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**Women making a difference : International Women's Day**  
**2010 Bevan Foundation Merthyr**

**Introduction**

Thank you Victoria/ Daneka for the kind invitation to share in your celebration today .

I am conscious that today, all around the world women are celebrating International Women's Day, a day which has been observed for 100 years and one when we celebrate the role of women in their families, at work, in their communities and across the world.

I know that many events are being held in Wales.

It is good to celebrate the achievements of women around the globe but also to highlight the injustices women still face:-

On the positive side I am sure that the majority of you will say that you have more freedom than your mothers did.

Freedom to choose where you will live or where you will work, who you will spend your lives with and whether you will have a family.



Yet on the negative side, the global picture for women is stark -:

Although written some time ago, the quote from the United Nations is still relevant : –

“Women constitute half of the world’s population,  
-perform nearly two-thirds of its working hours,  
-receive one tenth of the world’s income  
-and own less than one-hundredth of the world’s property”

There is so much to be done and of course women matter!

### **Women matter politically**

Everyday, decisions are made for us and our lives and those we love and live with.

Those decisions can be what school transport is on offer for our children, the sort of rubbish collection we have in our area, what services are available in our local hospital, which organisations are given support in our towns and villages, the hours we are allowed to work.

Whether our country goes to war.

All these affect all of us and yet those decisions are in the hands of mainly men.



Nothing wrong with that you may say because men can speak for us or can they ?

Despite the ground breaking success we have seen in the Welsh Assembly since 1999 where we have either had 50 per cent women as members or slightly less, in other tiers of government - local, National and European, men far outnumber women.

The Assembly has been different. I do believe that having such a "critical mass" of women has made a real difference to the way politics and policy making is affecting women in Wales.

Research carried out some years ago by Paul Chaney (Cardiff University) and Laura McAllister (Liverpool) found that when they analysed the interventions made by Assembly Members in debates, the majority of all contributions on equal pay, domestic abuse and the need for better childcare were by women Assembly Members. While these are often dismissed as "women's issues", they are very real problems that affect men and women in every community the length and breadth of Wales.

The big problem which faces us now is that there is likely to be less women as Assembly Members in the next election and that should trouble all of us. That along with questions of why we have so few women in politics at all levels should really be concentrating our minds today because women matter!



## **Women matter to the economy**

The crisis in the world economy has hit every community across Wales.

Much energy and debate has been spent on whether things should have been done differently and what lessons we should learn.

For me, one lesson is that we can't afford to leave the "economy" which after all is only a means I believe to a fairer, better life for everyone, to a small elite of people.

Women must be much more involved and this belief is rapidly growing.

Eg The Industry Minister of the Norwegian Government introduced a quota to ensure that a minimum of 40% of the membership boards of all private companies had to be women, arguing that this would make sound economic sense.

The investment company Goldman Sachs published a paper in 2007 arguing that the reduction of gender inequality would increase economic growth.

The World Bank suggests that poverty cannot be eradicated unless equality of gender is achieved.



Women contribute enormously to the well being of our communities either in paid or unpaid work and whilst doing all this still perform the bulk of caring and domestic work. The “double shift”.

Women still only earn a percentage of male earnings. For full time workers, women on average only earn 83p for every pound a man earns. And that is unacceptable given the Equal Pay Act came into force forty years ago.

What is positive is that women are not taking this lying down and progress is being made with government through campaigns and organisations such as “Close the Pay Gap” and bodies like Chwarae Teg who are doing fantastic work in helping to unlock doors to women who want to train and meet their potential.

The Equalities Bill going through parliament is tackling discrimination in work.

So yes, women do matter to the economy !

### **Women's legacy**

But what about our legacy and history?



As someone who has a strong interest in the history of what women have contributed to Welsh life I know that there is nevertheless much to celebrate and record.

We know that the history that has been taught traditionally in schools is about men and written by men.

It is men who have been in positions of power and more likely to leave traces of their activities.

But today in celebration of International Women's Day let's remember the vital role women have played in the rich history of Wales.-

The women who worked closely with their husbands in establishing the iron industries in Merthyr - Rose Crawshay and Charlotte Guest for example and the Welsh women who joined with the suffragettes to call for the vote..

And in other valleys areas like the Rhondda let's not forget Elizabeth Andrews who deserves to be remembered as one of the most influential women activists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who tirelessly campaigned for better social conditions.

More recently the women who campaigned during the miners' strike ensured that families were sustained during this difficult period.



And heroines such as those mentioned are not confined to the history books.

We have seen some today and will do so throughout the day.

I can think of my own heroines. :-

My grandmother who was so influential in my life when I was growing up in the Rhondda who had 5 children and was one of the women who worked in the munitions factories during the Second World War.

Quite often dangerous but essential work which has been described in Mari Williams's book "A Forgotten Army".

My mother too, who although was bright enough to do well at school, was forced to leave at 14 because her parents could not afford for her to stay on - one of that "lost generation" of young men and women whose potential was cut short.

Yet despite this became like many Welsh women of the post war generation ambitious that her own daughter should succeed.

But I know too you have your heroines in your families and communities which today on International Women's Day we must



celebrate. Take time to reflect on them today because women do matter!

### **International women**

As of yesterday, the world's population stood at nearly 7 thousand million people. Approximately half are of course women.

Globally women are still facing huge inequality :-

We know that two thirds of the 960 million non-literate adults in the world are women.

At the World Education Forum in Dakar in April 2000, the then UN general secretary Kofi Annan pointed out that two thirds of the more than 110 million children deprived of even elementary schooling was girls.

He said that "educating girls is not an option, but a necessity. Moreover, it's the most cost effective form of defence spending since educated women are tools in preventing global conflicts." So, if we want to build a more peaceful world then we have to prioritise education whether that is here in Wales or abroad.

And we know too that violence against women is a global problem.

At any given time the world over, women are being subjected to genital mutilation, and to gender based torture.



If you are a woman refugee or asylum seeker then violence is often the norm.

If you are a woman involved in prostitution or pornography then violence is often the name of the game.

If you are woman then you may be killed in a dowry related murder.

You may be starved for the simple reason that you were born a girl not a boy. That is unacceptable.

While over 20 per cent of women are beaten by their partners world wide, this is also happening here and now in South Wales.

On that I am pleased that progress is being made on exposing domestic abuse in our communities.

It is no longer seen as a woman's problem, a taboo issue, hidden behind closed doors. Domestic abuse is all of our problem.

These are extreme examples of injustice but as women we share many of the experiences faced by women across the world.

You may know that I chair the All Party Women and Democracy Group at the Assembly and one of the reasons for establishing this



Group was to mark the achievement of having so many women influencing policy making in Wales.

It also acts as a focal point for the worldwide interest Wales is attracting in terms of its National Assembly.

The Assembly has hosted many visits from women parliamentarians from across the globe.

During these visits it has been great to share common experiences. Although the cultures and geography may be different, the similarities can unite us.

Women's voices collectively do matter if we want to build a better world.

### **Women as role models**

Today in Merthyr don't any of you underestimate your power as role models.

As someone who was once a careers advisor I know how influential role models can be particularly to young women. (Could be Cheryl Cole or Margaret Thatcher! Who is to say? )

But nevertheless that is a big responsibility for all of us here but one which all of us must grasp.



Because we know that barriers still exist and women are often invisible.

Some years ago the writer Natasha Walter wrote :-

“You will have watched television and found that as soon as the programme switches from drama to current affairs, women become unimportant, the spoken-about rather than the speakers.;

for every woman who speaks on a news programme, four men do.

In the 1997 general election for every female politician heard on television news, 19 male politicians spoke.

If you have children, you will usually find that the final decisions in their education are taken by a man, for every three female headteachers of a secondary school, there are three male headteachers.

You may well encounter a police officer or enter a law court at some point in your life, then you will find that you are six times more likely to be confronted by a male than a female police officer and that you are three times more likely to see a male barrister than a female one.

If you go into hospital then you will find that your consultant is more that four times as likely to be a man than a woman”



Now those statistics were some years back but you judge how much progress has been made.

Probably not much because only very recently Cardiff North MP Julie Morgan, who has fought a very successful campaign with Girls Aloud singer Nichola Roberts, on banning sun beds, described how she was recently being interviewed on the green just outside the Houses of Parliament by a male journalist.

On finishing the interview, she was approached by a number of passers by who were intrigued to find out who *she* was interviewing!

They automatically thought that she was the journalist interviewing the male politician!

Women matter and must rise to the challenge because despite the progress feminism has made over the last 40 years, sexism is still rampant in our society :-

Many of us older feminists protested about page 3 topless models and hoped that things would have improved with women being freed from the degradations of them being seen as sex objects.

But it seems not.



The sex industry is alive and kicking with the proliferation of lap dancing clubs which are now being seen as somewhat normalised entertainment despite how uncomfortable that makes women feel.

Lads' mags such as Zoo and Nuts regularly serve up a diet of misogyny.

The Internet regularly displays pornography where women are brutalised.

Many young women feel that they can't speak out as they may be regarded as old fashioned and prudish.

But my point here is that if we want our daughters and our sons to grow up in a society where women are regarded not as sex objects and commodities then we do have to question our popular culture.

And that is whole debate to be had in our communities and women must lead it. Yes women do matter and their voices must be heard.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude.



For women within a few generations, a transformation has without doubt taken place.

But we must not rest on our laurels. There is still work to do and challenges remain.

I am sure you would agree with me that society is so much more the poorer if it doesn't draw on the talents of all its citizens.

But we can help each other too in the knowledge that our energy comes from other women - and to quote the legendary French feminist Simone de Beauvoir –

“ WOMEN who despite the constraints of tradition and the notion of what constituted women's proper role, **passionately challenged** the “subordination and silencing of the second sex”.

As sisters, mothers, friends, wives, girlfriends we matter.

The world needs us and we must step up to the challenge.

So on International Women's Day let's make a pledge.

If we are to shape a future which is more equal and just, then women's voices must be heard.

So today make your voice heard because -



'Women Making a Difference' 15  
International Women's Day  
March 8<sup>th</sup> 2010

**WE MATTER!**