

SPEAK OUT: Celebrate women leaders today; inspire our girls for tomorrow

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DATELINE — This has been a week of milestones – for women, for Americans. Eighty-eight years after the hard-fought battle for women's suffrage was won, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton stood before her party's nominating convention as the woman who has come closest to becoming an American presidential nominee and endorsed the first black nominee for president of the United States.

In this unprecedented primary year, as issues of gender, race and age played out across both parties' campaigns, Clinton's run for the White House sent a profound message to young women and girls across the United States. Yes, she can – yes, you can!

It is critical that our girls understand they can aspire to positions of leadership, even to the presidency. However, we have a lot of work to do before they truly believe that.

At the height of the primary season in March 2008, the Girl Scouts of America conducted a national survey of 4,000 girls and boys ages 8 to 17 to get their perceptions of leadership and opportunity. The news was striking: only 39 percent of the girls want to be leaders as they see leadership today – author-itative and individualistic, while girls are more likely than boys (67 percent vs. 53 percent) to want to be leaders in order to help other people and work in collaboration with others to achieve a greater good.

Furthermore, a strong majority (82 percent) of youngsters agreed that girls and boys are equally good at being leaders. But more than half of the respondents agreed that, "in our society it is more difficult to become a leader for a woman than a man," and that "girls have to work harder than boys to gain positions of leadership."

The fact that women hold only eight gubernatorial seats and make up just 17 percent of Congress seem to verify our youth's impression. Sixty-nine percent of the women serving in Congress have been Girl Scouts, which clearly speaks to the impact of strong leadership development for girls to set them on the right path early in their lives.

To encourage women and girls to pursue leadership positions, we must make bold statements declaring our support, and we can begin with our 2008 national conventions. With the eyes of the world watching, we should celebrate 2008 as the monumental year it has been for women and champion a national commitment to encourage women to seek public office. But girls need more role models – from the boardroom, to professional athletes, and within academia and science, technology, engineering and mathematics related fields – as inspiration to achieve positions of leadership.

The Girl Scouts' core mission is to teach girls leadership skills and imbue them with the confidence and courage to step into leadership roles.

Women here at home – including Swanee Hunt, the founding director of the Kennedy School of Government's Women and Public Policy Program; former Lt. Gov. Kerry Healey; and broadcast legend Liz Walker – all show our girls that anything is possible.

On this historic and momentous occasion, as we celebrate our candidates for the presidency of the United States, let us also honor women across America and demonstrate to the next generation that anything is possible – one day a woman will indeed take the oath for the highest office in the land. The future of our state, our country and the world rests in the hands of these girls. We must prepare them well.

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