

Women's Fund of Rhode Island

Remarks by Simone P. Joyaux, ACFRE, Founder and Chair

On the occasion of the second anniversary celebration of the Women's Fund

Introduction

On Tuesday, November 18, 2003, more than 500 women and men gathered to celebrate the second anniversary of the Women's Fund of Rhode Island.

The event's theme was "breaking the glass ceiling in the Oval Office." Simone's remarks are presented below, in their entirety.

The Women's Fund selected politics for this evening because we see this as a particularly important time – with the election of 2004 coming soon.

So as we look forward to this election, **let's not get seduced by the "apparent" progress in women's rights.** Because frankly, the progress is not that impressive.

- A few years ago, the U.S. ranked 52nd in women's political participation in national legislatures – now the U.S. ranks 59th.
- Of the people who run for elective office at any level in the U.S. before the age of 35, 86% are men and 81% are white.
- RI ranks 32nd in the nation in women's political participation.
- A decade ago, RI had a woman in its U.S. Congressional delegation but not anymore.
- There's been a decrease in the number of women in the RI General Assembly.
- Also, this is not just about getting women elected. This is about appointing women. For example, take a look at the lack of women in RI's judiciary.
- (And as you consider the status of women, think about the other marginalized groups in RI and in the U.S. – people of color, gays and lesbians, etc. Diversity is one of the values of the Women's Fund.)

Where are the women? Is this progress? I don't think so. I think this is a revolution stalled – a movement that demands louder voices and more activism.

Let's think about louder voices and the power of words. I've always been interested in words, their meanings, and the stories they tell. I'm an avid reader and have collected quotes since I was a teen. Now I think about the power of words as we strive to build activist movements.

It seems to me that important words have been co-opted.

- Like the “**F**” **word: Feminism. Feminist.** Did you read Anna Quindlen's column in the October 20th issue of *Newsweek*? The dictionary defines feminism as the belief in social, political and economic equality of the sexes. It's not a male or female thing – it's about basic human rights. I'm a feminist. And I know that many men and women in this room are feminists. So let's start using the F word again.
- And how about the “**L**” **word: liberal or liberalism?** The dictionary defines liberalism as “a political philosophy based on belief in progress, the essential goodness of humans, the autonomy of the individual, and the protection of political and civil liberties.”

What was the founding of the original colonies but a liberal response to Europe in the 1600s? Wasn't Roger Williams a liberal, striking out on his own to start a new community?

And liberalism crosses party lines. Teddy Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln were famous American liberals. Social Security, civil rights, Medicare, rural electrification, the minimum wage, land grant colleges – all of these were liberal initiatives established over conservative opposition.

Can we not be proud and state that we are liberal, progressive, feminists – no matter our gender, race, or political party?

With the right words and courage, will we speak out more? I fear we are too polite today. I wonder if we have confused integrity and speaking out with a dysfunctional politeness.

I try to imagine Rosa Parks sending a nice polite request to the bus company asking if it would be okay – if she were really tired – for her to sit down in a white person's seat in the bus. Instead, she sat down – a protest.

We seem to avoid words like racist and sexist and homophobic and privilege and class. We talk around them. We don't want to offend. We fear conflict.

- But tell me: What's more offensive than people and systems that deny social justice to women and girls, people of color, those who are **not** affluent, those with a different sexual orientation? Those people and those systems are racist, homophobic, classist, and yes, sexist!
- What does it say about us as individuals and a community when we use politeness as an excuse for not speaking out against injustice?

Let's not be seduced by the apparent progress! Women are still the under-represented majority in RI and in the U.S. So why does it matter? Why does it matter that women be seen and heard and share power rather than be the silent majority?

Because justice means participation and voice. And because it's a hidden brain drain to ignore women – to ignore any part of the community. Let me paraphrase Sr. Joan Chittister: “As long as women or any other group are excluded from the center of society (whether political, education, economic, etc.) then the human race stands on one leg, sees with one eye, thinks with only part of its mind” – and I'd say that it shows in the compromised quality of decision-making and life that faces our communities today.

Why would anyone want to ignore part of the body politic? It's all about power. Someone wants to retain his/her power by limiting that of others. And what are the results of this abuse of power?

- Power promotes a culture of exclusion and a culture of domination.
- And then when we don't speak out – we embrace a culture of silence.

I'm always amused when I hear leaders say that they picked the most qualified candidates, without regard to issues of diversity... and oops, only white men were qualified. Please, do any of you in this room – including the white men – actually believe that only white men are qualified for anything anymore?

And how many times will we listen and smile politely when someone in power says: “Sorry, I just didn’t notice.” Or when government and organizations take actions that disempower and disenfranchise?” Or how about when someone tells us “security and the economy are more important than social justice.”

I’m sorry I don’t accept those excuses. I hope you don’t either!

Please let’s not be seduced by the apparent progress to-date. Instead, **let’s reinforce the women’s movement – because we need a revolution.**

Let’s stand up and be proud: The women’s movement is a feminist, liberal, progressive movement that crosses party and gender and economic and issue lines to assure basic human rights for women and girls. That’s social justice.

Together we must give voice to those who have no choices. Because many of us in this room – even though we are women – actually have choices. And if we have choices, are we not responsible for speaking out for those who don’t?

Together we can and must change the attitudes of the people in power and demand laws and regulations that help make change.

In the final analysis, it seems to be it’s about holding people accountable – holding ourselves and others accountable. The feminist, liberal, progressive movement must take political power and hold people accountable.

So what can you and I do right now to increase women’s political voice?

First, let’s stop looking at the apparent progress and look at what still has to be done. Consider the following:

1. **Go beyond our own comfort zone.** Question our own privilege and position. Put ourselves on the line by taking action. Don’t opt for “getting along.”

2. **Lobby for laws:** Laws are an instrument of social change. We need laws that remove the constraints against achieving equity.
3. **Join groups that fight for social justice:** Cross party lines and find the connections among women's issues to advance the basic human rights of women and girls.
4. **Vote and encourage others to do the same!** Those who show up decide.
5. **Build a political force to contend with:**
 - No one should be able to run in any election – whether municipal, statewide or national – without dealing with women.
 - Pressure the political parties at the state and national level to aggressively seek out women candidates, and endorse and finance them.
6. **Give money to elect progressive women and progressive men** – money talks.
7. **Personally speak out:** Remember, silence is consent.
 - Participate in public protests like the March for Freedom of Choice in Washington D.C. in April 2004.
 - Personally speak out wherever you find yourself – because silence is consent.
8. **Exercise our economic power:** Let's boycott and strike if necessary. Tell those in power that what they're doing is not okay.

And finally, #9: Exercise our people power: Confront elected officials. Tell them: "If you don't do what I want, I will not vote for you and I'll get someone else to run against you."

There is no reason for us to be seduced by the apparent progress of women. Each of us must find our own way to speak out and take action – and what better time than now, as we look towards the 2004 election?

It doesn't matter which political party you favor or if you're a man or woman. It's about participating in a liberal, progressive, feminist movement to assure social justice.

- Frederick Douglass American abolitionist and son of a slave said: "You have to take power. No one gives it."
- U.S. Representative Shirley Chisolm said: The law cannot do the major part of winning equality for women. Women must do it themselves. They must become revolutionaries."

So here's to the revolution. Thank you.