

In the year 2007, the idea of men and women studying and living together on a college campus is so normal that no one – least of all those of you here today to start your Muhlenberg experience – would have reason to think about it. So it is worth remembering as we begin the celebration of 50 years of coeducation, how revolutionary Muhlenberg was.

In the academic neighborhood, and in the larger world too, the college was often ahead of the curve. Let me mention some examples to consider.

Muhlenberg enrolled its first women as full time resident students in 1957. Princeton did not do so until 1969, the same year as Franklin and Marshall. Lafayette made the change in 1970, Yale in 1971 and Dartmouth in 1972. Even Harvard did not grant its degrees to its sister college, Radcliffe, until 1963, and did not combine the two admissions offices until 1975, effectively ending centuries of separation. The list goes on – that is just a sample.

Think about how this campus has changed since Muhlenberg opened its doors to women – in the face of howls from many male students who behaved as if their sanctuary were being defiled. I should add, parenthetically, that some of the hazing to which women were subjected half a century ago could today be classified -- and punished -- as harassment. But that is now ancient history.

Where Muhlenberg had no women heading academic departments in 1957, there are now seven. Women direct four academic centers, serve as deans and associate deans and head 16 administrative departments.

Look also at changes in the wider world of women, post 1957. In that year, Switzerland allowed women to vote for the first time – and in only one canton. Now a woman is president of Switzerland.

With deference to President Helm, an expert in antiquity, it must be said that the first Egyptian queen may have ruled as early as 3000 BC and the city-state of Ur, in Mesopotamia, had a female ruler about 500 years later. But modern women with political power are a much more recent phenomenon. Using Muhlenberg in 1957 as the touchstone, it was not until three years later, in 1960, that the first woman became prime minister of a contemporary nation. That was Srimavo Banderanaika in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka.

Today there are five female prime ministers in the world and seven female presidents – some admittedly ceremonial, but presidents nonetheless. Of course, there are more than 190 countries, so the cheering is subdued. Still, a handful of women have been or are serving as defense ministers and foreign ministers, including Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice.

These appointments give women new prominence in international affairs, a recent encouraging trend that gets them out of the ghettos of ministries and departments devoted only to women and children and gives them global visibility among the statesmen and spear-carriers.

Since 1957, dozens of women have been speakers of parliaments and national assemblies, as Nancy Pelosi is now in the United States House of Representatives. But it was not until 1978 that the first American woman was elected to the Senate in her own right. She was Nancy Landon Kassebaum, a Republican, and from Kansas.

In Bangladesh until recently, women led both the government and the political opposition. But the less said about them the better at the moment; their accomplishments were not stellar and they are both out of jobs. In Pakistan, like Bangladesh a Muslim nation, a woman and former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, is negotiating to come back from exile and possibly to political power, despite charges of corruption that twice forced her from office in the 1990s. Never say women back away from impossible challenges.

Incidentally, those of us who were in Islamabad as reporters on the night the votes were being counted for Benazir's first election in 1988 were surprised to hear President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dig deep into Islamic history to assure us at a briefing that there were precedents for Muslim women in power. It is a lesson for our time.

There is more to do everywhere, of course – something for young women to think about as they plan their careers. Just last week the Council of Europe looked around its neighborhood and called the distribution of political power very unequal. Four years ago it set a goal of 40 percent of women in national legislatures. Only Sweden has met the target.

Closer to home, Zalmay Khalilzad, the first Muslim to be American ambassador to the United Nations, reminded a group of women working in foreign policy recently that both Afghanistan and Iraq have higher percentages of women in their parliaments than the US has in Congress.

During the coming year at Muhlenberg, there should be many opportunities to commemorate 50 years of equality here. We can also celebrate how pioneering Muhlenberg was, and hope it will continue to be so in many ways.

Don't let Lafayette or Princeton forget who got here first.

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