

Women in the Workplace: How Far We've Come; How Far We All Still Need to Go By Anne D. DarConte, CAE

March was Women's History Month, a month to commemorate and encourage the vital contributions women have made and continue to make in the United States. March 8th was International Women's Day. According to the official website, this day marked a global celebration of the "social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women."

First celebrated in 1911, this day remains both relevant and necessary 110 years later in the U.S. workforce. Wasn't 110 years enough time to address the inequities? Why not? How can it be that women still do not have gender parity and equality in our workforce?

Sure, there are historic "firsts." Escaping slavery, abolitionist Harriet Tubman is responsible for freeing hundreds via the Underground Railroad in the mid-19th century. In August 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, allowing women to vote in national and local elections. Amelia Earhart became the first female pilot to cross the Atlantic Ocean in 1937. The beautiful and talented actress Hedy Lamarr is not only memorable for her MGM performances, but also as the co-patent owner of a radio signaling device that became critical for preventing our wartime enemies from decoding strategic, military communications. And Rosie the Riveter (supposedly based on real life aircraft worker Rose Will Monroe from Michigan) became symbolic for the vital role women played in the traditionally male, defense industry workforce during World War II.

Forty-three years ago, a brand of cigarettes adopted the infamous slogan, "You've come a long way, baby," This highly successful advertising campaign along with the product it promoted, were designed to appeal to women and to the growing feminist movement. (Please note: I am neither endorsing nor renouncing cigarettes or cigarette smoking here.) Women were portrayed as confident, successful, and independent. Even Wonder Woman made an appearance.

Yes, 1968. We had come so far. Fast forward to 2021. We still have a long way to go.

Gather a random group of professional women and every one of them has a relevant story to tell. AENC did just this a couple of years ago at a conference session to kick-off its Women's Leadership Initiative. The stories poured out. Being asked to stay late to meet deadlines because they are single and don't have children. Being judged for having to pick up children from daycare by a defined time. Being ogled for how they look. Being excluded from the dinner, golf outing, or other event with male clients, prospects and/or colleagues when at a professional conference or on other business travel. Being subject to reservations that query readiness to work with a male-

dominated leadership team. Or perhaps, their story may be even more painful; a tale of workplace harassment or even violence.

According to ASAE, 75 percent of the association and nonprofit workforce is made up of women. Yet only 45% of the top leadership positions are held by women. Women earn 82% what men earn in same or similar occupations. Who is responsible? And how do we overcome these inequities?

Women, first and foremost, have a responsibility to prepare for the job at hand as well as for advancement. They must stand up and exert their confidence, tout their experiences and accomplishments, and earn the trust and respect of colleagues at all levels of an organization. They also have an obligation to treat others as they want to be treated; there is no substitute for The Golden Rule in all of our interactions.

Women have to be extra cautious to avoid potentially problematic situations as well as protect their reputations. They should avoid speaking with strangers, especially when traveling alone for business. They must watch their alcohol consumption during work-oriented functions as well as when traveling on their own. A hotel bar filled with well-dressed businessmen can spell hazard when one of them is plying you with drinks, any one of which may be spiked with drugs. Romantic workplace relationships should be avoided; besides all of the organizational policies that may be violated by such romances, the pitfalls of perceived/actual favoritism as well as the tension of a bad break-up often spill into the workplace.

In many families, women take primary responsibility for raising children and/or caring for elderly parents. No doubt these career gaps influence pay equality too, a fact that cannot be ignored and does impact salaries.

Organizations, their boards, and their staff leaders have responsibilities too, including an obligation to serve as role models. By setting the example that qualified females will not be treated differently in any aspect of their organization's governance, management, policies, operations or events, the association and the industry or profession it represents earns a respected reputation for excellence, equity and ethical values.

No longer can associations or any workplaces defend male-domination of an industry or profession (or its membership) as a reason to hire or promote a man over an equally or more-qualified woman. Such ill-founded excuses expose leadership voids, exemplify outdated mores, justify inappropriate (and possibly illegal) behavior, and endorse the immediate need for a cultural shift.

Sadly yes, such practices still exist. And 110 years after the first International Women's Day, I ask again, how can it be that we still do not have gender parity and equality in our workplaces?

Is it possible that some of the males guilty of such practices don't know they are even doing it? If not, how can they be made aware and educated to improve in a manner that

does not punish their victims? Awareness and education can be critical steps towards improvement. If aware, how should they be held accountable?

Perhaps at this point in our society, where race and identity are recasting our politics, public policies, workplace practices and our culture generally, we must remember that gender inequality continues too. It is long past time for rationale and civil discourse. We have an obligation to share our truths and have them heard. We must continue to share our stories, respect and appreciate our differences, and promote the productive and necessary distinctions of our contributions. We must hold our leaders accountable and we must require change when equity standards are not met.

Personally, when the time is right, I would prefer that “International Women’s Day” and other such designated examples of distinction are eliminated. I, like most I suspect, would prefer we celebrate a society where our voices rightfully calling-out discriminatory practices of any kind are no longer necessary. Then, I could proudly stand and shout, “Yes, we ALL have come a long way baby!”

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