

**National Council for Research on Women
Annual Conference**

Power MATTERS: Reshaping Agendas through Women's Leadership

Afternoon Plenary: Women Leading on Security: Barriers and Opportunities

Location: City University of New York

Event Date: June 6, 2005

Speakers: Marie Wilson, Charles Knight, Celinda Lake

Moderator: Linda Basch

Quotes

"My theory of social change can be summed up in two words—women's leadership."

-Charles Knight

"Already there has been a major change in perceptions—people like Condoleeza Rice and Madeleine Albright are indeed out there. The White House Project has been dealing with questions of how to put an expanded conception of security into a story that can be heard. Who are the validators for this message? How can people trust themselves to vote in ways to protect other kinds of security?"

-Marie Wilson

Overview

Voters' hesitation about female candidates and executive leaders largely revolve around perceptions of a woman's ability to be a "tough fighter" and "strong leader," one who can take decisive action and effectively command troops when necessary. This session will explore the cultural barriers women candidates and women executive leaders face in male-dominated policy arenas like national security. Speakers identified tangible ways for women leaders to advance a critical mass of women into elected office, be perceived as authoritative, and in turn, shape public policy agendas with women's perspectives and priorities.

Summary

Linda Basch, president of the National Council for Research on Women (NCRW), began by describing the three-year project of the National Council for Research on Women and the Center for the Study of Women and Society at the CUNY Graduate Center, *Facing Global Capital, Finding Human Security: A Gendered Critique*, which focuses on the intersections of human security, globalization, and gender. “Human security is a concept that shifts the focus of security away from states and territories and toward the well-being of individual people,” Basch explained. The concept encapsulates “freedom from want and fear,” “human dignity,” and “human empowerment.” Human security also includes notions of social and economic rights/development, as well as human rights. Basch explained that the project explores the gendered assumptions that guide our efforts in these areas.

According to Basch, a human security framework provides an integrated approach to addressing peace, security, and human rights. Such a framework links security to empowerment and views victimization and agency not as incompatible opposites but as two parts of a reality that need to be addressed. Finally, human security frameworks provide a sense of normative structures and accountability.

Traditionally, conversations about security have been informed by a military mindset. “Human security is still connected to military security in an uncomfortable symbiosis that needs to be teased out,” Basch explained. “These relationships feed into this panel’s topic, ‘Women Leading on Security,’ in many ways. Economic security, development, and human resources are considered ‘soft issues,’ while military and technological aspects of security are masculinized and reserved for ‘the boys.’ It is this second set of security issues that are front and center in current debates,” she said.

As an alternative, Basch noted, the White House Project asks how women candidates and voters can address and overcome the fact that these structures are masculinized. “Society does not see

women as viable leaders on security in the same way as men. For example, in the United States it is difficult to elect women to high levels of politics up to and including the Presidency, though we need women at the table to change the very definitions of security,” Basch said.

Marie Wilson, president of the White House Project, expanded on Basch's explanation of the White House Project's security project, which focuses on how women can adjust the framing of security issues. She emphasized that women bring new agendas to power, and that these women need to lead side-by-side with men. The White House Project, which is seven years old, is committed to placing a richly diverse critical mass of women in leadership in this country, up to and including the Presidency. The White House Project also works to train young women to run for office at various levels. “One of the key issues women could play a role in reframing is security, which was at the core of this election,” said Wilson. “The problem is more systemic than individual, and it's important to find out how we can actually get this critical mass into the pipeline.”

Wilson added that women are rarely perceived as leaders, nor are they portrayed as such by the media and popular culture. The White House's Project's “Who's Talking” study looked at Sunday shows to see how many women experts appeared; the numbers rose slightly from 11 percent in 2001 to 15 percent in 2005. “Already there has been a major change in perceptions—people like Condoleeza Rice and Madeleine Albright are indeed out there. The White House Project has been dealing with questions of how to put an expanded conception of security into a story that can be heard. Who are the validators for this message? How can people trust themselves to vote in ways to protect other kinds of security?” Wilson emphasized that creating new messages and narratives is key.

Additionally, the project started out using the language “Total Security Framework,” which George Lakhoff had asked the organization to test. Even though the language did not test well, a new paradigm emerged. “Ultimately,” Wilson concluded, “the clash of civilizations we've been hearing

about in recent years isn't about democracy—democratic values are shared across east-west borders. One thing that isn't shared totally is values around gender. In order to have peace here and elsewhere, we have to relax gender roles.”

Charles Knight, Co-director of the Project on Defense Alternatives at Commonwealth Institute, began, “My theory of social change can be summed up in two words—women’s leadership.” He continued by explaining that the political discourse of “toughness” is central to national security politics, and that security is a default politicians turn to that rarely fails them. Knight reminded that audience that it was Bill Clinton who said, “Strong and wrong beats weak and right.” According to Knight, fundamental gender structures run throughout politics. “Democrats are translated as weak and liberals as effeminate,” he said.

Knight called for a thoughtful deconstruction of the toughness discourse. “We need to distinguish between those qualities of toughness that are harmful versus those that are useful.” He continued by listing adjectives associated with “toughness,” such as “strong, muscular, decisive, active, resolute, vigorous, robust, determined, unsentimental, and realistic.” Knight posited that some of these adjectives convey a harmful toughness, whereas others are useful conceptions of toughness. Politicians often use words like “fighter” and “warrior,” and these words often give politicians credibility. Likewise, leaders say that they will “fight” hard for social security and for schools, but no one expects them to become violent. “This,” Knight suggested, “is where the discourse becomes gendered.”

Knight described a February Associated Press report about a Marine general in California, James Maddis, who said things like “it’s a lot of fun to fight— [it’s] fun to shoot some people.” This report exemplified the harsh realities of war, allowing the public to see the ugly side of male warrior culture. Notably, James Maddis questioned the manhood of his Afghan warrior counterparts. “Once Maddis demasculinizes the Afghans, he has no trouble killing them,” Knight explained. In response, Knight advocated for a new lexicon of definitions about masculinity.

Celinda Lake, President of Lake Snell Perry Mermin & Associates, described a project involving dial groups whereby participants dialed up or down based on how appealing and effective they felt candidates were while speaking in different settings. “A double standard emerged: At the moment women came onto the screen, female and male voters both immediately dialed down to indicate candidates were less effective,” she said. Participants trusted men and gave male candidates the benefit of the doubt. Participants were far more suspicious of the women.

Lake continued by noting that while voters like candidates to appear in informal contexts, this diminishes perceptions of effectiveness, especially for women candidates. Also, women often speak in collective terms, more speculatively, and wishfully, which leads to people to perceive them as less successful. “Voters like action-oriented words,” said Lake. “For voters to believe a candidate is effective they need to hear personal, biographical stories about the candidates’ successes. Voters like women to list specific offices and titles they acquired and specific accomplishments. Since voters are skeptical about women’s track records, it is important to link the personal to the professional,” she said. Lake added that presentation is especially important for women candidates. People want women to be standing, sitting at a desk, or directing people.

Linda Basch then concluded the panel by asking the participants to develop action points on the issues discussed. The panel drafted the following points:

- Expand the discourse of “security” to include notions of social and economic rights and development as well as human rights –in other words, “human security.”
- Train female candidates to develop an authoritative voice around human security agendas.
- Elect a richly diverse critical mass of women to leadership positions, up to and including the Presidency.