



Women's Leadership
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Thank you to Women in International Security - Canada for inviting me here. I am very happy to be present at the gathering of an organization that does so much for empowering women, in particular by building a network of women who extend mutual support.

I decided to speak on the topic of leadership by women today because I want to focus your attention on women who care about and support others, who try to uplift others, and concern themselves with ways to achieve that.

Let me be clear: in this talk I will not focus on the qualities one needs to possess in order to be successful. I am not concerned with individual success. Because at work, if my supervisor will exploit me and will not treat me with dignity and respect, I am not interested whether it is a man or a woman. Unfortunately these days, very often feminism is associated with women's struggle for individual success. In fact, as we talk about women, women's rights and equality, I would like us to go back to the early roots and promises of the movement and to shift our focus from the discussion of individual success to the discussion of advancement of women for the better good.

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I join Nancy Fraser in her expressions of concern, when she writes that

[...] I worry, specifically, that our critique of sexism is now supplying the justification for new forms of inequality and exploitation. [...] That would explain how it came to pass that feminist ideas that once formed part of a radical worldview are increasingly expressed in individualist terms.¹

And here, I think, we need to step back and take a bird's eye view to ensure that when we care about the well-being of each individual tree, we care about the well-being of the forest. These two things are not the same. As Aristotle said, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." We should not empower each individual tree, hoping that the forest will take care of itself. On the contrary, because we love the forest, we make the future of each tree close to our heart.

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And this is exactly what women leaders do. They think about the environment where they are placed, they are worried about the future of that environment, and they are keen on making it better - not just for themselves, but for everyone else.

Surely, one needs to stand on one's own feet before one ventures in the affair of rescuing others. In fact, I have always thought that the safety protocol on flights contains a special kind of wisdom applicable beyond flights and airports. As they say on airplanes, "put your own oxygen mask first, then assist others." But let us not forget that in times of turbulence, the relationships that we have created as we have worked with others for the common good is often the oxygen that we put on ourselves when we face turbulence. If we are only worried about ourselves, when we encounter turbulence, we may turn around and discover that there is no oxygen mask.

Surely, there is an overlap between individual success and leadership. I would look at it as a venn diagram: there are certain qualities, including persistence, focus, drive and enthusiasm that both sides share, yet it is the interest in the public good that distinguishes a leader from people who aspire for individual advancement.

And here, I return to the definition of leadership. Leaders possess, "the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations." Here I guide myself with work by Kouzes and Posner, which I find very useful. Leaders, by definition, are those who are concerned by the fate of their society, and who take steps - and often risks - in order to move their institution or community forward.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal>

But how does that happen in reality? One of the strongest characteristics of a leader is the ability to weave the web of solidarity; of female leaders, to weave the web of solidarity among women. Solidarity is a web of mutual obligations created through the expression of mutual support. It is through solidarity that we “sustain the condition of civic togetherness.”² I specifically draw on Arendt’s definition, since it centers not on abstract rationality or common identity, but on the process of taking action. It is through actions and the expressions of mutual support that we build a web of relationships capable of uplifting others and us.

But the practical question is how does one do it? One starts by defending women who are attacked. Attacked verbally, publicly or privately, physically or psychologically. As this audience knows very well, women are attacked very often—routinely. All of us have been and will be attacked. And self-defense against such attacks is incredibly hard. In fact, when one does it, one looks... defensive. And in the actions of self-defense one might justify all the usual stereotypes against women: emotional, upset, startled, nervous...

Above all, you might remember a German story about Baron Munchausen. The story tells of fictional Baron’s impossible adventures, such as riding on a cannonball, fighting a crocodile, and travelling to the Moon. One special part from the story about the funny Baron Munchausen was that when he falls into the swamp, Baron Munchausen pulls himself out of mire by his own hair. This story laid foundation to the famous experiment called Munchausen’s Trilemma. But let us remember that Baron Munchausen’s story is a fiction. We cannot get out of the swamp just by ourselves.

Furthermore, by defending other women, we, defend ourselves. Let me recall famous words by Pastor Martin Martin Niemöller:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

We defend others in the hopes of weaving the web of solidarity that will help others defend us when it is our turn to be targeted. In this process, we create a dense web of relationships, which is much harder for anyone to take on.

² Michael Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 59.

When we defend others who are attacked because they are women, we should defend them as women. And here I would like to paraphrase Hannah Arendt again, remembering what she wrote about ad hominem attacks. In her memoirs she wrote how when she was laughed at as a Jew, her mom advised her to respond “as a Jew.” If one is attacked as a Jew, she said, one must respond as a Jew. So if we are attacked as women, we must respond as women. But what does this mean, specifically? I think it means garnering one’s whole arsenal of experiences, perspectives, aspirations of being a woman and responding with them.

Interestingly, Hannah Arendt wasn't a feminist and she looked very skeptically at the women’s movement in general. But her version of solidarity played a significant role in her own life.

One evening in the late 1940s Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, both well-known philosophers and writers found themselves standing together on subway platform in uncomfortable silence. Both were retuning home from the editorial meeting of *Journal Politics* but neither had spoken to each other for six years. Arendt approach Mary and said, “let us end this nonsense. We think too much alike.”³ As one author summarizes this encounter “they found that on any number of public questions they always ended up on the same side, usually alone.”⁴ This encounter started one of the most influential friendships in the 20th century, throughout which both writers supported each other numerous times as each faced waves of attacks and criticism.

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I have personally seen such solidarity at work many times. One morning in January 2006 I turned on the TV and saw that the then-Minister of Defence was organizing a press conference dedicated to none other than myself. At the time I was a very active civil rights lawyer, criticizing the government’s human rights record. He called me “an androgynous creature with a dirty face who hasn’t read two books.” Well, how does one respond to that? By saying, no, I am not an androgynous creature? Or yes, I have read books that weigh more than you. This would be silly. But luckily, before I could blink my eye, there were many statements by my colleagues, NGOs, and embassies responding to him and chastising him.

³ Deborah Nelson, *The Virtues of Heartlessness: Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, and the Anesthetics of Empathy*, *Am Lit Hist* (Spring 2006) 18 (1): 86-101.

⁴ Deborah Nelson, *The Virtues of Heartlessness: Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt and the Anesthetis of Empathy*, *Am Lit Hist* (Spring 2006) 18 (1): 86-101.

But let me go back to the crux of the definition of women's leadership. What are the qualities that make a female leader? I would like to suggest two metaphors, describing the two personalities that women leaders possess. They are not exclusive - on the contrary, they are complimentary. Please, keep in mind that I speak of content, not of form.

A female leader possesses two personalities. I would like to call the first personality: Celine Dion. A personality of an A-student, of a good girl, of a responsible person who takes tasks seriously, who is a respected professional, a reliable colleague and a friend. Somebody who is exceptionally skillful in the activities that she pursues, who is responsive, rule abiding, hard working and determined. But this personality, of Celine Dion, is necessary but not enough for leadership. It is a *sine qua non* for leadership; it is a foundation on which the rest is built. But it is not enough to mobilize others, to work with others and convince others to join you and not enough to doubt the status quo and move forward for change. To move forward and affect change one must first disapprove of affairs as they stand, one must be dissatisfied with the status quo and have qualities that will help you convince others to work with you to move beyond it. Celine Dion personality is not sufficient.

So what is missing? Great female leaders, I suggest, possess a second personality, which becomes visible at times. I would like to call this personality: Janis Joplin. A rebel, a creative soul, a person with a will and a unique perspective, a person concerned with and unhappy with the world and inspired to retain her own personhood at a very high cost and to venture ahead to create a better world.

I suggest that great female leaders all possess these two worlds: the Celine Dion and Janis Joplin. It is a unique and surprising combination of the two that makes them into exceptional personalities at the center of their respective communities. It is a combination of the two that makes them respected for who they are, even among their adversaries, and allows them to have a vision towards a world that does not exist. Without Janis, Celine Dion is a well-respected colleague and a friend, devoid of dynamism, creativity, rebellion and charisma that moves things forward. Without Janis, she is missing the dissatisfaction with the status quo, the vision and creativity necessary for a great leader. Without Celine, Janis is missing the patience, focus and other qualities of a marathon runner required to make her vision of a better future a reality.

The key question then comes as to how to maintain this balance, how to keep Celine and Janis in happy cohabitation, and how to make sure they empower and not undermine each other. This is a very tricky question. Yet I am sure every great female leader has found a way to develop her own ways of keeping both Celine and Janis busy and happy.

