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Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future: Empowering Future Generations of Women and Girls: A Keynote Address for the Second World Conference on Women's Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, May 5, 2016

By Diana J. Fox¹

Introduction

I am deeply honored to be here to offer you some thoughts about the current and future condition of women and girls around the world through the lens of “empowerment”. It is rather a daunting task, and therefore I would like to thank Thalakhshana Liyanage and Lukshani Indrachapa as well as the entire staff of The International Institute of Knowledge Management for extending the invitation and challenging me with this opportunity. Opportunity, as we know, is among the most important factors in the advancement of girls and women toward gender equality, a theme to which I will return later in my comments.

My talk consists of three parts. First, I will share with you some of the insights that my own discipline of Anthropology brings to an understanding of the global status of women and girls. This is useful in positioning us now, in our particular point in history. I want to offer the anthropological perspective of a long term and holistic view. A time line helps us to imagine the distance we must go, but also to evaluate where we have come from.

Second, I will outline in general, some of the prevailing challenges and obstacles to universal gender and sexual equality, which I will point out from the start include gender and sexual diversity. It is important that we do not gloss over the difficulties, that we take stock of them and their enormity. Obstacles are not insurmountable, but they do require creativity, ongoing individual and collective action, and a long term view to move beyond them. We must think not only of immediacy—which is critically important in relieving current suffering, but also of the long term transformations we can build into our societies—work that is being done today in constructing new institutions and changing laws, as well as minds and attitudes.

Third, I will point to some of the areas where there has been success for women and girls. Success means many things and can be evaluated on many levels, from individual success to family, community, regional, national and worldwide achievements. For the child who has been trafficked, success means freedom from the abuse and loneliness of sexual slavery and the opportunity to rebuild one's life with psychological, educational, nutritional and community support. For survivors of domestic violence; for impoverished refugee mothers; for women who still cannot inherit land, or who can but are afraid to assert their newly earned rights; for girls deprived of education; for child laborers—really slaves; for women recovering from botched self-

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administered abortions; for women stigmatized by fistulas, left alone and in pain; for women in the workplace who earn less than men and who face daily battles of being taken seriously and fending off sexual harassment; for women facing ethnic violence and violence as a result of loving other women; for girls undergoing female genital mutilation; for wives suffering acid burns because dinner wasn't on the table on time; for women blocked from political office or high levels of management; for women seeking a life/work balance, juggling childrearing and career advancement—success means many things in particular for these different groups and individuals among so many other examples. Success for communities, and at both national and international levels of objectives has various meanings. However, all of these scenarios and levels of change share some features in common: success means freedom from the forces of oppression and the availability of opportunities to flourish and attain full human potential. Success means the ability to make decisions about one's own life and to enact them; success means access to resources and knowledge of how to use those resources. There have been successes, and it is critical we can identify why in order to chart a path for the future. Opportunities, choices, resources, decision-making power, support. These are what I would offer as constants of success in the quest for gender equality.

Anthropology: The Long View from a Four Field Perspective

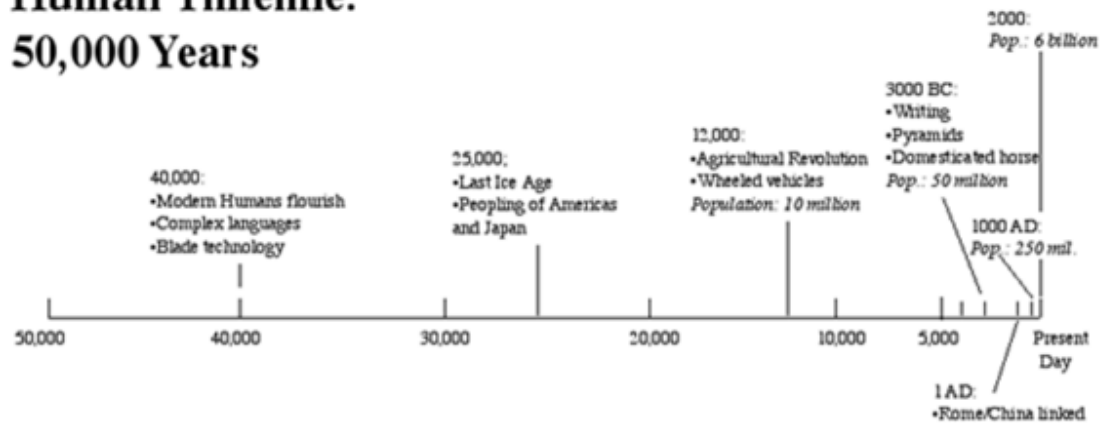
Let me begin with what my own discipline of Anthropology has to offer us in terms of perspectives and the long view. Anthropology has four interacting subfields—cultural anthropology which studies contemporary cultures and their near past; biological or physical anthropology which is about human evolution and the relationship between the body, culture, health and illness. Linguistic anthropology explores human languages, their genealogies, communication patterns in varying sociocultural contexts and the powerful use of symbols. Archaeology examines the cultures of the distant past through artifacts, revealing persistent human challenges, the reasons behind our failures and the diversity of their solutions. Ultimately all the subfields are linked together to offer a holistic view of humanity across time and space. This very long perspective into human origins allows us to look back from the present in a way that helps us to assess where we are now. Let's do that with an eye toward gender roles and themes of inequality.

The image below is a timeline that begins with anatomically modern humans moving out of Africa into Europe, which occurred approximately 40,000 years ago. However, as far back as 90,000 years, our species was living in small groups we call “bands” as foragers, exhibiting organized cultural behaviors.²

² Fagan, Brian. “Peopling the Globe” in Fagan, Brian M, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Archaeology*. 1996: 330-332. Oxford Univ. Press; Ingmanson, personal communication 4/19/16

ANTHROPOLOGY YIELDS A LONG TERM VIEW ON GENDER INEQUALITY AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

Human Timeline: 50,000 Years



Feminist archaeologists argue that small-scale band societies *in general* had a flexible and weak gendered division of labor. In a frequently cited study by the feminist archaeologist Elizabeth Barber on women's work in the archaeological record³ she offers examples of fossilized string made 17,000 years ago, discovered in the painted caves of France, as well as Venus figurines of voluptuous women wearing string skirts, dated around 20,000 BCE and with braided hair, indicating the existence of a string and weaving culture complex associated with women. String, created from gathered plant fibers such as flax, hemp, nettle, yucca and many others, was made into everyday objects--nets, carrying bags, clothing, traps—it was used everywhere human beings moved, and all early human societies were nomadic. Developments in archaeological technologies have permitted archaeologists with an eye toward gender to theorize about women's roles in these early nomadic, pre-Neolithic foraging societies. Feminist anthropologists suggest that these were among the most egalitarian societies that have ever existed on the planet. Foraging requires significant knowledge and skill; all members of a group must somehow participate in the survival of the collective through carrying, sharing and gathering behaviors. We also know from contemporary analyses that in many cases—not all, but many—when women contribute to productive labor and are not confined to reproductive/domestic labor, they achieve higher status and participate in greater decision-making. The foraging way of life is largely dependent on cooperative relationships in productive enterprises; hence, gender egalitarianism is a key dynamic for many foraging groups⁴. While there are exceptions both in the historical record and today, indicating patterns of male dominance, the principle of egalitarianism is also largely true of contemporary foragers—although their numbers are small and dwindling in our border-bound, sedentary, largely agricultural and industrial societies.

³ *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years. Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times.* 1994. Elizabeth Wayland Barber. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

⁴ *A World Full of Women 6th edition.* 2016. Ward, Martha C. and Edelstein, Monica D., NY: Taylor and Francis, p. 24-30.

Thinking back again at our timeline, we see that the invention of agriculture, known both as the Agricultural or the Neolithic Revolution occurred some 10,000 years ago, as horticulture was replaced by intensive farming practices through the invention of the plow, changing the human relationship with nature. Slowly around the planet, various groups of people began cultivating crops moving from simple gardening or hand-cultivation using tools such as digging sticks and hoes, to intensive farming. The Agricultural Revolution transformed not only how food was acquired and what people ate—and here the holistic anthropological perspective is key—but caused seismic shifts in human societies with significant impacts on women’s lives. Essentially, to understand contemporary inequalities, we have to go back to the dawn of agriculture where significant social stratification began to be formed. Among feminist scholars who study the origins of patriarchy, there is absolutely no dispute that agriculture brought enormous loss of power and status for women relative to men. Agricultural societies transformed the majority of people into peasants, who have the highest birth rates of any population in the world, whereas gatherer-hunters have the lowest. Agriculture birthed patriarchy in all its myriad forms, created hierarchies, slavery, standing armies and chronic warfare. Social inequality became the norm, amidst the flourishing of civilization. Agricultural societies brought about demographic transition through surplus production; it produced the world religions, central governments, writing and complex musical, artistic and architectural traditions as well as significant diversification of labor, specialized professions and trades. But amidst all this, women were in the process of producing the largest families in human history, dangerously birthing 8, 10, 12 children and more, under conditions of high maternal and infant mortality. Those who survived were continually in a state of pregnancy, birth and lactation. They continued their work with cloth, sewing, weaving and spinning which they could do close to the home. Women were also a reserve labor supply along with their children for periods of intensive planting and harvesting and they maintained kitchen gardens and ran households while men were away at war. Men controlled the productive resources and inheritance in the largely patrilineal societies that grew up around agrarian economies; inheritance rights were codified in the first laws, which also regulated the behavior of women. As feminist anthropologist Martha C. Ward writes:

“Agrarian societies develop elaborate religious, moral and legal justifications for their sexual stratification systems. Hammurabi’s Code was the first set of laws written down and provided the basis for legal systems in the Middle East, ancient Israel, and cultures of this important region. Of the 270 laws engraved on an upright stone pillar, approximately 100 of them dealt with the problems of keeping women in line, assigning ownership and responsibility for them, and defining the boundaries of their sexuality. In the ideologies of agriculturalists, women are subordinate, unclean and not bright enough to be trusted out alone. Women are viewed as suited only for inside and domestic tasks; they are incapable of public political and economic roles... Women have to rely on husbands for their livelihood—in short, institutionalized dependency, subordination, and political immaturity” (see footnote 4).

Hammurabi, the Babylonian King who ruled ancient Mesopotamia enshrined these laws at the end of his reign in approximately 1754 B.C.E. institutionalizing many practices that had already become customary. The stratified conditions that agricultural societies produced wherever there was agriculture in the ancient world included regional variations such as polygyny and various

lineage, descent and marriage customs. It is also important to note that some notable distinctions occurred among the societies of Native North America, and intermittently in parts of Asia and Africa where matrilineal, matrilineal arrangements grew up alongside religions with female deities; in these societies, women wielded significantly more power than in others. Patriarchy, however, has been the norm by far, and the patterns established in the Neolithic period persisted into the Industrial Revolution with its official eve beginning in 1760, but whose conditions were laid over the two previous centuries. Industrialism has largely preserved and created new structures of inequality; hence, we can state unequivocally that the institutionalization of agriculture, with brief recent exception, was not a beneficial development for women and their girl children. Moreover, in more recent history, as feminist historians have demonstrated, the rise of male dominated professions combined with industrial processes of mass production displaced women from those endeavors that had previously offered them agency and localized power even in the midst of agriculture: the healing arts of midwifery were replaced by male doctors with the institutionalization of biomedicine via the germ theories of disease; factory labor replaced women's home spinning, dying and weaving enterprises. Of course the situation is complex; maternal and infant mortality have declined significantly over the course of this history in many parts of the world through biomedicine, but we can only attribute the involvement of women in the sciences to the impact of recent women's movements. We can therefore say with unfortunate confidence that gender inequality is the longest, most persistent form of discrimination on our planet.

Let me pause to note that foraging as the dominant subsistence pattern for human beings has constituted close to 99% of human life on earth (Ingmanson, personal communication). This is a critical perspective for us to be aware of when we take into account that coordinated, systematic social movements for women's equality and rights began a mere two and quarter centuries ago. This is not to say that women did not resist, rebel, plot and collude as individuals and in their communities throughout the world to bring about change; but a systematic social movement to transform the structural inequalities of society and the very explicit "deliberately devised schemes to hold women in their place"⁵ (Langley and Fox 1994: xxi) did not emerge until first wave feminism, ultimately spawning the many contemporary women's rights and feminist movements that exist today and which fall under the umbrella of global women's movements. Sedentary, agricultural society has only occurred in the last 1% of human organized cultural life. Women's movements in response to the structural inequalities that emerged during this 1% of human history represent .025% of this period—250/10,000 years! This fact is cause for hope. This long-view of anthropology, including archaeological and weaving in more recent historical approaches, underscores the amazing achievements of women's movements given the thousands-of-years old edifice they have been up against and the speck of time they have existed. It is also cause for worry. These movements are fragile. In my own country, the U.S., we see decades of accomplishments in women's reproductive health care being systematically chipped away through Supreme Court decisions and a mere few sessions of Congress. A second insight of this long view is that although the type of society that offered women the greatest equalities, gatherer-hunter societies, are in the minority, they nonetheless have constituted the majority of human life. This means that women's oppression, while deeply entrenched and bound to family, property, morals, beliefs, customs—and still in many places, law—is *not* the norm for humanity as a species. It became the norm for particular types of social, political and economic arrangements as well as belief systems. The vast

⁵ *Women's Rights in the United States: A Documentary History*. 1994. Winston E. Langley and Vivian C. Fox. 1994. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

majority of human societies today are highly stratified, not only by gender but also by class and caste, race and ethnicity, sexuality, ability, religion, and many other features; nonetheless, changes are restructuring some hierarchies, dismantling others through the frameworks of international law to grassroots movements; from individual acts of courage and resistance to transnational social movements. Malala's story, for instance, has proven to be one of the most inspirational of the last five years; the teenage Pakistani activist who was shot by the Taliban for advocating girls' right to education and who won the Noble Peace Prize has become a symbol of resistance, her story resonating and reverberating on so many levels globally, from supermarket checkout lanes and populist talk shows on satellite TV to meetings with international dignitaries and high level government officials. The fact that she is also a controversial figure only serves to highlight further the pressing and interlinked issues of girls' education and violence as a tool of misogynistic oppression.

We are witnessing in the above mentioned efforts, the creation of new networks of associations and multi-level interactions, infused with principles of gender equality, many of them rooted in moralities of sharing labor, developing more flexible notions of gender arrangements, such as paternity leave, which have long roots in human social arrangements in our foraging ancestors, where it is likely that fathers played important roles in the socialization of children.

Another contribution of my discipline is the awareness we generate of societies around the world to see what problems they've solved, what we can learn and apply to our own societies, through cross-cultural comparisons. Anthropologists have identified matrilineal societies where women have attained high levels of productive participation across economic, political, religious and social spheres. As previously mentioned, many of the societies of Native North America are wonderful examples. Women in the Dine (Navajo) matrilineal, matrilocal pastoral culture own herds of sheep and pass them down to their daughters; they weave rugs from their wool as sources of income and make decisions about when to slaughter them for both subsistence and ritual purposes. There are other matrilineal societies in Indonesia, China, Africa. Unfortunately, western colonialism's imposition of many of the practices of patriarchy undermined women's status in many of these places, imposing patriarchal structures, both legal and customary, of ownership and decision-making on top of existing patterns. The number of challenges are sobering; however, we are also presented with an enormous opportunity. We know from close to ½ a century of Women's Studies research, from successful development programs and activist interventions that investing in women and girls has compound, positive effects on society as a whole. This is the compelling hope to the overwhelming obstacles and the profound suffering that girls and women face around the planet.

It is critical to point out that disparities begin with childbirth and continue throughout the life cycle. The organization, Every Mother Counts, indicates that every two minutes a mother dies from complications in pregnancy and childbirth—that's 303,000 women/year—and 99% of these take place in the developing world. Loss of a mother is also the loss of caretakers, teachers, health care providers and community leaders (<http://www.everymothercounts.org/pages/learn>). Reproductive health and other health challenges for women and girls are connected to poverty and cultural attitudes, and even knowledge since research on health problems has primarily been conducted through the lens of men's bodies, and predominantly white men at that. What we currently know about girls' and women's health is much more limited than what we know about men's health, although this is beginning to change as funding is directed to assist women becoming researchers and executing studies on the various determinants of women's health (<http://www.who.int/tdr/news/2015/studies-women-researchers/en/>).

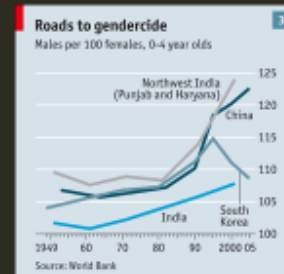
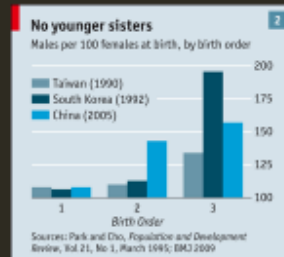
Gender discrimination is one of these key social determinants of women's health. According to the World Health Organization:

“Being a man or a woman has a significant impact on health, as a result of both biological and gender-related differences. The health of women and girls is of particular concern because, in many societies, they are disadvantaged by discrimination rooted in sociocultural factors. For example, women and girls face increased vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Some of the sociocultural factors that prevent women and girls to benefit from quality health services and attaining the best possible level of health include: unequal power relationships between men and women; social norms that decrease education and paid employment opportunities; an exclusive focus on women's reproductive roles; and potential or actual experience of physical, sexual and emotional violence”
(http://www.who.int/topics/womens_health/en/)

In addition to health, extreme poverty is of course very high on the list and many of the other categories are either causes of poverty or sources of its aggravation. As we know, women and girls are the poorest human beings on the planet. Seventy percent of people living in extreme poverty (earning less than \$1.50/day) are women and girls; yet, while women's labor constitutes more than 2/3 of the world's working hours, women own less than 1% of the world's property.
(<http://www.pciglobal.org/womens-empowerment-poverty/>).

Multiple forms of violence against women begin with girls as soon as they are born: infanticide claims the lives of many millions of girls worldwide. Cultural preferences for boys is found in many countries—China, Armenia, S. Korea, Azerbaijan and India for example, where abuse of ultrasound technologies starting in the 1980s has contributed to early detection of the sex of the fetus and rates of what has been termed “gendercide”. Research from India indicates that “there are about 400,000 sex selective abortions per year” (Skewed Sex Ratios at Birth, UNFPA, 2012; <http://www.sociology.org/female-infanticide-killing-the-little-girls-of-the-world/>). We can see the gender ratio imbalances in this image below:

SOME STATISTICS INDICATING “GENDERCIDE” OR FEMALE INFANTICIDE



Girls who survive and progress through childhood face malnutrition and hunger at greater rates than boys through food deprivation practices when men and boys are served first, from limited supplies. Pregnant women too suffer, as do their fetuses, from these kinds of cultural practices that favor feeding males over females. Girls suffer debilitating domestic workloads, far fewer opportunities for schooling than boys, sexual molestation, rape and trafficking, as well as those practices referred to specifically as “harmful cultural practices” including female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage, which, from a human rights perspective includes sanctioned rape of minors. As an anthropologist I would argue that all of the above are harmful cultural practices because they cannot be divorced from cultural devaluations and beliefs about the worth of girls and women found in many cultures throughout the world. Systems of values and beliefs are created and sustained by cultural processes including socialization, enculturation, childhood divisions of labor that still insist on girls’ involvement in domestic chores while boys are free to play and roam, reinforcing public space as male and domestic space as female from early on. The social, political and economic structures, such as norms of marriage, descent and inheritance that favor males (both *de jure* and *de facto*) reinforce these gender-divided attributes of culture. I would argue that the term “harmful cultural practices” normalizes those behaviors that occur outside of this definition. While the term focuses attention on some important and destructive cultural practices, it also directs our attention *away* from the cultural underpinnings of practically every form of gender discrimination that exists. Everyday forms of physical and psychological violence such as sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, as well as the wage gap, pressure on girls to conform to certain body images and cultural standards of beauty often engendering eating disorders and self-hatred, are also rooted in culture and reinforced institutionally—all of these are “harmful cultural practices.” The underlying cultural beliefs and values about girls and women in relation to boys and men sustain structures of inequality. We must simultaneously change from above and below, individual to individual, household to household, in school classrooms, in advertising, in policy-making arenas.

Violence against girls and women in all its myriad forms is so pervasive that it has been identified by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, in his new book titled *A Call to Action* as the number one challenge in the world today. Indeed he asserts that "...it is not possible to address the rights of women, the human and civil rights struggle of our time, without looking at factors that create an acceptance of violence in our society--violence that inevitably affects women disproportionately (http://www.cartercenter.org/news/features/p/human_rights/a-call-to-action.html). While significant progress has been made on many fronts from international law to changing norms of masculinity in some places, the work to be done on this front is enormous. The world has recently learned, for instance, that to maintain its control of sex slaves the terrorist organization Daesh (ISIL/ISIS) pushes birth control (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/to-maintain-supply-of-sex-slaves-isis-pushes-birth-control.html>). Sexual slavery is integral to Daesh's operations; the sexual slavery of women and girls claims to revive the practice as an institutional feature of its infrastructure. It is increasingly a recruiting tool and embedded in its distorted theology, tied to its bureaucracy and emerging court systems. A recent *New York Times* article notes that sexual slavery is elevated by Daesh via, "a narrow and selective reading of the Quran and other religious rulings to not only justify violence, but also to elevate and celebrate each sexual assault as spiritually beneficial, even virtuous" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html>). Other examples, such as the case of South Sudanese government soldiers who were encouraged by their government to rape women and girls as their form of payment (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201603140435.html>), indicate the persistence of cultures of misogyny and the use of rape as a form of torture to degrade, humiliate, punish, discriminate and control. Yet now the world recognizes rape as a war crime, following the 1993 International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in the precedent-setting case of the *Prosecutor v. Jean-Paul Akayesu*. Rape can be prosecuted as a separate substantive crime and even as genocide if there is evidence that it is used with intent to destroy a group psychologically or physically. As a crime under international law, the world has a critical weapon in the fight against sexual violence. (www.state.gov/documents/organization/6518.doc). But in too many places, violence is a fact of daily life and responses are not nearly widespread enough. On the island of Jamaica where I have done extensive field work, there is only one women's shelter in the capitol city of Kingston.

Turning again to more items on our list: the crises of environmental degradation and climate change increasingly affect the quality of life and exacerbate existing conditions. Water availability (from too little to too much causing devastating droughts or floods) largely impacts women and children's time and energy outputs since it is they who are the water collectors of the world. Housing availability, food production, and other key ingredients of livelihood are also impacted by increasingly unpredictable climate patterns, elevated storm risks, sea-level rise and the like. In terms of women's agency in family life, their capacity to initiate divorce—let alone no contest divorce—is still a critical right for women and children to escape abusive situations in the most dire of circumstances, and simply to have the right to decide one's life course as a reflection of an autonomous individual with agency and self-determination. Here, tensions between cultural relativism and the primacy of the rights of the individual continue to be discussed, when women's communal roles as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters often culturally take precedence in local contexts over and above their rights as individuals enshrined in international law. The argument is often made that human rights impose a western model of the individual above communitarian values. In the case of women's human rights, however, it is interesting to note that it is typically those in positions of power who support this argument; women whose rights are violated and who

become aware of institutional infrastructure of individual rights overwhelmingly support their own capacity to make decisions about their own lives. However, having said this, there are multiple caveats that must be considered, particularly when we are discussing girls and the intersection of gender discriminatory practices and their subsequent life choices. For instance, in too many places girl children still undergo early and forced marriages, in part due to custom but also due to poverty. Marriage offers parents the opportunity for a dowry in the form of resources or money, and is perceived as a way out of poverty. Additionally in some countries such as Kenya, where Masai girls, for example undergo FGM between ages of 5-7, the operations prepare them for marriages, symbolizing their moral purity. Women themselves perform the surgeries, as a security for a girl's future and both her and her family's economic stability. This confluence of practices—FGM, early marriage and poverty—also reduces the likelihood that girls will go to school (Mwakio: personal communication, 4/25/16).

Around the world, there are many interconnected factors such as these that entrench inequality. How can Millennium Development Goals such as goal #3, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, become meaningful realities rather than out-of-reach abstractions? Inequalities must be regarded as the product of intertwined factors so that the problems aren't addressed piecemeal. Other examples of interconnected challenges include women's "double shift" where women take on a disproportionate share of responsibilities for home and family in households where women and men both work outside the home—whether in urban areas or rural, where women are engaged in agriculture and trade. Almost everywhere, women and girls perform many more hours/week of domestic labor than do men and boys. This work includes food procurement, meal preparation, child-rearing, cleaning and caring for elderly, sick and disabled relatives. For girls, required household labor and caring for the sick reduces further opportunities for their education. Patrilineal and patrilocal patterns of descent and residence that favor boys as future earners and supporters of elderly parents also deter parents from investing in education, paying for uniforms, school fees and books in communities where they aim to marry daughters early and into other families. As future supporters of their families and elderly parents, the financial success of boys is deemed more significant. Yet another category of challenges includes increasing participation of women in government and in formal labor markets, integrating women into work and careers that are male dominated. This requires a commensurate involvement of boys and men in domestic responsibilities, with help from state funded childcare and both maternity and paternity leave. One negative trend associated with women moving into male dominated careers is the decline in status and pay as these forms of work become "feminized". The reverse is true when men move into female-dominated careers such as nursing and grade school teaching that are lower in pay and status. Men advance more quickly both in their career trajectories and in their pay than do women.

We must also address limited financing for existing laws and policies supporting equality for women and girls. The lack of funding for the implementation, monitoring and sanctioning of liberatory laws, clearly undermines their effectiveness. Moreover, while important, law alone is not enough to bring about change. New and existing laws that transform structural inequalities must be complemented by education and numerous other programs that change attitudes, beliefs, values and practices at all levels of society from households, to images of women in advertising and media, to educational content and strategies, to involvement of women in all institutions from politics to religious hierarchies which lend credence to beliefs about gender inequality as divinely ordained. Where laws already exist, customs—de facto practices—that privilege men such as hiring and promotion practices in the workplace must also be addressed. Masculinity must undergo

concurrent changes, where manhood is not regarded as reduced or compromised when men care for children and join in household domestic labor. The deep discomfort many men feel in relation to female authority figures must also change. As international relations theorists Ann Sisson Runyan and V. Spike Peterson⁶ argue, “It is simply not possible to understand how power works in the world without explaining women’s exclusion from the top of all economic, religious, political, and military systems of power. ... [C]ontemporary power relations depend upon sustaining certain notions of masculinity and femininity, notions of what is expected in regard to men’s and women’s lives.” Moreover, we must not assume that the State is inherently oppressive for women. Indeed, in some contexts, the state may offer women great support. However, in its current manifestations the state is a problematic institution that needs to be much more fully investigated from international feminist perspectives.

Complicating how we research, talk about and legislate for girls and women is the hegemony of a gender binary, where heteronormative and cisgendered assumptions prevail. The reality of sexual and gender diversity must be part of our discussions, not only locally, but internationally. We can begin with some important terminology. For those who are unfamiliar, cisgender refers to individuals who feel a complementarity between their culturally defined gender and their biological sex. We know from scientific research that between 1-7% of the world’s population are born with intersex characteristics, reflected in anatomy, sex hormone distribution and chromosomes. Some cultures have developed gender role diversity, from Native North American two-spirit persons, to India’s hijra populations, reflecting gender and sexual diversity in the human species, although certainly not without prejudice. Still, many societies have little or no terminology, let alone roles for sex and gender diverse individuals, widely discriminating and causing much harm and suffering. Societies with advanced medical technologies employing them to surgically adjust ambiguous genitalia in infants, typically imitate female anatomy because it is easier to construct than male sexual anatomy. This can lead to significant challenges later in life when surgeries do not conform to hormonal patterns that emerge during adolescence. A growing awareness of these traumas through campaigns for intersex and transgender rights have sparked various controversies in U.S. public life. Transgender adolescents have the highest rates of suicide attempts in the U.S.: 4.6 percent of the overall U.S. population has self-reported a suicide attempt; the numbers rise to between 10 and 20 percent for LGBT respondents and to a staggering 41 percent of trans or gender non-conforming people (<http://www.vocativ.com/culture/lgbt/transgender-suicide/>). These numbers tell us we must incorporate the findings of researchers into our activism. When we discuss the empowerment of women and girls, we cannot assume they are heterosexual or gender conforming. This is still quite radical in many parts of the world.

The Pathway Forward

Clearly, there is much work to be done. But as we move forward, we should do so keeping in mind the significance of our achievements in such a short amount of time. In this final segment of my talk, I reflect on three important components of change. First there is the global institutional infrastructure that has been established via the United Nations and other organizations. Second, the enormous contributions of Women’s Studies as an interdisciplinary, global, scholarly and activist set of discourses has been enormously influential in the way we gather data, understand

⁶ *Global Gender Issues*. 1999. V. Spike Peterson, Anne Sisson Runyan Westview Press.

and explain the problems that women and girls face. Third, I would like us to consider a perspective of hopefulness as we engage with one another during this conference and beyond, in spite of the daunting challenges before us. We often don't stop to consider our own attitudes and approaches to this work, knowing how immense and deep-seated the problems are. A reflective and reasonable attitude of hopefulness is necessary to bolster long-term commitment to these changes and to reduce activist exhaustion and despair.

Thus it is certainly true that since the end of WWII, there have been remarkable gains that have succeeded in eroding some of the entrenched structural frameworks that build gender inequality into societies over many thousands of years. These as we have seen, were formally institutionalized in law over three thousand years ago when early Sumerian codes were followed two centuries later by the Babylonian King Hammurabi's Code. Contemporary achievements have occurred in large part because of the seismic shifts at the international level via the engagement between international organizations and grassroots activism. The international frameworks created by the United Nations and women's rights campaigns have fostered women's international conferences generating platforms for action and tremendous collaborations both across and within multiple sectors of society. The importance of numerous, major international organizations in the fight for gender equality cannot be underestimated. These include the U.N. of course and its many branches associated with collecting data about gender equality, such as The Commission on the Status of Women and the various Expert Groups, UNICEF and UNESCO that work on issues affecting women and girls. These include the Millennium Development Goals, humanitarian support after natural disasters where research has demonstrated that women and girls suffer longer and disproportionately to men and boys; international human rights, peace and security issues. Other organizations include the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) among others. The interactions among these organizations and scholars, grassroots activists, policy makers, government officials, members of NGOs, Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) and as human beings indicate the involvement of people working for gender equality at all levels of society.

International treaties including The Convention on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the latest generation of human rights law is an umbrella framework for uniting indigenous activists and when combined with the precedents established through the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (The CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as regional human rights treaties we have a powerful set of global norms and the structures for implementing the rights enshrined in these documents in potentially powerful ways. Political will for funding, monitoring, reporting and sanctioning violations of these treaties is critical, and the world is particularly challenged when the richest and most powerful country in the world, the United States, demonstrates a shameful record in ratifying human rights treaties. Nonetheless, the human rights framework is a major achievement that can guide the planet toward dignity for all human beings notwithstanding ongoing debates, disagreements and contestations.

Another area of accomplishment is in the realm of Women's Studies itself as an interdisciplinary arena of scholarship and activism. Discussion surrounding the creation of WS departments began to be formed as an idea in the 1960s as part of second wave feminism and were first introduced in the United States in the mid-70s. Initially, the idea of studying women was itself a radical act, and in some spaces it remains so; the fact that women's studies students and faculty—both within specific departments and in courses inspired by feminist scholarship embedded within other university majors—are predominantly women and GLBT-identified, indicates the ongoing need to encourage heterosexual male students and faculty to become involved in women's studies.

Nonetheless, today, there are over a thousand Women's Studies departments in universities throughout the world and many of these have expanded their titles to include gender studies and sexuality studies, inclusive of masculinity and GLBTQ studies as academic departments respond to new explanatory models and useful identity politics that surface the need for inclusion of disenfranchised groups. In my own university I spearheaded a name and curriculum change from Women's Studies to Women's and Gender Studies, developing an additional concentration in GLBT Studies. This trend should continue because it brings a wider cross-section of students and faculty into the discipline, facilitating the spread of feminist thought and activism.

In addition to the magnificent growth of Women's Studies and related departments, feminist theory continues to be incredibly robust and responsive to critique and inclusivity. The proliferation of bodies of feminist thought is deeply encouraging. We see, for example, the expansion of the original three prongs of feminist thought—liberal, radical and socialist feminism—burgeoning into every possible academic field. Although some emerged more rapidly than others, the momentum has not ceased. We can include in this list my own field of feminist anthropology including archaeology, linguistics and biological anthropology. In Literature, feminist critical literary theory and the proliferation of women writers has been significant. Other branches include eco-feminism, Queer theory, Black feminism, Womanism, Black feminist queer theory, intersectionality theory, feminist psychology, feminist historical studies, Third World feminisms (a term promoted by the well-known scholar-activist, Chandra Talpade Mohanty), feminist history (including the history of science), feminist legal studies and feminist international human rights law. Even disciplines that have been slower and more resistant to feminist thought because of prevailing male dominance in hiring such as economics, political science and the hard sciences, we see an upswing in feminist perspectives, examining what questions we ask and why, who asks the questions, who receives grant funding and other features of institutional male dominance. Because of the two arms of feminism—scholarship and activism—we have seen the emergence of a wide proliferation of strategies for change and research processes including participatory-action research, collaborative self-reflexive methodologies and inter-subjectivity to accompany intersectionality theories and activism. International development efforts too have evolved from Women in Development (WID) in the 1970s, to Women and Development (WAD) and now to Gender and Development (GAD), the latter benefiting from recognition that women's relationships with men cannot be excluded from development planning. We still have significant work, as I've previously stated, in including gender and sexuality spectra into development planning, recognizing the limitations of gender binaries. Planning should encourage men, women and non-gender conforming individuals to move beyond essentialist assumptions, such as a direct corollary between gender and work.

Indeed as Sandya Hewamanne⁷ has noted, NGOs and state agencies are increasingly being encouraged by scholar-activists to adopt complex views of peoples' lives and relationships with an understanding of how they are produced via various histories and sociocultural locations. In addition, communities which are the focus of development programming cannot be regarded as passive victims, but as agents who are perfectly capable of evaluating, critiquing and strategically manipulating social roles and development strategies to maximize their benefits, engage in decision-making and transform structural inequalities in partnership with NGO catalyst

⁷ "Gendering the Internally Displaced: Problem Bodies, Fluid Boundaries and Politics of Civil Society Participation in Sri Lanka." Hewamanne, Sandya (2009). *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(1), 157-172. Available at <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss1/11/>.

organizations. If we ignore these realities we risk not only ineffective but potentially destructive programs that end up causing harm at worst and serving as short-lived band-aids at best.

As feminist scholar-activists spawn increasing numbers of departments in Women's Studies (and their variants) it is abundantly clear that feminism is not static but continues to make robust and profound contributions to scholarship, publishing, activism and advocacy, policies and laws as well as to changing attitudes and beliefs. Moreover, it is also clear that it is impossible to refer to feminist thought and action in the singular. As with all fields of study that are introspective and which grow from ongoing critique, there are pendulum swings from axes of disagreement to resolutions—a dialectical process that engenders new approaches so vital to any body of thought. For instance, the idea of a global sisterhood that emerged in the 1970s predicated on a monolithic concept of the category “woman” engendered critical responses from women all over the world highlighting the diversity and intersecting obstacles girls and women face. This discourse of “difference” demanded that the western women's movement to be reflexive, swinging the pendulum away from homogeneity to its opposite: in the 1990s an almost exclusive theoretical focus on differences among women ensued. From there, a significantly much more integrated and nuanced perspective emerged, exploring both points of difference as well as intersection, evoking important questions about the nature of collaboration and partnership, and the dynamics of power and privilege in thinking through strategies for change. The swift rise of Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, first articulated in the early 1980s, and the collaborative methodologies that grew out of that era of critique rapidly became a foundational approach to feminist theory and organizing. This framework examines the nature of intersecting oppressions. In Crenshaw's words, it is

“The view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity”⁸

The emergent collaborative efforts to seek points of intersection, plan courses of action and explore areas of overlap while simultaneously recognizing the need for specificity of various groups' issues, coincided with new communication technologies: cell phones with chat applications such as skype, WhatsApp, Kik, Facebook messenger and the like. These, along with document sharing programs such as Googledocs and crowdfunding platforms have produced collaborative efforts and virtual coalitions, building and enhancing transnational movements which have changed the face of feminist organizing for many of us. Known as “networked feminisms” social media are used as catalysts for gender equality, advancing feminism by promoting coalition building and to rebuke immediately, various forms of misogyny in the most public way possible, ensuring that the feminist tenet that “the personal is political” remains central (*Valenti, Vanessa; Martin, Courtney E. (2012). #FemFuture: Online Revolution (PDF) (Report). Barnard Center for Research on Women.*) While networking has always been an important tool of feminist organizing, the online medium is facilitating broader based coalitions and more rapid responses. For example, battering and rape, once regarded as a private family matter and the result of aberrant aggression is now recognized as part of systematic domination (Crenshaw 1993). The ongoing process of

⁸“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” Crenshaw, Kimberle. University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8. Available at: <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>

bringing domestic violence into the political and legal realms began with more conventional forms of activism; however, in the last decade, the enormity of the problem has been more widely grasped globally through online discussions and publicity, which have also promulgated social movement change. We have witnessed in the last few years attention given to a host of abuses women face including intimate partner violence on university campuses in the U.S.; gang rape of Indian women; Amerindian women of the Amazon organizing against oil drilling and large dam construction that would destroy their rainforest communities; the condition of women refugees and migrant workers as well as the prevalence of sex-trafficking. Transnational activist platforms have been launched via on-line organizing; collaborative scholarly work and international conferences are organized online including this one.

In my own work I have used these apps to communicate with communities I work with in Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica. I have participated in skype meetings bringing people from the US, Canada and the Caribbean together in to discuss organizational strategies, while simultaneously chatting with individuals on WhatsApp to highlight points to bring out as the meeting is unfolding. We can share strategies, send documents to evaluate, make recommendations and plan next steps at a heightened level of collaborative involvement. As well, I have strategized online in real time about themes for a new documentary film I'm collaborating on with J-FLAG, the premier GLBTQ human rights organization in Jamaica, that bring together people in Jamaica, California, Minnesota and my own state of Rhode Island, so that when I arrive in Jamaica in July, we have already made significant progress in our planning. Since our goal is for the film to be an educational, consciousness-raising, activist tool our collaborative methodologies, target audiences, safety issues, story line, ethical concerns, aesthetic dimensions and distribution goals all have to be addressed as part of the process.

Of course the digital divide remains a challenge and a source of critique of networked feminisms. As well, participation in virtual activism that starts and ends with a click of a mouse in an on-line petition is only one very thin activist strategy. We must remain vigilant not only in finding ways to bridge the digital divide, but to continue to reach out forging face to face connections. Still, these tools have been critical for so many, generating safe and anonymous spaces that reduce isolation, educate about all kinds of issues, including health, legal and identity oriented themes. Conversations that began in international conferences, the creation of platforms for change proliferate through the online world. As we know, these conferences bring together groups from international women's human rights organizations to grassroots activists, scholars and community members. This allows for airing conflict, identifying points of dissonance and moving debates to new terrains that challenge essentialist approaches to women's human rights, as women gain multiple literacies in one another's struggles. Female genital mutilation is one such arena where the world is seeing movement away from an "us vs. them" perspective through cross-cultural collaborations. Isabelle Gunning⁹ has made valuable contribution to this debate by arguing that "culturally challenging practices such as genital mutilation require the critic to engage in world travelling—both actual and virtual—engaging in multicultural dialogue and a shared search for areas of overlap, shared concerns and values. Her tripartite approach to the discussion of human rights issues includes: 1) to examine one's own historical and socio-cultural context so that dialog begins with an engaged self-reflexivity; 2) understanding how others see you—everyone is an

⁹ "Arrogant Perception, World-Travelling and Multicultural Feminism: The Case of Female Genital Surgeries" Isabelle R. Gunning. 23 Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 189 (1991-1992), available at <http://scholar.valpo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=twls>

observer through a particular lens; and 3) recognizing the complexities of the contexts of the other women.

Feminist human rights scholar Hillary Charlesworth notes that this permits us to visualize the global range of feminisms and requires us to engage in conversation in a variety of styles, from a variety of disciplinary angles, if possible in different languages.

Here is how we've made progress and how we must continue to move forward: through process that recognize the interplay of commonalities with differences, which harness multi-pronged strategies linking local, on-the-ground efforts with multiple levels of change; infusing activism with scholarship and scholarship with the insights of on-the-ground activists; where international and local ideas, meanings and practices engage one another, rendering women's human rights intelligible and meaningful in local context and where such contextualization infuses abstract laws with concrete meanings.. None of this is easy work; as we've seen the battles are enormous. They are fought at all levels, from the everyday lives of women in their homes and communities, from bedrooms to boardrooms, kitchens to political cabinets. We must not lose sight of the very local everyday realities; this work must be local and grounded. It also must be idealistic continuing to build a global culture of shared values, norms and approaches that underscore the centrality of gender and sexual equality that does not erase local contexts and which moves beyond blueprints for change that homogenize women as monolithic.

Thinking back to our initial timeline, there is cause for hopefulness, given the changes that have occurred already in a speck of time in this long view of humanity. At the same time, for those who endure psychic eternity of daily suffering, each moment is pressing: our perspective must be both long term and squarely in the moment.

I now would like to conclude with a few words about hopefulness as we engage with one another in this exciting conference that brings so many of us together from SE Asia and Asia, Africa, the Middle East and North America. Across the ages, scholars, shamans, philosophers, healers, storytellers, comedians, actors and many others have reflected on the bipolar existential condition of humanity as we swing back and forth from hopefulness to despair and back again, seeking meaningful lives. Many of us are deeply tied to our work, so that setbacks can be crushing, while successes produce elation. When I recently learned that a group of Samburu women in Kenya had replaced FGM with girls' education as a rite of passage, I experienced that elation and shared it with my students. Yet given the magnitude of human tragedies, the capacity for human cruelty and greed, nonchalance, apathy and willful ignorance, are we naïve to be hopeful? My view is not unique when I echo those who have opted for the hopeful swing of the pendulum—these voices exist in all cultures across time. Therefore I will close with another voice, that of one of my favorite contemporary activists, Rebecca Solnit who writes the following just in 2016:

“Progressive, populist, and grassroots constituencies have had many victories. Popular power has continued to be a profound force for change. And the changes we've undergone, both wonderful and terrible, are astonishing... This is an extraordinary time full of vital, transformative movements that could not be foreseen. It's also a nightmarish time. Full engagement requires the ability to perceive both. Hope doesn't mean denying these realities. It means facing them and addressing them by remembering what else the twenty-first century has brought, including the movements, heroes, and shifts in consciousness that address these things now. This has been a truly remarkable decade for movement-building, social change, and deep, profound shifts in ideas, perspective, and

frameworks for broad parts of the population... Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes — you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. [Hopefulness] is the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.”¹⁰

So let us now move forward taking full advantage of these moments together, filled with the hopefulness and faith that our actions matter.

¹⁰ *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Solnit, Rebecca. Haymarket Books, 2016.