

## HAPPY IN MY OWN SKIN!

### ***Debunking some of the stereotypical images of what a woman should be and getting on with the job at hand***

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#### **1. Introduction**

We have all heard the expressions: "barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen" or "go to university to choose a good husband", "work in the bank to choose a rich husband – then you won't need to work anymore" and "no married nurses – home life interferes too much". Women have moved away from these thoughts, and are constantly proving just how outdated these thoughts are. More and more families are headed by a single woman – she cannot sit at home and hope that "everything will be alright". However, these types of thoughts are still very much entrenched in some parts of the world and women have to work extra hard to show that they can manage the working life. There are still cases where a woman has the same responsibilities yet is paid less than male counterparts.

#### **2. Changing World Environment**

According to the 2010 Flux Trend Review edited by Dion Chang, **it is expected that 2010 will be "The start of the Female Century"**<sup>1</sup>. This document states that archetypal feminine principles such as caring for the home and the family are coming into play, the only difference being that now the world is seen as our home, and the global population as our children. We can see this trend particularly when we look at the global warming issue and the way that all areas of life are being affected in order to preserve the world for future generations.

The economic impact has had a significant role in changing work force demographics. Most job losses in 2009 occurred in traditionally male-run industries such as the banking sector and manufacturing, and (per Time magazine) at the start of 2010 there were more female workers in the USA than men!

Even technology is copying feminine trends. Social networks – which are becoming more and more pivotal to the way in which we operate our lives – tellingly mimic how women operate: forming communities and engaging in conversations; networking to get answers and achieve the outcomes required!

#### **3. Bag Lady**

While these trends all show a shift in thinking, we still have differing outcomes depending on the point of view of the person introducing certain issues or challenges. Have a look at the following example:

*As I walked down the busy sidewalk, knowing I was late for an important meeting, my eyes fell upon one of those unfortunate, homeless vagabonds that are found in every city these days.*

*Wearing what can only be described as rags, carrying every worldly possession in two plastic bags; my heart was touched by what I saw. Some people turned to stare. Others quickly looked away as if the sight would somehow contaminate them.*

*I was moved by some powerful inner urge to reach out to this unfortunate woman. Yes, where some people saw only rags, I saw a hidden beauty. A small voice inside my head called out, "Reach out, reach out!"*

Now, there are many women who would read this as if a woman had written this. They would be thinking about the groceries that could be gathered together to make this poor lady's life a

little easier, what shelter could be approached to provide a roof over her head, what clothing there was that could be shared. However, this was written by a man! The whole scenario is not what it seems .... Please refer to the last page for a picture of the “Bag Lady in Rags<sup>2</sup>”.

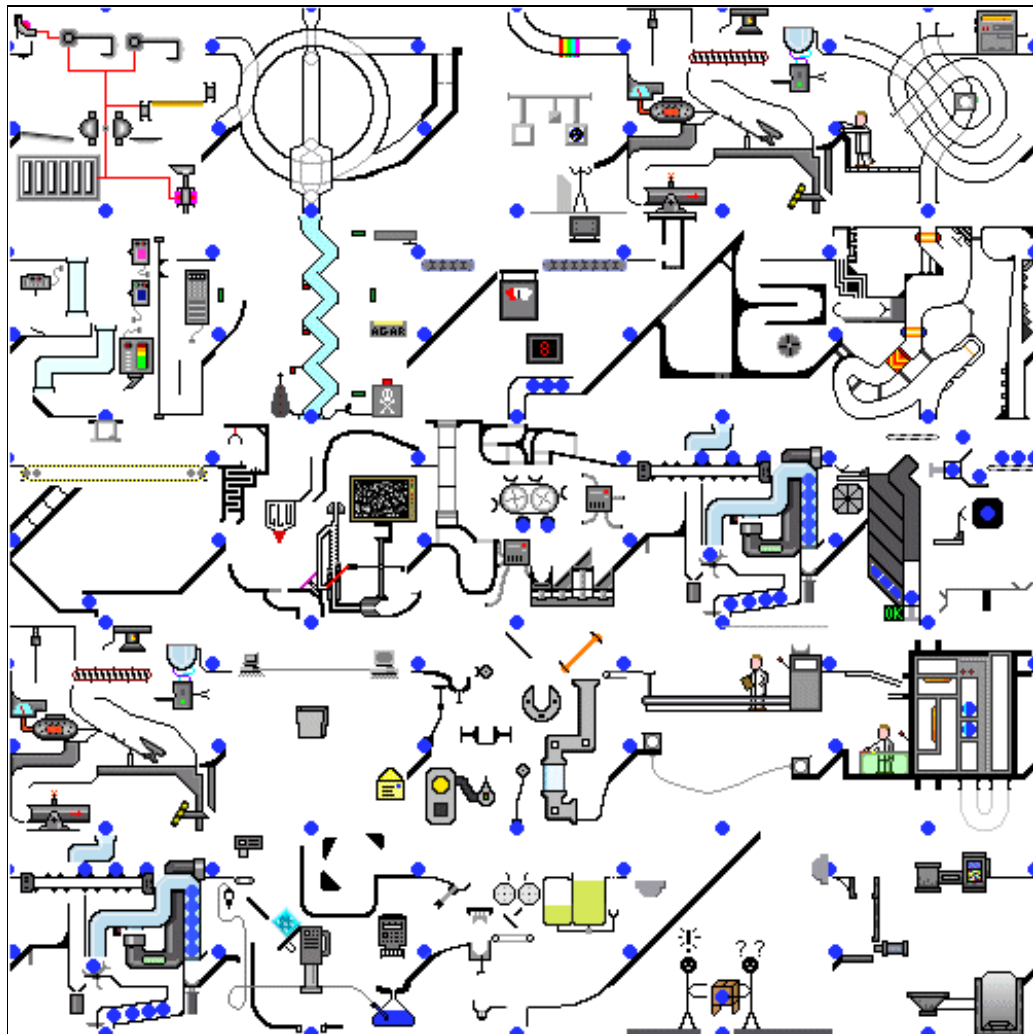
While this provides a laugh, we all know that there are different perspectives held by society on different matters.

#### 4. Different way of thinking

Yes, women have a different way of thinking about things and about processing things.

Recently I received this graphic, from a man, about the complex way that women process things and how women think.

Have you ever wondered how a woman's brain works? Well....it's finally explained here in one, easy-to-understand illustration:



Every one of those little balls is a thought about something that needs to be done, a decision or a problem that needs to be solved

Our society is now being commanded from the bottom up. Even in South Africa, we have shifted away from a centralised Mbeki administration to a more engaging and empathetic style of the Zuma administration. There is a significant shift from the head (logical, egoistic, bottom-line approach) usually associated with men to the heart (empathetic, care for the planet and for the entire human family) usually associated with women.

Look at the service delivery demands: we have moved away from the passive consumer to a very active and vocal consumer who wants to be engaged with, not talked at. The changing economic climate leading to retrenchments has made people approach life in a different way and question their value systems. Just as 9-11 changed the way America thought and brought about significant unity in that country, so the financial crisis and economic recession coupled with the potential climate change crisis has moved people from a self-centred “me” approach to an era of “us” and “we”. There is a growing civil voice that is calling for a new world order.

This call has been extended around the world with a view to encouraging women to get involved, particularly in local government. While the calls are not all new, it is a call that must be heeded if the needs of the communities we serve as local government are to be met. Numerous organizations are recognizing the worth of women in local government. The International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), *inter alia*, declared that:

- Considering that local government, as an integral part of the national structure of governance, is the level of government closest to the citizens, it is in the best position both to involve women in the making of decisions concerning their living conditions, and to make use of their knowledge and capabilities in the promotion of sustainable development.
- The executive Committee of the IULA realized that if local government is to meet the needs of both women and men, it must build on the experiences of both women and men, through equal representation at all levels and in all fields of decision-making, covering the wide range of responsibilities of local governments.
- In order to create sustainable, equal and democratic local governments, where women and men have equal access to decision-making, equal access to services and equal treatment in these services, the gender perspective must be mainstreamed into all areas of policy making and management in local government<sup>3</sup>.

Some examples of the drive to include women more extensively in local government are as follows:

- **IULA Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government**

At the World Executive Committee of the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), the worldwide association of local governments, meeting in Zimbabwe, November 1998, it was determined that **CALL UPON NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS TO:**

- Acknowledge that local government has a critical role to play in creating sustainable democracies and gender equal societies, and therefore, to grant constitutional, legal and financial autonomy to local governments to enable them to meet their democratic responsibilities;
- Support, encourage and create opportunities and resources for local governments to work for and promote gender equality;
- Recognise national associations of local governments as important partners in the development, promotion and support of gender equality at the local level, and in the exchange of experiences at the international, national and local levels;
- Work in partnership with local government associations and their members to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- Guarantee and enforce the right of women to a legal capacity identical to that of men and to the same opportunities to exercise that capacity, by ensuring equality and non-discrimination before the law and in practice;

- Guarantee and enforce the right of women to participate in the democratic system, by ensuring women the equal right to vote, to be eligible for election and to hold public office;
  - Develop and augment knowledge in the field of gender by ensuring that statistics collected on individuals are gender disaggregated and analysed with a gender perspective, and to make available resources for academic research with a gender perspective, that can be of use for the development of gender equality in local government.
- **Australian Local Government Women's Association's (ALGWA) review of the National Framework for Women in Local Government – the Way Forward:**
    - The Local Government Managers Australia (LGMA) National board, at its February 2008 meeting, adopted a national strategy to advance women in local government into executive positions. A key strategy platform was the development and promotion of a Year of Women in Local Government in 2010.
    - Five key issues were identified during this forum to provide a focus for the planning of the Year of Women in Local Government 2010.
      - Removing structural barriers to the advancement of women in senior management positions;
      - Improving the image of local government as an employer of choice for women;
      - Preparing women to lead and succeed;
      - Affirming women's right to be at the table; and
      - Implementing effective evaluation methods for measuring meaningful programs<sup>4</sup>.
- **The Phitsanulok Declaration on the Advancement of Women in Local Government** was made at the **Asia-Pacific Summit of Women Mayors and Councillors** held on 19-22 June 2001 in Phitsanulok, Thailand stated, *inter alia*, that they firmly believe that:
    - Women's rights are human rights;
    - Women and men have equal human rights, duties and responsibilities as citizens; these include the right to be free of poverty, discrimination, violence and particularly the right to participate equally in the process of governance, including the right to vote, to hold both appointed and elected office, and to participate in decision making at all levels of government;
    - Local government should create inclusive systems in order to legitimize involvement of women and community-based organizations in public decision-making;
    - Many women, both urban and rural, face additional barriers to the full realization and enjoyment of their human rights because of such factors as their age, race, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability, or socio-economic class, or because they are indigenous people, migrants, including migrant workers, displaced women or refugees;
    - Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the betterment of society; without the active participation of women at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved;
    - The low representation of women in decision-making needs to be addressed; in particular local government, as the level of government closest to the people, has a crucial role to play in ensuring gender equality in society<sup>5</sup>.
- **Women's Development Steering Group in Northern Ireland:** The Women's Development Steering Group was established by the Local Government Training Group to

identify and address training and development needs, against the background of the under-representation of women councillors and officers in the district councils. The main initiatives are:

- To drive the Women in Local Councils' initiative, so that each council and political party is challenged and supported to make measurable progress towards addressing any gender under-representation, thereby creating a local government sector which more accurately reflects the community it serves.
  - In striving to deliver this mission, the Women's Development Steering Group will focus on putting effective arrangements in place to meet the requirements of legislation and will develop effective partnerships with other key organisations to address inequalities and adverse impact in the local government sector<sup>6</sup>.
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- **The Women's Local Government Society (WLGS)** in the United Kingdom celebrated its centenary in 2007! In 1907 the "Qualification of Women" Act clarified women (ratepayers) were able to be elected to Borough and County Councils. This landmark enabling Act came about partly because of the lobbying of an influential group of women, networking as the 'Women's Local Government Society'. The constitution accepted by the WLGS at its first AGM in March 2007 and amended at its second AGM in February 2008 sets out the following aims :
    - To raise the profile of past, present and future achievements of elected women in Local Government.
    - To secure a greater representation of elected Women in Local Government in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, through positive action, promotion, support, mentoring and lobbying.
    - To facilitate networking opportunities for women elected to serve local communities.
    - To ensure elected women of all political persuasions and of all communities and backgrounds are able to influence the work of the organisation and are encouraged to participate in it.
    - To emulate the spirit of its Edwardian predecessor in promoting the cause of women as local elected community representatives.
    - To encourage the return of real power to women in their local communities through elected local government and to support the development of meaningful local democracy.
    - To celebrate the 1907 success of the WLGS in lobbying for legislation enabling women to be elected as councillors<sup>7</sup>.

South Africa would all be out of line if we did not listen to this call, if we did not heed the international trend to make decision making inclusive at all levels, but with particular emphasis on local government.

## 5. **Getting happy in my own skin**

Women, however, need to be ready to heed the call and move away from past insecurities and lack of self-confidence. Women need to take up their roles and responsibilities with confidence and assurance. Here is a fine example of the change in mind-set that needs to happen that we ensure we are happy in our own skin:

### **DO YOU EAT CHOCOLATE?**

We were raised on chocolate as children and even into adulthood. I will never eat it again. I hope from now on you will throw yours away whenever you are given any.

It seems as though nothing is safe to eat anymore. This is what happens when you eat chocolate! **THIS IS A MEDICAL WARNING!**  
It could happen to you, your family and friends!



Chocolate can cause SMALL FEET!  
**Warn everyone!**

Recently, in a large city in France, a poster featuring a young, thin and tanned woman appeared in the window of a gym. It said, "This summer, do you want to be a mermaid or a whale?"

A middle-aged woman, whose physical characteristics did not match those of the woman on the poster, responded publicly to the question posed by the gym.

*To Whom It May Concern,*

*Whales are always surrounded by friends (dolphins, sea lions, curious humans.) They have an active sex life, get pregnant and have adorable baby whales. They have a wonderful time with dolphins stuffing themselves with shrimp. They play and swim in the seas, seeing wonderful places like Patagonia, the Bering Sea and the coral reefs of Polynesia. Whales are wonderful singers and have even recorded CDs. They are incredible creatures and virtually have no predators other than humans. They are loved, protected and admired by almost everyone in the world.*

*Mermaids don't exist. If they did exist, they would be lining up outside the offices of Argentinean psychoanalysts due to an identity crisis: Fish or human? They surely don't have a good social life or many friends: who wants to get close to a girl who smells like a fish store?*

*The choice is perfectly clear to me: I want to be a whale.*

It is so clear that the respondent to this advertisement was "happy in her own skin".

## 6. Conclusion

When discussing ideas remember the words of Einstein:

*"There are problems in today's world that cannot be solved by the level of thinking that caused them."*

You will need to think "out of the box" - or use a different group of people to solve those

problems because conventional and traditional thinking won't crack it. After all, it was those levels of thinking on those groupings of people that caused the problems in the first place!

*Women's lives are different from those of men. They offer different and valuable perspectives when making decisions that affect entire communities.*

*Women offer valuable talent and experience providing benefits to many types of volunteer organizations and businesses. They hold a wealth of knowledge about their municipality that is often overlooked. Increasing the number and diversity of women who make municipal decisions will ensure the needs of women and men of all backgrounds and abilities are met. Municipal governments need that talent and knowledge.*

*Why is it important that more women become involved in municipal government?*

*Increasing women's participation in municipal government will:*

- *help ensure that municipal governments reflect the populations they serve*
- *increase the range of people who make decisions and who have input into decision making*
- *promote democracy by ensuring women's perspectives are counted*
- *increase the talent pool available to municipalities.*<sup>8</sup>

Ladies, move into the positions you know you can fill and **GET ON WITH THE JOB** - be those who make the difference: **BASADI BA ETSANG PHAPANG!**

**DON'T LET YOUR HIGH HEELS STOP YOU CLIMBING THE LADDER!**

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<sup>1</sup> Trend number 5 from the document 2010 Flux Trend Review, edited by Dion Chang

<sup>2</sup> The bag lady in rags



<sup>3</sup> IULA Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government - <http://www.cities-localgovernments.org/uclg/upload/template/templatedocs/worldwidedeclaration.htm>

<sup>4</sup> The case for women in Local Government - [www.lgwomen2010.org.au](http://www.lgwomen2010.org.au)

<sup>5</sup> Phitsanulok Declaration on the Advancement of Women in Local Government - <http://www.unescap.org/huset/women/summit/declaration/Declaration.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Women in Local Councils - <http://www.womeninlocalcouncils.org.uk/about-us/>

<sup>7</sup> Women's Local Government Society - <http://www.womeninlocalgovernment.org.uk/index.php?action=background>

<sup>8</sup> Woman in Local Government: Increasing our participation - <http://www.wilg.ca/more-women-needed/>