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## Light is shining through cracks in glass ceiling

Sunday, March 07, 2010

Tomorrow, the YWCAs of Princeton and Trenton will join communities across the globe in commemorating the 99th annual International Women's Day. It's an occasion to celebrate the achievements of women whose personal and professional decisions -- some mundane, others dramatic and ambitious -- have contributed in equal parts to the advancement of gender equality.

It's an occasion to marvel at how "18 million new cracks" have been added to "that highest, hardest glass ceiling ... and the light is shining through like never before." Indeed, it's an occasion to remark how those words were offered to us by a woman, as she conceded the Democratic nomination in 2008 after having shattered most Americans' anemic expectations of just how far a female candidate for U.S. president could go.

But Hillary Clinton is just one of thousands of remarkable women we've watched intently as they carved out a spot for themselves in places where they weren't necessarily welcomed.

There's Shirley Chisholm, who defied a culture pervaded by racism by becoming the first black woman elected to Congress.

There's Sally Ride who, as the first American woman to enter space, propelled "astronaut" to the top of the career list for thousands of starry-eyed little girls.

Then there's Marian Anderson, one of the 20th century's most notable opera singers, who was not allowed to perform at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., for no reason other than her skin color. And, alongside her, there was Eleanor Roosevelt, then first lady of the United States, who saw to it that Anderson was granted a stage more befitting her talent: the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

There are Condoleezza Rice and Madeleine Albright, who both brought great dignity to the face of American diplomacy when they served as U.S. secretaries of state, the position in which Clinton now serves the country.

And, of course, there are the countless everyday women, whose acts of daily transgression and courage never were printed in the history books -- women who pushed the envelope in ways that may have felt insignificant at the time, but that nevertheless contributed in constructive ways to what "being a girl" looks like and feels like today.

We're doing a disservice to our daughters if we don't tell them the stories of these women, because it's precisely these stories that give our girls the ability and the audacity to imagine even bigger and bolder futures for themselves.

Yet at the same time, we'd be doing them an equally tragic disservice if we didn't acknowledge that we're still far from achieving true gender justice. We should embrace occasions such as International Women's Day as times of celebration. But we should also use them as a spotlight to expose the many ways in which women and girls still live with constraints placed upon their ability to exercise full economic, social, political and cultural rights.

Take health insurance, for example. In the individual market, insurers frequently use a practice called "gender rating" to charge women higher premiums than men for the same coverage. Perhaps even more outrageous is the fact that, in some states, women can be denied health insurance on the grounds of so-called "pre-existing conditions," which include being a survivor of domestic violence or having had a Caesarian section.

Or take the threat of violence that women and girls routinely face. The United Nations reports that at least one out of every three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. And the violence begins early: Forty percent of teenage girls interviewed in a Kaiser Permanente poll described knowing someone their age who has been struck or battered by a boyfriend.

Or take the wage gap: American women earn on average 78 cents for every dollar a man is paid for equal work. Think 22 cents don't matter? For a woman holding a college degree or higher, that's a difference in lifetime earnings of \$713,000, according to the Center for American Progress.

These and other issues critically shape major elements of a woman's life. Among other things, this includes her physical and emotional well-being, her workplace productivity, her chances for professional advancement, and her likelihood of living in poverty with no economic mobility.

These are the sorts of very real constraints that women and girls continue to face when it comes to their freedom to exercise a full array of the rights due to them. Americans who care for the women and girls in their lives should inform themselves of the details that comprise this reality, so that they are able to join the movement for gender equality not simply because they have to, but because they feel compelled to do so, with gusto and sincerity. Otherwise, in another 99 years, we'll still be counting the number of cracks in that glass ceiling, rather than celebrating its full and total destruction.

Judy Hutton is CEO of the YWCA Princeton.