

KEYNOTE MESSAGE  
**Liberal Forum on Women in Leadership Roles**  
**Cape Town, South Africa**  
3 April 2017

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**Power That Includes,  
Not Excludes**  
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Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak to individuals who respect women—those who hold up half the sky but end up carrying more of its weight.

Perhaps 100 years from now, our generation will be known for the audacity of commercial flights to the moon or finding the cure for the common flu. And yet sadly, it will also be remembered for its inability to curb violence against women or misogyny at the highest levels of governments around the world. Such a forum as this saves humanity from the ignominy of widespread apathy to the issues that women face.

I don't know if anyone of you here has ever visited the Philippines. But I would like to bring you to a place you've probably never set foot before.

In my hometown called Naga, there's a lady who walks with an exaggerated limp, her left foot much shorter than her right, because she was afflicted by polio when she was very little. Poverty is a huge reality in our country, so it's not uncommon to see women—even differently abled women—working to help make both ends meet. But this lady, Fe Carranza by name, is something else. Every day, she goes out to sell buns of bread at the Naga City Hall and other business establishments across the city. To deliver her products, she herself drove a tricycle, which looks like this.

You have to see Fe start her motorcycle's engine to truly appreciate the strength of this amazing woman. She turns her back to the front, puts her normal left leg on the right-side pedal and kicks it until the motor comes to life. Only then can she proceed.

That was precisely what she was doing the first time I saw her. I linked Fe to the Persons With Disabilities Group (PWD) so she could get assistance. And she did. She got technical know-how, the much needed equipment, capital and access to market.

Fe's rise from poverty was a hard one. But she emerged victorious. She now employs workers and supplies soya bread and chilled soya delicacies to many schools and village day care centers in the province. The lesson is clear: given wide spaces to bloom, women become leaders in society. They truly hold up half the sky—when they are nurtured in an enabling environment.

On the global stage, the influence of strong, able, and skilled women is widely felt. In Forbes' list of the Most Powerful People in the World in 2016, German Chancellor

Angela Merkel is third, the US Federal Reserve chairperson Janet Yellen is 6th, British Prime Minister Theresa May is 13th, and Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, 25th.<sup>1</sup> The diversity of opinion and perspective provided by strong and skilled women in board rooms, in local governance, in legislation, in multi-lateral organizations, in trade and finance, and in development work, ensures a more balanced, more inclusive world.

Pew Research Center, an international think tank, said early this month that the number of countries that have female leaders continues to expand. But, there's a problem. The list is still relatively short and women leaders rarely lead for a long time.

There are currently 15 female world leaders, and eight of them represent the first time that a woman has held the highest office in their countries. This is double the number in 2000, but can you guess how many countries of the 193 member states of the United Nations have women leaders?

Fewer than 10%.

To me, this means our world is experiencing gender enlightenment, but not fast enough. And in my experience, it is because we need to change the way we look at the problem.

We all need to look more closely at the realities the women of our time face down on the ground, where poverty cannot be summarized in a spreadsheet nor described fully in a powerpoint presentation. We are too focused on what happens in high society; we forget to look at the grassroots, where the number of suffering women is so much higher.

In my country at least, the problems women face are more complex than people realize. I was a lawyer for the poor for most of my working life. I worked with so many women who suffered abuse. I would always get a knock on the door in the middle of the night from women who need a place to stay after being beaten up by their husbands.

We would work, sometimes until late at night, to prepare their cases for emancipation from their abusers. By the time we would go to court, more often than not, the abused woman would back down, preferring instead to go back to their abusers, worried that they will be separated from their children because they do not have the financial capacity to provide for them. Time and again, it has always been apparent that our women need to be economically empowered before they can achieve the real independence they need.

This proves that the barriers that prevent women from claiming leadership roles are tightly interwoven with cultural, social, and economic difficulties. It is not only that boys are still expected to be better at Math than girls. Or that physical strength is still

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alixmcnamara/2016/06/06/2016-power-women-list-highlights/#a03e9e61f579>

expected to be a quality needed in a leader. It is that women are excluded from power groups, and that violence or misogynistic remarks against women are still considered the fault of the woman if her knees show when she sits. I don't know if many of the women here in this room have experienced this, but don't people have opinions all the time about your clothes and whether you are gaining weight or not? By contrast, have you heard anyone talk about men's outfits?

Sadly, overt discrimination is still a huge reality in our world, but there's also what Harvard Business Review calls second-generation gender bias. A social psychologist named Faye Crosby discovered 25 years ago that most women don't realize they have experienced gender discrimination and *they deny it even when it is true*. That's because second-generation bias does not overtly exclude or harm women; it simply disconnects her from men and from leadership roles.

That's also part of what is preventing abused women from claiming their freedom from their oppressors. For so long, women have felt that their place is not to lead—as if staying in the home and taking care of children is not a leadership role. The women in this room who are involved in creating legislation or executing national programs know that making a toddler calm down while you are thinking of 10 other things to do is a lot more intractable compared with dealing with 10 male members of Congress who cannot agree on a bill. The point is that women in any society have to deal with second-generation gender bias, and they don't even know what it is even if it happens to them.

There are emerging difficulties too. The rise of social media has made women easy targets, especially those that hold leadership positions—from media to government. Where physical security only requires good locksmiths and prudence in one's schedule or the places where we can be seen, finding sanctuaries against misogyny, harassment, alternative facts, and crass language on social media is a lot more complicated.

What do we do? How do we reduce, if not remove, the oppressive conditions that threaten women? And once that's done, how do we nurture their unique strengths so that they can occupy leadership positions and help build an inclusive world?

Much has already been done by so many organizations to provide safe and nurturing environments for women around the world. The UN, the World Economic Forum, the corporate world, and all our countries have expressed commitment to break the glass ceiling for women and encourage them to rise up to the challenge of leadership. Let me just mention a few that I think are critical.

First: we must take a closer look at the structures of organizations and make fundamental changes if needed, so that we can create spaces for women to take on leadership roles. For instance, in our country and I believe also in South Africa, we have closed-list party elections. The people vote for a party, and the party nominates the representatives. How do we ensure that there is gender balance so that males and females are equally represented? In this, South Africa is ahead of its time. Your "Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill" calls for equal participation of women in the economy and in decision-making positions, both in public and private organizations—specifying that it should 50-50 representation.

Second: There should be a shift in the way we strengthen organizational structures, training designs, and mentoring activities of women organizations. When I served as president of the Naga City Council of Women, we discovered that there was a need to simplify all training on the gender and development budget provided under the Magna Carta for Women, to the point that women merely had to tick boxes in a document. We had to respect the fact that women immersed in poverty had very little time for meetings and trainings outside of their survival duties and that they of course had a long learning curve, and that's very understandable. By taking the time to innovate and adjust to women on the ground, they organized themselves better and lead more powerfully.

Women organizations should do more to go beyond their usual circles and reach out to women who would rather finish their laundry than attend a meeting on women's rights. It's the women who are quiet and reticent who are in much need of help. Women need to help women.

Third: Perhaps it's time to come up with a global effort to educate women around the world about their rights against abuse, especially emerging ones like second-generational bias and harassment on social media. In *"Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers"*, published by the Harvard Business Review, authors said that *"second-generation bias is embedded in stereotypes and organizational practices that can be hard to detect, but when people are made aware of it, they see possibilities for change."*

Once women recognize the effects of second-generation bias and all other forms of harassment, *"they feel empowered, not victimized"* because they can do something about it.

This is a very short list of ideas, but the ideas are only as good as the actions that follow them. We are glad that more women leaders are shining, but we hope that we will see the same dynamism at the grassroots level.

The global narrative on women points to one thing: women's issues should be central to policy making, and we are happy men are joining this conversation. Gender equality is not a "soft" issue that forms part of a footnote, because reality has shown that when women are heard more, societies thrive better.

That's because women have unique strengths. Women are not temperamental just because of biology; we are emotional because we care a lot. We are intuitive because we are beings of empathy. We can take charge when needed and make 10 decisions per minute because our brains are wired for survival in whatever circumstance.

Women in governance in particular are endowed with even more amazing skills. You sometimes choose not to speak, and yet affect the entire conversation. But when you do, you do it with power that includes rather than excludes, with foresight and depth. You bring so much to the table, whether at home or in business. You are heroes in your own right. #