

Empowered Leaders Lighting the Path to the Future

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Margaret Sanger's quote "Woman must not accept; she must challenge. She must not be awed by that which has been built up around her; she must reverence that woman in her which struggles for expression" roars like thunder in the hearts of many women who have fallen victim to oppression and discrimination. This quote lays the foundation for all women who have felt the weight of a thousand silenced voices and a million unexplored dreams. *Fragile, weak-minded, inadequate* are words that have been used to belittle the average woman and hold her from her true potential. The choice to change those words to *driven, strong, and unstoppable* is within many women who decide not to let society hold them back. The power of choice is engraved with blood, sweat, and tears in the hearts of many women who make that first step to making a difference.

Oppression is like a tree, shading people from the truth and spreading its branches far and wide. As it grows, it wilts the forever growing-flower known as woman that longs for the sun of equality. Among those branches are lack of education and inadequate income. Women who have taken the sightless glimmer of light to blossom like Oprah Winfrey, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Mary McLeod Bethune all have chopped down some of the branches that keep us in darkness. Mark Nepo captures the essence of what all these blooming flowers have done, as he states: "If I dare to hear you I will feel you like the sun and grow in your direction" (p. 10). These women are linked by their sound decision to change the route predestined for them. The easiest choice that anyone can do is lie down and accept the cards that they have been dealt, but to face the unknown is the bravest.

Choice is the first stepping stone in the direction of many paths that lie ahead. The first step is the most frightening to any woman as her head tells her to turn around but, her heart yearns for more. The path is even rockier than any woman would have ever thought and there are always voices warning her to turn around, voices that spit words like venom slowing her down until she is almost paralyzed. There will be many obstacles such as rejection and stereotyping along the way that will leave her so bent and broken, that these obstacles will have her crawling back to the road most taken. Those who make the choice of continuing down their path of unknown will experience the sweetest taste of victory. The path of the unknown will expose weakness, vulnerability, and imperfection, which all should be embraced.

Owning our story can be hard, but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky, but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light (Brown, 2010, p. 55). Women want to experience the victory of overcoming any impediment that blocks their path to gaining an important place in the future.

A person who has the courage to grow helps break down the boundaries that have been set and inspires others to grow. One person fighting for the change that he or she wants to see can build leaders with qualities such as sympathy, assuming responsibility and upholding a certain standard of justice. Women are molding leaders that understand problems and strive to find a solution, as well as exceed expectations when trying to reach a goal. The choice to reach their full potential has shaped many women's lifestyles, with women having a voice in political decisions and even careers in law and medicine. The ongoing fight to diminish discrimination because of gender helps shape all aspects of our society. Women have dealt with the

overwhelming weight of oppression for too long and are now fighting back with their choice to be more than a housewife. Women are using their right to vote, gaining an education, and positioning themselves in leadership roles to break down the walls of oppression.

Oprah Winfrey is a great example of a woman who had the courage to grow and not let the color of her skin or gender act as a road block on her life. Oprah, who was raised in a poverty stricken neighborhood and who was a troubled teen, is now one of the most influential women in business. She is women who started with nothing and grew it into something, not letting stereotypes hinder her goals. Her desire to bring quality entertainment projects into production prompted her to create Harpo Productions. She was the first woman in history to own and produce her own talk show. Oprah even has her own leadership academy for girls, which teaches young girls to excel and have the ability to move beyond challenging circumstances. Her focus is to nurture the potential of these young women who attend her school and help them grow into leaders.

Education is a power weapon once gained and can never be taken away. A lack of education leaves an individual unaware of his or her rights and unprotected from abuse and oppression. Women have always been seen as secondhand citizens, because they lacked educational substance, but not by choice. In countries like China and India, baby girls are often killed because their gender creates a financial burden on the family and they project that the female will bring in no income. Also in India, during the child's middle years if she is not killed, she will have to help out with housework and taking care of other siblings rather than getting an education to support the family. Their lack of choice hinders them from stepping passed the dusty front porch unto the vast horizon.

In American history, it is very evident that women did not have access to higher education before 1848. Even though a few women would attend a female seminary or academy, they were not allowed into colleges and universities. The restriction of women's rights to higher education led to an enormous change in American culture as a whole. Women who were given the chance to achieve great things include Elizabeth Blackwell, who was the first woman in the United States to receive a medical degree and Ellen Swallow Richards, who was the first professional chemist in the United States.

As the desire for fulfillment grows in women, so does the number of women in the work force. As children, we all have fantasies of being that rich successful doctor or lawyer driving around in a fancy car. The restriction and stereotypes that surround women have only acted as a catalyst driving that hunger for more to new heights. When women decide to embark on their desire for purpose they are in essence saying "I chose to be an active participant in my life rather than a spectator" (McGraw 2006). Women have struggled for such options as a fulfilling career, a role in politics and the most important of them all their own choice. Women are in medical positions, on the Supreme Court and in the scientific field but they are not being treated as equals, since they are not being paid the same as men.

There has always been a gap between the pay for women and men doing the same job. A national average of 77 cents on the male dollar has been recorded in 2008 but for African American women it was 68 cents and 58 cents for Latino women, as reported by Time magazine. Another impact on the inadequate pay for women is that less educated women, most high school dropouts have seen a dramatic decrease in wages more than their counterparts. With the increase of single parent homes supported by women there is not a balanced in these households. These women are given more responsibility but less money for support. Increased poverty, constrains

on economic growth, a negative effect on the wealth of families and communities are all outcome of gender discrimination in the workforce.

The workforce has always been seen as male dominated, especially in fields such as business. Business is a field where many decisions are made, money is a key component, and representation is important. Over time, women have kicked in the front door to the business industry breaking down the idea that women are too weak to handle a business. Women are not seen, heard or utilized in the business field, because of common thoughts such as being “motherly” or “gentle.” Women have the same leadership attributes as men that drive them to run for high positions and make millions of dollars. Some influential women in business are Andrea Jung, Ann Livermore, and Linda Chen, who rank as the highest paid women in their field.

Andrea Jung reveals that she knows that she is a great example for women with her statement “Women like myself, CEOs, can pave the way for more women to get to the top.” Andrea Jung is the Chairwoman and CEO of Avon Products Inc. Avon is a multi-level marketing company and Jung is the longest tenured female among fortune 500 companies. Andrea Jung is a great example of a woman who used the slightest amount of sunlight to blossom. She used the resources that were given to her to seek higher education at Princeton University, from which she graduated magna cum laude and progressed far in her life. She is now one of the top five most paid women in the United States. The right to choose her own path led her from the executive vice president at Neiman Marcus to become the CEO of Avon Products. At first she was just the president of the product market group where she was in charge of market research and strategic planning, but she never stopped striving for more and moved up the cooperate ladder. Andrea

Jung is like a shining light in darkness guiding many women to work hard, be better and prove that they have some self-worth.

The power of choice is acting as a catalyst fueling women's need for change and helping them mold the future. Women want to mold a future that highlights the great works, determination and perseverance of many women all over the world. Women are being awakened to their full potential in great numbers, embracing the rights and freedoms that we have been given, and are taking what is rightfully theirs and taking a stand for what they believe in. Women are standing up, letting their voices be heard and making the right choices to protect themselves from being silenced one again. The words "women shall be seen, not heard" shall never be heard by one little girl ever again as women become empowered leaders.

References

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