

MALVERN COLLEGIATE GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT CONFERENCE

May 4, 2018, 10:45 – 11:15 a.m.

KEYNOTE TALK

This is a pretty exciting time to be a young woman, but I bet some things about it can feel scary too. Starting high school is a big deal – you are going to go from being the student leaders, the girls other kids look up to, to being the youngest people in the school.

But it is not just the move from grade 8 to grade 9 that makes this an interesting time to be a young woman. There is a lot happening in the world around you, too.

I could talk to you about so many things this morning, all of which will have an impact on your lives and, more importantly perhaps, all of which you have the opportunity to have an impact on.

But because you have a lot else to do today, I am going to focus what I have to say on what it means to be a girl, a young woman, an adult woman and, eventually, an older woman.

When I was your age, I had never heard the word feminism and, if I had, I probably would have said I was not interested. I was very fortunate to grow up in a family (I and the oldest kid of 6 – 4 girls and 2 boys) where I did not really see any big differences between being a girl and being a boy.

I started to see those differences when I was in high school. When I was in grade 12 (around 1970), girls were not allowed to wear pants to school. This struck me as really unfair, and so I took on the school principal about it. It took awhile, but eventually the dress code changed. First, girls were allowed to wear pant suits, then pants with tops that covered our bums. Unlike the boys, we were never allowed to wear jeans or Tshirts, so we did not get true equality in terms of what we could wear even by the time I left high school.

I had another more serious experience in high school that showed me how it was different to be a girl. One of my male teachers, who I really liked because he was funny and interesting, behaved inappropriately with me. I was pretty naïve for my age – no doubt much more naïve than any of you are – so when he touched me, I had no idea what to think. I knew I did not like it, but I also thought that somehow it must be my fault that this was happening.

No one talked about sexual abuse or sexual assault in those days – I would not even have known what those words meant if someone had said them to me.

So, I did not talk about it – with my friends or with my parents. I just tried to find ways to never be physically close to this teacher and, even though I loved the subject he taught, I did not take it again after that year because I did not want to have to be in his class.

I have no doubt that I was not the first or last victim of that teacher, and that makes me mad to this day. I was older than you guys, but I was still a kid, and someone should have been there to protect me and other girls from this man.

That is something that is better today than it was then. Unfortunately, sexual abuse and sexual assault still happens, but at least they are talked about now and most schools have policies in place to support students who are abused by a teacher.

Being able to turn to your friends, being there for your friends when they turn to you – this is so important for you now and, really, forever in your lives. If I had been able to talk to a friend about what this teacher was doing to me, maybe we would have been able to stop him.

And that brings me to another story. While it starts with a sexual assault, it is also about girls' empowerment.

When the daughter of a friend of mine was in grade 10, she was sexually assaulted by a boy who had been her best friend. She was devastated. At first, she just told her mum, because she was really embarrassed. But after a few weeks, she told a couple of her closest friends. And you know what? Those girls told her they had heard of this boy doing similar things to other girls. Eventually, about 8 or 9 girls, all of whom had been sexually assaulted or harassed by this boy, got together to talk about how they felt and what they wanted to do. They went to the sexual assault centre for some advice and then, as a group, they sat this boy down, told him how his actions had made them feel, told him not to do it again to any girl and told him they would be keeping an eye on him.

These girls felt great – they had supported one another, even though they did not know each other that well at the beginning, and they had taken action to address sexual violence in their school community. They had spoken up, and by doing that, had made their environment safer for other girls.

There is a message here for all of us: at the end of the day, as these girls found out, you need to be sure your friends have your back and they need to be sure you have their back.

I have just come back from a meeting in Halifax, a meeting of 150 women from all across Canada who are working for women's equality. Some, like me, work on the issue of violence against women; others are working for women's political equality, some for equal opportunities in sports, the trades, STEM; Indigenous women who are working on issues specific to their communities were at this meeting, as were immigrant women, older women, women with disabilities and young women.

On the first day, a panel of four young women spoke about their experiences of being girls and women and their hopes for the future.

I have been working on these issues for a long time – more than 40 years – and it was very inspiring for me to hear the optimism and commitment of these women.

They certainly have a lot more figured out than I did at their ages, and that makes me feel positive about the future, even if sometimes it seems like we are not getting very fr.

I was well into adulthood before I called myself a feminist, but I realized later that I had been a feminist for a long time before I called myself one. I am proud to say that my daughter, who is in her 40s, also calls herself a feminist – makes me think I did something right when I was raising her!

Any of you call yourself a feminist? Any of you have mums, aunts, older sisters who call themselves feminists?

We hear a lot of negative stuff about feminism and feminists. I have been told I hate men and have no sense of humour, among other things.

Let me clear the air with you: I do not hate men. My partner is a man. I have a son and a step-son and four grandsons, all of whom I like a great deal.

I also have a good sense of humour; I just don't happen to find women's inequality and violence against women very funny.

Being a feminist really just means that you believe women and men should have equal rights and opportunities. It is not very complicated or scary.

I am sure you agree with me that women and men should be paid the same amount of money for doing similar work, that women should be safe from violence in our relationships and at school and work, that girls have as much right to go to school as boys do, that a woman has as much right to be Premier as a man has.

If you do, then you are a feminist.

One thing a lot of people – especially boys and men – don't understand is that feminism is as good for them as it is for us. I see this through the eyes of my grandsons all the time – the ways they are pushed into boxes of how boys are supposed to act and behave.

If we make the world one where women and men are equal, that means boys and men can step out of gender stereotyping that says they are not supposed to show their emotions or cry, that they are supposed to be the breadwinner for the family, that they have to be strong all the time.

If women start to earn as much money as men do, then families can afford for fathers as well as mothers to take time off work to raise their children.

If women and men are truly equal, then there will be less violence against women, which is good for girls, boys, women and men.

Four years ago, Emma Watson, who I am sure you all remember from the Harry Potter movies, was made the United Nations Women's Goodwill Ambassador.

In her speech at the United Nations in 2014, she called on girls, boys, young women and young men to join the work to end gender inequality. As she said: "If not, me, who? If not now, when?"

That is what I want to encourage you to think about as you finish up your last few weeks of school this year and get ready for the big move to high school in the fall. Whatever dreams you have for your future, remember this:

Girls and women in this country and around the world still do not have equal rights with boys and men. But, we have the power to change that. It will take all of us, and there is no time to waste.

When we work together, even if we don't always agree about everything, we can make the world a better place for all of us.

A good place to start is right here: in your families, your communities and your school.

Here is just one example. Even though you are not old enough to vote in the provincial election, get involved. Learn about issues that have a particular impact on women, children and youth. (Ontario Thrive.ca) Tweet about those issues. Consider going to an all-candidates meeting to hear from the candidates in your riding about these issues. If one of them impresses you, offer to volunteer on their campaign.

You will learn so much, including skills that will be helpful to you throughout your life, and you will engage with your community.

What else can you do?

Call yourself a feminist and feel proud when you do.

Speak up when you see, hear or experience something bad.

Have each other's backs. Stick up for your friends.

To paraphrase Emma Watson: If not you, who? If not now, when?