Democracy and Women

To write about democracy in the United States—a system of governance that its etymology identifies as "government by the people"—and to separate out women, brings to mind the slave Sojourner Truth's 1851 appeal, "Ain't I a woman?" But the fact is, a little more than a century ago, women were not part of democracy. They lacked the *franchise,* which is to say, the constitutional right to a vote. After the American civil war, when the U.S. Constitution was amended to include recently freed slaves, it was the emancipated men who received the vote, not black women, and not white women. One could imagine Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1866, the first woman to run for the U.S. House of Representatives, even though she was not eligible to vote, shouting, "Ain't I a person?"

From before this nation's founding, women pulled their weight, in spite of their second or third class status. Back in 1776, just prior to the colonials announcing their plan to defy the king of England, Abigail Adams wrote a letter to her husband, John Adams, to, "…remember the ladies." Her words urged him and the other members of the Continental Congress to consider the rights of women while laying the framework for the new, independent nation. Adams must have been busy with more important things, because it was nearly 150 years before the House of Representatives voted to pass the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. And in the one hundred years since receiving that right to vote in 1920, women have had to fight to gain a foothold in the halls of Congress. The last time I checked, women made up approximately fifty per cent of the population. But today, women represent only twenty-five per cent of the Senate, and close to thirty per-cent of the House of Representatives.

How slowly do things move? Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, was, in 1949 serving in the U.S. Senate. She was given a key to the women's public restroom. It was not until the early 21st century that Congress provided satisfactory (equal) restroom privileges for women members of Congress. Such are the indignities women were made to endure. And on an unrelated but equally contemptible note, there is not enough room here to cite all the examples of the unwanted sexual advances endured by women working in the Capitol, at all levels.

The struggle continues. Women today must fight for certain rights that have been denied them, and in some cases they have rights that are in peril of being reversed. Women remain underpaid in comparison to men in comparable positions. But, similar to the struggles of minorities in this country, the institutional systems continue to oppress. This is not a revelation for educated women, or men for that matter. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg is often quoted as having said, "I ask no favor for my sex. All I ask of our brethren is that they take their feet off our necks." She was citing from the 1837 writings of Sarah Grimke, an abolitionist from South Carolina, who with her sister Angelina fought against slavery and for the rights of women. So long and entrenched have these barriers been, perhaps we need to consider creating a branch of academia called CWT, or "Critical Women Theory," to study the effects of governmental and institutional oppression of women. (Actually, there is such a thing. It's called Feminism Critical Theory)

America prides itself on its advances, and how we are "number one" in most everything. Were it only so. Although world-wide, out of all the 193 United Nations member states there

have been only 59 countries who have had a woman as leader, the United States is not one of them. And there have been some pretty tough women: Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Angela Merkel, Benazir Bhutto.

Although history documents societies in which women took a strong role, most anthropologists agree that there are no known examples of unambiguously matriarchal societies. Given that throughout human history, cultures have mostly relied on physical strength and violence or the threat of violence to maintain societal order, male-dominated societies have exclusively dominated. Most of these societies have been supported by a religious framework that is also exclusively male dominated, with women only in a subordinate role. Indeed, women who dared to exert any form of mental acuity, exhibit skillful talents or leadership abilities were often ostracized, or in some cases, accused of witchcraft. Inheritance law, limited opportunities for education, and the withholding of other opportunities suppressed advancement of women, even until recently. Women writers found it necessary to write under an assumed male name—or credit the work to a man. But today, social justice, and the upheaval that such revolutionary change brings, is revealing some promise for our future. More women than men are now obtaining post-secondary education degrees, and this is all to the good. Some religious organizations have opened up prominent roles to women. Eventually, with women taking the lead, there is hope that all of us, men and women both, can work together to make a just society, a civil and fully democratic society.

Richard Waterman

It is one thing to write about forms of government, about volunteerism or political ideologies, or other abstractions, but on the subject of women and democracy, I will try to be mindful of the fact that not only am I not a woman, there may be women out there that will actually read my comments. Therefore, to those women who may read these words, I hope that having taken into account my experiences and prejudices when writing about this important subject, I have been fair-minded and liberal in my thinking.