

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

The Gender Gap

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Honoured guests and friends:

Today, I will address the topic of the gender gap within the Canadian context - the real and perceived gap between men and women in 2004.

Over the last two decades, we've seen a lot of changes in Canada for both women and men. No longer are individuals governed by the strict roles which limited their participation in society. Today, many more women are working outside the home, and we are proving to be very successful in business, in politics, and in the professions. In fact, Canada has one of the highest levels of participation of women in the workforce of any developed country.

At the same time, we also have many more men who are staying home to care for their children, and taking their role as fathers very seriously. However, a gap still exists between men and women's aspirations to participate in all aspects of life, and the actual opportunities available to them.

Having said that, men continue to be more revered than women. I know that in some instances, awards given to women are also given to their husbands because society dictates that it is wrong to leave them out. The same does not apply to women, because we are still perceived to be less important than men.

So, the big problem is one of perception. After thirty odd years of progress, Canadian women are still perceived to be unworthy of the kind of recognition that is afforded men. You may say to me, well, you've made it, so what's the problem? The problem is that, I am more of an exception than the rule, and all Canadian women need to have the same opportunities. And besides, I do encounter the same problem with perception.

At the University of Toronto, I am only the fourth woman Chancellor in its 177 year history, and we still have not had a woman President at the University yet. And in the Senate of Canada, even though over 30% of the Senators are women, the public still think that Senators are old white males. When I introduce myself to strangers around Parliament Hill, I am asked which Senator I work for. Well, I am female, and a visible minority at that, so I must be staff!

Recently, CBC had a programme called “The Greatest Canadian”. The public was asked to identify 100 great Canadians. Guess what? A list was produced without one woman in the Top 10. To add insult to injury, the top woman on the list of 100 was a country music singer with a pretty face and a great body. In fact, of the 19 women who made the list of the top 100 greatest Canadians, 6 of them were pop singers, and another was an actress. What does this say about the way women are perceived in Canadian society? In reference to this CBC programme, the November 1st issue of *Maclean’s* magazine, wrote, “...sorry ladies. Seems some people take HIStory literally.”

Because of this perception, many women who might deserve the label of greatness do not make it into our history books. One of these women, who I have become familiar with in my research, is Dr. Elsie MacGill. She was a woman who overcame society’s prejudice, and a nasty bout of polio, to become the first aeronautical engineer in North America, and the first woman aircraft designer in the world. She led a staff of 4,500 to create a fleet of more than 1,400 Hawker Hurricane fighter aircraft, which contributed enormously to Canada’s war effort during WWII. She was, without a doubt, a great Canadian! But, was she ever mentioned as a great Canadian on the CBC?

On the other side of the coin are the men who have found it difficult to take on new roles. In a recent study by the Radcliffe Public Policy Centre, young men indicated that they wanted to take an active role in raising their children, and that they are willing to make the time and effort, even sacrificing promotions in their careers, if necessary. And, in the case of marriage break-down, many men are now involved in joint custody arrangements. In Canada, the figure stood at 42% in 2002, an increase from 30% in 1998. Women are now awarded custody in less than 50% of court decisions.

Many men are willing to take on the responsibility of caring for their families so why does society still think women are the primary caregivers?

I want to stress that equal opportunity does not mean that women and men are the same - nor would we want to be. What it means is that we can be both equal and different. It is a matter of being open-minded to the possibility of changing roles. Thirty years ago, we couldn't have imagined that women and men would be where we are today in Canada. As women, we have entered the workforce in large numbers, and many men have gravitated towards the home, but Canadian perception remains out-dated.

One of the real areas where the gender gap is great is in Canadian politics. About 20% of the MPs in the House of Commons are women, and this level has not changed for a decade. In the Senate, which is an appointed body, we are doing a little better at over 30%. But we are still well behind Rwanda and the Nordic countries. (Rwanda is now number one for representation in the lower house at 48.8%. Among Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Norway, the regional average for representation stands at 39.7%!)

With so many women in the workplace in Canada, why are we so far behind in politics? Is it because women just aren't interested? Or is it like the former Governor of Texas, Ann Richards, said, "Being a woman in politics is like being Ginger Rogers. You have to do all the same dance steps as Fred Astaire, but you have to do them backwards and in high heels."

The situation is similar in the business arena. Women held just over 11% of board director positions in the *Financial Post 500* in 2001. More than half of these corporate boards had no women at all, and only 3 were chaired by women. Interestingly, our Crown corporations, where board members are politically appointed, had the highest percentage of women (over 23%). This means that the Canadian government is trying to close the gender gap.

The fact is, most women still work in pink collar jobs, and some traditionally male professions are still employing mostly men. And, the average wage for women is only about 73% of that of men's. We need to correct that.

Understanding why there are few women in politics, on corporate boards, and in the professions is not a simple matter, and I don't have enough time to go into it today. However, we can discuss a couple of ways this can be corrected. We know that both children and adults tend to look for mentors and role models, so, the few women who have attained high positions have the responsibility to pave the way for others to follow.

To prove my point, I'd like to tell you a story about Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway. As the first woman ever elected as Prime Minister, everyone said she wouldn't last, but she was Prime Minister for 10 years. During her tenure, a group of boys and girls were playing in a schoolyard. A boy boasted to his friends that he would like to be Prime Minister when he grew up, but the girls laughed at him and said, "Don't be silly! A man can't be Prime Minister. It has to be a woman."

Another way to correct the gender gap is that progressive leaders in the community, with an understanding of the principles of merit and equity, nominate suitable candidates for awards, for political parties, Crown corporations, as well as membership on corporate boards. In my case, I am doing my part, by helping individuals who I believe in, male or female, to advance the agenda of equity based on merit.

Today, in Canadian universities, 60% of the graduates are women. Taking the University of Toronto as an example, as of 2002, women comprised more than 56% of the full-time undergraduate programme, and over 54% of the graduate programme. The percentage is even higher in the part-time programme. Realizing that these numbers have been gradually increasing, it is puzzling that less than 30% (28%) of full-time tenured and tenured-stream faculty are women. We know that this gender gap needs to be closed so that our investment in education is realized.

Incidentally, just as girls are catching up in education, boys are falling behind. According to Canadian testing on literacy between 1994 and 2002, girls maintained a significant advantage over boys in reading and writing. In recent figures, at age 16, girls scored one-fifth higher in reading, and over 16% higher in writing, over boys. There are also fewer boys than girls graduating from our high schools. Canadian society needs to address this phenomenon before the education gap becomes even wider. While we move the women's agenda forward, we need to be mindful not to forget the boys in our schools.

In Canada, we have two laws that help make equity possible. The first is the Employment Equity Act which requires that employers set goals to move towards achieving equity for minority groups that include women, persons with disabilities, visible minorities, and aboriginals.

The second Act is the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in which there is an equality provision which reads:

“Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical ability.”

This Charter shapes our character as Canadians, and has formed the basis of our values over the past two decades. In Canadian society, we are continuously striving towards equity, where individuals will be judged on merit and merit alone. We are not there yet, but we have these two pieces of legislation as our best tools to move our agenda forward.

As a woman, I am well aware that I am much better off in Canada than in most nations in the world. Still, I look forward to changes over the next decades, when Canadian society recognizes that men and women are equal - in rights, as well as in recognition of our contributions to our country.

Personally, I look forward to the day when strangers address me instead of my husband as “Senator”, and as “Dr.” Poy instead of “Mrs.” Poy. The day will come when credit card companies no longer request the approval of major purchases by my husband, nor send refunds, owed to me, to him. Believe me, all this is still happening today. Frustrating, isn't it? Despite our many achievements, we are still perceived to be dependants of men. We all need to work towards closing that gender gap.