

UN Commission on the Status of Women:

Role of Women in Poverty Eradication

The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges (Item 3 (a) (i))

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for having me here today. It is a great honor, and the theme for this year's commission is exciting and thought provoking.

I come from the town of Claverack, in Columbia County, NY. Columbia County is a rural county of 60,000 people and the Town of Claverack is the second largest town in the County, with a population of 6,000, 1400 of which reside in the Village of Philmont, which is a condensed rural village. I have the honor and pleasure of being the Town Supervisor, which is an elected position and serves the role as the head of the Town Board as well as sit on the County Board of Legislators. [I was elected just over 2 years ago, for my four year term, as not only the first Democrat to be elected in 35 years, but I also am the first elected woman to be Town Supervisor in its over 200 year history.]

So what can I, and we, as women, do to help eradicate the poverty that surrounds us?

The issues of poverty are obviously complex and multi-layered – as evidenced by the depth of offerings at this year's commission. Poverty is complicated by issues of education, job opportunities, access to information, physical and mental health issues, family planning issues, and more. So I would like to speak to you today, of some of MY experiences and where I believe that each of us, especially women, can have a role that would make a difference.

As we consider how to empower women to help eradicate poverty, one of the simple things we can do is to honor and celebrate what IS being done. We can acknowledge the powerhouse that women have been, and continue to be, as the backbone of much of the volunteer work that services the community to help with the eradication of poverty. Especially in politics, our attention is so often drawn to how things DIDN'T work, or DON'T work, instead of focusing on the successes within the programs. I think we can help support all our efforts by sharing the stories of how many people ARE serviced... like how our local Food Pantry, run almost entirely by women, which last year was aiding about 60 people is now at almost double that – yet still has managed on volunteers and donations. These are our unsung heroes, who work every week, without much acknowledgement, praise or recognition. It can make such a difference in people's lives – so let us applaud and acknowledge every action that is done that contributes to the eradication of poverty, whether big or small. Many of us want to, and strive to do big...but I want to also acknowledge how big the small contributions of many can be. We are in the midst everyday of many empowered women eradicating poverty.

The next thing that we can do is to actually ask for help, as well as offer support. I recognize that when we speak of empowered women in the United States, especially rural women, we tend to think of the pioneer women, the self sustaining frontier's woman, who knew how to do everything from birthing children to

defending their land. With this view of empowered woman as self reliant, I wonder if we are missing something. Self reliant can mean, but does not always, mean empowered. If we imagine ourselves as “self reliant”, we may be shutting ourselves off from accepting support. I recognize that in myself. So it is our task to acknowledge the difference between self reliant and empowered. Empowered means we have the strength to ask for and receive help. It means we have the self esteem to make mistakes, to try and fail as well as try and succeed. It means having to give up the claim of being a victim, even when it can be a comforting crutch. It means supporting others, even when we think they are empowered “enough”.

I also believe that a role woman can play in the eradication of poverty is to run for public office and or to encourage other woman to do so. As an elected official and town leader, I have the opportunity to identify issues within the town and am in a position to serve the community by working to directly resolve these issues. I believe that better representation of woman in office brings additional perspectives to the role. I think that men are often in full support of the same things that women are interested in, but I think we may notice different things. And, as women, who are stereotypically known to be good listeners and nurturers, I also think we may have access to different information. It’s hard for me to believe that many of my male elected officials would be spoken directly to, as I was, by a 24 year old woman on her 5th pregnancy about how no doctor in the county would allow her to have her tubes tied, as she desired and requested. There are real, individual issues, that as a town leader I not only have firsthand knowledge of, but have the power of influence to do something about. Especially in rural and small communities, elected officials have the opportunity to truly serve the people to the benefit of their communities.

I had the privilege of hearing Jennifer Lawless speak on her research on Why Women Don’t Run for office and two of the things that caught my attention are that one - women are less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for office, from anyone – so I am hoping that you will suggest to women you know to consider running. Then you may immediately run into one of the other reasons that Lawless found in her research, which is that women are much less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office. As Jennifer noted, we are measuring against the standard WE would set for ourselves, not the actual bar of behavior for our elected officials. Men tend to look at the people currently in office, and say “Sure, I can do that” whereas women tend to think of the way they think it should be, and think it is more than they can do – so they don’t seriously consider it, whereas men do. So please encourage the women that you know to consider running for office, and help them to realize they can do it.

Whether we are talking about running for office, or creating different opportunities for people in need or suggesting behavioral changes to help eradicate poverty, we are breaking barriers and this in itself can be frightening to people, even when they believe it might be better. When I got elected as Town Supervisor, I found it was one of the best, but the most difficult, jobs I have ever had. I had entered into a system that had been dominated by the “old boy’s network” and I was an outsider. All the people I was working with had not wanted, or expected, me to be there. So as we look to how to eradicate poverty, I am very aware of the difficulty and fear of change – even the most well meaning change, or change that a majority agreed upon. My experience is that it happens in very small steps. It happens by recognizing where you are, and appreciating what is, no matter how excited you may be about what could be. It is finding small and simple things that you

can agree upon and working to enact those to build trust. It is in knowing and understanding that you will be misunderstood and misheard, time and time again, and yet you must be patient. And it is in also recognizing the point when it is time to move forward, even if everyone will not be with you. It is in knowing that you cannot change other people's behaviors, only your own, which you hope will alter theirs. I think these are skills that women can, and do, excel at. As natural listeners, relationship builders and multitaskers, often charged with managing children (and childish behavior) we have many of the natural skills it takes to understand where we are, and patiently, but steadily create change. I am very pleased to say that after two years in office, we have made amazing progress as a group, working together with respect and hope and excitement of what is possible. By finding common ground from which we could move forward from, and empowering all of us to move forward together, everyone is more engaged in being a part of the solution.

And then, even though we know that change may be difficult, and we must be patient, we also need to have and hold a vision of possibility. We need to believe that all things are possible, while at the same time truly understanding where we are. I think, in general, there is a natural tendency to consider how we want things to be, without as much focus on where things are, and working from there. There is an organizational management tool that suggests companies look at their 5 year plan and work backwards. If this is where we want to be in five years, what do they need to have completed by year 4, where would they be in year 3, etc. And when they do that, they often find that what needs to be done in year one is already a large distance from where they were now. It is not that we should give up on what is possible, but to move forward with expectations that will empower us, not defeat us.

In order to win my election, I too needed to recognize where we were. The odds were not with me to win, but by acknowledging that, while at the same time believing it was possible and trusting in the people's voice, the strongholds of the past changed. The reality is that I am a Democrat, in a Republican and partisan, stronghold. I have seen many campaigns based on the belief that "WE can do better". To me, this is an example of not acknowledging where we were by implying that everyone else is as unhappy with where they are as you are, which may, or may not, be true. In our town we did not have any big, controversial issues so I offered to listen and to bring fresh energy to the role. I did not talk about things that were wrong but what was working, and where things could be strengthened; sharing my appreciation of where we were while incorporating a look to the future. In the end, this belief in the possibility and option of change, while respecting what was already in place and of value is what I believe gave people the comfort to consider doing something differently. Not from a place of anger, despair or frustration, but from a place of open possibility. Women can be excellent multi-taskers. If woman can take on the role of holding this seeming dichotomy of what is and all that is possible, our actions will be even more effective and lasting.

Our ability to do this also dovetails effectively with another asset that I believe woman naturally offer in the role of the eradication of poverty – and that is our natural relationship building skills and interest. In rural communities relationships are personal. We do not have the luxury of urban anonymity. You know who comes to the food pantry, needs Meals on Wheels, or was picked up by the taxi for social services. You know who lost their job, had someone in their family die or is drinking too much. And if you don't know, someone else does, and they can tell you. So by using our skills in relationship building we have opportunities to help create the connections and support relationships that will have true day-to-day impact in people's lives. Our local Community Action Agency Director spoke to me about the not surprisingly numbers of single women and

children who make up the highest majority of our poverty level population. She also noted how sometimes a pregnancy for a teenager is the most “normal” thing they have experienced yet in their life – regular people get pregnant. People are suddenly giving them attention and in the end, they have a person to love and a person who loves them. This is again, understanding where we are. Perhaps we can use our relationship skills to empower and offer some “normalcy” to others whose experience is different than ours.

This is similar to the value in the efforts we can make to strengthen existing services with better coordination. For instance, there is a health leadership team I am a part of that is working to enact the needs identified by the public health department. What we have recognized is that there are entities whose mission is focused on ACCESS and there are other groups that are focused on PREVENTION. But what we lack is a group whose mission is COORDINATION. If we notice and take advantages of opportunities for coordination we can create even small shifts which will raise the level of effectiveness of the current silos of important efforts exponentially.

As has been noted, poverty issues are complex and multilayered. I recognize that the realities of individuals’ lives in poverty can be much more complicated than I might imagine, or wish, them to be.

But the things that I am mentioning in the ways that women can have an effective role in the eradication of poverty are things we can begin today. Women excel at action and there is an exciting multitude of ideas that are offered to us, especially in these next two weeks, to bring into action. With the power of recognizing that we can start right now, by acknowledging and celebrating what is being done; by empowering ourselves by asking for help and support; by understanding the fear and challenge of change; by acknowledging where we are while believing all that is possible; by building our relationships and efforts at coordination and mentioning to every woman that we meet that they should consider running for office, our actions **will** be strengthened and fruitful and **we will** be empowered to eliminate the barriers to wealth for **everyone**.