



**Speech by
Ambassador Barbara K. Bodine (ret.),
Senior Fellow, The Belfer Center for
Science and International Affairs
The Kennedy School of Government,
Harvard University,
delivered to the
Women as Global Leaders Conference,
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates,
April 12th, 2006.**

Leadership for the Global Community: Demanding Our Rights; Accepting Our Obligations

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, and the young women to whom we bequeath the future.

I would like to thank the organizers and our hosts for the commitment and the effort that has gone into making this second annual Women as Global Leaders Conference a reality. In particular, I would commend Provost Larry Wilson of Zayd University and the gracious sponsorship of HRH Shaykh Nahayan.

I am deeply honored to share this podium with HRH Queen Rania, The Honorable Mary Robinson, Her Excellency Shayka Lubna Qassimi, Mrs. Cherie Booth and so many others, each a distinguished leader in her field. I am most honored to be part of a conference for over 1000 women from across the world who will be the leaders of tomorrow.

I hope this will be an annual event far into the future – for the sake of future women leaders from around the world, and for the sake of the future of the world.

This year's conference centers on the theme of communities in transition and looks at the various ways women act as leaders within their communities – local, national, regional and global.

The traditional and fundamental roles and responsibilities of women toward their family, their neighborhood, village or town is well known and well understood. They are universal. A conference I attended in January on the role of women in peace and prosperity became mantra on our role as the guardians not just of our children but of our community's history, culture, traditions, religion and values. A heavy burden. From that comes our legitimate and growing role in the broader public debates on education, health and other “family issues.”

I want to take this discussion to another level, to our role and our responsibility, in fact, our obligation, to an even broader community – to our countries and the international community. With that obligation comes the obligation to not just demand our seat at the table, but our obligation to prepared to take on the responsibilities not simply as guardians, a somewhat passive concept, but as active participants and even leaders in the national and international debates on issues that affect us...and every issue affects us.

First: What is a Leader?

In preparation for today I rummaged through any number of books of quotations and wise sayings to find some appropriate way to begin. Countless words have been written on leaders and leadership by both the academic observer and by and about leaders themselves.

Perhaps the best was the simplest:

A leader is one who takes us elsewhere.

Taken a bit further:

A good leader is someone people will follow if only out of an implicit trust, and curiosity, that you are going someplace they may want to be.

- A leader has a vision of where that “elsewhere” or “someplace” is. It must be a goal beyond the immediate and the obvious. It should always be just beyond our grasp.
- A leader must inspire not just manage.
- Leadership is personal, intensely personal. You – and only you – can decide what leadership means to you, what kind of leader you wish to be and what kind of leadership environment you wish to create. What is your goal, your vision, your “elsewhere?”

Leaders must not only know where they want to go, but how to get there. They must have to tools to make their vision a reality. A vision without tools is just a dream. Pleasant for you, but of little use to others. The tools available to you are what this conference will explore.

This conference will, I trust, give you ideas, perhaps inspiration, but it will not answer the fundamental question of what kind of leader you will be. You will take from this conference stories of our own experiences and lessons learned, but the outcome will be yours.

I have met a number of you. I am impressed with the breadth of countries, regions, cultures and religions you represent and equally impressed with the breadth of professional and social issues with which you are involved, with the capabilities and courage for change you bring to the table.

In One Lifetime

The change you seek is attainable, but will not be easy.
I know. I've been there.

Conventional wisdom tells us there are generations of change between the political, social and economic status of western – European and American – women, and women elsewhere in the world, not least in this part of the world. It is a conventional wisdom I have heard as often from women in the region as I have at home.

This same conventional wisdom contends that the divide will not be closed easily or quickly. We hear echoes of this from both sides. Each suffers from grandiose visions of one, and stereotypic notions of other. Each compares a reality to an ideal, not reality to reality, or ideal to ideal.

Like most conventional wisdom, it is wrong.

I spent virtually my entire adult life involved in some manner with the Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula. I have seen a lot of change, most of it good. The changes in the life and status of women in this region are remarkable.

- Reflecting Qu'ranic teachings that stress the fundamental equality of men and women, a number of constitutions and basic laws explicitly guarantee equality as a first principle – something my own constitution does not do. As examples – the Omani Basic Statute forbids discrimination on the basis of gender. Morocco's 2003 family law brought modern practice and inherent rights more closely into alignment.
- Reflecting centuries' old tradition – best exemplified by Khadija – that women work, own and inherit property and engage in business, women have increasingly assumed prominence in all aspects of public and commercial life.
- An Arab woman has headed the UNDP'S Middle East/North Africa Division twice in a row – Dr. Rima Khalaf al-Hunaidi, who launched the Arab Human Development Reports, and now by Her Excellency Amat al-aleem as-Soswa, the former Minister of Human Rights from Yemen. Dr. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) is the first Saudi to head a UN agency.
- Women have seats at most cabinet tables, sit in most parliaments, are appointed to most Majlis as-Shura. They have the right to vote in all but two countries and have decided elections on more than on occasion.
- There has been progress in education and health care.
- It is the norm for young girls to receive basic education. Women now account for at least 50% of students at most institutions of higher learning in the region. You are higher achievers on average than your male counterparts.
- Child spacing is increasingly adopted and successful and with that, there has been a considerable drop in fertility rates, infant mortality and maternal mortality. In a number of places your life expectancy exceeds that of men.

These advances have occurred in the space of a few decades, not centuries. Most have occurred in your own lifetime.

Another Lifetime

The changes that have taken place in the United States have occurred primarily during my lifetime, during my own career.

When I was in high school, I was thrown out of a physics class because “girls don’t take physics” or any hard science. That was not much different than the experience of the first American woman lawyer – in 1869 – who was turned away by law schools because “it would be likely to distract the attention of the young men.” Not much changed in one hundred years.

Choosing to go to graduate school and to a professional graduate school at that, mystified to my friends, as well as my family.

Women were expected to be

- Teachers – but not professors
- Nurses -- but not doctors
- Secretaries -- but not lawyers, corporate or political leaders.

We were there to provide support and to assist...but not as decision-makers.

Not much different than the commencement remarks at an American woman’s college in 1898 – “Seek to be good, but aim not to be great.”

What a clarion call to mediocrity!

Fortunately, growing up where I did, I did not know that women were not supposed to be diplomats, either. There were women diplomats, as there were women doctors, lawyers, corporate leaders, but they faced careers circumscribed by tradition, not by their capabilities or by their ambitions.

Women would, in the view of the times, take the job of a qualified man, and would, most probably, leave their careers early in any event. Women were not worth the investment. Women were not barred, but dissuaded from seeking careers and employers dissuaded from recruiting them. Women diplomats were barred from serving in “hardship” posts – which is much of the world, and barred from hard language training – no Chinese, Japanese, Russian or Arabic. You can well imagine how those twin policies constrained a woman diplomat's career opportunities.

One boss of mine, the number three in a very large embassy, told the ambassador he did not accept the idea of a woman diplomat in any job. It was beyond credulity that a woman – and a very young one at that – could serve as the embassy’s liaison officer to the U.S. military in that country. To underscore his opposition, he put me in an office with a refrigerator, a hotplate (pre-microwave days) and the coffee pot. He put me in the kitchen.

I am not talking about the 40’s, our stultifying 50s or even the aggressively liberal 60s...this was the 1970s. Perhaps before many of you were born, but not really all that long ago. One generation.

But things were changing. While this boss reflected a traditional view and perhaps a majority view at the time, it was not the view of the Department’s leadership. When I asked to be reassigned rather than stay in that office, the ambassador chose instead to transfer my boss back to Washington and into early retirement.

Not bad.

Other changes were afoot. A friend of mine, after years of pushing, became the first woman officer to receive full Arabic training. I was the 4th to study Chinese (numbers 1, 2, and 3 were in training with me).

The Department of State began actively recruiting women. In the mid 1970s, the Department's Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs launched an aggressive effort to recruit as many women officers as it could. Every embassy in the Middle East and South Asia had at least one woman officer; every office in Washington the same. By the late 1970's, that bureau, my bureau, had the highest percentage of woman officers of any regional bureau and retained that distinction for decades.

Nine years into my career, and only 5 years from my kitchen office, I was the deputy at our mission in Baghdad, one of only a handful of deputy chiefs of mission (number two to the ambassador) worldwide.

Eight years later, I became Deputy Chief of Mission at our embassy in Kuwait, the first American woman deputy in the Gulf, and seven years after that, ambassador to Yemen.

Change has come so quickly that I was neither the first woman ambassador to Yemen – my German colleague beat me to that distinction – nor the only American woman ambassador in the region. There were six at that time.

We have had a woman ambassador in virtually every country in the Middle East, and a charge' d'affaires in Saudi Arabia. We have a woman currently accredited as ambassador to the UAE.

From the days of women barred from Arabic language training, or postings outside Western Europe, my diplomatic staff in Yemen was over 50% women – they were the senior officers at post, including my own deputy, and all had full Arabic language training.

What was even more remarkable, this was not a conscious decision on the part of the Department of State. There was not some plan to see that would happen when you have a predominately female embassy. Each of my staff members was chosen based on her own qualifications. When Washington realized the somewhat unique profile of Embassy Sana'a, there was no attempt to “make it more balanced.”

Women diplomats with hard language training; women diplomats serving outside Western Europe; women diplomats in senior decision-making positions had become routine.

That sounds deceptively simple and smooth. It isn't and it wasn't.

The Ground Rules

The ground rules for women are different.

1 – There is a 60% rule – women must work 60% harder to make the same professional progress. Since we are often 60% smarter --- some universities in this region have lower

admission standards for men than for women to keep the balance close to 50/50 – this isn't a major problem, but it can be tiring.

2 – In the workplace, men are assumed qualified until they prove otherwise; women are at best neutral until they prove themselves qualified.

3 – There is less tolerance of error.

Success is idiosyncratic; failure is predetermined.

By that I mean: When you do well, it does not prove that women are capable...only you are. If you fail, it is proof that all women are doomed to failure.

4 – There is less tolerance of emotions. Men are dynamic, creative ...women, well, it's biology. We can't help it.

5 - Women who take their place in the public life of their communities – as professionals, as officials, as heads of NGOs, as leaders – are expected to still fulfill their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

You can have it all...but you have to do it all.

Survival Skills

So, how do you survive, prosper and move forward?

The three most important skills are:

- Patience... with perseverance
- A sense of humor...with a thick skin
- Good friends and colleagues...both men and women

(1) Patience with Perseverance: Change is never as quick as it ought.

The question is whether you will shape the changes in your life, or let life shape you. If you choose to shape the changes, you will need perseverance.

There are people – women too often – who take “no” to mean “no”....
No, you can't; No, you shouldn't; No, you won't.

To succeed, think of “no” as just a long way to “yes”. Back up; assess the situation; identify allies, build coalitions; and if you can't get through the door, try the window,

If I had listened to the “can't, shouldn't, won't”...I simply would not be here today. I would have had my mother's life, my grandmothers' and every other woman in my family's life. I would not have had my life.

You have to believe in yourself and your goals. You have to learn to speak up and to speak out – not loudly, but clearly and consistently. God gave you a voice. Use it. Use it widely, but use it.

At the very least, those who would help and support you won't know what you think, what you want, what you need unless you tell them. They cannot read your mind.

(2) A Sense of Humor - This may be a prerequisite for life.

I don't mean the ability to tell a joke, but the willingness to see that many of the obstacles you face are more absurd than malicious. Or, at least, choosing to deal with them as absurd rather than malicious.

Relatively late in my career, I headed the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the Department of State. Talk about a male-dominated world! The FBI, the CIA, the military and every other self-described "tough guy" in the government.

An American general came to my office one day and, in the course of the briefing, talked to me as if I was a half-witted child. Condescending is not quite it.

My staff – and his – waited for my reaction. I said nothing. The next time he came to call, I had moved all my degrees, certificates, awards and citations to the wall behind my desk. He had to confront them as he once again briefed me, but the tone had changed. He got the message.

There is another side to a sense of humor or sense of perspective – Be not afraid to fail. Be not embarrassed to fail. Yes, as I said, you may be judged more harshly than a man who makes the same mistake, but it is the only way to learn. Failure is a process for getting to success.

Someone described it in a talk as

“Failing Forward: Surviving My Biggest Mistakes”

(3) Friends and Colleagues - You can't do it alone; you don't have to.

Networking, partnering, building constituencies, developing regional and professional links – these are critical skills. You draw strength, broaden your expertise, maximize your impact. Pretty self-evident, but not something women are comfortable doing.

There is a corollary that should not be forgotten or minimized – there are farsighted and courageous men who are ready to take risks and break with tradition. They must be part of the networking, the partnering, the support systems. When the Middle East Bureau recruited so many women officers in the 190s, the leadership not only recruited us, they mentored us, trained us, and made sure we had all the career opportunities our male colleagues did.

Women in this region have a major advantage in building these links and networks – your strong family ties provide a natural network and support system. Use it; draw from it.

In the U.S. many of us are disconnected, at least geographically, from our families and our families tend to be rather small.

Many of us don't know our second and third cousins. May not know much about our immigrant families' background, even our true family name.

In Kuwait, in Yemen, elsewhere in the region where I have worked and traveled, one constant is the blessing of large, close families.

When I was in Yemen, with 18 million people, it seemed that everyone had some link, some tie, to everyone else. In Kuwait, where I also served, with less than a million, I am sure that is true.

I have been consistently impressed with the strength and intelligence of Arab women in every country I have served in or visited. In Yemen, where women have extensive political rights, but lack many social and economic opportunities, those women who have had the advantages of education have shown a deep commitment to improve the status of all Yemeni women.

I vividly remember meeting with the members of the National Women's Committee – an umbrella organization of women involved in NGOs and related work.

When each woman stood to introduce herself, she quite often gave a profession – often with the government – as well as her work as the head of an NGO, often one she had herself established. Knowing that these women had family commitments as well, I was awed by their energy and their dedication.

I also met a range of women across Yemen who were the first in their fields ...the first pilot, the first psychiatrist, the first...and the list went on and on. I had the honor and great fun to host these women for an afternoon at my mufraj in my official residence. I was deeply impressed by what they had accomplished, what they had overcome, and what they saw for themselves and for their daughters.

I noticed with dismay, however, that while they were committed to the broader issues of rights and opportunities, little effort was made to identify and mentor individual young women facing many of the same obstacles these women had themselves years before.

We need to reach out.

Are We There Yet?

Constitutions, basic laws, statistics tell us we are doing well, doing better than before; some would say doing "well enough." We know it is not "well enough."

At one post where I served, the Minister of Labor – a good and honorable man – hosted a conference with the unfortunate banner in English of "Women in Labor." ("in labor" in English in this context means the process of giving birth, not of being part of the work force).

At the start of the conference, the Minister outlined, in some detail, the constitutional, legal and regulatory advances and protections enjoyed by women in that country...and what he said was true and to be commended. An equally impressive member of the government acknowledged the claims of the minister, but then laid out, in equally detailed terms, where those laws, regulations and policies fell short.

The laws were not enforced or implemented. They were not always understood by the courts. Too many women were not aware of their rights, or how to defend them. The “elsewhere” I spoke of is not the creation of the legal structures, or not only that. While important, critically important as a baseline, this is both already underway, and a false promise.

I noted earlier that women are in most parliaments, most cabinets, most majlis as-shura, but in too few numbers.

The right to vote in this region dates to the late 40s in Pakistan and Syria, the 50s for Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and the 60s for Algeria, Afghanistan, Iran, Morocco, Libya and Sudan. Bahrain and Jordan joined this club in the early 70s and Kuwait in 2005. Women also vote in Yemen, Qatar and Oman.

As I am sure everyone in this room readily recognizes, the attainment of this fundamental right does not, in and of itself, bear much relationship to the reality of women’s political participation (in some of these case, men’s as well), or their accepted role in the public sphere.

This is not a problem unique to this part of the world. According to the IPU (International Parliamentary Union), the world average for women parliamentarians is only 16%. Not very impressive if you factor in most countries granted women political rights at least 25 years – one generation - ago.

The picture is more bleak when broken down regionally. Not surprisingly, Northern Europe – especially Scandinavia – dominates the top rankings. All are in the high 30%, with Sweden at over 45%. Sub Sahara Africa makes a strong showing in the upper ranks, but after the Scandinavians' showings, the percentages drop precipitously.

The United States is 69th at 15.2%, or one-third of Sweden, and ranks between Cape Verde and Angola. France is 85th with barely 12%. If we compare reality to reality, rather than ideals to realities, Morocco’s 11% is respectable next to France’s 12%.

Is culture, religion, economic development or the “maturity” of the democracy key indicators? No. Japan is 105th with 9%; Brazil at 107th with 8.6%; India at 109th with 8.3%; and, Turkey 127th at 4.4%, behind Lebanon, Algeria and Jordan.

A tight focus on electoral processes and parliamentary structures can distract the debate from exploring the many, many avenues to affect change available to women.

Yes, it would be highly preferable to have equitable representation in elected legislatures – where the laws are made – in the executive branch – where policy is made – and in the courts – where rights are defined and protected.

Our ability to shape the changes to our lives cannot wait for that day to arrive. The “elsewhere” we seek is the ability to fulfill the promises made and the opportunities out there.

Does It Matter?

Does it matter if we get to “elsewhere”? Does it matter if we choose to create a life different than our mother’s and create the promise of better for our daughters?

Women have had virtually the same role in society – in all societies – for generations upon generations. Why change? What possible difference does it make?

Would the world be a better place if women were in charge? Or even properly represented in the community, national and international councils that decide our day-to-day lives and shape our longer term fates?

I don't know.

Are we wise as well as smart? Are we strong as well as perseverant? Are we less corrupt, more compassionate, less aggressive, more collaborative, less enamored with the toys of war?

Would we be more accountable to our community, would our actions be more transparent, our willingness to expand participation and our commitment to equality – not just gender equality – be more steadfast when we have power, when we are leaders? In short, we significantly affect the quality of governance, the quality of the political, economic and social life in our communities? We would like to think so.

I don't know.

But the issue, the criteria, the benchmarks for women to step up and take on leadership is not – cannot be – that we are better – although I suspect we are. The issue is that 50% of the world has not just the inherent right but **the obligation to actively** shoulder 50% of the responsibility.

Mainstreaming Women's Issues vs. Mainstreaming Women

There are two ways we can go – one is to mainstream women's issues. The other is to mainstream women.

There is merit to the first approach. We see ourselves as guardians, nurturers, peacemakers. We are. We champion children, education, health care, safe neighborhoods, traditional values, if not traditional structures. We should continue to do so, with pride and without apology.

However, in mainstreaming women's issues, raising their profile in the national and international debate and on government agendas, we need to work away from the idea that certain subsets of issues are "women's issues." Our purview. Our prerogative.

Those who advocate that women must have a seat at the table during reconciliation talks, peace conferences, conflict resolution, imply that we will bring to the table a kinder, gentler perspective, a civilizing perspective, but what is important is the implication of what we do not bring - hard edge logic, steady pragmatism, or strategic vision.

Some make the argument that by taking the lead on "family issues" women are staking a claim to all issues. While I agree with that logic, in practice it does not work that way. By concentrating, by allowing ourselves to be channeled into a narrow range of fields – even

those where we have a comparative advantage – we risk self-segregation in the policy arena. We risk marginalizing the issues, and women.

We need to turn the paradigm around and understand that all issues are women's issues.

All issues – national security to the economy, defense as well as education. Women's issues are not only those that affect the half of the world's population that is women, or our children. They profoundly affect all humankind. Women's issues are human rights, health, education and development. They cut to what is needed to build and maintain stable and successful families and communities. But they are also finance, defense, security, economic and finance, medicine, law, theology and science.

We must recognize, get comfortable with and get competent in the range of policies and issues that confront us as people, not just as women, that confront our communities and confront the world.

As women enter public and economic life, we need to not limit ourselves. We must strive to become decision-makers in all fields, including, perhaps most especially, those in which women are traditionally under represented. To be taken seriously we must seriously approach and become credible, recognized experts in the "serious" issues on the national and international agenda.

We need our voices heard not just in town meetings or someday in the halls of the legislatures, but as journalists, columnists, pundits and political philosophers. We need to be the "talking heads" on television.

We not only must become leaders in education, in health, in child protection, but be competent, comfortable and credible – credible – on defense, on proliferation, on security, policing, counterterrorism and counter proliferation. These are not "guys' issues" that only affect "guys" and that only guys can understand. These issues affect us all equally...just as the quality of education, the quality of drinking water and the quality of health care affects us all.

I am concerned that we risk segregating ourselves politically even as we move into the public space. There can be no parallel universes, to gender segregation on policies. We don't live on separate planets. Success or failure in one set of issues will drive success or failure in the other.

We therefore must be active players across the board. It is not so much that "women's issues" need to be mainstreamed, but that women need to be mainstreamed.

There has been tremendous change already in your lifetime. There has been in mine.

It takes enormous courage to be a leader. It takes courage to make your voice heard above the static of conventional wisdom. It takes courage to reach out to others who share your goals, and to those who would follow if you would lead. We can not only demand our rights, but we can accept our obligations.

We can still seek to be good...but we can also aim to be great.

Thank you.

