

Women Striving to Reach the Top

Excerpt from *Politics had its price*
Life and work of Maria Liberia Peters
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"The world needs new combinations of leadership and women play an important role in this change. History has been pulling from one pond. It's not surprising that if you fish in that pond, all you end up fishing for is men. You have to stock the pond with others." Laura Liswood, founder of the Council of Women World Leaders is quite clear about her vision of female leaders in the world. Although several women succeeded in becoming a successful world leader, there is still work to be done for women to be accepted as capable partners in leadership. In general, it is not accepted for women to climb the corporate ladder. As Liswood puts it: there is no such thing as a glass ceiling for women, it is just a thick layer of men. But we can push through it."

Liswood's idea for the founding of the Council began while doing research for her book *Women World Leaders: Fifteen Great Politicians Tell Their Stories* (1997)¹. One of the female politicians she interviewed for her book was Maria Liberia Peters, then prime minister of the Netherlands Antilles. Sitting on her back porch in Curacao, Maria suggested that all women leaders in the world should be brought together as a group. Liswood: "During the interviews I had done, I discovered many similarities in the problems and perspectives of women leaders. So I took Maria's suggestion and we had the first meeting in Stockholm in 1996 where many of the world leaders came. The meeting resulted in the founding of the Council by me and the president of Iceland Mrs. Vigdis Finnbogadottir. So yes, Maria was quite instrumental in creating that idea."

The Council's mission is to mobilize the highest-level women leaders globally for collective action on issues of critical importance to women and equitable development. "The council is

¹ The book was first published in 1995 and revised and republished in 2007 by The Council Press. The book delves into the women's leadership styles, family backgrounds, values and working habits. It also addresses the public's expectations of women versus men, and how the women themselves view their power.

formed by women who were or are presidents, prime ministers or heads of state or government. The purpose is to provide a mechanism to use in the empowering of these women, the convening power of these women, to help shape the agenda and to help create a critical mass voice for these women leaders and to initiate and support other appropriate projects based on current events. We have a fellows program for students, being the next generation of leadership. We also do a series of round tables, where we bring experts together. We also particularly focus on women who are ministers because we think that ministers are also very important.²”

A strong voice

Heads of state or government become members of the Council by invitation. Liswood: “We, as the Council, contact the women leaders and invite them to join the Council after they have been freely elected as head of state or head of government. The chair of the Council, in this case Mary Robinson³, and the chair of the Women’s Ministerial Initiative, in this case Madeleine Albright, send a letter of invitation for them to join.”⁴

Because the Council is formed by former as well as current leaders from all over the world, it has a very strong voice. Liswood: “We are a small organization but because of the membership we have basically all the sitting women presidents and prime ministers. We have 35 members, given the group that it is, our letters or actions usually get quite a bit of notice.⁵ And also all of our members are important and heavy weights. The organization is a bit unusual in that most organizations of heads of states are formed by former leaders and ours is former and current leaders. Therefore we have more power. When there is an issue brought to our attention we get a collective agreement amongst women leaders on this particular issue and then they agree to sign for instance a letter of support.”

Maria Liberia Peters was one of the first members of the Council. Her input through the years is highly appreciated by the Council members. Liswood: “Maria is very interested in

² The Council initiated the Ministerial Initiative that engages sitting and former women ministers and cabinet members. They formalized five ministerial networks being Environment, Finance, Economics and Development, Women Affairs, and Health and Culture.

³ Mary Robinson, president of Ireland from 1990 - 1997

⁴ Since the time of writing, Margot Wallstrom has become the chair.

⁵ As of November 2008, there are 37 members.

woman-issues. She is very concerned about that and willing and able to take leadership roles as requested by the Council.

She is very engaged in international events and international issues. She is a good resource for us as a council. Apart from Maria as a person, it is also the Netherlands Antilles connected to Europe as Part of the Kingdom of The Netherlands, part of the Caribbean and part of Latin America. I think the Netherlands Antilles itself is a very outward looking country. It has a long tradition of women in leadership positions. You had several women prime ministers. Before Maria you had Lucina da Costa Gomez. Furthermore I remember Suzy Camelia Römer, at the time when she was a minister and later on became prime minister. And now you have the current prime minister Emily de Jongh-Elhage, who also joined the Council.”

Entering politics for a cause

Why is it so difficult for women to reach that corporate ladder? According to Liswood there are different reasons, one of them being that women are hindered by the perception that they can't lead. A study reported that 57 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs were men over 6 feet 2 inches tall. There is no research correlating leadership ability with skeletal structure, Liswood said, but something else is going on: "We all think that height qualifies someone to lead. Women are typically shorter and therefore aren't instantaneously viewed as leaders until they prove themselves." Also she mentions the "power of the mirror". Role models for women leaders remain few. "It is hard for women to know what they can be unless we actually see it," Liswood said. Women are very well capable to lead. Liswood said that women are generally better listeners than men, and that this comes in handy for political leaders. "Women also bring different kinds of people to the table and every women leader she met had passion, ideas, focus, persistence and resilience. Most also entered politics not for the sake of it, but because they had a cause that they deeply believed in and wanted to fight for." As was the case with Maria Liberia Peters who once said "My work in education made me realize how important the early years were in forming a human being and that you cannot separate politics from human development, Then there comes the moment when you realize that if you really want to make a difference, the only way is through politics, and then you walk right into it. In my own case, I thought, well, I'll try it, and if I don't like it, I'll say

goodbye. But then you realize you've entered a one-way street, and you remain because you are continually challenged.”

Is Liswood satisfied with the number of women leaders in the world? “Well, one is never satisfied in that respect because if you compare it to the number of men-leaders, they are quite a bit less. One would also wish that there were more women world leaders on the horizon. The good news is that we see a few recent elections of women presidents and prime ministers. We got Angela Merkel (Germany), Michele Bachelet (Chile), Cristina Elisabet Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina). Especially in Latin America, you see it more and more. The Caribbean is also an interesting area. We had Dame Eugenia Charles of Dominica⁶, in the Netherlands Antilles you had Maria Liberia, Suzy Camelia, & Emily de Jongh. I don’t know if it’s the matriarchal society but it seems to have a strong role for women. I guess maybe because the men were always off working on other islands. There are also a lot of single parent households and that creates a lot of power for the women. I think that is why you have, in those countries a tradition of outspoken strong women leaders. One of which is Maria.”

“Maria, although not actively involved in politics anymore, is still interested in what is going on. She is very outspoken indeed, she let’s them know what she likes and doesn’t like. I think that will never stop and I think is a very good thing. She has a passion. It started, if you look way back, when she started as a school teacher. She saw the importance of a good education and a good educational system. Women often have the tendency to become activists based on what they work on, their experience and their emotions. That is what drives them. Maria is very passionate. I have seen pictures of Maria in the “Mardi Gras” Parade. She is very much part of the people too. That is what made her so popular, so able to have that credibility. They even called her ‘Maria, mother of the people’. She was out there willing to be part of what the peoples’ concerns were. She is a very strong family-woman. I think that is a very important factor why she is accepted by a lot of people.”

⁶ Eugenia Charles Prime Minister, Dominica, 1980-95, d.2005

Future

There is still a lot of work to be done with respect to eliminating the gap between male and female leaders and stimulating women to strive for and reach higher positions. Liswood:
“The goals that we as woman have is a slow process, it goes slower than we all would like. I call it tail-winds and head-winds. Tail-winds move you along faster and head-winds slow you down. Things like quotas or a confirmative mechanism in parliament are things that speed up things. There is no question from all the research that those confirmative mechanisms will aid the speed in which woman will get into positions of power. I think the most recent trend of leaders, presidents and prime ministers, appointing 50% of their cabinet/ministries women, is a very interesting trend. Because cabinets are often where you pick up prime ministers. There is where you get the kind of experience and exposure and resources and knowledge that put people in the position nowadays to run for president and/or prime minister.”

The title of the book is:

Politiek heeft zijn prijs
Leven en werk van Maria Liberia Peters

Translated it is:

Politics Had its Price: The Life and Work of Maria Liberia Peters