

WORLD AFFAIRS COMMENTARY

by Rahim Kanani

[Interview with Tiffany Dufu, President of the White House Project, on Gender Equality](#)

In a recent in-depth interview with Tiffany Dufu, President of the White House Project, we discussed the organization's evolution and plan moving forward, challenges and obstacles to success, gender equality in the United States, her advice to President Obama, and much more.

The White House Project, a non-profit organization, aims to advance women's leadership in all communities and sectors—up to the U.S. presidency—by filling the leadership pipeline with a richly diverse, critical mass of women.

Rahim Kanani: What have been some of the major milestones of The White House Project over the last decade?

Tiffany Dufu: When we reached 10,000 women trained at the start of last year, that was a major milestone. It spoke to the impetus for this organization's founding, to get more richly diverse leadership into the pipeline and to normalize women as leaders. The *Vote, Run, Lead*TM training program is the core of our work; it's where we are on the ground, in five different regions across the country. Our *VRL* milestones definitely include targeted trainings and partnerships, such as *Women Rule!* with *O, The Oprah Magazine* in 2008, and the *START Now Summit* just last year. Both sessions empowered women to mobilize around an issue that they saw as bigger than themselves, because it takes leaders at all levels to make something happen.

Starting the Corporate Council in 2006 was a major endeavor that helped complete our circle of cross-sector work, putting a focus on training corporate and businesswomen. In 2009 they produced the *Benchmarking Women's Leadership* report, a piece of research that reveals people's admitted comfort—and the subsequent lack in reality of—true gender parity across ten different industries: politics, academia, law, sports, etc. That piece has been cited in the media from Katie Couric to *Good Morning America* and more, and our 2010 programming included a tour around different cities, welcoming professionals from various industries, to discuss what we found and to make recommendations about how to rectify gender disparity.

Our partnership with Barbie was a major milestone, too. We worked with Mattel to release President Barbie in 2000, putting into the hands of children everywhere a model of a woman President—and into their minds, the idea that girls can be world leaders, too. President Barbie runs every four years now.

The milestones I'm most proud of, though, are the ones created by our alumnae—more than half of whom are women of color. They're the ones that make the real impact as they author, support and pass legislation and practices that further us all in our pursuit of inclusivity and social and economic progress. That's what TWHP is all about and it's what we're here to do.

Rahim Kanani: At the same time, what have been some of the major obstacles or challenges to that success?

Tiffany Dufu: A deep-seated, culture-wide—and often unconscious—perception that women cannot or should not be leaders. Marian Wright Edelman said: *You can't be what you can't see.* And if you look at the fact that women leaders comprise only 18% across sectors in the U.S., how are our little girls supposed to comprehend that they can be heads of state, or heads of corporations, or heads of anything other than the household?

It becomes a vicious circle, then: There aren't enough women leaders, because our foremothers didn't understand from an early age that they could sit at the head of decision-making tables. And if little girls don't see women in public leadership, they won't always aspire to it. Because they don't aspire to it, they don't strive for it, and they don't become it. Eventually they're leading the next generation of women who live in a culture where women once again hit that social, cultural, or psychological ceiling.

My son is four years old and sees himself as a leader already. When someone remarked to him that he could be President of the United States one day, he immediately responded, "I've thought of that, but I think I'm going to be a paleontologist instead. Because when you're President, you have a lot of cleaning up to do, and I don't even really like cleaning up my toys." He already has it in his mind that he can do anything. My daughter is still too young to articulate anything like this (she's two), but I want to make sure she perceives the same access to opportunities.

One solution is putting women into the pipeline, in order to normalize women leaders, so that young women grow up in a world where they can point to hundreds, and thousands, of women leaders who are part of a cycle of role models.

Rahim Kanani: Having been appointed president of the organization on January 20th, 2011, how do you envision the White House Project moving forward into the next decade?

Tiffany Dufu: My vision for The White House Project is that we will achieve dramatic social impact, reignite civil society, and innovate solutions to our toughest problems by training women to advance their leadership. We want to bridge the gap between citizen and leader, filling the pipeline with a diverse group of individuals who are work toward social progress. We will meet people where they are—in cities, small towns, and reservations; in schools and in business; online and in-person, through tubes, texts and tweets. The technology and tools are at our fingertips—and at the fingertips of our children—we just have to leverage them.

I want to expand our core capabilities around training. I envision that the movement of women's leadership will form an ecosystem of powerful, diverse, accountable leaders, across sector, and class and across the country.

Rahim Kanani: What has surprised you the most about your work since joining the White House Project?

Tiffany Dufu: What is surprising, and terrifying, is a lack of awareness of the status quo. Our experiences are boxed up inside various inequities, and it's dangerous because sometimes, everything looks fine from inside that box. Two instances:

I recently spoke with a female corporate executive who told me she didn't feel there were barriers for women in the workplace. She was surprised to find out when I shared with her that women get paid approximately 80 cents on the dollar. She just didn't know the information. We can do a much better job of educating people about the issue of gender equality, as well as about the advantages of having women in leadership.

Even more recently, I was talking with a close friend—someone whom I love, who is very important to me—and he said that childhood obesity is a direct result of the high number of women going to work. Now, at first glance, maybe that statement looks true. Surely, the fact that children are eating more processed foods is probably a contributor to weight gain. But to say, in essence, that it's solely the woman's responsibility to provide a healthy meal for a child is such an antiquated and unequal belief. Yet it's so deep-seated that my friend didn't even realize what he was saying.

But truly, such interactions are part of what motivate me to do this work.

Rahim Kanani: In rating the current state of affairs in the United States in terms of gender equality, how would America score, and are we on the right path?

Tiffany Dufu: In an Inter-Parliamentary Union study of 188 countries, the U.S. ranks 72nd for women's leadership. So that's clear how we score! Not well, especially for the leading democracy. Especially for a country that is supposed to be a beacon for values and human rights. Especially for a place where people across the world still, after so many years, dream about living. The recent White House study on indicators of women's social and economic well-being laid it out plainly and clearly for us—we may be on the right path, but it's a slug's path. And we can't get fooled by the shine it leaves behind. The fact that women still only get about 80 cents on a man's dollar is incredible to me. So sure, more and more women have college and graduate degrees, and we had a truly viable female candidate in the presidential primaries in 2008. According to the Congressional Research Service, at the current rate, it would take 500 years for us to reach gender parity in government. We can't mistake these intermittent victories—however significant they are—for true equality. We can't stop working toward our goals.

Rahim Kanani: If President Obama granted you an audience to discuss ways in which we could narrow the gender gap in the U.S. in all areas of society, what would be your advice both for the immediate term, as well as the long term?

Tiffany Dufu: Short-term: Build the leadership pipeline. Get women in now. Train them on how government works, how they can work within it, and how they can change it and make it better. Remind them—constantly—that they are the leaders we need; that they are able. Research has shown that part of the reason why women don't run for office is because they don't see themselves as qualified. But take a man with the exact same experience and he'll step into leadership in a moment. That's why we need to build confidence, particularly in young women.

Long-term: Reinvigorate the movement for gender equality in the U.S., in the way other countries are reviving it around the world. We want to create the kind of energy and momentum that Obama had in his 2008 campaign: engaging young people, new voters, diverse constituents.

That's precisely one of the reasons why I'm so excited about TWHP's social media movement, a campaign we are working on now and officially launching later this year.

Also long-term: Pass legislation that supports equal opportunity, and work toward further systemic changes that enhance and promote it. It may be on the books to provide equal pay, but again, the recent White House report demonstrates that doesn't happen. Until women have economic security and are on par with men that way, women will always lag behind, be unnecessarily dependent or lack independence they might want. On the same note, we need to give all families access to quality child care, so that women can be even more productive members of our workforce economy, knowing their children are well-cared for. Until we have a system in which we are providing an affordable safety net for women and their children, women will never advance and the gap will remain far and wide.

Rahim Kanani: If the work of the White House Project is necessitated by virtue of a larger national or international injustice, what is that injustice?

Tiffany Dufu: Mostly simply: sexism. The belief that men are superior to women, that women's roles belong in the private realm. It's a bias that permeates many of our institutions.

Looking deeper, our work is necessitated by a detrimental, pervasive lack of civic participation and civic engagement in our country. There's a vacuum between the people in power, and the citizens who are affected by the decisions that those leaders make. We train such a diverse group of women because we want to create and encourage leaders in all regions, in cities and small towns, of all backgrounds, so that we fill that vacuum with people who can envision and affect change.

Rahim Kanani: Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright often says "there is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women". Why do you think it's so important to encourage and foster women-women alliances in the movement for gender equality?

Tiffany Dufu: Because a house divided against itself cannot stand. As half the population, women are a heterogeneous group and, like any diverse group, are susceptible to divisions. We must learn to stand together with each other and our male allies.

But the more of us who are engaged in the movement, with diverse alliances represented, the more women will innovate solutions to tough problems. We need a diverse group of women whose priorities range from generating new jobs, to passing greener policies, to providing better access to health care and improving education. We need all kinds of women to reflect the issues that are important to people.

TWHP believes in building bridges among individuals and among groups. As a nonpartisan organization, we believe that engaging, inspiring, informing and equipping the most diverse group of women will help us accelerate social and economic progress. That's not always the easiest thing to talk about in the progressive community. But if we are to truly embody the values we say we hold as an organization—most importantly, diversity and authentic leadership—then

we will encourage a robust dialogue among skilled, accountable, inclusive women leaders who will come up with the best, most innovative solutions of our time.

Rahim Kanani: Lastly, how long do we have before the United States swears in its first female president?

Tiffany Dufu: It can happen in 2016. The question we're asking at TWHP is different, though, and it's one that Nicholas Kristof addressed in his blog on International Women's Day earlier this week, and one I've mentioned earlier in this conversation. When will we have enough women that they are normalized as leaders? Because when we do have a woman in the White House, it should be her agenda that we address, not her gender.

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