

Reasons to Celebrate

by SHERALYN ROMAN

In the newspaper world, writing about something that happened three or four days ago is the very definition of OLD news. Sometimes, however, old news is important news, just like understanding history in all its glory and its ugliness is an important opportunity for us to reflect upon and learn from those who have gone before us. That's my excuse for writing about something that happened this past Monday, a celebration of International Women's Day. There are reasons to celebrate, even while there remains much work to be done.

I think of myself as coming from a generation that was raised to believe all things were possible. If I wanted to be a scientist or a doctor or whatever ? I could. The fact that I was a woman was not to stop me from dreaming big. Yet, feminism was still, for many, an 'F' word. Feminists were sometimes viewed as 'strident' or 'oppositional' and did they have to be so loud? Rather than being seen (as perhaps a man would have been) as strong, independent and as leaders, they were instead fighting battles perceived by men as having already been 'won.' After all, didn't we have the right to vote? Weren't we now being recognized in our educational institutions and in business and government as equal to men?

Here's how short-sighted that opinion was. In the US, as late as 2010, there were still some states that had not independently voted to approve the Equal Rights Amendment Act! Here at home, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was only signed in 1982, and even then, for some provinces and premiers, it was problematic. According to PEW research statistics, as recently as 1995 there were still no women CEOs in any of the Fortune 500 companies and while that number today might be higher, as of 2020 there are only 37 and none are women of colour.

I know that many women my age would also agree that while we were raised to believe all things were possible, we faced both large and small challenges every step of the way. During one summer job experience, a male co-worker asked me if I was wearing a bra that day. It was one comment in a long line of many from that same individual and I have never forgotten it.

But, he was a senior manager and I was just university student. Did I say anything or complain to anyone? Nope. There was no mechanism in place for that to happen, nor did I feel empowered in any way to do so. After graduation, with a degree in my hand and full of excitement, potential and confidence, I interviewed for a position where the much older, male manager, asked me if I 'planned to get pregnant anytime soon?' This didn't happen in 1923, or 1952 (still wrong of course) but in the late 1980s!

Perhaps some of you would have spoken up, but there was no #MeToo movement at the time and many companies had not yet even dreamed of a policy on harassment and discrimination. As a result, working in HR, a career highlight for me was to be a part of a team that implemented change on this front and on other similar forward-thinking policies. Educating employees on appropriate workplace behaviour and paving the way for the next generation of young women to have systems in place for calling out the bad behaviour is something I'm proud of. Back then the only person who might have taken any kind of affirmative action was my Mom if I had told her. She's never backed down from a fight.

On a more positive note, not long ago I wrote a column called 'Shattered Ceilings' addressing positive female role models right here in the Region of Peel, in Caledon and in Dufferin. Currently five women sit on our municipal Council of nine and strong female Mayors have provided leadership to these communities both in the past and currently. I am privileged to know the Executive Directors of a number of female-led organizations who are leading the way in changing our communities for the better and who mentor and empower other women along the way. I am proud to be a part of agencies and business cohorts who are the living embodiment of women supporting women. Progress continues even if it is sometimes a slippery slope. I am not happy for example, to live in a world where women are targeted just for going to school but I am amazed that militants couldn't silence Malala Yousafzai. It's sad that a former President tried gaslighting a young girl but nothing could stop Greta Thunberg and it's the pathway to a better world when the World Health Organization makes time to listen Indigenous water warrior and youth leader Autumn Peltier.

As hard as my mom tried to instil it in me, I'm trying even harder to raise my daughter to know that she can do anything, and her brother to know that we are all equal citizens of the world. When systems fail, as they sometimes do, I'm happy to know that in 2021 we live in a world where problematic behaviours might still exist but where there are stronger mechanisms in place for meaningful action to be taken to address and rectify them. It's been particularly challenging throughout this pandemic to know that women have been harder hit, impacted more than men by loss of jobs or by having to both work and home school. Collectively though, we're up for the challenge and there are reasons to celebrate. Happy International Women's Day!