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Presentation to Three Rivers Democratic Women

The Special Power of Women in Good Governance

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you this evening. It is an important time for women in government. As the toxic effects of a narcissistic, power mongering President swirl around us, it is time to reflect on a strategy that can return compassion and moral clarity to the public arena. This is a unique time for women to take leadership at all levels of government.

Role models are important.

I had the good fortune of growing up under the influence of strong, independent, wise women who have guided my path from my earliest days. My Nona, Pasqualina DiNardo DeMarco not only introduced me to the wonders and beauty of nature as her gardener's assistant from my earliest days but also as my wise mentor during the teen years when my rebellion at the Italian patriarchal family structure chafed my spirit. Her advice that "Men may rule but the women govern" helped me to see how the family decisions were declared from the men, but the content and discussion was shaped by the women.

From my Mother, Marcella DeMarco, Ph.D. I learned the art of leading from beneath. She was a master at diplomacy by dinner party throughout our time in the Foreign Service, and beyond into her days as a union organizer.

In my early career, I served as staff to Connecticut Governor Ella Tambusi Grasso. She sent me as a technical expert in her delegation to the National Governors Conference negotiations on low level nuclear waste siting. In sending me off to that assignment she said: "Being female is a fact of life. What you do with it is up to you. Take advantage of the opportunity to ask the toughest question in the room." As a woman in a male-dominated industry, this advice stood me well for most of my career.

I have been actively engaged in public policy since 1976 in three different states. After sixteen years training for a career as a research biologist, I fell off the tenure track from having two children in close succession. I took five years to raise them, and found out you can't go back. Not in 1971. I came to politics through the circuitous route of staff researcher, expert witness and appointed Commissioner of the Regulatory Commission of Alaska. Finally I am now elected to serve as Mayor of the Borough of Forest Hills beginning in 2026.

Institutional and Structural Barriers to Women.

Women continue to hold a disadvantaged position in the face of the law. Though women were central to the formation of the original foundations of our nation through diplomacy, financial and political advice, urging for justice and fairness, women did not have the right to vote until the 19th Amendment to the Constitution: **"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."** The amendment granting women the right to vote was enacted on June 4, 1919, at the start

of the Roaring Twenties, after a nearly century-long meandering fight for enfranchisement. It didn't become part of the Constitution, however, until it was ratified by the 36th state legislature — Tennessee — on August 18, 1920.

The more comprehensive Equal Rights Amendment (28th) to the Constitution states: **“Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.”** Was first proposed in 1923, and passed by Congress in 1972. It as been ratified by 38 states, as of January 27, 2020, and thus meets the constitutional requirements as the 28th Amendment, but has not been formally certified as a ratified Amendment to the Constitution. Challenges to the length of time for adoption by at least 36 states, and confusion from some states rescinding prior adoption keep this in legal limbo to this day.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Title IX Education Amendments of 1972. Together, these laws vastly expanded opportunities for women and girls at work and in school. Since passage of the Equal Pay Act, women's labor force participation and education levels have increased dramatically. While in 1963 only 38 percent of adult women overall were in the labor force, today that figure is 59 percent.¹ Likewise, in 1963, less than seven percent of women 25 years and older were college graduates, but today nearly 31 percent of women have graduated from college.² Women have also entered professions that were previously closed to them, using Title VII to fight back against exclusionary policies and practices.³

Gender Disparities Continue in the Workplace

Women account for about 51% of the U.S. population and 57.5% of the U.S. labor force.⁴ But women have always owned less wealth⁵ than men due to historical and ongoing factors like employment pay discrimination⁶, lack of access to credit,⁷ lack of access to education,⁸ and barriers to property ownership.⁹ For millions of women—especially Black women, Latinas, and other women of color—the economy is still not working. Too few jobs are good jobs and managing caregiving demands often feels impossible.¹⁰ Women are more likely to be concentrated in low-wage jobs, be responsible for caregiving, and experience sexual harassment and assault. Additionally, the United States has the highest rates of maternal death of developed countries, with U.S. maternal mortality rates increasing when rates have decreased globally.¹¹

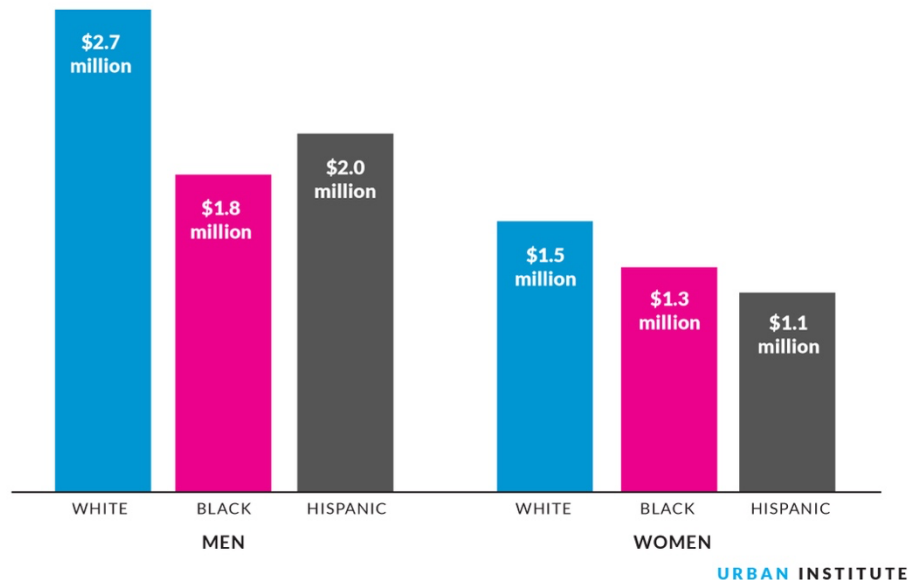
Despite the Equal Pay Act of 1963, a Wage Gap persists. In 2022. Because women earned \$0.77 to a man's \$1.00, women would need to work three additional months in a year to be paid what men are paid. There is an unequal foundation to begin growing wealth, and the wealth gap is significant. In 2022, a woman owning [\\$0.68 per a man's \\$1](#). In wealth assets. The [largest gender wealth gap](#) is between men and women who had never been married.¹² For every \$1 of wealth owned by a white household, Black households [own 23 cents](#) and Latinx households [own 19 cents](#). Women of color experience the most [profound wealth gap](#) because they face both gender and racial disparities. This leads to a “double income gap”—research has shown that Black women working full time have been underpaid by up to [\\$20,000 a year](#) Single Black women

have a median wealth of \$200 and single Hispanic women \$100, less than a penny for every dollar of wealth owned by single White non-Hispanic men.¹³

Average Accumulated Real Lifetime Earnings at Ages 58–62 for People Born 1950–54, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Source: Melissa Favreault, Urban Institute's tabulations from the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation matched to Summary Earnings Records through 2012.

Notes: 2015 dollars. These people are ages 58–62 in 2012. Excludes people outside US for more than 10 years of adulthood; this is especially important for Hispanics, who are more likely foreign born. Earnings are accumulated using assumed interest rates from the OASDI trustees report.



<https://apps.urban.org/features/wealth-inequality-charts-2017/>

Health disparities persist for women, especially women of color.

According to 2022 health statistics,¹⁴ Nonelderly people of color (19%) and hispanic (18%) people were more than twice as likely as their White counterparts (7%) to be uninsured; and overall, Black (72.8 years) people had a shorter life expectancy compared to White people (77.5 years). Women of color had the highest rates of pregnancy related mortality, four times higher than the rate for white women and Black (10.9 per 1,000) infants were at least two times as likely to die as White infants (4.5 per 1,000); Black (21%) children were more than three times as likely to have food insecurity as White children (6%), and Hispanic children (15%) were over twice as likely to have food insecurity than White children (6%) as of 2022.

Clearly these data influence the participation of women in politics. Women demonstrate political leadership by working across party lines through parliamentary women's caucuses—even in the most politically combative environments—and by championing issues of gender equality, such as the elimination of gender-based violence, parental leave and childcare, pensions, gender-equality laws, and electoral reform.¹⁵ However, although women comprise a bit more than half of the total population, women are under-represented in governing bodies at all levels across the country.

Federal: Women comprise 26% of Senate; 29% of House,
State: Women comprise 30 % of State Executive Elected Positions: {Governors, Lt Govs, Attorney General, Secretary of State, Treasurer/CFO; State Auditor; Comptrollers, Commissioners} 30.5% of State Senators and 34.7% of State House Assemblies
Local: Women comprise 32.4% of officials in municipal office; 25.4% women Mayors of cities over 30,000 population.
<https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/current-numbers/women-elective-office-2025>

Under-representation of women in government is a significant issue because women offer distinct value and perspective to the process of governance at all levels. America since its founding, has operated under a patriarchal leadership model. This displaced the tribal leadership existent in Indigenous communities, many of which were matriarchal in structure. There is a huge difference.

Models of Leadership:

Patriarchal leadership typically prioritizes hierarchy, competition, and individualism, often at the expense of collaboration and inclusivity. The patriarchal leadership values authority and control, perpetuating power imbalances and marginalizing diverse voices. This expression of leadership transcends gender, race and class, with even the most marginalized among us upholding the values of supremacy culture (e.g. perfectionism, urgency, either/or thinking, quantity over quality, and so forth), where finger-pointing and scapegoating edge out collaboration and problem solving. Here the lone wolf wins the top spot, even at the expense of wellbeing and connected relationships. The quality of our lives and the health of the natural world become the externalities of corporate profit.

Matriarchal leadership is more inclusive and holistic.¹⁶ Instead of separating personal and professional lives, matriarchal leadership encourages bringing our whole selves to our work and relationships. It operates on different timelines, and it seeks not to hoard power but to distribute it. Effective leaders able to meet the complexities of our times are deep listeners; they celebrate the gifts of each individual on their team; they show up for others; and they invest time to develop themselves – personally, professionally and spiritually. Matriarchal leadership is inherently decentralized.¹⁷

Principles of Matriarchal Leadership:¹⁸

1. **Deep Listening:** involves listening not only with our minds but also our hearts. Deep listening requires us to take in many perspectives, and let the voices of a network speak to us as if they are one. What is Life communicating to us through each voice and action,

through the confluence of events unfolding before us, and in the stillness when we are at rest?

2. **Celebrating Individual Gifts:** builds belonging. It is born out of deep listening and requires humility, as we must acknowledge that there are many ways of knowing and being. We must be curious when others work differently than we might expect. It's harder than it sounds. especially in the context of how most of us have been educated, where nuance and variability are rarely uplifted, and culture has dictated a moral imperative to conform. Unlock the true potential of our team. When each member's unique talents, gifts and ways of being are given space to be expressed and acknowledged as a gift, we gain superpowers we could never have hired for. And we discover new reserves of energy that fuel us in building impact together.
3. **Showing Up for Others** means being present not just physically but empathetically, and adopting a spirit of service to our team and our community. Whereas the old paradigm dictated that "workers" serve leaders, the new era of leadership calls for reciprocal relationships of mutuality. Matriarchal leaders look for opportunities to enable the success of others, which might mean rolling up sleeves on a menial task, or being a compassionate witness to the suffering of a teammate. It might also mean sending food to a family in the community who've experienced a loss.
4. **Investing in Self-Development**, whether through conferences, workshops, reading or meditation, is not just a choice but a responsibility. Deep listening, self-awareness and curiosity are the compass guiding matriarchal leaders towards new levels of self-development, shaping a mindset that naturally gravitates towards connection and interdependence. In our times, for most of us, regardless of our cultural background and positionality, the work is to unlearn supremacy culture and challenge the implicit biases we hold. We grow through living, making mistakes, and doing the repair work in our relationships to heal the harms we create. It's meaningful work, yet it is also deeply uncomfortable and can butt up against our own fears of being exiled for not doing it all perfectly. The trick is to keep our hearts open, and allow ourselves to vulnerably name the seemingly un-nameable. In so doing, we allow others to do the same, and create a courageous space that welcomes whole human beings.

Women in the Patriarchal Government:

Throughout history women have served as effective powers in government, leading from beneath. How many of you have been in the position of holding up an incompetent boss? How many of you have been the unrecognized ¹⁹ crafter of compromise? Our stories are numerous and woven into the fabric of our country back to the beginning. Some examples of my favorite examples of effective women leaders in American politics:

Abigail Adams: As a close advisor to her husband, John Adams, she advocated for women's rights and education. She also managed their farm and finances while he was away.

Martha Washington: She established precedents and expectations as the first First Lady. Actively advocated for the Revolution with social gatherings in each of the capital cities to foster solidarity for the cause. She was a constant presence with the army, providing comfort and support to the soldiers, and managed her home and estate.

Rachel Carson Dept Interior Fish & Wildlife Service 1932-1952

Her work laid the foundation for the entire movement to conserve and protect the environment with fact-based policy initiatives: data plus story. She brought credibility; eloquence, passion, and courage to the uncharted field of environmental protection in law.

In 1933, Frances Perkins (1882–1965) became the first woman in a presidential cabinet when Franklin D. Roosevelt named her Secretary of Labor. She established the first standards for worker safety due to her witnessing the 1911 Shirtwaist Factory Fires in New York; she was concerned about chemical exposures in the workplace due to her friendship with Rachel Carson. She was the longest-serving Secretary of Labor.

Eleanor Roosevelt not only served as the connection to the people for her husband President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but went on to shape the United Nations, serving as the first delegate from America. She drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Women have the power to bring compassion, balance, dignity and joy to processes of governance too often mired in petty politics and power struggles over ego. It is time for women to stand together and call for a return to a government of compassion and caring; a government of shared prosperity and improved quality of life for all citizens; a government of moral alignment with basic human rights and dignity. It is time for women to step forward and lead from the heart of our nation.

Endnotes:

¹ Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://data.bls.gov/pdq/querytool.jsp?survey=ln> (last visited May 3, 2013). In 1963, 38.3 percent of women age 20 and older were in the labor force. In 2012, 59.3 percent of women age 20 and older were in the labor force. Historically, labor force participation for African-American women has been higher than women's labor force participation overall. In 1972, 51.2 percent of African-American women age 20 and older were in the labor force. In 2012, 62.6 percent of African-American women age 20 and older were in the labor force. The figure overall for women in 1972 was 43.7 percent.

² U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey: Educational Attainment: CPS Historical Time Series Tables tbl.A-2: Percent of People 25 Years and Over Who Have Completed High School or College, by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex: Selected Years 1940 to 2012, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/historical/index.html> (last visited June 3, 2013). The Census Bureau does not have data for educational attainment in 1963. In 1962, just under 7 percent of women age 25 and older had completed four years of college or more, the same as in 1964. NWLC assumes the figure was the same for 1963. In 2012, the most recent year with available data, 31 percent of women age 25 and older had completed four years of college or more. Completing four years of college or more is used as a measure for college graduation

³ National womens Law Center. 50 Years and Counting: The unfinished business of achieving fair pay. August 2015. https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/final_nwlc_equal_pay_report.pdf

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. United States Population by Age and Sex. (2020 data.) https://www.census.gov/popclock/data_tables.php?component=pyramid Bureau of Labor Statistics Historic Trends in women's labor force participation (2023 data) <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/womens-databook/2023/#:~:text=Historical%20trends%20in%20women's%20labor%20force%20participation&text=The%20rate%20then%20rose%20to,labor%20force%20was%2057.3%20percent.>

⁵ Deere, C.D. and Doss, C.R. The Gender Asset Gap: What do we know and why does it matter? *Feminist Economics*. 2006. 12(1-2),1-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545700508056>

⁶ National Womens Law Center. 50 Years and Counting: The unfinished business of achieving fair pay. August 2015. https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/final_nwlc_equal_pay_report.pdf

⁷ Allen Abraham, Credit Discrimination Based on Gender: The Need to Expand the Rights of a Spousal Guarantor Under the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, 10 Brook. J. Corp. Fin. & Com. L. (2016). Available at: <https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/bjcfcl/vol10/iss2/6>

⁸ William Diep. Despite Progress, Women in Higher Ed Still Face Barriers. National College Attainment Network. March 14, 2025. <https://www.ncan.org/news/696085/Despite-Progress-Women-in-Higher-Ed-Still-Face-Barriers.htm>

⁹ McDevitt CL, Irwin JR. The Narrowing of the Gender Wealth Gap across Nineteenth -Century United States. *Social Science History*. 2017;41(2)255-281. Doi:10.1017/ssh.2017.5

¹⁰ Sandra Markowitz, Jasmine Tucker, Julie Vogtman. The Recovery Paradox: Women and Families Need More Support to Sustain and Improve Economic Gains. National Womens Law Center. October 2024. https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final_The-Recovery-Paradox.pdf }

¹¹ <https://www.gao.gov/women-and-gender-public-policy>

¹² Ana Hernández Kent. The State of U.S. Household Wealth. The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. June 23, 2025. <https://www.stlouisfed.org/open-vault/2025/june/the-state-of-us-household-wealth>

¹³ <https://nwlc.org/resource/gender-and-racial-wealth-gaps-and-why-they-matter/>

¹⁴ Nambi Ndugga, Latoya Hill and Samantha Artiga. Key Data on Health and Health care by Race and Ethnicity. KFF, Inc., June 11, 2024. <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/key-data-on-health-and-health-care-by-race-and-ethnicity/?entry=executive-summary-key-takeaways>

¹⁵ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2008). Equality in politics: A survey of men and women in parliaments. September 15, 2025. https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation#_edn19

¹⁶ Defriend C, Cook CM. Reawakening of Indigenous matriarchal systems: A feminist approach to organizational leadership. *Healthc Manage Forum*. 2024 May;37(3):160-163. doi: 10.1177/08404704231210255. Epub 2023 Nov 11. PMID: 37950639; PMCID: PMC11044517.

¹⁷ Tandem Team. The Principles and Practice of Matriarchal Leadership. Tandem Innovation Group. May 22, 2024. <https://tandemig.com/blog/the-principles-and-practice-of-matriarchal-leadership/>

¹⁸ Ibid. <https://tandemig.com/blog/the-principles-and-practice-of-matriarchal-leadership/>

¹⁹ Cokey Roberts. *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation*. Harper & Row, New York. 2009.