

The Call to Action: *What it Will Take to Inspire the Next Generation of Global Leaders*

By student-journalist, Tess Adams, junior at North Salem High School and ambassador of the student-founded Junior Social Entrepreneurship Summit in Berlin and LA on *Tina Brown Media's Women in the World Conference* (April 6-8, 2016).

“I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew the woman I wanted to be,” held fashion pioneer Diane Von Furstenberg as she opened the third and final day of the Women in the World Conference - or as producer Tina Brown would later put it, the Women in the World *Movement*. The final day of the summit alone hosted some of the finest female leaders of the twenty-first century, from innovative technologists, to sexual and domestic abuse survivors, to world leaders, to hollywood icons, and everything in between.

In the first tier balcony of the David H. Koch Theater, an aura of great magnitude whose flavor could not possibly be encompassed by mere words, settled over a crowd of hopeful change-makers as mist lands on a gamely field. We wished, we waited, and these hopes were answered; and by none other than Mrs. Von Furstenberg herself with her confidence, poise, and a fierce testament that would rock social media networks for days to come: “I have never met a woman who’s not strong.” It was a well won applause-worthy moment, but little did audience members realize its foreshadowing characterization of the feminist soldiers yet to march the stage.

This was my first press event. And frankly, the bar could not have been set much higher. I think it is fair to say that passion is the driving force of achievement. So there is a special moment when a journalist finds her niche, her connection to a said subject, that dictates the honesty of her work. While each panel dissolved and reformed anew, this jump was easily made as the women of stories and screens became tangibly in reach, suddenly vulnerable in the authenticity of their passions without ever losing a trace of strength.

Did you know that 759 million people are *food insecure* or that 2 billion people in the world lack any sort of financial capability? No? Neither did I. What about the fact that in Mexico, every four hours a woman is attacked or killed due to gender disputes and that seven out of ten women fleeing to the United States are raped before they can be granted asylum?

What’s shocking here is not the statistics themselves, but the fact that we’re shocked *by* them. Many of these conditions have existed for decades, only to be exacerbated by change that is not inconsequential, but is still insufficient.

“We’re not helpless unless we choose to be helpless,” championed television star and social activist America Ferrera, as she dually complimented the grace under fire executed by

women escaping frightening cases of misogynistic violence in Central America, while demanding that those with the ability to fight for reform do so. While entirely justified, the accusation brings into question a grave concept: Have we - those with this privilege - chosen helplessness, not wanting to stray too far from our own battles? Or have we collectively crafted a society that represses motivation to fight and to change, allowing us to forget that it is simply *a choice*?

Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Programme, Ertharin Cousin, brought validity to this question by asking Americans to “[let] leaders know you care.” In discussion with 60 Minutes’ Lesley Stahl, Cousin brought forth more disturbing truths about the relationship between public attention and media. Essentially, when the media puts a distress sign on an issue, infatuation might take hold for a window of time, however, it often loses its luster long before the problem has been alleviated. Unemployed men, victimized women, starving children - young, old, black white - it doesn’t matter how you shape it, *old news just isn’t sexy*.

In Mrs. Ferrara’s panel on “Women on the Run” - which featured Lilia Aguilar (former member of Mexican Congress and founder of *Moving Mexico Forward*), Astrid Ellis (Guatemalan kidnapping survivor), and Maria Hinojosa (executive producer and host of NPR’s Latino USA and president of Futuro Media Group) - the women conferred on the “umbrella” phenomenon that occurs when critically different issues are melded into one by a public who wouldn’t know any better. Although their application was centered around American accusations against Central American migrants, the concept holds true as the echo of a much broader theme.

This might be why the task of making a difference appears so daunting, especially to younger crowds who are already met with enormous pressures from school, parents, and friends. And let’s not forget the role of social media. In an age defined by the colossus that is the social network, young people are ingrained to be intimidated by their own anonymity. Conscious consumerism is often forsaken - quality for quantity, and authenticity for big brands.

In regards to Mrs. Von Furstenberg’s opening sentiments, most young women are challenged in finding the answer to the question that seems to be weighing down on us from every angle: *Who am I now? And who do I want to be?* If our hope is to inspire the next generation of global leaders, it seems that, like with most problems, the task must be approached from both sides. We as young women have a responsibility to seek out this answer, leaving no room for the distraction of apologies made for being who we are. But the women of the world own a responsibility as well - that we must work tirelessly to spread this message.

So here is the choice - and it is *a choice*: there’s the blame game, and the narrow-mindedness, and the “well, it doesn’t really affect me” thoughts that we’ve all honestly

had; but there are also the immensely diverse audiences who took time off from work and school and the agendas of everyday life to listen to the wisdom and discussions of the faces of change this past week. Those voices of wisdom emerged as mothers of a community they sought to materialize through the divulgence of their passions and vulnerabilities to complete strangers all for the grander scheme of collectivization. And finally, there are the millions who do share this passion for social justice - those who act on it, and those who don't, and those who will; those who spread kindness, who fear the consequences of stagnation more than the side effects of change. For those who comprehend the many dimensions of problem-solving and accept the enormity of global issues humanity has yet to scathe, build your own community of change-makers, and engage especially with those who don't. For those who are just now thoughtfully considering the implications of regression, allow yourselves to be engaged. As Mrs. Von Furstenberg so articulately put it - "Use your voice for people who have no voice."

This is my call to action. *What's yours?*