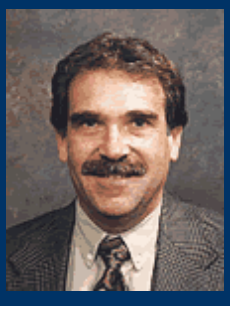
Articles & Commentaries

p-Watch — USA



by Michael Manson, long and closely associated with the APO when he was the Assistant Director of the East-West Center's Institute of Economic Development and Politics in Honolulu. He helped to initiate a number of collaboration programs between the APO and the East-West Center. Manson also served in the Asian Development Bank, and was Director of Communications with the State of Hawaii's Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism. He is presently an educator, and a regular contributor to this column.

Running at Half Speed

As my students piled into the train to participate in a Model United Nations conference at Northeastern University in Boston, I could not help but make a mental note that of the 16 only two were young men. The other 14 students were bright, articulate, motivated women who had decided to spend two days discussing pressing international issues facing a troubled world. I could easily extrapolate from this experience to my classroom, where young women consistently outperform their male counterparts. My thoughts ran to the broader picture of a world in which in many instances countries either purposely or through cultural predisposition decided that they would accept the consequences of entering the global arena while leaving behind roughly 50% of their intellectual resources, i.e., women. A business doing the same would certainly flirt with failure.

The USA today reflects a society that embraces but falls short of taking full advantage of the immense reservoir of talent and energy represented by its female citizens. Current political events (including the recent French election) have brought issues of female leadership to the fore. Hillary Clinton’s candidacy for president and Nancy Pelosi’s tenure as the first woman speaker of the US House of Representatives are forcing the USA once again to take measure of its biases against strong female leadership. We should not forget that women did not receive the right to vote in the USA until 1920, despite their tireless efforts on behalf of the country’s poor and disadvantaged. Certainly if there is a litmus test for intellect and courage, women passed it decades ago. Have US women finally achieved equity in leadership circles?

Altering a 371-year tradition, Harvard University welcomed its first female president in 2007. It was an ironic twist that her predecessor, Lawrence H. Summers, lost his job in large part because he alluded to the possibility that women have “less intrinsic aptitude” for science than men. That statement caused an uproar throughout academia. Four Ivy League colleges now have female presidents, as does the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This makes considerable sense given that 58% of undergraduate

students are women. According to the US Department of Labor, 90% of women are pursuing their studies beyond high school. The figure is 61% for men. Among people in their 20s and 30s, more women than men have college degrees, and about half of the students in medical and law schools are female. For law school that figure was 10% in 1970. Nationally, of roughly 2,000 colleges and universities, one-quarter are headed by female presidents, up from about 10% in 1986.

> **“Of women starting out in science, medicine, or law, few remain in the field or rise to the ranks of their male counterparts.”**

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, only 2% of undergraduates were female in 1960. Today women make up 44% of the student body. This increase is not surprising given that standardized test results in science for high school students in Massachusetts show only a 2% difference between boys and girls scoring in the “advanced” or “proficient” range.

If one assumes an even split between men and women in aptitudes for science, law, and engineering, why aren’t we seeing statistics that reveal this 50-50 split in the professions and in board rooms? This misalignment has been the topic of much research and discussion. One argument is the lack of support women receive from universities if they show an interest in the sciences and technology. They are easily discouraged by a sense of impending failure, real or imagined, that society or individuals (Lawrence Summers) predict will negate all their hard work and hopes. Some university departments in science and technology want to limit enrollment given the lack of laboratory space and financial resources and purposely weed out the weaker students. Those weaker students may not be the least talented, but those that lack the backing of a society that has reinforced the myth that women lack the intrinsic talent to succeed. New programs sponsored by the National Science Foundation want to attract more women into computer science and electrical engineering, hoping to boost the percentage of women in these fields beyond the current 28%.

The study of gender (in)equality does not lack for statistics. Those statistics paint a consistent picture of something gone awry. Of women starting out in science, medicine, or law, few remain in the field or rise to the ranks of their male counterparts. Although we are approaching parity in medical school admissions, 68% of medical faculty are male and 32% female. The unevenness is particularly noticeable in the higher ranks, with 35% of full/associate professors being men and 10% women. There has been progress since 1979, however. Today one in three physicians is a woman; in 1979 the ratio was one in 10. In the legal field, men accounted for 52% of law degrees and women 48%. Partners at law firms, however, are 83% male and 17% female. Some 46% of female law graduates leave the legal profession as opposed to a 31% dropout rate for men.

There is a continuing controversy over the discrepancy in pay levels for women and men who do the same job. The latest statistics reveal that women earn 80% of what men earn one year after college graduation. The gap increases to 69% 10 years after college. That is an improvement, however, from 1979 when women earned only 63% of men’s pay. A US Department of Labor study revealed that 60% of women are in the labor force, an increase from 43% in 1970. Among working women, 32.6% have college degrees, compared with 11.2% in 1970. Despite women earning less than their male counterparts many

women are playing a bigger role in paying the family bills. In two-income families, 25% of the women bring home a bigger paycheck, while the 1987 figure was 18%.

The impact of women in the economic picture thins out if you consider women at the top, either as corporate board members or as top managers. Of the 100 largest publicly traded companies in Massachusetts, only 10% have women CEOs and 50% have no women board members. Only 9.2% of the executive positions in those companies are held by women. At Fortune 500 companies, 12.4% of board seats are occupied by women and the percentage of corporate officer and director positions held by women is about 15%.

In politics the “glass ceiling” of the business world is replaced with the “marble ceiling.” Despite the heavy news coverage of three women prominent in politics, Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, and Condoleezza Rice, only 16% of the US Congress is female. Only one woman remains on the US Supreme Court. In 1920, the year women were given the right to vote, there were no women in Congress. Their numbers increased to 10, 11, and 87 in 1950, 1970, and 2007, respectively.

One way to bring more talented women into the US workforce and into leadership positions is to solve the critical issue of childcare in a gender-equal society. The US has done poorly in this area. Women in the USA have the highest fertility rate of any major developed country and very weak family leave policies compared with other developed countries. About 43% of professional women leave work voluntarily to attend to their families. This leaves US women in the lurch. Recent trends, however, have shown that women may be devising their own solutions: enter the “mompreneurs.” One study showed that women-owned dotcom start-ups survived the dotcom collapse far better than male-owned companies. Female-led companies increased by 17% from 1997 to 2004, and it is estimated that 40% of all privately held companies in the USA are now headed by women. It is not surprising to see this strong showing by bright, talented women who are eager to be part of an economy running at full speed.

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