

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

**Women in the Changing World:
Equality and Responsibility**

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Principal Murton, Tess Cecil-Cockwell, Wendy Cecil, Dilkush and the entire Panjwani family, members of the Board, friends, ladies and gentlemen:

Thank you for inviting me to speak at Branksome Hall. I am honoured to be here.

My topic today is about women in our changing world. Please note that when I speak about women, I include girls of all ages, particularly the young women of Branksome Hall.

I understand that you have just celebrated your centennial. Congratulations! Since 1903, Branksome Hall has been educating girls in the Toronto area, and over this period, your graduates have left their mark on this city, in Canada, and around the world.

Having just completed my PhD last year, and also assumed the position as Chancellor of the University of Toronto, you can guess that I am a strong believer in formal education. However, education to me is not just about academics and high- scores. Education is learning about life, and the world around us, as well as learning the skills of interpersonal relationships. In this respect, I believe Branksome Hall serves its students well through its holistic approach to education, besides the intellectual and academic aspects.

From my own experience, high academic scores account for only about 50% of our success in life. The other half is social and language skills. So I am delighted to learn that as of September, 2006, all Grade 11 students at Branksome Hall will be enrolled in the International Baccalaureate

Program, which teaches students languages and cultures of the world. As the only girls' independent school in this part of the world to offer this program, Branksome Hall recognizes that we are living in a changing world, where girls need to be equipped with the skills to be global citizens, capable of living and working anywhere. This kind of education will give you confidence in yourselves to move forward with your lives, as well as help others along the way.

Women in Canada today have very different opportunities, and expectations, than most women had a couple of decades ago. It doesn't surprise me to read in a comprehensive report entitled "the New Canada" in the *Globe & Mail*, that girls today are more assertive and confident, with distinctive, and often progressive views, which differ markedly from their male counterparts.

The *Globe & Mail* survey found that women in their 20s are more acutely aware of, and most strongly opposed to, racism, and discrimination. We are the strongest advocates of government programs to care for children and the elderly, for social housing, and for state intervention to ameliorate income disparity. Many of you would know that women have a reputation as the "healers of nations", but now, awareness is more profound among young women, and with that comes great responsibility. I will go into this in more detail later.

First, I would like to speak about the changes that have already happened to women in Canada. Think about what life was like for women at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Branksome Hall was first established. Women couldn't vote, never mind run for political office. And, unless they were very poor, they did not work outside of their homes. Even though women have always worked in helping their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, they were not paid and their work was not recognized.

In Canada, as well as in many other western countries, the two world wars helped to change the perception of women's capabilities in our societies. This was particularly so during the Second World War. When the men, as well as some women, went to the war fronts, the women back home had to fill the positions that were traditionally filled by men, in order that the countries could function normally during wartime. Even though after the War, situations were reversed, and women had to go back to being housewives, to make room for the men so that they could take back their

jobs, women already had had the opportunity to prove themselves, and they began to demand equity with men in society.

Of course, this is a very simplified version of what happened in western countries. It was different in other parts of the world, as well as for ethnic minorities, in countries like Canada. Today, I will concentrate my discussions on the changes in general in recent years in Canada, without bringing up ethnic differences, because that would be a different topic altogether.

A little while ago, I met a very senior alumna of the University of Toronto, who told me that she was the first female to graduate in medical school. The hospital didn't quite know what to do with her when she had to be on night call and had to stay over in the hospital. Since women weren't allowed to wear pants, a modest contraption was designed especially for her, which was stiff like a board and very uncomfortable. She said it with a laugh, of course.

On the subject of clothing, when I came to Canada on a student visa to study at McGill in 1959, women weren't allowed to wear slacks to lectures. We all know how dreadfully cold the winters can be in Montreal. I remember walking from the residence to the Arts Building, with a wind chill of 50 below. Not only was my forehead frozen, and ice crackled in my nostrils, my knees were frozen as well, in those days of the mini skirts, despite multi layers of tights. I remember the female students who had to take public transportation to class. They wore slacks but had to change into skirts in the common room before attending lectures. Things have certainly changed a lot since then.

I was fortunate that my parents believed in education for girls. But, there was no expectation for me to go out into the work force after graduation. It was a common belief, not only in Asia, but also in Canada, that educated women bring up educated families, so we needed to be educated for the next generation. Somehow, we were expected to get married after graduation. It wasn't that professions for women were frowned-on; it was just that they were not encouraged.

Many of you would know about the radical changes that happened in Canada in the 1960s. Judy LaMarsh, Canada's first female Cabinet Minister, was able to convince Lester B. Pearson's government to set up the Royal

Commission on the Status of Women. In 1970, the Commission's report called for a radical change in society to address prejudice against women that was "deeply imbedded" and "little understood". About the same time, many Canadians were also questioning the established order, and women began to ask themselves why they were treated differently, and why they couldn't be independent, and have professions like men. Not that there weren't female doctors and lawyers, but there were very few, and women were discouraged from pursuing these professions, because society dictated that their primary function was that of homemakers. And if women planned to work at all, they were to set their sights on working as schoolteachers, nurses, and in the so-called pink-collar jobs.

What did I do in the early 1960s when I graduated? Like most young women, I did what was expected of me. I got married. I have to say that no time was wasted since I was able to read hundreds of books, to teach myself how to sew and to type, as well as learning all the homemaking and cooking skills that have served me well throughout my life.

As a young person growing up in Hong Kong, I never had the opportunity to learn anything around the household because we had cooks, servants and chauffeurs. Coming from a family background like that, I was really quite useless. You would laugh if I tell you that I didn't even know how to boil water when I first came to Canada! So, when I got married, it was like being in total immersion, and it was very good for me.

I love learning, but I didn't develop a burning desire to have a profession at that time. It came later. One thing that is very important, and that is that I have always had the confidence that I could be whatever I wanted to be.

Thinking back, the feminine culture at that time was so different from the present. Among many women, working meant you had to work for economic reasons. I still remember my mother-in-law, who had lived in Canada since 1942, used to take great pride in making sure people knew that she was "a lady of luxury". In other words, she didn't work. I also remember my own mother, who lived in Hong Kong all her life, asking me why I worked when I didn't have to. It was impossible for her to understand that I worked because I wanted to achieve something in my life.

Going back to the beginning of the 1960s, very few women worked in the so-called non-traditional occupations. Only 0.25% of engineers and 7% of physicians were women. In comparison to recent years, by 1999, women made up 47% of all doctors and dentists. However, the numbers are still low for natural sciences, engineering and mathematics, where only 20% are women. Even today, the majority of women are still concentrated in what are viewed as “traditional” roles. Over 70% are still in clerical, administrative, sales and service, nursing, health-related occupations, and teaching.

Many of you would say that conditions are very different now. There are endless opportunities for women, especially in the western world, so the battle has been won. You know what? It hasn't. Since my appointment to the Senate, I have become more aware about what is happening in Canadian society. Legally, we are constantly striving towards our goal, but psychologically and culturally, we are not there yet.

In everyday life, I am constantly reminded of being second-class because I am a woman. I am constantly referred to as Mrs. Poy, and my husband is called Senator Poy. After all, a senator has to be a man, right?

I often involve my husband in my business discussions, but frequently, questions are directed to him, and him alone, despite the fact that he often doesn't know what they are talking about. In one instance, the lawyer who was making a pitch to me would not look at me at all, but only at my husband, so naturally, he was not hired.

A few years ago, I made a large purchase which was a set of couches for our family room. When the delivery was made, I used one of my credit cards. As is often the case, the card had to be verified. The woman on the phone asked to speak to my husband. When I asked why, she said my charge had to be approved by my husband. I said, “No you don't.” I told her since that was her problem, I would use another credit card.

What burns me up even more is that, a few months ago, I had a run in with a very expensive men's store. A refund that should have been sent to me was sent to my husband instead, despite the fact that I was the purchaser, and it was my credit card that was used. The reason, I was told, was that I didn't exist in their computer system, even though I have been the loyal customer, and my husband has not shopped there for years.

Recently I received a gold card from a large hotel chain, and on it, I'm referred as Mr. Hon. Vivienne Poy. If you are the honourable, you have to be a man. Well, people just don't get it, do they?

A couple of weeks ago, I was among a group of Canadian parliamentarians in Taipei to observe the Presidential election, but since my husband came along as a spouse, the hotel insisted on putting the room under his name against my instructions. I almost lost a fax sent to me from my office because the hotel couldn't identify me. Fortunately, there wasn't another Poy checked in at the hotel at the time. That wasn't the first time that had happened in our experience.

My husband is astounded by how often this happens to me. I can go on and on, but the point is, if it is happening to me so frequently, it has to be a thousand times worse for women who are disadvantaged.

Despite much progress, much remains the same for women as it was many years ago. We are a long way off from achieving equality, not only in fact, but also in people's perceptions and attitudes. What comes to mind, particularly, is the fact that it is such a struggle for me to amend our National Anthem to include women. It is clear that Canadian politicians, and Canadian society, are ambivalent about gender equality. Attitudes need to be changed.

Now I would like to discuss gender equality. According to the dictionary, equality refers to being "identical" or the same. We know that women are not the same as men, nor would we want to be. Recently, people have started using the term "equity" which means "fairness, impartiality, justice". Gender equity should mean that we all have choices, and our roles aren't set in stone. So when I say equality, I mean equity in the treatment of both genders. In other words, equal opportunities and equal pay for equal work. Please note that, women who work full-time still only makes 72% of what men make.

Since women and men are different, we tend to choose different roles in society. It doesn't mean that we can't have interchangeable roles, but most of the time, we like being who we are. For women, we can't change the fact that we are still the ones who bring the next generation into the world, and being mothers influence the way we see the world.

The role of motherhood gives us the responsibility for future generations, and having a child can certainly change our perspective on life. For that reason alone, women should have the opportunity to play a much greater role in government. I don't mean one or two women - I mean a critical mass that can influence policies. For Canada to have a true democracy, we need to have equal representation in our government, which means around 50% of legislators should be women. I am afraid our government of today is not doing well in this respect.

I am sure many of you are aware that career women of this generation realize the importance of family, and many are turning to part-time work, or actually putting their careers on hold because they simply cannot leave their children at home with someone else. This is because their husbands or partners are not willing, or not able, to share the responsibilities involved in childrearing.

Statistics bear this out. Michael Valpy of the *The Globe and Mail* wrote last June that, although women are more highly educated than they have ever been, and are extremely capable and confident, women are not willing to sacrifice family, friends, and children, for their careers anymore. Women are seeking balance in their lives, and defining success in much broader terms than men. I believe, if the workplace were more geared to accommodate their needs, women's talents would be better utilized.

Although women are graduating in record numbers from law schools, they are 60% more likely to leave the profession because "the culture of the legal profession, like that of much of the workplace, still tends to treat women like men in skirts". Among doctors, where the majority are now women, women are changing the profession from within by opting to work in clinics, or in private practice, for the number of hours that suit them.

In business, the membership of boards continues to reflect a society that is white and male, rather than the diverse market that it serves. According to *Catalyst*, which tracks these numbers, more than 51% of Canada's largest public and private companies and Crown corporations have no women on their boards. Only one in nine board seats in Canada is held by a woman. Aside from the fact that this is just bad business, since women make an average of 80% of consumer decisions in Canada, it is only through having an influence at the Board level that women will begin to shape the

workplace to make it more family-friendly. One needs only to think of the recent comments about single mothers by the head of an important Crown corporation to realize that outdated ideas exist, and that they are largely tolerated.

Now, I don't believe that either men or women should have to sacrifice their lives for their career. Instead, workplaces need to change to be more "family friendly" cultures that give both fathers and mothers the chance to see their children grow up. Society can also teach the next generation that there is no such thing as "women's work," or "men's work." Everyone should have a choice according to preference, instead of gender.

In my youth, I made the same choice as many young women today. I stayed at home when my children were young, and raised them first before launching into a career. This was in the late 60s and early 70s. After the Royal Commission on the Status of Women came out, I used to get referred to by "career" women, and even some men who thought they were "hip", in what they believed to be derogatory terms, as a "stay-at-home mom" and a "housewife," but I knew what my priorities were. It was the "in" thing to be a career woman in the early 70s, often at the cost of abandoning husbands and families. Interesting enough, most of these people have since disappeared off the radar screen, and I ended up with not only interesting careers, but also a balanced life with a close relationship with my family.

For my young friends at Branksome Hall, you may wonder how equality can be achieved if you were to choose motherhood instead of a profession? Well, you can certainly choose young men who believe in it as a start. You can also contribute to gender equality by bringing up your children to respect the rights and the abilities of both genders.

Going back to when I was in my twenties, I had my own solution to bring about equality. I knew I couldn't retrain my husband, since he was brought up by someone else, but I could certainly train my children. I had only boys, and saw no reason why they couldn't learn what I call the "survival techniques", like girls do, such as cooking, laundry, mending and housekeeping. At the same time, they were also able to learn from their Dad about mechanical things. So, in effect, they were a lot better off than me.

Well, for our boys to know about housework turned out to be, not only very useful to them, but also helpful to me. As children, they really liked

hanging around me because I always told them it was easy and fun, and I made it fun for them. In the kitchen, they began as my sous chefs, and could gradually take over preparing meals when needed, as well as cleaning up. I taught them to mend and sew on buttons, and to do laundry and ironing. So, besides our sons learning to be useful around the house, we also developed a strong bond that has continued throughout our lives. I believe that, in order to bring about equality, children have to be taught at home. Parents have the responsibility to treat, and to teach, their sons and daughters about equality of opportunities, and that men and women are partners in our society instead of one gender dominating another. What children will also learn is that equality and responsibility go hand in hand.

I believe if women want to live in an equitable society, we need to be prepared to take on an equal amount of responsibility as men. Both men and women have to be willing to assume responsibilities that may not have been their traditional roles. My sons will tell you that men can be as good, or better, at child-rearing than women.

I find it interesting that some of my friends, and some daughters of my friends, believe that women can have equality, but without the responsibility that goes with it. Such as, in a marriage situation, they think that what is yours is 50% mine, and what is mine is mine. And then there are those women who think that, because they are women, they are supposed to be supported by their men, and that it is their God-given right to act spoiled, and offer little in terms of responsibility. It is in cases like these that men react negatively to women's quest for equality, and I would agree with them. These women retard the progress of equity between the sexes.

My concept of responsibility goes beyond contributing towards housework; it includes financial contributions, as well as what we do in everyday life. For example, I never hesitate to open a door for men when I happen to be walking in front, and I have a free hand. If I were in a position to do something for another human being, such as getting up to give a seat to an old man, I would do so without any hesitation. To me, gender equality means both genders should be treated with equal respect.

In order for women to gain equity with men, we have the added responsibility to make that change happen. We need to realize that we are part of a community, and we owe it to ourselves not only to do our best to be

successful in our lives, but also to reach out a helping hand to those who follow in our footsteps.

By far, the most important responsibility is mentoring. Women who do well in politics, in academia, in business, or in the professions, have a responsibility to help other women by encouraging and educating them, as well as giving those who follow opportunities to move forward.

For this generation, many of us are aware that the choice between motherhood and career is very different from that of the last generation. This was well illustrated on the cover of the March edition of *Maclean's* that reads, "Kids over career." As I mentioned before, women are choosing to drop out of careers because the work-life balance is viewed as unachievable. This shouldn't be necessary because in parts of Europe, especially in the Nordic countries, there is more emphasis on the importance of family for both genders, and accommodations are made by both government and society.

We are aware that when university educated women drop out of the workforce because it does not accommodate their needs, it is a great economic loss that Canada cannot afford as its population ages. I also believe that the workforce benefits from the unique perspective that women bring to it. When the women drop out, we are also losing the role models for the next generation. An alternative to this is to change the professions from within, so that men and women's need for balance in their lives are better met.

Many institutions of higher learning have proved to be amenable to this change over the last few years, mostly because women are attending in record numbers. There are now more women than men enrolled full-time in university undergraduate programs. As women come to represent a critical mass of students, their numbers in the faculty need to increase. An example is the University of Toronto, where women faculty members are recruited proactively. The Status of Women Officer listens to the concerns of women faculty members, and an Early Learning Centre has been put in place to provide day care to babies and toddlers.

Another example is the Economics Department at Carlton University. Economics is a field previously dominated by men, and textbooks are full of abstract numbers and situations where individuals are making rational

decisions in isolation. Prof. Frances Woolley (Frances Woolley is one of two women in a 25 member department of economics at Carleton University) said that women don't see the point of doing these meaningless exercises that don't relate to the "real world". Now that women are making up 52% of those in the master's programs, Prof. Woolley predicts that their views will change the profession.

Across Canada, women still only make up one third of full-time faculty in our universities, which is far from their representation in the classrooms. This also means that there are few mentors for women in our education system. Lois Frankel, director of Carleton University's School of Industrial Design, says, "It's not just that we're teaching, we're role modelling responsible behaviour as professionals" It's women like Profs. Woolley and Frankel who are the academic mentors for the next generation.

In government, our legislature needs to catch up with the rest of Canadian society. I was appointed to the Senate in 1998, and since then, I have become very aware of the inequities that exist. To say that politics is an old boys network is an understatement. As Judy LaMarsh once remarked at a Women's Convention, men think that in politics "one woman is a crowd".

In 1921, Agnes Campbell MacPhail was the first woman to be elected to the House of Commons. She was one of four women candidates in that election. When I see women struggling in politics today, I think of her, a solitary woman surrounded by men, in the House of Commons. I count her as a fearless mentor for women. Unfortunately, women remained rare in politics for many years. Between 1920 and 1970, there were only 17 women elected to the House of Commons.

Many of us owe a debt to the Famous 5 (Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, Louise McKinney, Henriette Muir Edwards, and Irene Parlby), the five Albertan women whose bronze statues now stand on Parliament Hill, reminding everyone who passes that, because of them, women were finally recognized, in 1929, as persons with rights and privileges in Canada. This change, incidentally, enables women to serve in our Senate.

Today, women make up about a third of the Senate, and approximately 20% of the House of Commons, and most provincial legislatures. While this is clearly an increase since 1970, we have been stalled at this level for some time now. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, countries like Cuba, South Africa, Turkmenistan, Pakistan and

Nicaragua precede Canada in its dismal 36th place in the world for representation of women in the Lower House.

Can you imagine that Rwanda leads the world with almost 49% of seats being held by women? I assume their legacy of violence has led their government to believe that women are important to ensuring peace in the nation. For countries like Sweden, the 45% representation of women in the legislature has meant that the laws are changing to account for family and community needs.

Unfortunately, the women who do enter politics in Canada remain subject to sexist comments, and personal attacks. In 1997, Angus Reid, in collaboration with the CBC, conducted telephone interviews with 102 female politicians. 81% of them agreed that politics could be described as “an old boys” club. They had all faced scrutiny by the press, and voters, of their appearance, wardrobe, age, family responsibilities, and weight. Such considerations would rarely be applied to men. More shocking perhaps was the finding that 60% had fielded inappropriate or demeaning gender-based remarks. Most of the women interviewed thought that if there were more women in politics, the aggressive, often rude, nature of debate in legislatures might change for the better.

I believe that, at some level, this is a numbers game. When women’s representation in Parliament becomes commonplace, rather than exceptional, it will become unacceptable to engage in the kinds of attacks that make it difficult for them to participate in politics.

In the Senate, our former Government Leader, Senator Sharon Carstairs, has been repeatedly criticized about her hair, clothes, tone of voice, and ironically, most of the criticisms have been from women. Many of you are aware that Belinda Stronach, while running for the leadership of the Conservative party, was given the utterly unacceptable labels of a “dishy blonde”, and a “hot babe”.

Right now, politics is a difficult road for women to travel. If it is hard to be a woman in business, it’s even more difficult on Parliament Hill, where a typical day can start at 7 a.m. and end at 10 p.m. Chi Nguyen of Toronto, who recently interned in Sheila Copps office on the Hill, is in her early 20s, and she intends to make a difference. She says, “the way we do politics in Canada is very combative, and women who make it often tend to be

criticized in the media merely for doing what the system demands.” Having experienced the difficulties inherent in politics first-hand, however, Chi isn’t shying away from a challenge. “Twenty years from now, she says, I’d love to be in politics”. Perhaps many of you will echo her spirit. When you see a wall, just climb over it! Our political system needs to change from within.

Now, let us turn to the voluntary sector, which is another important area for mentoring. Traditionally, women have been more involved in the life of the community than men. Most non governmental organizations (NGOs) are run by women, such as the *Women, Peace and Security Committee*, to which I belong. Women tend to do more volunteer work, in hospitals and clubs, and engage in more diverse activities. The work many women do is extremely valuable, but receives little recognition. So, for those of you who volunteer, you are to be commended for your contributions. You are carrying great responsibilities on your shoulders, because you are the backbone of our civil society, and your importance cannot be underestimated.

We are fortunate to be living in Canada, but we need to realize that we are citizens of the world. Students of Branksome Hall, your education and the International Baccalaureate Program, will expose you to that world, and will help you to realize the relationship you have with people everywhere.

Despite the gains of some women in the governments in many nations, as well as in the corporate world, the lot of the majority of women in the world remains destitute. We hear constant reports of violence committed towards women. As women, we have a responsibility to our sisters in the world.

From my experience, although there may appear to be a lot of differences between peoples and cultures, ultimately, we all want the same things – economic opportunities for ourselves, and a better future for our children. Women everywhere should have the opportunity to share the same opportunities you have. They should have the chance to pursue a career, to live free of fear of war and conflict, and to raise their children in peace and harmony. Many women don’t have these simple opportunities. It is up to us to continue to advocate for women’s rights as basic human rights throughout the world.

Our world is changing faster than it has ever before. Women need to realize that equality also means the responsibility to mentor. You know that men have always had their “old boys club.” Women, on the other hand, have traditionally spent their time and energy on caring for others. Now is the time when we can rely on each other for assistance.

It is true, women have made a great deal of progress in recent years, and we all know that there are a few women who have made it to the top, nationally and internationally, in government, in the corporate world as well as in the professions. But, when you look around, how many of them have actually used their positions to mentor other women, and give others a chance to improve their lives. Unfortunately, many of these women surround themselves with men as their power-base, and the lives of the women in their countries may actually deteriorate. So, I would like to say this to the students of Branksome Hall - the fate of your sisters in the world is your responsibility. We are not only living in a changing world, we are here to change the world.

The day I was appointed to the Senate was the day I became a public servant. I take everything I do for Canadians very seriously. I know I am just one person, but I do believe every person can make a difference. Today, I am spreading the word about the importance of gender equity and our responsibility to others in our society. Fighting political battles is not my forte, but influencing others is. It is my good fortune that I have been “adopted” by different communities across the country, since my appointment to the Senate, so I have the responsibility to do my share in making Canada a better place for Canadians.

Today, I want to thank Branksome Hall for the opportunity to share my thoughts with everyone.