

Zonta International – Umdæmisþing á Akureyri 1. og 2. September.

I think I can proudly say that my generation gradually managed to prove that ensuring gender equality is not only the right thing to do but the best thing to do.

Today it is widely recognized that gender equality makes society and all its institutions better and more prosperous and successful for women and men alike. The abolition of gender injustice and inequality is not a by-product of other developments. It is a precondition for equality, justice, and peace in all societies.

We all gain in the long run although some men lose their privileges and monopoly on power in the short run. Some men feel threatened if a woman is coming at their side – feel belittled – and try to find a way to keep women in their “proper” place.

The political symbol of all nations has always been the male. The political individual was from the beginning created in the form of a male, and he still is. It is he who has determined the discourse, decided what matters and what does not, what has value and what does not, what is true and what is not. And he who defines reality has power and authority on his side. It is not a coincidence that we talk about his-story not her-story.

This is the soil from which we have grown. This is our collective political heritage – for both women and men. Power is transferred from the men of one generation to the men of the next generation. Power has always been passed down through the male line, and still is. We all know that it is extremely rare for power to be transferred between women.

Let's not fool ourselves although some women have managed to climb the career ladder in business and politics and have even made it all the way to the top. Just look at the most wealthy 1% of every nation – 90% of them are men. Do you need more evidence?

In every society, the male has an advantage that I find increasingly difficult to tolerate as I grow older. To change this, women must be ready to revolt against the entrenched traditions and attitudes towards gender status and gender roles. They must be disobedient. Nowhere in the world have women gained sovereignty or liberation without revolting against predominant ideas.

Women's liberation unleashes a lot of energy that can be a source of wealth and prosperity. Men must understand that it is in their favour too to unleash the female energy. In a globalized world no state can afford not to make women's empowerment a priority, no country can shy away from utilizing this energy for the benefit of society as a whole. If this energy is lost, societies fall behind, become backward and undemocratic.

Those societies tend to fall prey to conflicts between interest groups, racial groups, and religious groups, led by men who believe that political power is limited, and that all available means must be used to acquire power and hold on to it. That the winner has power on his side and does not share it with others.

This view of power has had devastating consequences all over the world and is fertile ground for conflict. Just look at the war in Ukraine.

We live in a world that is out of order (polarized, crisis and wars, increased authoritarianism) and it is an uphill battle to ensure that liberal democratic values such as gender equality are at the forefront.

Actually, it is more about protecting the achievements we have made than about making new ones.

We must revisit and redefine the concept of power. Power should not be exclusive, not a zero-sum game. Power can be shared and when women enter politics, they should do it to advance empowerment. Politics should always mean empowerment – of people, of countries and of ideas.

When women are elected to parliament or take their place in government or are chosen to hold other positions of power in society, they enter an environment that is developed for men, by men. And they often face great dilemmas. They try to hold on to the ideas and values that are important to them, in an environment that is governed by different values and based on other traditions.

I have a long and, at times a difficult, experience of being one of a very few women in different governing bodies both nationally and internationally. Very few women are in this group and women's empowerment is rarely on the agenda. Speaking out on behalf of women is not easy because there is a lack of experience, knowledge and therefore interest among those attending these meetings. When you start speaking you can almost see how the men's attention evaporates before your eyes.

So, what do we do? How do we change this?

I think there is only one answer. We must have more women in all leading institutions in society. Women should have their 50% share in all governing bodies such as Parliament, administration, national and local governments, political parties, leadership of international institutions

etc. And they should not need to fight for their share – it is rightfully theirs.

3

Fighting with the men means that women must master the art of war and play by the rules of patriarchy. Let's not forget that we should not be in politics to satisfy our own egos but to make society better, more egalitarian, more human. We may hold a powerful role, but that role and the power we held should not define us, our existence, or our value. Egoism is the worst trap of patriarchy.

When you get trapped the most important thing is to have the friendship of other women that reminds you who you are and where you come from. Women in politics or in business must realize that we women are different from men and should not adopt patterns that have been developed to suit them.

We must bring with us into the public arena the altruism we women try to practice in the family. There we build on cooperation but not competition, on nurturing, educating, and bringing out the best in every individual. We must remember that we struggle for equality because we are different from men. We cherish diversity and do not want to copy men.

Bear in mind that we have a lot to offer, and the world desperately needs us and our value system. So let's be proud of ourselves, use our comparative advantages and change the world's value system for the sake of our children and grandchildren.

