

**VANCOUVER, JUNE 23, 2017**

**CANADIAN FEDERATION OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN NATIONAL CONVENTION**

Thank you so much for inviting me. It's a real honour to speak to so many who are committed to improving and advancing the rights and opportunities for women.

First, I want to apologize. When I agreed to speak, I planned to speak about education. I even had a great title – Education: The Cure for Populism, Propaganda, False Prophets and Poverty. After long struggles into the night, I realized it would make a great book. I'll let you know when I get it published.

Meantime, the best that I can offer are some thoughts on how populism and false prophets flourish even in educated societies and what lessons we ought to take from that.

The 100th anniversary of women getting the vote in British Columbia is this year. Among the women at the forefront of the suffrage movement were educated and – coincidentally, some were founders of the University Women's Club of Vancouver.

To mark the occasion, I interviewed women who ranged in age from late-90s to early 20s about the past and the future. They agreed that much work is still to be done. And, they feared that many gains that have been made are being eroded.

Having all eagerly anticipated the election of America's first female president, they wondered what on Earth it means to have a misogynist like Donald Trump leading the world's most powerful country.

From the beginning of his campaign, his tweets and hate speech against women have emboldened others to denigrate, disparage, deride and threaten women. The level of vitriol spewed by anonymous online trolls and emailers has increased dramatically. I've seen it in my own inbox and in comments about me on social media. I've seen more of it that's been sent to female politicians. It was bad before. It's worse now.

Beyond that, his policies, cabinet choices and supreme court appointee will all make the lives of women and children more difficult whether it's the further erosion of public education, limiting reproductive choices, and a medicare plan will leave another 22 million Americans without health care.

All of that, of course, is beyond our control. But what we know all too well is that ideological seepage across our undefended border is almost inevitable -- especially these days when most people get their news from social media.

For now, Canada is swimming against the American tide with our self-proclaimed feminist prime minister. The federal cabinet is half women and two weeks ago, the federal Liberals announced a funding framework and \$7.5 billion over 11 years to help the provinces establish early childhood education programs.

Not only is there indisputable research of the benefits to children's long-term educational, health and even wealth, access to quality childcare is one of the major barriers to Canadian women's participation in the labour force.

Earlier this week, McKinsey & Co. released a report that suggested Canada's GDP would grow by \$150 billion in 10 years simply by getting more women in the workforce. What that would entail is increasing female participation in resource and technology industries and increasing the number of women CEOs.

All of that is good news. But we still have plenty of problems begging for solutions. Aboriginal women and girls by every measure lag the general population whether it's in life expectancy, wage-earning potential, the likelihood of being placed in government care or being raped or murdered.

As educated women with the power and knowledge to advocate, we need to add our voices and support female, aboriginal leaders who know best what changes are required.

We also need to be more cognizant the barriers that women and children in other minority ethnic, cultural and religious communities face. ESL funding for immigrants and refugees, for example, is sadly lacking.

But I am also concerned about the educational prospects for children as government funding for private funding for private schools increases.

Let me explain using an example that I know all too well.

Bountiful is a fundamentalist Mormon community in southeastern B.C. where polygamy has been practised for more than 60 years. It is a canary in the Canadian coal mine when it comes to women's and children's rights.

Taken as such, let me say that the canary died long ago. The Bountiful experience doesn't bode well for other minority women and children. In these patriarchal societies, their complaints and concerns are too often cruelly ignored both within and outside their communities. But we can't let tolerance blind us to the abuses.

Bountiful is a community of about 1,500 that I've been writing about for more than 13 years. For more than 60 years, the leaders and the most powerful men in the community have practiced polygamy.

For more nearly seven decades, the B.C. government has ignored the long list of problems that not only plague the community but are endemic to polygamous societies. Those problems include:

- forced marriage
- sexual exploitation of child brides
- forced child labour of both boys and girls so that men can support their exceedingly large families
- child trafficking
- the expulsion of surplus boys
- and, the forced relocation of women and children away from their husbands and fathers who were suddenly deemed unworthy.

And, over the years, the provincial government has poured money into the private schools there where girls were taught that their highest and best use was to be a plural wife and have as many children as physically possible.

Over decades, those schools produced no more than a handful of high school graduates and not a single university graduate.

The government even funded the midwifery clinic where the ages of teen mothers and their middle-aged husbands were kept secret.

I started writing about Bountiful at the urging of Jancis Andrews, a CFUW member. She emailed me in May 2004 demanding to know why I would write about the trafficking of Asian women and not about the child brides being traded across the Canada-U.S. border by the fundamentalist Mormons.

I hadn't written about it because I didn't know about it. Jancis began to educate me.

The University Women's Club of Vancouver took up the cause and established the Bountiful Roundtable, which brought together half a dozen other groups to lobby for action on behalf of the women in Bountiful.

Despite all of those efforts, it wasn't until this November that the first Bountiful community members went to trial. Up until those charges were laid, the B.C. government had refused to act because a succession of attorneys general and their lawyers believed that religious rights trumped the rights of women and children to the most basic protections and the most basic rights to go to school, to choose when or if to marry and to choose who to marry.

At that first trial, the former bishop -- James Oler -- was acquitted of removing a child from Canada for unlawful purposes. That's under appeal.

But Brandon and Gail Blackmore were convicted and will be sentenced next Friday (June 30).

Their daughter was only 13 and still in elementary school in 2004 when the Blackmores drove her across the border and handed her over to Warren Jeffs. Jeffs is the prophet of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

In a religious ceremony, their petite daughter became one of Jeffs's more than 80 wives. His subsequent rape of this innocent and frightened young girl was recorded and the tape was played in the Canadian courtroom. It was also played during Jeffs's Texas trial and helped lead to his conviction and sentencing to life sentence for child sexual abuse.

In April, there was a second trial. James Oler was once again a defendant. This time the charge was polygamy. Also charged was Oler's brother-in-law, Winston Blackmore, another former bishop –and Canada's most notorious polygamist. There were 24 women listed on Winston Blackmore's indictment – close to half of them were under the age of 18 when he married them.

At the time of the trial, Blackmore had 145 children. But he's had two more since then. His 147th was born this week.

Generations of women and children were sacrificed by a succession of attorneys general and government lawyers who firmly believed that religious freedom trumps the rights of women and children.

It took a lengthy and expensive constitutional reference case in 2010 to dissuade them. A judge concluded that they were wrong – that Canada's law forbidding polygamy is a justifiable limit on religious freedom because of its many inherent harms.

Even with that decision, it was another four years before charges were laid; another two years before the trials began.

Bountiful represents a systemic failure on the part of highly educated people. And it highlights the tenuousness of Canadians' understanding and commitment to equality rights.

So what about other reclusive, religious communities or immigrant and refugee communities where language barriers limit women's connections to mainstream society?

Let me be clear. I wholeheartedly support Canada's commitment to both bringing in more refugees and immigrants. But protecting the rights of women and children once they are in Canada is something that we need to take very seriously.

We can't let tolerance blind us to abuses that may be taking place within those minority communities. Because they are happening.

Recently, I wrote about coerced marriages within the South Asian community. It's common enough that mosaic -- an immigrant settlement society -- has written a handbook to help its staff recognize the signs of distress either among women and girls who are in forced marriages or among those who are likely to put into such marriages.

And, of course, there have been well-reported, high-profile cases both here and in Ontario of so-called 'honour killings.' Less reported are cases of other traditional practices such as female genital mutilation. Only recently, I heard that there is such a thing as breast ironing. Mothers pound or otherwise flatten the breasts of pubescent girls in an attempt to stop their development.

The rationale is that it will make her less likely to be sexually harassed or raped, or less likely to be married early or become pregnant outside of marriage. Some have even argued that it was done for their daughters' own good – by being less attractive, she would be able to finish school.

There are days when I find it hard to be optimistic given all of these problems and challenges. But let me tell you about two women from Bountiful who were both ardent defenders of polygamy and their community when I met them in 2004 and 2005. I met them at

conferences organized by the B.C. Teachers Federation and by Beyond Borders on women's rights and on child brides. These two women were among a handful who had been allowed to attend because the community's leaders were certain of their loyalty.

They were both at the November trial. The one told me that because she'd left and taken her children, her daughters were now travelling and working abroad.

The other woman was Esther Palmer. She had been one of Bountiful's midwives and at the trial, she admitted under oath that she'd lied to police about the ages of the young mothers in both 2008 and 2010. She did it to protect her brother – Jim Oler.

She said she'd lied because she'd been taught that it was okay to lie for the Lord and defend the religion at all cost – even at the cost of innocent children.

In 2012, Esther was deemed unworthy and told to leave Bountiful. Since then, four of her nine children have never spoken to her. One of them – a daughter -- sat in the front row, glaring at Esther throughout her testimony. She left without speaking to her mother.

Without her pioneer dress and her hair swept up and back into a braid, Esther looks years younger. I told her how different she looked. Esther laughed. "It's because I'm a different person now."

But she told me about her 32-year-old sister, Amy, who left Bountiful with her five children last summer. They all live with Esther who is supporting them because Amy only has a Grade 6 education. She has no work experience, no resume, and no idea of how the world works.

Not only does she need financial help, Esther says Amy needs the same kind of services and supports that Canada provides to refugees.

That's how far removed these Canadian-born women and children are from mainstream society.

But the fact that women like Susie, Esther and Amy *do* leave gives me hope.

Paradoxically, Trump's election also gives me hope.

It was both brilliant and tragic to think after Trump won, women returned to the arts and craft of their grandmothers, regrouped in pink pussy hats and crowded into the streets.

I admit that I find it somewhat dismaying that so many women want to claim the derogatory term of pussy as their own. But that's not a criticism of their actions or intentions, only an indication of my age and upbringing.

Still, standing up to abusers and misogynists takes more than rallies and letter writing. It takes education women like us to encourage, mentor and support these young women. Already, their digital nativism makes them powerful advocates and organizers.

We also need to seek out women leaders in other cultural and faith communities and support them in their efforts.

And, we need seek out and nurture more male allies.

But, as we're increasingly confronted with the trolls and the bullies -- we need to be brave . . . because what we're fighting for is worth it.

Thanks so much for inviting me and for listening.