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'The Future of Women's Leadership'

I'm delighted to have been asked to meet with you today; I propose to launch a discussion about women as leaders, today and in the future. I know that 9 of you met last Friday to do a preliminary discussion of some of these issues; Laura has filled me in on some of the points that you made then, and it's clear that it was a rich and thought-provoking conversation; I'm sure today's will be as well.

First off, what do we mean by leadership? As some of you know, from having read the book, in *Thinking about Leadership* I use the term fairly broadly: "Leaders define or clarify goals for a group of individuals, and bring together the energies of members of that group to pursue those goals." A leader can define or clarify goals in lots of different ways: by issuing an edict or fatwa, passing a law, voicing a command, sending a tweet or presenting an interesting idea in a meeting of colleagues. Leaders can mobilize people's energies in lots of different ways as well, from subtle quiet persuasion to the coercive threat or use of deadly force. Thus it's most appropriate to think of leadership as a spectrum, from the most visible leaders like the president of the US, or a dictator such as Qaddafi, to more low-key leadership behind the

scenes. I argue that leadership in this broad sense is essential to all collective social activity; we can cooperate or act in parallel without leadership. But if we are to undertake a collective project, leadership will be required.

Most of the time, when we think of leaders, we think of the guys (usually guys) “out front” -- the general rallying the troops, the president on the podium, the CEO behind the desk, the guide showing the way to his followers. These are the visible, paradigmatic leaders, with uniforms and insignia; they are the objects of idolatry and protest; as Machiavelli said, such leaders may be loved or feared or hated. But they are rarely ignored.

However, there are also many leaders who are much less prominent, less obviously “in charge.” I was on a panel at the international Leadership Association conference in London last week, with Nigel Bowles of the Rothermere American Institute and Alan Renwick of the University of Reading, in which we discussed leadership “behind the scenes.” We suggested four examples of this kind of leadership: first, the “hidden leadership” of a president or Prime Minister in his or her shirtsleeves with the inner cabinet, making crucial decisions away from public view.

The second kind of behind the scenes leadership is “leading from behind,” as described, for example, by Nelson Mandela in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*. Quoting the regent chief of his people, “A leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.” This same kind of leadership is praised by Lao

Tzu in the classic manual *Tao te Ching*. James Macgregor Burns quotes this passage from Lao Tzu: “Bearing yet not possessing/ Working yet not taking credit/Leading yet not dominating/ This is the primal virtue.”

The third kind of leadership behind the scenes is that of the organizers in the movements we call the Arab spring or Occupy Wall Street or Occupy the London Stock Exchange. These movements have sometimes been called “leaderless revolutions,” and indeed they are notable for the absence of larger-than-life public figures who stand in front of a microphone and speak for the whole crowd. But some activists are doing the work of organizing, mobilizing people, behind the scenes, across cyberspace; everybody didn’t just spontaneously decide to turn up on Tahrir Square on January 25, or wander randomly down to Zuccotti Park or St. Pauls Cathedral. The activists in Egypt had been communicating through social networks like Facebook and Twitter for many months before January 25, organizing smaller earlier protests, developing tactics. And once the movements have begun, there is a lot of organizing that must be done, providing the essential services, deciding on the specific activities like holding General Assemblies or “process sessions” to review what has been done, continuing to communicate.

This is a fluid kind of leadership, without visible figures that the press can identify as speaking for everyone, without long speeches or prominent authority, but it’s leadership nonetheless: defining or clarifying goals for a group, and mobilizing people’s energies to pursue them. It depends heavily on

social technology, and given the power of these tools, it is a novel kind of leadership that we need to understand better.

Today, however, I want to give special attention to the fourth of our examples of “leadership behind the scenes”: that which is often associated specifically with women. Over all these past centuries, men have generally occupied the visible, out front positions of leadership and women a more subtle, low-key behind the scenes leadership. Do we think this will always be true? Or might the future bring a different story?

To explore this question, I’ll first consider briefly the kinds of leadership that women have always provided, and then look at the positions that are slowly becoming more open to women today. I’ll discuss some of the obstacles that still remain for women in top leadership positions and some of the advantages of behind-the scenes leadership. Then we’ll ponder what the future is likely to hold.

### *Women’s leadership in the past*

Throughout history, leadership has been closely associated with masculinity. Most people in the past have simply assumed that women were incapable of leadership. And not just the past: a few weeks ago, a guy supporting the opposition candidate to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, running for re-election as President of Liberia, was quoted in the *New York Times* saying that the main reason for his opposition to Johnson Sirleaf was that “a woman should not be head; a man should be the head.”

Very few women in history before the 20<sup>th</sup> century exercised institutional authority over men as well as women. It's worth remembering, however, that women in almost every society have been influential in some contexts. Women have often been the power behind the throne, the savvy mistress of the king or the dowager empress ruling through her son. And despite the stubborn linkage between leadership and maleness, and some women in almost every era have also proved themselves capable of providing leadership.

In chapter 4 of *Thinking about Leadership* I point out that certain situations have been especially auspicious for women as leaders: all-female settings such as women's colleges or convents, and occasions when dynasty trumps gender so that Cleopatra or Elizabeth I of England can be a ruling monarch. Where men are temporarily absent – Quaker Nantucket, when most of the men were at sea, or in wartime where the men were away fighting-- women have had ample opportunities to lead. Women often lead movements where women's interests are especially involved – think of the prohibition or settlement house campaigns of the late nineteenth century and the battle for woman's suffrage.

Much more frequently, women have been leaders in more informal situations: healing “wise women,” and market women in Africa, European salons in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Women in many societies have provided leadership in schools, families and family businesses. And countless women across history have provided leadership in volunteer endeavors such as

education, religious activities, care for the sick and wounded, cultural affairs, and charity for the poor. This is a more low-key, behind-the-scenes kind of leadership than being a king or a prime minister; but it is essential to the health and flourishing of all human communities.

So that's a rough, impressionistic survey of the different kinds of leadership women have exercised in the past: a very few leaders "out front," as queens or abbesses, with countless women providing more informal, subtle leadership behind the scenes. What is likely to be true of women's leadership in the future? I'll answer this question in terms of three possible scenarios, different visions of the future of women's leadership.

### *Scenario One*

In the last few decades, unlike the more distant past, we have seen dozens of women in the most authoritative and powerful positions in the world. More than eighty women were elected president or prime minister in countries around the world between 1945 and 2008. Increasing numbers of women are entering state and national legislatures, sometimes with the help of quotas for their participation, sometimes simply as a result of increasing interest and acceptability. Women hold office as senators, governors, corporate CEOs (including the new president of IBM), university presidents, heads of foundations and social service agencies, rabbis, generals, Anglican priests, and Supreme Court justices.

If you just project that same trajectory forward, you might assume that the future will be one in which all top leadership posts finally become gender-

neutral and women are as likely as men to hold them. Sometimes we act as though we assume this is the obvious likely path, and the only question is how long it will take. As Deborah Rhode of Stanford points out, “At current rates of change, it will be almost three centuries before women are as likely as men to become top managers in major corporations or achieve equal representation in the US Congress.” OK, but eventually, we may think, we’ll get there, because that’s the direction in which things seem to be moving. You might call this path *convergence towards parity*.

One problem with this scenario, however, is that women who are ambitious for formal leadership still face formidable obstacles, and there is no guarantee that the obstacles will just melt away in the years ahead. The barriers to women in authority today are more subtle than those faced by Queen Elizabeth I, but they are surprisingly stubborn. A number of familiar images or metaphors have been coined to make this point – “glass ceiling,” or “leaky pipeline.” In their recent book entitled *Through the Labyrinth*, Alice Eagly and Linda Carli use the ancient female image of the “labyrinth” to describe the multiple obstacles women face on the path to top leadership. It’s not just a straight linear path towards eventual convergence.

So think of yourself as finding your way through a maze, to the central prize of top leadership. This is a challenging task for men as well as women; but women encounter some *additional* cul-de-sacs and dead ends that men generally don’t face.

In the first place, women in almost all societies have primary (if not sole) responsibility for child care and home making. If they are employed outside the home, they are expected to undertake what has been called “the second shift,” managing such responsibilities in addition to their professional occupations. Few organizations (or nation-states) have workplace policies that support family-friendly life-styles, including high quality, reliable, affordable child-care facilities, flexible work schedules while children are young, and support for anyone caring for a sick child or aging parent. This makes things very hard for working parents, and especially for working mothers. Some people do manage a two-career family. Those of us who have tried can attest that it is very much worth the effort; but it does take two committed partners, healthy children, lots of stamina, enough money to pay for good childcare and housekeeping, strategic planning worthy of a mid-size firm -- and a fair amount of luck. Until policies in firms, institutions and nation-states change to be more hospitable to working parents, this will continue to be true.

Other labyrinthine obstacles blocking the path to top leadership for women include gender stereotypes that keep getting in the way of your being judged simply on your own accomplishments. For example: Women are supposed to be nurturing – but if you are kind and sensitive, somebody will say you are not tough enough to make hard decisions, not strong enough to fire someone; and if you show that you are up to such challenges, you will probably be described as “shrill” or “bitchy.” This “catch-22” clearly plagued

Hillary Rodham Clinton in her campaign for the presidency, as if has countless women across the years.

Women are also less likely to have mentors. Some senior male professors or corporate leaders do try specifically to advance the careers of young women (Lou Gerstner and Sam Palmisano did this for Ginni Rometti at IBM), but male bosses often find it easier to mentor young men, seeing them as future versions of themselves, taking them out for a beer or a golf game, and for many reasons, find it hard to imagine doing this for young women. Many (not all) senior women are happy to mentor other women; but if there aren't any senior women around, and the men aren't sympathetic, you don't get mentored.

As if all of this were not enough, the most insidious obstacle on the path to top leadership for women is popular culture, a formidable force in shaping expectations for young people, which rarely suggests a high-powered career as an appropriate ambition for a person of the female sex. Think about all the ads and websites and TV shows that portray young women as sexy, submissive, sweet –rarely are women shown making decisions, moving things forward. All this shapes what we think women should be like in powerful, subliminal ways. The ambitions of girls and women are discouraged when they are taught to be deferential to males and not compete with them for resources, including power and recognition. Women internalize these stereotypes, which leads all of us sometimes to question our own abilities.

And finally, in terms of obstacles to women's out-front leadership, I've so far been describing the situation in Western democracies. And as we know, women who might want to be involved in political activity or provide leadership in any institution face even more formidable obstacles in many parts of the world these days. Think of Afghanistan or Pakistan, where the Taliban in some areas have even denied women education or any opportunities outside the home. And there are many other cultures where women are routinely excluded from any formal positions of authority. For any woman ambitious for leadership in such settings, the idea of "convergence towards parity" will sound like a very distant dream.

For all these reasons, therefore – expectations of primary responsibility for domestic duties, gender stereotypes, absence of mentors, the power of popular culture, if not systematic exclusion from political activity – women ambitious for out-front leadership today face significant obstacles that do not confront their male peers. This means, at the very least, that the first scenario for the future of women's leadership – *convergence towards parity* – is going to take a lot longer than its advocates might hope. Such a future would also require more deliberate action on the part of governments, businesses and individual leaders, to create family-friendly workplaces and overcome all the other obstacles that stand in the way of women being out-front leaders.

*Scenario Two*

However: discussing the issue in terms of obstacles assumes that significant numbers of women are ambitious for top leadership; and maybe this isn't true. In a thought-provoking essay entitled "You've Come a Long Way, Baby – and You've Got Miles to Go," Barbara Kellerman of Harvard sees no reason to assume that women will continue to move into demanding positions of top leadership at the same rate as we did in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. She asks us to consider the possibility that most women really don't *want* such jobs. As she puts it: "Work at the top of the greasy pole takes time, saps energy, and is usually all-consuming." So "maybe the trade-offs high positions entail are ones that many women do not want to make." Maybe, in other words, there are fewer women senators or CEOs because women "do not want what men have."

If Kellerman is right, then we could expect that as women see what such positions entail, fewer of us will decide that high profile leadership is where our ambitions lie, and the numbers of women in such posts will recede from a current high-water mark toward something closer to the world before 1970. Women have proved we can do it, in terms of high-powered, visible leadership posts; we've seen the promised land; and most women, in this scenario, will decide they are happier where they've been for most of their lives. Instead of *convergence towards parity*, you might call this second scenario the *differential ambitions* scenario.

As some of you know, we found something of this kind in our recent study of undergraduate women's leadership at Princeton. Many recent alumnae and current female students told us that they were not interested in

holding very visible leadership positions like student government president or class president, and were more comfortable leading behind the scenes, as vice-president or treasurer. Sure enough, in this fall's election campaign for president of the freshman class at Princeton, there were 8 male candidates and only 1 female, and 6 female candidates for secretary. (One of the men was elected president, beating a male opponent in the final runoff, but women became vice-president, secretary and treasurer.) Women are also much more likely to head "cause-oriented" organizations such as Greening Princeton, the Committee to Reform K-12 education, tutoring in Trenton; or be president of their dance group or a cappella group, than to have major offices in campus-wide organizations.

When we asked women about this, they told us that they preferred to put their efforts where they could make an impact, in places where they could actually get the work of the organization done, rather than advancing their own resumes or having a big title. We were struck by how many women told us that they *prefer less visible posts, getting things done behind the scenes, concentrating on issues that they care about* -- the environment, the arts, social welfare -- rather than get engaged in university-wide activities like student government. In this, they gave different answers than their male peers. And they also gave different answers than the alumnae who first made Princeton co-educational 40 years ago: those women were feisty pioneers determined to prove that they belonged at Princeton against considerable skepticism and

opposition, in the heyday of second-wave feminism, and they showed very different tendencies than the students of the last 10 or 15 years.

Thus our committee discovered that today (to quote our first general finding): “*There are differences—subtle but real—between the ways most Princeton female undergraduates and most male undergraduates approach their college years, and in the ways they navigate Princeton when they arrive.*” We found, in fact, some statistically significant differences between the ambitions and comfort-levels of men and women at Princeton, in terms of the types of leadership that appealed to them and the ways they thought about power. As the season for applications for Rhodes and Marshalls rolls around, we find that the candidates at Princeton are disproportionately men, once again, although we have made some progress recently. And we’ve learned that those women who apply have usually been specifically encouraged to do so by one of their professors or their friends.

We have some evidence that these patterns in leadership hold true on similar campuses, although not necessarily at all kinds of institutions of higher education. So if you project our Princeton findings forward, and if Barbara Kellerman and others who think this way are correct, there’s no reason to believe that women and men in the future will converge in terms of types of leadership. You might instead predict that these *differential ambitions* will mean that women will always choose and occupy less prominent leadership posts than men, even as they make a significant difference behind the scenes.

My husband Bob and I spent an hour recently observing the protest encampment at St. Paul's and talking with some of the participants. A very articulate, thoughtful young single mother left a discussion group we were observing and came up to us to explain what was going on, and why she has chosen to participate in the protest. But the person who was running that "process session" was a man; and most of those in that circle who spoke, as well as the guy in the information booth and those protesters pictured in the newspapers as meeting with the cathedral authorities, were all male. We don't know whether this is a result of choice or expectation or a random feature of one unsystematic observation session, but it was nonetheless striking to us.

So what is the future going to be like—*converging towards parity*, or *differential ambitions*? I'll be interested in your views on this, but my own take on the issue is that the future is that both these scenarios are too simplistic.

In the Princeton study, in addition to hearing from women who preferred low-key posts, we also learned that some women who *do* consider running for visible campus posts, especially a presidency, get the message from their peers (mostly their male peers) that such posts are more appropriately sought by men; there is also evidence that men are much more likely to vote for other men, whereas women vote for candidates of either gender. This falls into the obstacles category, rather than being evidence of differential ambitions. And as we know, in revolutions in Egypt or Libya, as was true in France in 1790s or Russia in 1917, women are often crucial participants in the fluid times

of revolutionary fervor, but somehow get edged out when the time comes to form a new government or build a new society.

So differential ambitions are not the whole story: there are also factors that discourage women from running for high office, and once they envision themselves in these jobs and see these posts as relevant for women, more women put themselves forward. And most important, when they are specifically invited or encouraged: when someone – an older student, a friend, a faculty or staff member – says to them: “You really ought to run for this office, or apply for a Rhodes Scholarship, you’d be really good at this,” women are much more likely to consider this a real possibility and decide to go for it.

Therefore, to those like Barbara Kellerman who assert that there is a “natural” difference in motivation that explains the disparities between men and women in top leadership, I would respond that we cannot know whether this is true until more women are invited and urged to try for demanding leadership positions, and can attain such positions without making personal and family sacrifices disproportionate to those faced by men.

It may well be true that because of oxytocin or some other hormonal factor, female human beings will generally want to spend more time with their young children than their male partners; but it doesn’t follow that the gender division of labor should be absolute, or that all a woman’s other talents should be permanently subordinated to that purpose. It should not be beyond our powers to create a world in which women and men can both spend more time

with their young children, and women do so even more than men, if they so choose; but it won't forever bar them from rising to the top of their professions, in a world where we may live healthy lives into our 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> decade.

Thus my guess is that the future will bring a mixed scenario, with some women demonstrating and pursuing ambition for high office, and others demonstrating a preference for more low-key posts, serving causes they believe are important to pursue, working behind the scenes. The main point is that *both kinds of leadership should be valued and made possible, for both women and men, and individuals should not be channeled into one or the other simply because of gender.*

Leadership of both kinds – out front and behind the scenes -- is important to the individual and to one's community - and *dealing with the requirements of one kind can often help a leader be more effective in the other.* And as Aristotle said long ago, by learning how to be good followers, students will also learn some important things about leadership. They will learn what can be done most effectively behind the scenes, and also become familiar with the opportunities and challenges of high-profile posts as they observe those whom they follow.

In this mixed scenario, where both types of leadership are attractive models for people of either sex, both men and women will be better leaders during their undergraduate years; and when they graduate, they will be prepared and motivated to take on leadership of both kinds. They will be out front or behind the scenes in different proportions depending on the

individual and his or her circumstances, personal preferences, specific situations and opportunities. But the choices won't automatically be linked to gender. And in the end, these men and women as individuals, and also our university communities, our towns and nation-states, our corporations, non-profit organizations and our world, will indeed be better off.