

How can we ever forget the impassioned plea of Frederick Douglass, issued in our defense of the right to vote? How can we ever forget that young legislator from Tennessee by the name of Harry Burns, who was the deciding vote in ratifying the 19th Amendment. He was planning on voting "no," but then he got a letter from his mother with a simple message. The letter said, "Be a good boy Harry and do the right thing." And he did! Tennessee became the last state to ratify, proving that you can never ever overestimate the power of one person to alter the course of history, or the power of a little motherly advice.

Will we look back and see that we have finally joined the rest of the advanced economies by creating systems of education, employment, child care and health care that support and strengthen families and give all women real choices in their lives.

At the 200th anniversary celebration, will they say that women today supported each other in the choices we make? Will we admit once and for all there is no single cookie cutter model for being a successful and fulfilled woman today, that we have so many choices? We can choose full-time motherhood or no family at all or like most of us, seek to strike a balance between our family and our work, always trying to do what is right in our lives. Will we leave our children a world where it is self-evident that all men and women, boys and girls are created equal? These are some of the questions we can ask ourselves.

Help us imagine a future that keeps faith with the sentiments expressed herein 1848. The future, like the past and the present, will not and cannot be perfect. Our daughters and granddaughters will face new challenges which we today cannot even imagine. But each of us can help prepare for that future by doing what we can to speak out for justice and equality for women's rights and human rights, to be on the right side of history, no matter the risk or cost, knowing that eventually the sentiments we express and the causes we advocate will succeed because they are rooted in the conviction that all people are entitled by their creator and by the promise of America to the freedom, rights, responsibilities, and opportunity of full citizenship. That is what I imagine for the future. I invite you to imagine with me and then to work together to make that future a reality.

SHATTERING THE POLITICAL GLASS CEILING: WOMEN IN POLITICS

by Christopher Sandersfeld CC '00/SIPA '01

Women around the world are occupying seats in parliaments, courts and presidential palaces in greater numbers. And while a declaration of victory and an end to political exclusion is premature, the situation may finally be reverting to its former glory. That is, the glass ceiling that women face today may be, in fact, a fairly recent development. We must keep in mind that women had been successfully ruling countries long before feminism was a concept or a movement.

For female rulers, there is something to be said for "divine-right" government, the kind that bestows a monarch or a member of a royal family with the unique grace of God or the mantle of Heaven. The kind that anoints a leader of pure blood and indomitable spirit. The kind that grants women the ability to rule and to make their mark in the annals of history. The kind that, for the most part, conferred legitimacy of rule to both kings and queens, emperors and empresses.

Although this system of government surely has its own set of flaws, it also shows that women have always been a powerful force in regional, national and international politics. Female leaders were feared, they were loved and above all, respected. Of course, civil rights were another matter entirely. Even the birth of republican forms of government and democracy would not eradicate the civil rights gap—nor have they yet completely succeeded.

OF QUEENS AND EMPRESSES

Women in politics is hardly a new concept. There are many notable examples of powerful female monarchs throughout the past several thousand years, but it is unclear to what extent these rulers understood or cared about the more fundamental civil-political rights of women in their countries or others. Even so, by occupying the positions of power that they did, these women were examples of leadership and leadership potential—and equality.

Famous names and their reputations flow off the tongue. Queen Elizabeth I of Great Britain is one of the most well-known and widely studied rulers among Western historians. Her 45-year reign is impressive not only because of its length, but also because its tenure encompassed a period of prosperity and discovery on an international level. Likewise, two centuries later, Queen Victoria (a 64-year reign) and the Victorian era were also periods of immense progress both in technology and the evolving world

order.

Catherine the Great of Russia is another often-cited example of female monarchical power. By continuing the Westernization processes of Peter the Great and expanding the territory of Russia to include the Crimea and portions of Poland, Catherine solidified her place in history as a trailblazer.

Several thousand miles away in China, the empresses and concubines of the emperors were known to wield enormous power both in the Imperial Palace and in the country. Perhaps the most well-known Chinese example is of the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi. The Empress Dowager, who died in 1908, began her palace life as a concubine to the emperor. Through skillful maneuvers, she ultimately found herself as regent for her son and her nephew—a position that afforded her a great deal of power, even as her empire was collapsing to internal rebellion and foreign incursion.

Even several centuries before the Empress Dowager or Queen Elizabeth I came to power, queens ruled ancient societies as well. The legend of Cleopatra may now be more fictionalization than truth (due in part to missing pieces in the historical record and motion picture romanticization), but the queen known as Cleopatra did exist and functioned as a viable ruler of Egypt until country and queen ultimately succumbed to Rome's (and Julius Caesar's) advances.

Much less well-known, but perhaps no less important, are societies in which women exert ultimate political and social control. Known as matriarchal societies, these social organizations have existed (and continue to exist) for thousands of years. Several Native American cultures can be counted among them, including the Pueblo, Iroquois and Innu. Hawaii under the rule of Queen Liliuokalani (1891-1895) is yet another example. Even today, anthropologists can identify societies that qualify as matriarchal in the South Pacific, India and South America.

BUILDING THE GLASS CEILING

As monarchies fell and were replaced with governments resembling republics and democracies, women also seemed to fall out of positions of high political power, especially where elections were involved. It is curious to note that since royal blood was considered to be a "divine" attribute, female rulers were not considered less legitimate than their male counterparts once in office, even if some monarchical rules made it difficult for them to get there. However, that legitimacy for rule did not translate into the electoral process.

It would be inappropriate to suggest that the rise of democratic forms of government caused the proverbial glass ceiling to be created, but it is curious to note that the two might, even in a very tangential way, be related.

This is not to say that democracy and republican government doomed female leaders and politicians forever. A look at current statistics and trends in women's participation in politics suggests that, in fact, as notions of

gender equality change and evolve and as the modern glass ceiling is further broken, women are climbing the ladders of power and moving toward greater parity with their male counterparts. Ironically, the Age of Enlightenment and Reason did not extend into an Age of Equality.

AROUND THE WORLD

Examples of modern, powerful women in politics are numerous, ranging from former Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel to former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan to former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India.

Great Britain has been a model state in terms of the evolving participation of women in politics. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who served longer than any other British prime minister of the 20th century, will be remembered as one of the most influential leaders of her country and continues to exert political power within her party. And Thatcher is not the only woman to hold high political office in Great Britain, the Rt. Hon. Betty Boothroyd, Speaker of the British House of Commons, is the first woman to hold the post. She is just one of over 160 female Members of Parliament.

Europe as a whole is also opening its door to more women. Angela Merkel of the German Christian Democratic party is currently being feted as a rising political star in the country and perhaps the next German Chancellor. For the Christian Democrats, a very conservative party, to put forward a female in such a prominent role speaks highly of the commitment of both party and country to putting and keeping women in positions of power. This is also indicated by the presence of quotas in other parties like the Social Democrats: a minimum of 40 percent of candidates fielded for office must be female.

In France, a change in political culture is also underway. The French Gaullist party, traditionally conservative, recently chose a woman, Michelle Alliot-Marie, as its new leader. Additionally, Martine Aubry, a labor minister, is considered by many observers of French politics to be a serious contender for the French Presidency.

South Asia has been a particularly strong bastion of women in politics, especially women in the top seat of power. Beginning with Indira Gandhi in India, the subcontinent has seen and continues to see female chief executives. Sonia Gandhi, also in India and the daughter-in-law of the former prime minister, has emerged as a formidable political force in the Congress Party. In Pakistan, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto made her mark on the scene and continues to exert influence, though now in exile in London. Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Bandaranaike is also a part of a political dynasty (her father was also a president of Sri Lanka), but she has made a name for herself by standing firm in the wake of terrorist activities of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Even countries in the Middle East, where a strict Islamic reading of the

Koran was often used to justify leaving women out of the political process, the numbers and trends are encouraging. Most women in the Middle East are now able to vote (Kuwait is a notable exception) and many are even holding office, as in Iran, Qatar and Yemen.

Parliamentary representation rates for women around the world is also increasing. In Nordic countries, approximately 39 percent of parliament members are women. Rates across continents show that female representation is actually very similar—around 14 percent and increasing on a yearly basis.

THE UNITED STATES

Although no woman has yet held any of the top four elected offices in this country, that may soon end. The Clinton Administration, for example, appointed Madeleine K. Albright as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Additionally, the top contenders of the 2000 Presidential race, Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Vice-President Al Gore, have both been rumored to be considering drafting women for the so-called "veep-stakes," or hunt for the vice-presidential candidate. For Republicans, names like New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman, Representative Jennifer Dunn and former Red Cross President and former presidential candidate Elizabeth Dole have circulated among media and academic insiders. On the Democratic side, Gore is said to be considering Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, among others.

Geraldine Ferraro, 1984 Democratic vice-presidential candidate, was the first to break the gender mold on the presidential ticket. Although the Democrats lost badly that year (to an extremely popular incumbent President Ronald Reagan), the symbolism of her run was not lost on any political observers.

Governors' mansions in the U.S. are still notoriously occupied overwhelmingly by male governors. Only three of the 50 U.S. governorships are held by women—New Jersey, Arizona and New Hampshire. Interestingly, the top five elected offices in Arizona are all held by women, as are the top three offices in New Hampshire.

Female office holders in both the Senate and the House of Representatives have been increasing, and could increase even more in this election cycle. Currently, there are nine female Senators and 58 female Representatives—still well below the 14 percent aggregation for female participation in world politics.

Receiving the most attention in the upcoming Senate race is Hillary Clinton, a recent New York state resident. The race will likely be bitter (she is running against Republican New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani), but it will also set new precedent. She will be the first First Lady to run for a major public office, although Clinton has already transformed the office of First Lady into its own bully pulpit.

THE YEARS TO COME

Participation of women in politics may not be increasing fast enough for some. But media analysts and armchair politicians alike agree that a trend is in place. With the speed and ease of communications increasing exponentially almost on a daily basis, many feel that the number of female presidents, prime ministers and parliamentarians will increase dramatically in the near future. The ability to get one's message out more quickly and easily and more cheaply than before through the online world could greatly contribute to this trend. And while the Internet may not confer a "divine right" to rule, it may provide another hammer to smash new holes in the political glass ceiling. ©