Realizing Women’s Full Potential

STRENGTHENING WOMEN

BY JAKE HEALEY, JAMIE MOESSER, MADELYN LUNNEN, AND KRISTINE HOYT

It’s only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you realize your true potential.
—PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

Reaching one person’s potential can be a difficult thing, not only because of the circumstantial obstacles life can erect but also because the definition of that potential is different for every person. One fully realized person will invariably look different than another, no matter which two people are being compared. Women, historically, have had a harder time not only defining what possibilities exist for them as a group within the broad range of potentials but also in reaching them, for a variety of reasons. Of late, though, BYU’s College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences has focused on helping women make those definitions through several specific efforts encouraging them to reach for those potentials.

Why?
The reasons for this focus, beyond the overarching and inherently obvious need to equalize opportunities for potential-reaching between genders, are plentiful. Some have arisen from challenges to established BYU practices, others from careful academic study. All of them stem from the college’s mission-driven aim to “study the family as the basic unit of society,” an aim that correlates strongly with the focus on family of its sponsoring organization, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as expressed in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”

Four faculty members and some students have joined in the broad, worldwide dialogue about specific obstacles women face to reaching their full potential.

Prosperity Depends on Families: Jason Carroll at the United Nations

“The sustainable prosperity of nations, and of women and their children, depends on the health of marriage and families,” said Dr. Jason Carroll—professor in the School of Family Life, fellow of the Wheatley Institution, and author of over 100 scientific articles and book chapters on marriage—to the Commission on the Status of Women of the United Nations in March 2016.

Using internationally curated data provided by the Social Trends Institute and data from his own research on the effects of delayed marriage, Dr. Carroll stated that while it is generally assumed that delayed marriage is a positive trend, emerging evidence is starting to challenge this assumption. This is particularly true when marriage is delayed until after age 30, which is becoming the demographic norm in many parts of the world. This has come to light through data that reveals that delayed marriage into the 30s contributes to the global trend of falling birth rates, which weakens sustainable economies, and through evidence that delayed marriage is directly linked to a significant rise in children born outside of marriage and single-parent households.

Dr. Carroll emphasized that the negative consequences of these trends, such as poverty and family instability, are particularly felt by women and their children. “In the United States, 48 percent of all first births are now to unmarried women,” he and coauthors Kay Hymowitz, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Kelleen Kaye write on the site Knot Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America. They add that the timing of childbirth is now preceding marriage on average: “Moderately educated women with a high-school diploma and perhaps a year or two of college . . . are playing a leading role in the trend. They make up more than half of the young women in the United States, and though they are following in the footsteps of their more educated sisters in postponing marriage, they are not adopting their strategy of delaying parenthood.” Yet that same research, as well as that done by poverty expert and Hinckley presenter Kathryn Edin, shows that children born to unmarried couples “are three times more likely to see their parents break up, compared to children born to married parents.” Dr. Carroll stressed that “any efforts to ensure gender equality, sustainable lifestyles, and opportunities for women and their children need to be directly linked to strengthening marriage and shared parenting patterns in families.”
“We live in a growing and globalizing world; thus, being able to recognize and understand the vast human experience and varied perspectives is a vital asset.”

—ELVIRA COREA LAZARO, STUDENT

Also at the UN: Natalie Romeri-Lewis and WomanStats

Professor Natalie W. Romeri-Lewis, along with 21 participants from the difficulties Home, and Social Sciences, attended the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations in March 2015. The conference’s purposes were to ignite global discourse and renew political commitment to accelerate the implementation of the comprehensive affirmation of women’s rights and empowerment adopted in 1995 by 189 governments, which remains only partially fulfilled.

The purpose of BYU’s attendance was to increase awareness of the WomanStats project, which is a database of information related to the link between the security and behavior of states and the situation and security of the women within them. An ongoing project, it involves 13 principal investigators at nine universities across four countries, representing six fields of study: international relations, geography, psychology, sustainable development, statistics, and sociology. Three thousand foreign ministers, diplomats, United Nations staff members, NGO directors, journalists, scholars, and royal family members, as well as Chelsea and Bill Clinton, the president of Croatia, and the executive director of UN Women,Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, were introduced to WomanStats at this conference.

In addition, commitments were obtained from almost 500 experts across the world to participate in WomanStats’ Expert Bank. 116 data points were gathered, and a variety of presentations were made.

Dr. Romeri-Lewis says of their experience: “NGOs and diplomats found our research project extremely useful. Some . . . even dropped their jaw[s] when they heard that we represent the most comprehensive compilation of information on the status of women on the planet. The NGOs love the fact that our database and maps are free because many cannot afford the luxury of good data. Attendees requested postconference online training sessions and offered to provide us with data-rich reports once they returned to their home countries. WomanStats accomplished what we went there to do.”

Research Relating Marital Dysfunction with State Dysfunction: Donna Lee Bowen

The importance of this effort to increase knowledge of the many women face around the world and to put that knowledge into practice was echoed in an August 2015 study published in the American Political Science Review by BYU professor Donna Lee Bowen and coauthors Perpetua Lynne Nielsen and Valerie M. Hudson.

The study revealed a distinct correlation between poor government and poor treatment of women by exploring “micro-level processes that affect predominant with dysfunctional syndromes of state behavior.” The study found that “clans typically . . . are characterized by extreme subordination of women affected through marriage practices. Particular types of marriage practices give rise to particular types of political orders and may be fiercely guarded for just this reason. Thus, the existence of powerful clans tends to undermine the possibility of a functional, capable state.”

Women’s Studies Conference

While women in general have faced different, and perhaps more obstacles than men, their influence should be and is evolving. Women often work to break through stereotypes to reach their full potential. The purpose of BYU’s attendance was to introduce BYU’s students and faculty to the latest research in women’s studies and to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas.

“The world needs more people that can embrace their sexual desires. The conference was finally able to see that I belong here at BYU. I have been able to mature within my comfort zone, experimenting with unfamiliar ways to voice my opinions, and [exercising] leadership have allowed me to flourish as an individual.”

Virginia Pearce attends the Women’s Studies conference.
Economic Development and Human Trafficking") and participate in an internship in London. These experiences allowed me to recognize and better understand that theory of women’s studies applies in all aspects of life, from politics to business to sports. I am very thankful for the women’s studies minor for not only enlarging my world and perspectives but creating a place where I can confront and help solve societal issues. Women’s studies is a minor of empowerment where we can learn to stand up for the injustices in our communities and bring awareness to issues that affect each one of us on a daily basis. From a micro to a macro level, change can be made for our current and future generations.

Initiatives for Female FHSS Students and Faculty: Mikaela Dufur
A report recently released by a committee organized to study the challenges faced not only by female students but also by female faculty within the college identified a refined list of those challenges and a list of suggestions to improve gender equality in various college opportunities. This study was spearheaded by Mikaela Dufur, an associate professor in the Department of Sociology, who reported the results to the National Alumni Council meeting in September 2016. One challenge the study identified was gendered confidence gaps. The report says:

Female and male student surveys demonstrated notable gaps between men and women in terms of research experience and confidence for future academic and career plans. Female students were less likely to report planning to go on to graduate school or careers after graduation, a finding that might be anticipated given the Church’s emphasis on mothering and homemaking. More troubling, however, was the finding that female students reported being much less confident about their ability to be accepted to graduate school or find a good job after graduation than their male counterparts were.

Another challenge it identified was that female faculty were more likely to be called upon to serve on college and university committees and to informally mentor students. While most faculty valued these opportunities, they were also concerned about the impact such service may have on research time.

The committee made several recommendations that the National Advisory Council endorsed. Among those recommendations were:

- promotion of more opportunities to connect female students and faculty with women, college alumna included, who have careers in the social sciences
- greater access to explicitly safe spaces for faculty and students to discuss hard cultural issues together
- better support for young parents, such as dedicated spaces for breastfeeding in FHSS buildings and invitations to young mothers to bring baby monitors to classes so that if they have to step out, they can still hear the lectures from the hallways
- greater awareness of Church leaders’ support of women’s education

Subjects like work-life balance “need to take place in spaces that include only faculty and staff as well as spaces organized for students to interact with faculty and staff on these issues.” The need to have more female faculty as mentors, and the difficulties that department chairs and female FHSS alumni face in doing so, was also discussed in the report, in an issue of the School of Family Life’s alumni magazine, and during an October 2016 Facebook chat with the school’s alumni group.

What Does It All Mean?
The general challenges that women face in reaching their full potential are definitely there, but they are far from insurmountable, especially when focused on by the administration, faculty, staff, and students of BYU’s College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences.

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