

**2011 Women's History Month "Pink Tea"**  
**Conexus Arts Centre – Jacqui Shumiatcher Room**  
**Tuesday, October 18, 2011**

Thank you, Lisa, for the introduction – and I want to thank the organizing committee for inviting me. It's an honour to be included as part of the program for Women's History Month.

I see that the theme you have chosen for this year is "The Voice of Women in Education" This is an important topic and focus.

My thesis is: All of us have stories to tell – both positive and negative – about our experience as women. It is important for us to share them so we can all move forward.

You could argue that the "Famous Five" were a perfect example of that – sharing their experience, galvanizing others to their cause so women could be declared as "persons." They asked:

"Does the word 'Persons' in Section 24 of the British North America Act, 1867, include female persons?"

Women did not get the right to vote in one swoop. They had to work hard and they gained little steps:

For example, it was in 1869 when Britain granted unmarried women who are householders the right to vote in local elections.

In 1881, some Scottish women got the right to vote in local elections. I am not sure how “some” was defined!

In 1893, New Zealand granted equal voting rights to women.

In 1894, the United Kingdom expanded women’s voting rights to married women in local but not national elections.

It was not until 1916 that Canadian women in Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan got the vote.

In 1918, Canada gave women the vote in most provinces by federal law. Quebec was not included.

In 1929, women were found to be “persons” in Canada and therefore able to become members of the Senate.

Quebec women were the last women in Canada to get the provincial vote. Quebec women finally got the right to vote provincially in 1940. This is shocking, but still all Canadian women still did not yet have the right to vote.

The *Indian Act* did not allow Mi'kmaq women to vote until 1960. I am of Mi'kmaq heritage, and I am so disappointed that Canada was so late in granting Mi'kmaq women the right to vote.

In short, it was after close to a century of fighting for rights that all women in Canada got the right to vote.

But the challenge to women is not over in this country.

It is more important than ever to develop strong women leaders for our province, our country and our world. Your commitment to be here today shows just how important that is to you – and I thank you for that commitment.

Women's leadership is so important – and in too many cases, so underestimated. I'd like to tell you a personal story that made that clear to me once again.

I was at a meeting in the United States in summer 2009, when Bob MacDonald tried to introduce me to a state Governor. The Governor immediately reached out his hand to the man beside me. Bob said, "No, that is not the President," so the Governor reached to the man sitting on the other side of me. Bob said, "No, no, it is her." The Governor looked shocked, and said "I didn't expect YOU to be the President."

That incident told me a great deal about the perceptions many people still hold about women – even 82 years after they were declared persons in Canada!

It was amusing and the Governor meant no offence, but it was a sad reminder to me – even in this day and age, sometimes people find it hard to believe that a woman can be President of an organization like a university.

Of the almost 100 universities and colleges that make up the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, only 15 or so currently have female Presidents. That's a number that hasn't grown in recent years.

If we look at corporate boards or CEOs we see similar numbers. These numbers are stagnating. We are not seeing the rise of women in influential positions as fast as we should.

This certainly does not represent either the scope or the abilities of our female population!

Clare Boothe Luce said:

“Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say, ‘She doesn't have what it takes.’ They will say, ‘Women don't have what it takes.’”

We need to remember the struggle of the Famous Five and our grandmothers and mothers. My grandmother loved school and had to leave it in grade four to become a house keeper for a family. My mother remembers growing up as a daughter of an Italian immigrant, and being spat on and called a “dirty wop.”

My parents struggled financially with six children on a miner’s salary. They decided that they needed to do something if they were to fulfill their dream of having all six children attend university. My mother enrolled in Queen’s University and got her accounting degree through correspondence without ever stepping onto a university campus.

My father tells a story of coming home after a night shift and seeing my pregnant mother stirring porridge at the stove, holding a child, swinging a child on her foot and studying a text that was propped up on the back of the stove. That was my role model!

Shirley Chisholm stated: “The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, ‘It's a girl.’”

I know that for a fact. I remember my daughter Taylor at around five years of age sitting at the supper table telling us she knew what she wanted to be when she grew up. I asked her, “What do you want to be?” She answered quite forcefully, “A man!” I asked, “Why, don’t you like being a girl?” She

answered that all the important people in the world were men – policemen, firemen, businessmen...and she wanted to be important!

As you can see, language forms ideas in our children at very early ages and our English language favours men. We need to be conscious of this and educate both our boys and girls. It is as important to talk to our boys about discrimination as well as our girls.

We also need to talk about the treatment of women around the world – for example, the recent announcement that in 2015 women in Saudi Arabia will get the right to vote, but only in municipal elections. That day, a woman in Saudi Arabia was sentenced to a lashing for driving a car. This is an example of the injustice women still face around the world.

Let's look at women in education.

In 1862, Mount Allison was the first University in Canada to admit female students! Women could attend university, but could not vote.

I didn't know that at the time, nor was it a factor in my choosing Mount Allison – but it's nice to be part of a long line of educated women from that University!

When we look at the world situation, we should be concerned. The United Nations Population Fund is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. It holds that education is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for girls and women. This is true not only because education is an entry point to other opportunities, but also because the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations.

Investing in girls' education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. Investments in secondary school education for girls yields especially high dividends.

Girls who have been educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller and healthier families. Educated women can recognize the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves and their children. Education helps girls and women to know their rights and to gain the confidence to claim them. However, women's literacy rates are significantly lower than men's in most developing countries.

The education of parents is linked to their children's educational attainment, and the mother's education is usually more influential than the father's. This does not mean we don't worry about educating the boys; it means it is an imperative to educate all children.

UNICEF states that more than 110 million of the world's children – two thirds of them girls – are not in school. In addition, of the world's 875 million illiterate adults, two thirds are women.

Half of the girls who live in developing countries (excluding China) will be married by their 20th birthday.

Other statistics are particularly alarming. Girls between 13 and 18 years of age constitute the largest group in the sex industry. It is estimated that around 500,000 girls under the age of 18 are victims of trafficking each year.

Female genital mutilation affects 130 million girls and women globally, and places 2 million at risk annually.

This to me is shocking, and we should be outraged that these practices still exist. Religion, culture or tradition does not justify abuse or submission of women. We need to speak out against these injustices.

In some cultures, the preference for boy children results in pre-natal sex selection and infanticide of girls. In one country, for example, there are 933 women for every 1,000 men, resulting in 40 million “missing” women.

It is difficult for women around the world. We need to educate about that, because many people think the feminist movement achieved its goal of equality. IT DID NOT!

Other women – like the Famous Five – have helped open the door for women, but we owe it to them and to ourselves to continue that. As women and as individuals, we must not lose that momentum.

And I'm pleased to see that University of Regina students and alumni are carrying that momentum – making important contributions to advancing equality issues for women in our province and beyond.

A perfect example of that is one of our very own students – Amber Fletcher.

This morning, Amber received the 2011 Governor General's Youth Award in Ottawa for her commitment, advocacy and passion for improving the daily lives of Canadian women.

This brings me to today's young women. I have a lot of hope for them, but our responsibility is for all women worldwide. We need to speak out against injustice, recognize the situation for women around the world, and educate people so that women's voices can have power in the world.

This generation is the most socially conscious generation we have ever had. They care about racism, they care about the environment, and they care

about injustice. I have faith they will leave this world a better place than we have left it. To ensure they have the knowledge to do so, we **MUST** educate them – both boys *and* girls!

Amber is one of the many women following in the footsteps of the Famous Five – and speaking of the Famous Five, there is no better person to quote than Nellie McClung to end my presentation and underscore the role all of us have to play:

“The Women who have achieved success in the various fields of labour have won the victory for us, but unless we all follow up and press onward the advantage will be lost. Yesterday’s successes will not do for today!”

I’m so proud there are women who are following up and pressing onward for all of us! I know that our children and grandchildren will learn from our mistakes and tolerate injustices no more. I have faith that the world situation for women will get better – it **HAS** to!