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Keynote Address: The Difference "Difference" Makes

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS: THE DIFFERENCE “DIFFERENCE” MAKES

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Deborah L. Rhode*

I. INTRODUCTION

In my experience, no event about or organized by women gets off the ground without a long list of thanks. This is one of the differences that gender difference makes, and this keynote will be no exception. On behalf of all the participants, let me register deep appreciation to the faculty, students, and staff that made this conference possible.

Events like these are testaments of our partial progress. Over the last two decades, we have witnessed a transformation for women in law, but not a transformation in leadership positions. Almost 30% of lawyers are women, but they represent only about 15% of federal judges and law firm partners, and about 10% of law school deans and general counsel positions at Fortune 500 companies. The same patterns are apparent in other leadership sectors, such as management and politics. Women are half the electorate but only 15% of Congress and 6% of state governors. They account for about half of managers but only 1% of the Chief Executive Officers of Fortune 500 companies. The underrepresentation of women of color is even greater. They account for only about 1% of corporate officers, and under 1% of law firm partners.

What explains these disparities is a matter of dispute. One aim of the American Bar Association (ABA) Commission on Women in the Profession is to explore the reasons why, and to identify strategies for change. To that end, the Commission and the Leadership Institute of Harvard's Kennedy School of Public Policy cosponsored a leadership summit focusing on “the difference ‘difference’ makes,” and that is the subject of my talk today. The summit included a gifted group of leaders and scholars who study leaders—including Patricia Schroeder, Patricia Ireland, Eleanor H. Norton, Sheila Wellington, and Elaine Jones. Their contributions are collected in a forthcoming collection, *The Difference “Difference” Makes: Women and Leadership*. I provided the opening essay for that collection and my aim in these brief remarks today is to give you a sense of the most important research on gender and leadership.

This is no small task. Recent surveys have identified over 5000 scholarly works on leadership, and an additional cottage industry of self-help publications and popular commentary. A growing segment of this work focuses on women. I will try only to highlight the key findings.

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II. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

A central problem for women leaders, including women lawyers, is the lack of consensus that there *is* a significant problem. Gender inequalities in leadership opportunities are pervasive; perceptions of inequality are not. A widespread assumption is that barriers have been coming down, women have been moving up, and equal treatment is an accomplished fact in public life. Only 3% of male lawyers think that prospects for advancement in the legal profession are greater for men than for women.

Such views are hard to square with the facts noted earlier. But the most common explanation is that women's underrepresentation is the product of cultural lag; current inequalities are viewed as a legacy of discriminatory practices that are no longer legal, and it is only a matter of time until us girls catch up.

However, this pipeline theory cannot explain the extent of underrepresentation of women leaders in fields like law, where they have long constituted over a third of new entrants. Nor can cultural lag explain the disparities in advancement among male and female candidates with comparable qualifications and experience. For example, studies involving thousands of lawyers have found that men are at least twice as likely as similarly qualified women to obtain partnership. The "pipeline" leaks, and if we wait for time to correct the problem, we may be waiting a very long time. The same is true in other leadership contexts. At current rates of change, it would take about three centuries for women to reach parity in Congress or in executive suites.

In accounting for gender disparities, a wide array of research reveals certain persistent and pervasive patterns. Women's opportunities for leadership are constrained by traditional gender stereotypes, by inadequate access to mentors and informal networks of support, and by inflexible workplace structures. Let me say a few words about each.

A. *Gender Stereotypes*

Gender stereotypes work against women's advancement in several respects. First, and most fundamentally, the characteristics traditionally associated with women are at odds with the characteristics traditionally associated with leadership, such as strength, assertiveness, authoritativeness, and so on.

Although recent theories of leadership have stressed the need for interpersonal qualities more commonly associated with women, like cooperation and collaboration, women aspiring to leadership still face double standards and double binds. Every woman in this room has probably experienced some version of this dilemma. We risk appearing too "soft" or too "strident," too "aggressive" or not "assertive" enough. Moreover, what is assertive in a man often seems abrasive in a woman. An overview of over a hundred studies involving evaluations of leaders indicates that women are rated lower when they adopt "masculine" authoritative styles, particularly when the evaluators are men.

A related obstacle for female leaders is that they often lack the presumption of competence accorded to their male counterparts. Even in experimental situations where male and female performance is objectively equal, women are held to higher standards, their competence is rated lower, and they are less likely to be viewed as leaders. For example, when individuals see men seated at the head of a table for a

meeting, they typically assume that he is the leader; they do not make the same assumption about a woman. The problem is compounded for women of color, whose performance is subject to special scrutiny and whose achievements are often attributed to special treatment.

Women with children face another double standard and another double bind. Working mothers are held to higher standards than working fathers and are often criticized for being insufficiently committed, either as parents or professionals. Those who seem willing to sacrifice family needs to workplace demands appear lacking as mothers. Yet, those who want extended leaves or reduced schedules appear lacking as professionals. These mixed messages leave many women with the uncomfortable sense that whatever they are doing, they should be doing something else. That guilt can be reinforced by children, like the six-year-old who informed his mother that when he grew up, he wanted to be a client.

Assumptions about the inadequate commitment of working mothers can in turn influence performance evaluations, promotion decisions, and opportunities for challenging assignments that are prerequisites for leadership roles. Since many lawyers assume that a working mother is unlikely to be fully committed to her career, they more easily remember the times she left early not the times she stayed late.

B. Support Networks

Another common obstacle for women leaders is the absence of mentors and access to informal networks of advice, contacts, and client development. Problems of exclusion are greatest for those who appear "different" on other grounds as well as gender, such as race, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation. Women with family responsibilities also have less time for informal socializing that may be essential for success. As the president of Catalyst, Sheila Wellington has noted that after work, men head for drinks – women for dry cleaners. Men pick up career tips; women pick up laundry, kids, dinner, and the house.

It is, of course, not only men who are responsible for patterns of exclusion and inequality. As recent reports make clear, some workplaces have what sociologists once labeled "Queen Bees": women who believe that they managed without special help, so why can't everyone else? By contrast, other women leaders are more sensitive to gender-related problems but reluctant to become actively involved in the solution. Some of these women are hesitant to become "typed as a woman" by frequently raising "women's issues," by appearing to favor other women, or by participating in women's networking groups.

Many other senior women do what they can but are too overcommitted to provide sufficient mentoring for all the junior colleagues who need assistance. Given the demographics of upper-level positions, women will remain at a disadvantage unless and until providing adequate support networks is seen as an organizational responsibility.

C. Workplace Structures

A similar point can be made about workplace structures that fail to accommodate family commitments. A wide gap persists between formal policies and actual practices. For example, over 90% of surveyed law firms report policies permitting

part-time schedules, yet only about 3% to 4% of lawyers actually use them. Most women surveyed believe, with good reason, that any reduction in hours or availability would jeopardize their prospects for advancement and could put them "permanently out to pasture."

The problem is compounded by the sweatshop schedules routinely expected of those in leadership positions. Hourly requirements have increased dramatically over the last two decades, and what has not changed is the number of hours in the day. As one expert put it, "can women have a high powered career and still have children? Sure, as long as she doesn't plan on ever seeing them." The celebrated litigator, David Boies is famous for putting the choice to young associates: "would you rather sleep or win?"

Although the absence of family-friendly policies is not just a "woman's issue," the price is paid disproportionately by women. Despite a significant increase in men's domestic work over the last two decades, women continue to shoulder the major burden. Part of the reason is that most workplaces reinforce traditional roles. Fewer than 15% of Fortune 1000 companies and surveyed law firms offer the same paid parental leave to fathers as well as mothers. Fewer than 5% of men take part-time schedules or extended leaves. As a male lawyer explained to a Boston Bar Association work/family task force, it may be "okay to say that they would like to spend more time with the kids, but it is not okay to do it, except once in a while." In short, many workplace structures leave both men and women feeling unfairly treated. Men cannot readily get on the "mommy track." Women cannot readily get off it.

Yet these norms make little sense, even from the most narrow economic calculus. A wide array of research from both professional and business settings indicates that part-time employees are more productive than their full-time counterparts, particularly those bleakly working sweatshop schedules. And, considerable data indicate that such flexible arrangements save money in the long run by reducing absenteeism, attrition, and corresponding recruitment and training costs. Balanced lives help bottom lines.

In fact, there are substantial economic costs connected with all of these barriers to women's advancement—traditional stereotypes, inadequate support networks, and inflexible schedules. Women represent an equal share of the pool of talent available for leadership. They also have distinct perspectives to contribute. In order to perform effectively in an increasingly competitive and multicultural environment, organizations need advisors with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and styles of leadership. The point is not that there is some single "woman's point of view." But gender differences do make some difference, and they need to be registered in leadership positions.

III. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LEADERSHIP STYLES AND PRIORITIES

A. Leadership Styles

Over the last two decades, commentary on women's leadership styles has become a growth industry. Over two hundred empirical studies have attempted to assess gender differences in leadership characteristics and effectiveness, and a still

greater volume of journalistic and pop psychological accounts have focused on the same issues. These analyses reflect quite different views of women's "different voice," in part because their methodologies and quality vary considerably.

However, some experts have at least helped make sense of divergent results through sophisticated meta-analytic techniques, which cumulate data from multiple studies after controlling for their quality. Other researchers also have achieved greater reliability by examining large samples of leaders in organizational settings, and by collecting evaluations from observers as well as self-reports from participants. Taken together, these studies challenge some conventional assumptions about women's leadership.

First, perceptions of gender differences in styles or effectiveness remain common, although the evidence for such differences is weaker than commonly supposed. It comes largely from "self-reports" and laboratory studies, which often indicate that women leaders display greater interpersonal skills and adopt more participatory, democratic styles, while men rely on more directive approaches. But these differences do not emerge in most research involving evaluations of leaders by supervisors, subordinates, and peers in real world settings. Most of these studies also fail to reveal significant gender differences in the effectiveness of leaders, despite stereotypes about women's lesser competence. Four recent large-scale studies involving a total of over 65,000 managers found that women outperformed men on all but few measures.

There are several explanations for these divergent results. One involves socialization and stereotypes that encourage women to develop interpersonal skills and participatory rather than authoritarian styles and to then describe themselves in those terms.

By contrast, the force of conventional stereotypes is weaker in actual organizational settings. Women who have achieved leadership positions generally have been selected and socialized to conform to accepted organizational norms. It is not surprising that their styles resemble those of male counterparts, or that they are even more effective leaders, given the hurdles women have had to surmount to reach upper-level positions.

B. Leadership Priorities

An equally important, but far less studied, question is the extent to which women use their leadership differently than men. The answer appears to be "some women some of the time." In law, many women leaders, including those in this room, have used their positions to support women's issues and advancement. But as individuals like Margaret Thatcher remind us, putting women in power is not the same as empowering women. To advance women's interests, we need women—and men—in leadership positions with a commitment to those interests.

How do we get them? Let me close with few general observations. The most important factor in ensuring equal access to leadership opportunities is a commitment to that objective, a commitment that is reflected in institutional priorities, policies, and reward structures. For example, employers must incorporate diversity goals into their business planning, make progress toward those goals a factor in performance evaluations, and gather information about persistent barriers and effective responses. The ABA is a good case history. Until relatively recently,

women were significantly underrepresented in leadership roles. That began to change once the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession was formed and began issuing annual reports that compiled the low percentages of women officers and chairs. Women, it suddenly appeared, could do the math. And once they did, the numbers dramatically improved. All legal workplaces need to go through a similar process and consider who is where, who is not, and why they are not. Problems to address include performance evaluations, mentoring, support networks, work/family conflicts, and quality of life.

IV. CONCLUSION

This is not a modest agenda. But neither is it beyond our reach. Just in the space of a single generation, we have witnessed a transformation in gender roles and leadership opportunities. When I went to law school, I had no course by or about women. There was no women's law association and no events like this one.

What is striking to me now is how little of it was striking to me then; it was just how law and life were. All that has changed, partly through the efforts of those represented at this conference. Thank you for joining with us in that struggle and helping to strategize about its future.