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‘Women, their rights & nothing less’

The very lucky ones of us have parents or grandparents who are 90 years old. In that context, 90 years do not seem so long. Yet in waiting for a principle like equality to come to full fruition, 90 years is a long time indeed. The 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution will be 90 years old on Aug. 18. The equality for women it mandates has had several “waves,” and for those born in the midpoint between 1920 and 2010, equality for women appears to be a fact of life. The question is whether the appearance is the reality.

Cause for celebration

In celebrating how far we have come, it helps to put the fact that we could not vote 90 years ago in juxtaposition with the candidacy of Hillary Clinton less than 90 years later. Ironically, that juxtaposition highlights the frustrations inherent in women’s accomplishments — the fact that Clinton’s candidacy was so very unique, the fact that her husband’s role and reputation were so prominent, the fact that Sarah Palin was arguably nominated by the other party on the theory that any woman would win all women, and finally in the bottom-line fact that Clinton did not win. The glass ceilings may have been cracked, the glass gavels may be increasing, and the executive washrooms may be at least now 15 percent unisex. Is that cause for celebration or a clarion call to finish in the next decade what was so bravely started by concerned citizens those many years ago?

Successes among us

We have had some spectacular successes — on our own Illinois Supreme Court we had the stellar Justice Mary Ann G. McMorrow “succeeded” by the esteemed Justice Anne M. Burke. We have had and do have numerous female judges on the Appellate Court of great

distinction and wisdom. Many of our extraordinary judges working in the trenches throughout the state are women of intellect and balance. Attorney General Lisa M. Madigan is not only a woman of accomplishment, but she believes in accomplishing the goals of women and men equally.

State’s Attorney Anita M. Alvarez and many women serving in the mayor’s Cabinet not only have achieved much themselves, but continually seek equal justice for all citizens. Our state takes justifiable pride in our president’s wife, Michelle Obama, who is a force in her own right, and in Valerie Jarrett and other astute women who surround this president and participate in formulating our government’s policies. We celebrate Oprah, we rejoice at women in entertainment who influence our culture, and we note with pride that women are now becoming a majority of the work force and almost 50 percent of college and professional students. It would seem then that the suffragettes would view us all as worthy successors and able beneficiaries of their efforts.

Half the sky but far from half the pie

There is an ancient Chinese proverb that notes that “women hold up half the sky.” Sadly, that recognition has not translated into anything like half the economic pie. In the legal field alone the statistics are shockingly unequal. The Chicago Bar Association’s Alliance for Women and the Coalition of Women’s Initiatives in Law Firms issued a report in June on its “Call to Action: Advancing Women Attorneys in Leadership in Chicago.” With all their worthy advocacy and efforts, it still appears that, at best, 20 percent of all law firm partnership positions surveyed in Illinois are occupied by women. This is not to diminish the accomplishments of the Call to Action or the

commitment of all lawyers. Nevertheless, a 20 percent representation of women as decision-makers is a long, long way from equality.

That statistical distance between women and power is repeated in boardrooms and corporate offices. In 2009, a Fortune 500 study concluded that for those companies women accounted for only 15.2 percent of board directors and 13.5 percent of the corporate officers. That is in spite of the fact that sound research indicates a clear correlation between the number of female board members and stronger financial performance.

The percentage of women in political power is only slightly above those of women in the power seats of firms and corporations. Women hold about 17 percent of the Senate seats and comprise 16.8 percent of the House of Representatives. In statewide offices women fare somewhat better — holding about 20 percent to 24 percent of those positions.

Filling in half the sky

Women seemingly have “stalled out” at about 20 percent and remain in that sense less than equal. They still make less money than men for the same jobs, and still are expected to raise children while forging ahead.

It would be foolish not to be aware of how far we have not come while celebrating how far we have. Our concerted effort as a society of lawyers should be to demand significant change in the next decade, a 10-year plan with checkpoint incentives, and specific targets, so that on the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, we can look back and look forward with truly equal hope. We should approach the work with a sense of urgency. We are the sons and daughters of the first suffragettes who relied on us to finish the work they began, and time is of the essence. ■

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