

Speaker: Women still unequal in U.S. work force

Former Clinton administration official delivers keynote address at annual Women's Recognition Luncheon

By Holly Bowen Daily News staff writer

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Maria Echaveste said women make up half the U.S. work force but are still largely expected to choose between career and family.

Echaveste, 55, was deputy chief of staff to former President Bill Clinton and is a lecturer in residence at the University of California-Berkeley School of Law.

She delivered the keynote address, titled "Women: Changing the Family, the Neighborhood, the Country, the World!," Wednesday afternoon at Washington State University's annual Women's Recognition Luncheon.

Echaveste used her own family as an example of the differences between the roles of men and women in society, even in an age when society is "rushing to become color-blind."

She said she handles child-care arrangements even when traveling and said it's difficult to explain to her two young children why she's always on an airplane or away from home while working.

"Many of us work because we want to work, because we have careers, because we've chosen a path," she said of women feeling pressured to choose between jobs and family. "Many of us work because you can't provide for your family the opportunities and the kind of life that you want without two incomes."

She said the United States needs to strike a balance because women must work to earn a living but aren't necessarily receiving support for their families.

She said many other countries, especially in Europe, have paid maternity leave and other family benefits for working parents, but people in the United States are mostly on their own.

"That leads us to this individualistic model or ideology or framework that allows us as a country basically to say to families across the nation, 'You decided to have children, so that's your issue,' " she said.

Echaveste said that despite the prevalence of women in the workplace, many government agencies, corporations and institutions haven't adapted to that evolution in society.

"Half of the (Bachelor of Arts) and graduate degrees in this country are earned by women," she said. "But they still earn 77 cents on the dollar. Law firm women partners, who you think would earn (more), earn 68 cents on the dollar."

She said higher-paying jobs are available in science and technology, but institutions aren't doing enough to encourage women to enter those fields.

Echaveste said people shouldn't deny their backgrounds or culture for the sake of equality, however.

"You make better decisions when it's not the same group of people with the same experiences," she said.

She said she speaks to many young women who ask how they can get a powerful job like she had in the White House.

"I find myself saying to them, you think hard and fast about the choices you make," she said. "But let it be your choice."

Echaveste's speech was followed by the presentation of WSU's annual women's awards. Director of Payroll Services Alice Smethurst and doctoral student Bernadette Menke were named Women of Distinction, and psychology Professor Rebecca Craft received the WSU Woman of the Year award.

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