

Women at Yale . . . and Elsewhere

Nannerl O. Keohane

President of Duke University

First, let me put my Yale cards on the table: not only a Yale Ph.D., but also two sons and two daughters-in-law who all had great experiences here; one has just returned as an assistant professor.

I also salute Yale's record of women in the senior administration. And I admire the women faculty who are intensely focused on how Yale, in the years ahead, can not just play catch-up, but find a new path that will show all of us how to do a better job in the 21st century.

My assignment is to tackle the question, "How does gender matter?" with brief illustrations from four institutions: Wellesley, Stanford, Duke, and Yale. By looking at ways gender has influenced the evolution of these institutions, we may identify some of the factors that will make a difference moving forward.

Wellesley as a "woman's place"

Wellesley might almost be taken as an embodiment of what Max Weber would call the "ideal type" of a women's institution.

Wellesley's founder in the 1870s, Henry Durant said, "Women can do the work; I give them the chance." By design, almost the entire faculty and most of the rest of the workforce at Wellesley at the outset were female. Even the buildings were built with the female body in mind.

Alone among the Seven Sisters, Wellesley has always had women presidents. When there was a move early in the 20th century to appoint a man, alumnae rose up in outrage. "We do not want a man in our Adamless Eden," they said. A far cry from Yale, which has only recently noticed the presence of Eve. What could we possibly learn from Wellesley?

The importance of *symbolism*; let me take just one example.

At Wellesley, in the main reading room of the library, portraits of all the presidents create a striking impression of self-confident, powerful women leaders across a dozen decades. Contrast that with the halls of honor at any of the other three institutions on my list; with only a few exceptions, all the portraits honor middle-aged or elderly white men. When distinguished alumnae are honored and their amazing careers are recounted at Wellesley, they are all women. Students may or may not pay conscious attention, but this is bound to sink into their psyches and help shape what they believe is possible.

This is one obvious way in which gender matters: an institution's iconography, conception of itself and its history, and the messages that it sends about who can wield authority and who matters around this place.

A comparison with Yale on symbolism

To make the contrast especially striking, let me fast forward to the special Tercentennial edition of *Yale* magazine from last March. In twelve pages of distinguished graduates there are two women—Marian Wright Edelman and Jodie Foster; and there are several female names in the roster of "Who's Been Blue"—someone clearly gave some thought to that. But in the centerpiece essay by Lewis Lapham, the place of women at Yale turns out to be either non-existent or decidedly bizarre.

There is a passing reference to graduates of Yale Law School: "Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, the newly-appointed Supreme Court justice and the woman who had accused him of sexual misconduct." Hello?

There are four other references to women: the Irish maids who cleaned the rooms in the 1920s; the opening paragraph of the freshman handbook in the 1950s that enjoined new students "to treat Yale as you would a good woman"; and one lone graduate student, "an actress from the Drama School who had been to bed with Brando." Then a passing reference to the Corporation's vote in 1969 to admit 500 women undergrads. That's it. Symbolism, I would argue, *does* matter.

So are things better at Duke and Stanford? In some ways, although no one would call either of them a feminist institution. Each has been committed to coeducation since the end of the 19th century, but they have taken rather different paths, and this leads to some interesting lessons for Yale.

Stanford and the implications of equality

Stanford was founded in 1890, during the "first wave" of coeducation in our country, and it was explicitly required of the trustees that they "afford equal facilities and give equal advantages in the University to both sexes." From the beginning, however, "equal" treatment encompassed some significant differences in actual experience.

For one thing, there was a backlash against coeducation across the country around 1900, as women turned out in droves to take advantage of the new accessibility of the universities. It was feared that having too many women would dilute the perceived value of the institution and turn men away, thus reducing the needed number of those "male leaders," to quote from the history of another university. Also, women didn't produce the athletics teams that kept alumni happy, nor did alumnae contribute dollars to the institution at the same level as men. So Stanford in 1899 imposed a rigid quota of 500 women undergraduates that lasted for decades.

Women had few opportunities to provide leadership within the student body at Stanford. This changed briefly during the second world war, when for the first time the president of the student body was a woman, but in 1945 Stanford “returned to normalcy,” and women relinquished these offices and returned to the token vice presidencies that they had held all along.

This leads me to identify a second way in which gender matters, in addition to symbolism: *participation* in leadership at all levels of an institution. In this area, Stanford, like most nominally coeducational institutions, fell glaringly behind anything approaching equality for many decades. This sent the powerful message that women were fine in their place, but that place did not include serious leadership in any dimension of life, even undergraduate student government. If there are no role models, and no opportunities to learn to lead, if all the leaders are always male, it is a rare woman indeed who will think of herself as potentially a leader, whatever the rhetoric of the place may say about equality.

As far as members of the faculty and administration, graduate and professional students, there was not even the verbal commitment to equality. As recently as 1969, women made up less than 5% of the faculty—not radically different from Yale. This began to change in the late 1960s, as it did almost everywhere, with the high water mark of the women’s movement. The women faculty, almost to a person, came together with the sympathetic support of a few male colleagues and the university leadership to create an astonishingly vibrant feminist community on campus. We worked together collegially (not always an easy or efficient way to work) to create powerful and durable institutions like the Center for Research on Women and a Feminist Studies program for both undergraduate majors and graduate students. It was an exhilarating time indeed, and Stanford still bears the imprint of that revolution.

And here’s a third way in which gender matters: in *scholarship*, in the curriculum and in research agendas, in what is thought relevant and important to study. The establishment of

a well-regarded feminist research center and teaching program helped bring luster to Stanford, and the fact that almost all their previously traditional women colleagues become deeply involved in feminist scholarship helped legitimate the field among the men.

Duke and its Parallel Paths

Duke came to coeducation by a rather different route. Women were admitted to graduate education in 1892, the same year as Yale; and in 1896, tobacco entrepreneur Washington Duke gave a generous gift with the requirement that education be provided for women on equal terms with men. Once again, a strong proto-feminist male benefactor made the difference in requiring that women be given a chance to be educated. Too bad nobody of that stripe showed up in New Haven in 1890.

When Washington Duke’s two sons set out to endow the university and build a whole new campus in the 1920s, the decision was made to create a coordinate college for women, on the old campus more than a mile away from the new one. The Woman’s College provided residential life and extracurricular activities, but most of the upper-level classes were taught on the new West campus and thus women were educated right along with the men.

In some ways, it seemed the best of both worlds, and alumnae of the Woman’s College recall it fondly. Their academic work was basically the same as their male classmates, and they had all the advantages of a social life and male friends; yet they also had their own place, and the opportunity to run everything themselves in the Woman’s College. They had their own student government, parallel to that of the men and equal in legitimacy; they had their leadership organizations, and as role models, some strong women deans who are the stuff of legend even today. But, as with Stanford, few female faculty members.

As the “second wave” brought coeducation to Yale and other Eastern institutions in the early 1970s, it also led to the dissolution of the Woman’s College and full coeducation at Duke. But the flourishing of the Woman’s College in the midst of the university

for almost half a century has given a distinctive cast to Duke. For one thing, there is the powerful symbolism of those women leaders, as part of the iconography of our co-ed campus—pictures hanging on the walls, the names of the buildings, and so forth. The tradition of participation created the expectation that major student leadership posts at Duke will be held by women as often as men. And Duke now has one of the highest proportions of women in the professional schools, and women on the faculty, of any major university.

And so we come to Yale

In looking into the history of women at Yale these days, it's striking how much of it focuses on the early days of coeducation. Clearly this was a traumatic event for Yale. But it does put into high relief how little it seemed to have mattered to the institution that there were graduate and professional women at Yale for decades before 1969.

There is no question that we got a magnificent education; the Yale political science department in the mid-1960s was indisputably the best in the world. I had great friends and classmates who have gone on to lead the discipline today; and most of the professors were welcoming to women students as well. There was the occasional eccentric exception who refused to teach women; but in general, the riches of a great university were made available to us with little sense that it was grudging or condescending. Rather it was that we were peripheral, almost invisible, not quite there in the same sense that the men were. And there were very, very few women faculty to be role models for anybody.

Yale has come a long way since then: women on the corporation, in the senior leadership, more women on the faculty, a fully coeducated Yale College, the formation of the Women's Studies program. In participation, and to some extent in scholarship, if not yet much in symbolism, there has clearly been a great deal of progress. I salute the leaders of Yale for clear commitment in making progress in this area; and I know that not only does gender matter, but administration matters as well!

The first wave of women's college education brought us institutions like Wellesley; the first wave of coeducation brought us Stanford and Duke; the second wave brought coeducation to Yale College. What lies ahead? Perhaps a third wave of coeducation in which Yale can provide leadership for all the rest of us.

But as we focus on the future, let us not forget the women who have gone before us; not just the feminist pioneers who helped pave the way for all of us, but the unsung heroines—those Irish maids who made the beds, the cooks and nurses and secretaries, the faculty and graduate student wives who typed the manuscripts and tended the children so the men could work. They are also women of Yale, and since gender matters, we should value the kind of work women have traditionally done, as part of the University's wholeness, and value the women who have done this work.