change in the electoral system. Some form of proportional representation, as in many countries in Europe, would make it possible for women to be represented in greater numbers.

Once elected, women must cope with the media. While women M.P.s are described as aggressive or shrill, men are described as assertive. And, as many have experienced, women’s appearance is subject to intense scrutiny and criticism. According to one IPU survey respondent, “the media can make or break a politician, especially if the media still holds to traditional sexual stereotypes”.

The same situation holds true in business where a successful and experienced businesswoman such as Heather Reisman, owner of Indigo Books Music, and more Ltd., faced sidelong criticism over her takeover of Chapters Inc. The media suggested that her husband had given her a present, as if Reisman’s own business acumen played no part in the purchase.

It is now 2001, and women only fill a mere 2% of CEO positions, 3.4% of titles with significant influence, and only 7.5% of the seats on the boards of Canada’s 560 leading companies. In fact, nearly half of Canada’s largest corporations have no women in senior management posts.

Women entrepreneurs, who have proven to be equally as successful in business as men, also have trouble getting financing. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business found in a survey conducted in 1996 that there was “outrageous” discrimination by banks against female business

owners. Women were refused loans 20% more often than men, and when they did get financing, they often paid a higher rate of interest than men. And what's more, some banks still ask husbands to co-sign these loans.

So, for all our accomplishments over the last three decades, there is still a long way to go. What I find interesting is that women are still defined by the media as "a special interest group". Don't we make up more than half the population of Canada? I am not suggesting that we need to be radical feminists, but I also think we cannot afford to be complacent.

I will give you an example of where complacency may be a problem. The fact that the national anthem only refers to "sons" is a case in point. Like men, we contribute to Canada's well-being, and yet we are not recognized in Canada's national anthem in the line "true patriot love in all thy sons command". Just imagine the reaction of men if this line were to read "true patriot love in all thy daughters command". This is why I have started a petition to amend the national anthem, and I hope you will sign it during the course of this Conference.

There have been 6 attempts in the House of Commons, over the past two decades, to change the lyrics of our national anthem to make them inclusive of women, but they have all failed. I find this really surprising in this day and age. When I started the debate in the Senate in February, it aroused a great deal of interest both in the Senate, and across the country. There have been some pretty strong feelings, both for and against an amendment to this line. When I read the arguments against change, especially those from women, I am reminded of the difficult struggle our foremothers had when they fought for the right to vote, and the distance we still have to travel to become the norm, as men are. If we don't move forward, we risk losing what we have gained.

Why do we need more women leaders to chart a course for the next generation? How will this change our lives as global citizens, and what does the future hold? Two years ago, Francis Fukuyama, the award-winning author of *The End of History and the Last Man*, wrote an article entitled "*Women and the Evolution of World Politics*." In the article, Fukuyama suggested that a society in which women made up a significant percentage of world leaders would be less competitive, less hierarchical, and less prone to war because women "form relationships" while men practice "realpolitik". While one might quibble with Fukuyama's arguments for

biological determinism, the majority of women are more concerned with feeding, clothing and educating their families than with gaining power. Fukuyama's findings are confirmed by the International Parliamentary Union (IPU)'s survey last year. The IPU notes that "where women are present in sufficient numbers, they are beginning to work for change in the political environment, and to influence not only the outcome of political activities but also the international agenda". The tragic events on September 11th of this year made me think that if only women had more influence over the global agenda, we would live in a safer world.

Why do we need more women in government? According to Margaret Thatcher, it is because women are more efficient. Thatcher said, "In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man, if you want anything done, ask a woman." This was certainly true in Thatcher's case, who, however you might feel about her actions, was an eminently decisive force in world politics.

Aside from efficiency, women's biological status may give us a different orientation to the world. While women and men share many of the same concerns, the perspective of women may lead to different policies. This is certainly borne out in South Africa where over 30% of the cabinet and 30% of the legislature consists of women. As a result, South Africa has passed a significant number of laws that touch on gender issues. These include the liberalization of abortion laws, domestic violence laws, and legislation related to sexual harassment. Women, who gained power as part of the political struggle against apartheid, may also have influenced the establishment of the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" in South Africa (1995-2001).

In the Nordic countries, where significant numbers of women participate in politics, there is no special designation for women politicians or women's issues, according to Birgitta Dahl, speaker of the Swedish Parliament. In Sweden, women are treated as the norm, not as representatives of a minority. They hold 43% of the seats in the Swedish legislature – the highest percentage in the European Union (IPU). The result is that Sweden has some of the best social programs in Europe, and its productivity grew by 47% between 1990 and 1999 – more than both the European average and American growth over the same period. Not surprisingly, given the influence of women on the foreign policy agenda, only Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands have ever reached the

internationally recognized goal of 0.7% of G.N.P. for Overseas Development Assistance (ODA). Meanwhile, Canada's contributions to ODA have been declining rapidly over the last decade to an all-time low of 0.25% of G.N.P.

As Canadians, we should learn from countries like Sweden in order to improve our own. Why is it necessary for us to have women leaders? The answer is provided by the Swedish example. What it suggests is that women do have a different perspective on the world, and yet, as Margaret Thatcher emphasized, we are also efficient. In Canada, we need role models who will help future generations of young women to gain confidence in themselves and their abilities. We need more women in every field in order that our country can develop a more compassionate social policy agenda both domestically and internationally.

From a global perspective, women's participation in a leadership role is crucial to economic development, international relations, and world peace. I recently attended a meeting of the Joint-NGO Committee on Women, Peace and Security. This group was formed because women and children are affected differently than men by war and conflict. Women, and children, are often the victims of war, subject to rape and other crimes against humanity. They are also increasingly forced to be participants in conflicts. In the wake of the September 11th tragedy, the room for this meeting was filled to capacity with representatives from NGOs and government departments. Someone noted during the meeting that after September 11th the voices of women were not heard. This was evident when President George Bush gave his speech before Congress, and there were only a handful of women onlookers. And yet, women's input is needed in this conflict since the lives of women and children in Afghanistan are at stake. Under the Taliban, they have suffered untold miseries, and unless women have some role to play in Afghanistan's reconstruction, they will continue to suffer. And when mothers suffer, children grow up with a distorted view of the world.

Increasingly, it is not just government and business leaders who are influencing the national and international agenda. Over the last decade, the civil society movement has grown, and NGOs, academics, unions, and many other groups representing a multitude of issues, are now interacting with governments, and world leaders. Essentially, civil society has become the public's way of engaging with the issues that are affecting our lives on a

daily basis – issues such as human rights, war and peace, education, food security, environmental problems, and health. Many women are playing a leading role in this movement for the simple reason that we want our children to have a future.

The international Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has found that investing in the education of women results in a greater return than educating boys because literate women teach their children to read. Women are the primary health care providers in many rural settings. In developing nations, that are highly dependent on agriculture, they are also expected to provide their families with water, food, and fuel. Consider that in at least one in every three of these households, there's a woman who is the sole breadwinner. As the Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, said in her speech to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the belief that men are the sole economic providers is only a myth. Interestingly, many developing countries don't want to accept the reality that their survival depends on women.

The importance of women in civil society is vividly illustrated in John Stackhouse's book *Out of Poverty and Into Something More Comfortable*. He describes the efforts of women in one of the poorest states in India, Bihar, to educate their girls in primary school. The motto of the women's groups is "if a girl is awakening, the whole world is awakening". Gradually, realizing the transformative power of education, groups of women in the region are taking over the education of their children, in the hopes that education will lead to a fundamental change in the values that govern Indian society.

In the book, Stackhouse also comically describes the women in Africa known as 'Mama Benzes' because of their size, as well as their preference in automobiles. These are the African women traders, who commute across borders, their arms filled to overflowing with duffel bags, and garbage pails full of goods for sale. Stackhouse argues that the 'Mama Benzes' are "the great hope for their lands. They are a lifeline of commerce in their region, and often the only source of good relations between English and French Africa, between old rivals like Mali and Senegal, or between war zones."

The UN Special Envoy on AIDS, Stephen Lewis, has also remarked on the "immeasurable strength" of African women. Lewis has noticed in his travels throughout Africa that women are "the backbone" of the

collaborative, activist work that goes on in the communities at the village level.

These anecdotes are also borne out by women's business groups worldwide whose studies have shown that men are more likely to think in a hierarchical fashion, and focus on established rules and procedures. In contrast, women business owners tend to emphasize creative thinking, are better communicators, and better power sharers. As a result of these traits, the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, lends almost exclusively to groups of women, each of whom runs a small business. The women act as collateral for each other, ensuring repayment of the loans. Having said all that, I still maintain that women are not necessarily better business managers than men. A balanced approach, in which we learn from one another, would provide the optimum result.

In economic terms, women's tendency to work cooperatively, network, trade, and build institutions that provide a framework for society, is commonly called social capital. Social capital, like human capital, has been recognized as an essential component of development. Since, it is also recognized that women are a tremendous human resource, largely responsible for feeding their families, as well as for much of the trade that takes place in the informal economy in developing countries, promoting the leadership of women, and women's equality, is not a marginal issue, based merely on ideological concerns, or political correctness, as some might suggest. The fact is that gender equity is crucial to the social, economic and political well being of the world.

When we talk about the leadership of women, it is not sufficient just to promote a token female presence. In itself, this is unlikely to lead to real, substantive change. We have had women leaders who have done little for women in their respective countries. It is unfortunate that when some women become powerful, they surround themselves with those with special vested interests, and often these individuals are men. Just having a few women in the upper echelons of power is not the issue, for a feminine presence is very different from a feminist one. We need a critical mass to affect change, be it in governments or corporations.

Many of you are the leaders of tomorrow; both men and women, who believe gender equity is beneficial to our world community. It is important that women do not stand alone. We need the support of men who believe

that their sisters, girlfriends, and wives are their equals. Men who want their daughters, and granddaughters to live in a world in which there is a level playing field. Please remember that besides a good education, intelligence and people skills, you need the strength of character to help those behind you to get ahead. You need to put the good of society ahead of your own ambition. I'd like you to think about Canada's slogan for the UN International Year of Volunteers: "the value of one is the power of many". What it says is that you, everyone of you, can make a difference.

In addition to everything that I've talked about, the reason why we need many women to take leadership roles is because that is the only way to bring about true democracy. After all, about half of the world's population consists of women. We are certainly grossly underrepresented.

Returning back to the theme of this conference, I contend that it is possible that one day in Canada, and throughout the world, women and men will be recognized for our accomplishments equally; there will be equal opportunity for all, whatever their race, class, or origin, and women will no longer be subjected to violence and abuse. Then, it will no longer be necessary to have "women in leadership" conferences, because the leadership of women will have become the norm.

How will we achieve this? We all have the power to determine the future by educating our children, boys and girls, to confidently assume the varied responsibilities of life, in the workplace, in child rearing, and in the home. This education must start from the day a child is born. If we want real and lasting change, it means changing our concept of gender in society.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you an anecdote recalled by Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland at the Beijing Conference on Women (1995). When Dr. Brundtland first became Prime Minister of Norway, many Norwegians did not believe a woman could handle the responsibilities of being Prime Minister. They predicted a short tenure, and a disastrous end. She served as Prime Minister for 10 years, during which a quota of 40% female membership in the cabinet was established. Years later, Dr. Brundtland was told about a conversation in a schoolyard among a group of boys and girls. A boy boasted to his friends that he would be Prime Minister when he grew up. The girls laughed out loud and said, "Don't be silly! A man can't be a Prime Minister. It has to be a woman."