The Future of Women's Leadership

Adele Ramos Salzer Lecture: Newcomb College Institute
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Editor's Note: On November 5, 2012, Dr. Nannerl Keohane addressed Tulane as a part of the Newcomb College Institute's Adele Ramos Salzer Lecture Series. Dr. Keohane has served as the president of Duke University and Wellesley College and has published research on feminism, women's leadership, and higher education. The following text—"The Future of Women's Leadership"—originates from Dr. Keohane's personal lecture notes.

I am indeed deeply honored to be the Adele Ramos Salzer Lecturer this year.

The topic I want to address is: "The Future of Women's Leadership." I want us to think together about what life will be like when those of you who are Newcomb Scholars today launch your own professional careers, and my own four granddaughters are ready to take their places in significant leadership. And, of course, this topic is particularly appropriate in light of the purposes of the Newcomb College Institute and the history of this college.

To tackle this subject, we need to have a sense, at the outset, of what we mean by leadership. People often give lectures or write books about leadership without saying what they mean by this term; we may all think we know, but it's important for a scholar to make clear how she defines her key terms. In my book *Thinking about Leadership* I put it like this: "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 a memo or an edict or fatwa, by passing a law, by barking a command, or just 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 coercive threat or use of deadly force. We can think of leadership as a spectrum, from the most visible leaders like the president of the US—or on the darker side a dictator such as Qaddafi—to the kind of low-key leadership behind the scenes that can make a huge difference to the individuals whose lives are touched by it.

In this talk, however, instead of thinking about a spectrum of leadership, I want to deliberately simplify the issue and juxtapose two kinds of leadership: leadership out front and leadership behind the scenes. Over all these past centuries, men have generally occupied the first kind—the visible, out-front leadership—and women the second, the more subtle, low-key behind-the-scenes leadership. In the past few decades, this appears to be changing, as more and more women step up for leadership "out front" in many fields. But what about the future?

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 open to women today. I'll discuss obstacles that remain for women in leadership positions and ponder what the future is likely to hold.

Women's Leadership in the Past

In *Thinking about Leadership,* Chapter Four, I remind readers that throughout history, leadership has been closely associated with masculinity. Very few women before the 20th century exercised institutional authority over men as well as women. Most people in the past have simply assumed that women were incapable of leadership. But this isn't only in the past: a guy who voted against Ellen Johnson Sirleaf for re-election as president of Liberia last year was quoted as saying the main reason for his opposition was that "a woman should not be head; a man should be the head." Yet despite this stubborn linkage between leadership and maleness, some women in almost every society and era have proved themselves capable of providing leadership.

As I remind us in the book, certain situations have been especially auspicious for women as leaders: all-female settings such as girls' schools, 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 lead movements where women's interests are especially involved—think of the prohibition or settlement house campaigns of the late 19th century and the battle for woman's suffrage.

Much more frequently, women have been leaders in more informal situations. Women have provided leadership in 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 or heads of school, 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 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 positions in the world. Almost 100 women have been elected president or prime minister of their countries since 1945. In the US, women hold office as senators, governors, corporate CEOs, 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 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." Yet eventually we may think, "we'll get there, because that's where things are 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 of England, 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 surely *not* a straight 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 childcare 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 lifestyles, including high quality, reliable, affordable childcare, 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, money to pay for good childcare and housekeeping, strategic planning worthy of a mid-size firm—and a fair amount of luck.

Other labyrinthine obstacles blocking the path to top leadership for women include gender stereotypes that keep getting in the way of women being judged simply on their 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; 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 it has countless women across the years.

Women also have fewer opportunities for mentoring. Some senior male professors or corporate leaders do try specifically to advance the careers of young women, but male bosses often find it easier to mentor young men, seeing them as future versions of themselves; they take 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 this support.

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. Contemporary culture 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, behind a desk in the corner office, or in a lab coat or military uniform. 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 to compete with them for resources, including power and recognition. Women internalize these stereotypes, which leads them to question their 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. 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. For any woman ambitious for leadership in such settings, the idea of *convergence towards parity* is 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 will 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. (Those of you who have read Anne-Marie Slaughter's recent cover story in the *Atlantic* are surely aware of these complex issues).

Scenario Two

However, discussing the topic in terms of obstacles assumes that significant numbers of women are ambitious for top leadership—and maybe this isn't true. In an essay from 2003 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 20th 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.

In fact, we found something of this kind in a recent Princeton study on the 40th anniversary of undergraduate co-education. At the request of President Shirley Tilghman, I chaired a Steering Committee on Undergraduate Women's Leadership. We issued our report in March 2011. If you have not yet seen the report, you can find it on the Princeton website, linked to the university's home page under the title "Realizing Potential." Our committee was charged with determining "whether women undergraduates are realizing their academic potential and seeking opportunities for leadership at the same rate and in the same manner as their male colleagues." In a nutshell, the answer was no: women are not seeking leadership opportunities at the same rate and/or in the same manner.

Many recent alumnae and current female students we surveyed or interviewed 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 the election campaign for president of the freshman class at Princeton in September 2011, six months after we issued our report, there were eight male candidates and only one female, and six female candidates for secretary. Other young women told us that they were not interested in the traditional student government organizations and instead wanted to lead in an organization that's doing something they care about, working for a cause, whether it's the environment, education reform, tutoring in Princeton, a dance club or an a cappella group.

When we asked young women about this, they told us that they preferred to put their efforts where they could have 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. 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 in the 1970s or 80s were feisty pioneers determined to prove that they belonged at Princeton against considerable skepticism and opposition, and they showed very different tendencies than the female students of the last ten years.

Thus our committee discovered (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.

If you project forward our Princeton findings, and if Barbara Kellerman and others who think as she does 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.

So what is the future going to be like—*converging towards parity*, or *differential ambitions*?

Some Data to Complicate the Picture

Instead of offering a neat, clean "third scenario" for the future, I want to complicate the issue somewhat further by offering some more relevant data.

First piece of data: In the Princeton study, in addition to hearing from women who preferred low-key posts, we learned that some women who *do* consider running for visible campus posts, especially for an office like president, get the message from their peers (mostly their male peers) that such posts are more appropriately sought by men. That's the kind of obstacle we need to overcome. And we are finding that as the discussion of women's leadership intensifies on campus, more women are emboldened to put themselves forward for offices they might not have considered relevant before. They tell us that mentoring is very important, and being encouraged to stand up for a post, to develop their self-confidence, makes a big difference. As a direct result, several programs are springing up on campus, mostly student-initiated, to do precisely this. They have been very successful, and they show that there really is a hunger for mentoring.

So differential ambitions are not the whole story: there are also factors that discourage women from running for high office at a place like Princeton, or the US Congress, and once they

envision themselves in these jobs and see these posts as relevant for women, more women put themselves forward. Even small changes can make a difference. For instance, we learned that the main reason women didn't run for president of the freshman class in the past is that they are diffident about putting themselves forward and having their posters on all the lampposts until they know more about Princeton and its culture. So now the election for freshman class officers has been postponed until later in the year, when people know each other better and have a chance to test the waters. And most important, when someone—an older student, a friend, a faculty or staff member—says to a young woman: "You really ought to run for this office, you'd be really good at this," she is much more likely to consider this a real possibility and decide to be a candidate. We have a lot of evidence that this is true.

We were overjoyed last spring when Princeton had five Rhodes Scholars—four of them women—and four Marshalls—three of them women—with similar numbers for Gates Cambridge. This is a dramatic change from the past decade: the warden of Rhodes House himself had pointed out that there had not been a Princeton female Rhodes Scholar since 2002. Faculty and staff members have now begun to change that dismal record through encouragement, mentoring, invitations to apply, and support through the process.

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 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 or prestigious prizes. We also cannot assume there is a "natural difference in motivation for top leadership" until women can attain such positions without making personal and family sacrifices disproportionate to those faced by men. And on the basis of our recent experience at Princeton, when these things happen, women do indeed step forward for positions of leadership in significant numbers.

Second piece of data: It's quite possible, even likely, that due to oxytocin or lactation or some natural mothering instinct, or for whatever reason, that mothers will always want to spend more time with their young children than do their male partners. However, this doesn't imply that they should be out of commission as potential leaders for the rest of their lives. That disjunction has got to go: the view that because most women want to spend time with their toddlers or even their teenagers they can never become CEOs or rise to the top of their profession. Spending time with your kids doesn't shrivel up your brain or render you incapable of top leadership. As Patricia Schroeder once said in response to such misconceptions: "I have both a brain and a womb, and both of them work." Many women live a long time these days and are often blessed with vigorous good health for many years.

We need more flexible pathways through the labyrinth so that women can—if they wish—spend more time with their kids and still get back on the fast track and catch up. I know that sounds visionary, but this should not be beyond our powers as a society. We've accomplished more challenging things than this!

A cautionary note, however: people do have to make choices about their lives. If you choose to be a full-time mother and homemaker for 20 years, you cannot expect to be tapped for a major management job the day your youngest leaves for college. But with better support than our society now provides you ought to be able to have significant time with your kids and *also* aim for a top job at some point in your career. If this is your goal, you might combine mothering with keeping your hand in as a professionally trained and ambitious woman in a less demanding fashion, through significant volunteer leadership, consulting, a part-time job, or interactive

connections with your former firm. Any of these can help make sure you don't sever the ties completely.

It would also help to get rid of the "supermom" image that has become much more prominent since my family did the "two career family" bit in the 70s and 80s. Do you as Mom really have to take your kids personally to *every* soccer game, dentist appointment and ballet lesson? Where's Dad in all this, or your child's best friend's mom who could share the duties with a carpool? Surely there's some other way to organize our lives as dedicated moms if we put our minds to it.

My own personal view is that our society would be better off if *both men and women* had more time for their kids, for each other, for travel and leisure and stretching their minds. I don't think the path to the top has to be a greasy pole. But that's a different talk.

What other facts do we know? We know something that few people in earlier generations had the opportunity to learn: women can be very fine leaders, in a variety of organizations and tasks. The dreary age-old assumption that women lack the capacity to lead, or that institutions would somehow be spoilt if women led them, has been finally and decisively put to rest by the performance of amazing women leaders in every field, including quite a few graduates of this university. Leadership is not, and should not be, a male prerogative.

A few other relevant things we know: women as individuals vary in ambition and the competitive urge, just as men do. They may channel their ambitions in different ways, sometimes subliminally through investing in their husbands or their sons, but that doesn't mean women lack ambition. We also know that some women in power pay special attention to women's and family issues, and work to pave the way for other women, and other women in power do not. We know that some women, in some contexts, lead in ways that seem identifiably feminine, and others do not. And finally, we know that the nature of leadership itself is changing—with the intricacies of globalization, the formidable powers of new social technologies and changes in the media, and growing bodies of evidence that diverse leadership teams make better decisions than ones that are homogeneous, and often better decisions than a single leader, also.

So What's the Future Going to Be Like?

Against the background of these disparate but surely relevant bits of data, it is of course impossible to provide a definitive scenario of exactly what women's leadership will look like in the future. I have no neat "Scenario Three" to conclude with. There are too many different factors in play, too much fluidity. But here are a few hints of what I think we might be in for.

In the concluding section of our report, which you can read online at the Princeton University website, we spoke of a world in which both male and female undergraduates, and men and women more generally, would take on both kinds of leadership posts, out-front and behind-the-scenes, high-profile and supportive. Leadership of both kinds is important in getting the world's work done, but they do not need to be so frequently divided along gender lines. Dealing with the requirements of one kind of leadership can often help a leader be more effective in the other. But women should have a serious shot at high-powered leadership if they wish, and men should take their share of the crucial work of leadership behind the scenes instead of always trying to be out front.

Fortunately, there will be pioneering leaders of both sexes in the years ahead, providing role models in leadership. There will also be visionaries, including scholars developing new political and social theories, as well as through rhetoric and poetry and art. These will be our

guides as our daughters and granddaughters, their husbands and partners, our students and their students in the years ahead, fill out the scenario of women's leadership.

In her great feminist classic *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir reminds us that it is very hard to anticipate clearly things we have not yet seen, and that in trying to do this, we often impoverish the world ahead. As she puts it, "let us not forget that our lack of imagination always depopulates the future." She goes on to say, "The free woman is just being born…Her 'worlds of ideas' are not necessarily different from men's, because she will free herself by assimilating them; to know how singular she will remain and how important these singularities will be, one would have to make some foolhardy predictions. What is beyond doubt is that until now women's possibilities have been stifled and lost to humanity, and in her and everyone's interest it is high time she be left to take her own chances."

Because several generations of women and men have worked hard since 1949 to make the path easier for women, our possibilities as leaders are no longer "lost to humanity." But these gifts are still stifled, to some extent, and we are still operating with models of leadership designed primarily by and for men, models passed down for millennia. It is surely high time we as women be left to take our own chances—with support from our partners, our families, our colleagues, and from society as a whole.