



**Caring for future generations:
Women in leadership positions and the girl child**

Third Annual Meeting of Women Speakers of Parliament organised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the occasion of the 51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

New York, 2 March 2007

United Nations Headquarters, Room 8

**Session 3:
Women Speakers: Role models for the next generation?**

“Lifting As We Climb”

**Presentation
by**

**Leslie R. Wolfe, Ph.D.
President
Center for Women Policy Studies, Washington, DC, USA**

I am honored to be part of this important meeting, for which I thank Anda Filip and Anders Johnsson for their gracious invitation. I only regret that my own spectacular Speaker – Representative Nancy Pelosi, the first woman Speaker of the US House of Representatives – could not be with us here today, and I know she will be eager to join you at a future meeting when her schedule permits.

However, I am delighted to bring you greetings from the 1,500 women state legislators from the 50 states in my country, with whom the Center works every day. In fact, these elected women leaders, and their counterparts in our Congress, are the primary “constituents” for the Center for Women Policy Studies. We serve as their “national staff” to help them implement the Beijing Platform for Action in our country, through our *Contract With Women of the USA*® -- which is our own women’s human rights policy agenda.

It is a very special delight for me to be sharing this panel with Madam President Prammer – and I would like to tell her, and all of you, that although I am no longer a girl child or even a young woman, you are *my* role models and I am inspired by your leadership.

To address the theme of this session, let us begin by reminding ourselves how much has changed in the status of women in the world since we were girls. When I was a girl in the 1950s, I had never seen a woman leader in the United States Congress, a woman member of the US Supreme Court, a woman CEO of a major corporation, a woman astronaut, a woman head of state, a woman president of a top US university. I dared not even dream of such things.

And much later, when I was a young woman in my 20s in the late 1960s, pursuing a Ph.D. in English Literature, I was the only woman in my class, none of my professors were women, and I was regularly discouraged in both overt and subtle ways from pursuing this “un-womanly” path. One of my colleagues in the Ph.D. program told me that he never thought of me as a woman but rather as “a giant brain.” Does this seem familiar at all – the contempt veiled by an apparent “compliment”?

Despite all of the obstacles we have faced in the past 30-plus years, we come together today having achieved many victories – with many more struggles before us. For me, this is a glorious moment. You and your parliamentary colleagues give me hope for the future of politics and policy change on our planet.

So I must say that I believe the title of this session is in need of a small amendment. It is not “role models for the next generation?” -- with a question mark -- but rather with an exclamation mark. Because you already *are* role models for the next generation – including both those of our sisters who still are girls and those who are young women in their 20s and 30s.

As women Speakers of Parliament, you are creating a new political norm that sends girls the most powerful of all messages: “Women are national political leaders.” You are making it impossible for people to ask those silly questions to which we are so accustomed: “Can a woman be a leader of men?” “Can a woman be tough enough?” “Are women’s rights really so important to our Nation’s economic and political success?” The simple answer is: Yes.

But girls and young women need more from you and from all of us than role model status. Being born with ovaries is not enough. Girls need to know that your leadership will improve their lives and the lives of their mothers, their families, their communities, their countries – and the planet that we will leave to them.

To address this responsibility to our youngest sisters, I have taken as my title the phrase, “Lifting as We Climb.” This is the motto and theme of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, one of the oldest women’s organizations in the United States, founded in the late 19th century by African American women throughout our country to provide leadership and service to their communities.

The mission that is reflected in this motto is the one I offer to you. Our individual leadership has a sacred purpose -- to lift our sisters and communities and countries out of oppression and poverty and despair, to promote women’s human rights across the board. Indeed, we climb our ladders to success and power so that we *can* lift up our sisters. We truly are “lifting as we climb.”

As women in power, you are the ones who can lift up women’s human rights to the top of the political and parliamentary agenda. You are the ones who can ensure that we attend to the impact of all public policies on women and, especially, on girls. Together, we can support their dreams and their ambitions and throw open the doors to equality and empowerment for all of our girls – as they are our daughters, our sisters, our legacy to the future.

Indeed, as leaders of Parliament, you are more than policy makers. You are our visible and outspoken public voices for girls. As their leaders, their heroes, you can show our youngest sisters that there is a better way to run the world. I am reminded of what my dear friend Bella Abzug said at Beijing – that we are not simply trying to join the “mainstream,” because it is a polluted stream. As Bella said: “We want to change the stagnant waters into a fresh flowing stream, making it safe and life enhancing for everyone.”

But first and foremost, as leaders of Parliament, you are the ones – the only ones -- who can take the most urgent step towards achieving this goal. You are the only ones who can pass laws, and monitor their implementation, to mandate that our governments confront the worst abuses of women’s human rights, which persist in various forms in all of our countries. You can make this a political priority – to change the realities that restrict girls’ ambitions, ruin their health, destroy their lives.

Simply bringing these realities to the parliamentary agenda takes a step towards confronting the intertwined crises that continue to harm our girls to this day: sexual violence, lack of educational opportunity from primary to professional school, coerced child marriage, employment discrimination and inequities, lack of property rights, international trafficking of women and girls worldwide, the HIV/AIDS epidemic – which is a women’s epidemic

in all of our countries, the lack of political participation and empowerment, and the desperate poverty to which so many of our young sisters are relegated by inequality and discrimination and which in many ways is both the root and the result of women's oppression.

When you pass laws and implement policies and make speeches to your constituencies and to your country about these issues, you empower parents and NGOs and inspire our optimism. You give us the weapons we need to fight the war for equality and empowerment and freedom for our girls and young women.

Let me conclude by telling you what our colleague and friend Shirley Chisholm said in the 1970s. Shirley was the first African American woman to ever serve in our Congress and she was, until the end of her life, a model of outspoken and courageous advocacy for women's rights. In the early 1970s, she said that "the law cannot do the major job of winning equality for women. Women must do it for themselves. Women must become revolutionaries." Brave words, indeed. Shirley knew then what we know now -- that the law is the essential first step to success. And so she gave each of us -- parliamentarians and advocates alike -- a mission of partnership in our shared quest for an egalitarian future.

I thank you with all my heart for your leadership and I promise you the full support and partnership of the Center for Women Policy Studies in this mission. I commit our hearts and minds to you and to our colleagues at IPU as we seek creative new ways to share your achievements, your vision, your leadership with your constituents and with our own.