

Gender equality? Still a way to go

By Tabitha Wells

?I raise up my voice ? not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.?

? Malala Yousafzai

This year's theme of International Women's Day focused on equality, and how it creates the possibility for the world to thrive in all aspects of life. Male and female do more than just compliment each other ? when we work together, we have the opportunity to progress forward, to impact positive change, and to grow and learn.

Although the Government of Canada has pursued a commitment to uphold gender equality, with this concept being enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, there is still a long way to go.

Women are still underrepresented in many professions and industries throughout Canada, some of the most obvious being business leadership roles and politics. In spite of the strides that have been made, there are still antiquated ideas in many workplaces that women cannot fill certain roles because they are better suited for men for a myriad of reasons.

For the longest time, gender equality wasn't even in my vocabulary. I was fortunate to grow up in a family where my parents were partners, not with one in charge over the other. Gender did not seem to hinder things we wanted to do ? my sister was even one of the first girls in Scouts here in Orangeville. We weren't discouraged from pursuing education in fields we wanted because we were girls, or told we couldn't do certain things because of it.

In college, gender politics and the concept of feminism were first introduced to me, but it was all so foreign I wrote much of it off. It wasn't until I entered the workforce that I started to take notice of the preferential treatment of men, of the higher expectations placed on women, and for the first time encountered a roadblock to a goal because of my gender.

At one particular workplace, I often encountered statements of bewilderment from people regarding my being in that job because I was a woman.

?You can't really know about this stuff.?

?Is it hard for you to work in a job where you don't understand what it is you're selling??

And my favourite ?I want to speak to a male associate, not a woman. You won't know anything about this.?

In many industries, as a woman I have to work twice as hard to gain the respect of the people around me, watching as male colleagues receive preferential treatment by those around us.

Part of what makes me most frustrated is I know my experiences with this are actually quite limited compared to the reality for many. I recognize that I am fortunate ? in general, my talents and skills in many of my workplaces have spoken loudly and carried weight with the people who were truly important. But I know many stories of those who have had it worse. Who make the situations I've encountered look like nothing more than an encounter with a schoolyard bully.

Things are changing, but slowly.

What does it take to keep pushing forward? In my opinion, a big part of achieving full gender equality has always been about the ability to recognize women making great strides and achievements in industries and positions generally held primarily by men.

Change is achieved by having role models to use as examples, and then being able to stand up and lead by example ourselves.

International Women's Day has been a big part of this. It provides an opportunity for women around the world to learn about and recognize the achievements of other women. It brings people together, male and female, to learn about the strides that have been made and discuss ways to pursue further equality.

By achieving equality and addressing the issues facing women, we open the door to find solutions for many of the issues facing men as well. Without equality, however, neither of these can be properly addressed.

Where women are empowered to step forward, so are men. Equality eliminates the ideas of gender roles, allowing men and women to be weighed on the same platform. It opens discussion and allows for progress.

Status of Women Canada suggested three specific steps to help change progress in the right direction:

Start with changing attitudes and behaviours.

Recognize gender stereotypes and subtle sexism encountered every day are part of the problem.

Challenge the sexism and discrimination that allows for gender inequality to exist.

Most importantly, change begins by speaking up, by not being afraid to use your own voice. This can come in many forms ? from a sharing of experiences, to a celebration of progress, and even as an advocate for those in worse situations than yourself.

Just think ? if one teenaged girl standing up for her right for education in a Taliban-dominated part of Pakistan's Swat Valley could

inspire and create change, how much more change could a chorus of voices across our nation, and from there, our world, create?