

Wonder Women: S*x, Power, and the Quest for Perfection

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Featuring Debora Spar, President of Barnard College



On Thursday, June 19th, Debora L. Spar, the current president of renowned Barnard College and previously one of the youngest female professors to be tenured at Harvard Business School, joined FWA Members and guests to talk about her new book titled, “Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and The Quest for Perfection.”

With the event being hosted by RBC Capital Markets, a President’s Circle Sponsor, many topics were brought to light during the lively discussion including the fact that while it has been nearly 50 years since the Equal Pay Act was established, many women are still living in a “man’s world.” Some interesting statistics highlighted during the presentation include:

- Female job applicants with children are 44 percent less likely to be hired for a job than are childless women with similar qualifications
- Fathers, by contrast, are 19 percent more likely to be hired than are comparably qualified men without children
- During the economic downturn of 2008-2009, 19 percent of senior-level women lost their jobs, compared with only six percent of senior-level men.

President Spar was on hand to delve into in the ways in which women’s lives have, and have not, changed over the past forty years. According to President Spar, “The challenges that confront women now are more subtle than those of the past, harder to recognize and thus to remove. My generation made a mistake. We took the struggles and the victories of feminism and interpreted them somehow as a pathway to personal perfection. They are problems that come from the nearly impossible standards of perfection that women have somehow rushed to embrace.”

Raleigh Mayer, co-chair of the Professional Development Committee added, “Revealing that her original working title for “Wonder Women” was “Confessions of a Reluctant Feminist,” Spar noted two things: First, the concept of feminism is often misunderstood and tough to market these days, and, second, that the word ‘sex’ sells.”



Ms. Spar’s book Wonder Women places the new and increasingly complex challenges countless women are currently facing in addition to sparking a debate in regards to the undeniable strides

forward women have made over this time period, and what other steps are key for women to see true equality for the long term as well. “Any approach to women’s issues must start from the reality of women’s lives rather than from an idealized or ideological view of who they should be and what they should want. If women are ever to solve the ‘women’s problem’, they need to acknowledge that they can’t, and shouldn’t do it alone. Men must help, Ms. Spar commented.”

Looking at Ms. Spar’s background, in spite of the fact that she never considered herself a feminist, she did always believe that young women could raise their families while simultaneously remaining on a successful career path. “We thought we could just glide into the new era of equality, with babies, board seats, and husbands in tow,” she writes. “We were wrong.”

A strong believer of the sheer importance of women’s education and leadership, Ms. Spar is credited for spearheading initiatives that include the Athena Center for Leadership Studies, an interdisciplinary center devoted to the theory and practice of women’s leadership, and Barnard’s Global Symposium series, an annual gathering of high-profile and accomplished female leaders held each year in a different region of the world. She is a graduate of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, and received her doctorate in government from Harvard. Ms. Spar is a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences and currently serves as a trustee of the Nightingale-Bamford School and a director of Goldman Sachs as well. Prior to coming to Barnard, she was the Spangler Family Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.

Additionally, she has written many books including Ruling the Waves: Cycles of

Invention, Chaos, and Wealth from the Compass to the Internet (2001); The Baby Business: How Money, Science, and Politics Drive the Commerce of Conception (2006); and most recently Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection. President Spar is married to Miltos Catomeris and they are the parents of three children.

As the event came to a close, every registrant received a copy of Ms. Spar’s new book and she was on hand to personalize it; an added bonus of attendance. Peggy Decker, co-chair of the Professional Development Committee said, “What a fascinating discussion and historical review of where women have been since the introduction of the women’s movement. She

created the awareness for us that we all must play a role, individually and collectively – and by both men and women – to continue our commitment to this important transformation... especially for the next generations.”

Special thanks to renowned author Deborah Spar, FWA’s Professional Development Committee and Co-chairs Peggy Decker and Raleigh Mayer, with special recognition to Simone Vinocour of the RWomen’s Network, RBC.

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Members and guest enjoy the book signing of Debora's latest book.