

# LINE ON LIFE

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## "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" \*

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On September 19-21, the American Psychological Association (APA) hosted the second Women's Health Conference. The keynote speaker was U.S. Representative Patricia Schroeder (D-Colorado). She is a 24-year veteran of Congress, who plans to retire at the end of this session.

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*"You've come a long way, baby..."*

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Schroeder typically starts her speech by showing her audience an old Chinese shoe. Bought in an antique store in China, the shoe fits in the palm of her hand. For Schroeder, it symbolizes the pain women felt, when their feet were so tightly bound, they could not grow. Wearing such shoes forced women to stay close to home – both physically and mentally.

*"Half way through the century, [men] finally stopped binding women's feet. But today our minds are still bound. When are we going to get those unwrapped? Are we going to get those unwrapped at the end of the century, or are we going to be grateful for crumbs and not get our full due?"*

Schroeder urged women to be proud of their past accomplishments, but to strive for further changes. Women still need to secure better health care and equal status in our society.

She compares the 104th session of Congress to "a raging sea of testosterone." Schroeder says they started by "gutting" the Congressional Women's Caucus.

*"Now we have no staffs, no offices or phones on the Hill. Newt Gingrich has crippled us, as well as the Black and Hispanic caucuses.... Now we don't even see our Republican sisters."*

Schroeder struggled to pass the Violence Against Women Act. It authorized \$1.67 billion over six years to fund various programs – women's shelters, a domestic abuse hotline, and rape education and prevention programs. However, many legislators and judges were hesitant to endorse this legislation. They thought that laws on domestic violence should be determined at the state level. According to Schroeder,

*"But the reason we needed a federal law was because nothing was getting done at the state level. We had one city where more women were killed by their policemen husbands than policemen were killed in the line of duty. That's probably not a place where you'd want to call 911 for help."*

Eventually the act passed. However, it only received 60% of the recommended funding. In the late 1980s, Schroeder introduced legislation to have the National Institutes of Health (NIH) include women in its studies. The studies on various habits – drinking coffee or using aspirin – had only been done using men as subjects. In Schroeder's words,

*"So I called the NIH and asked them, 'This applies to women too, right?' And they said no. Even breast cancer research had been done on men."*

Congress did pass a law requiring NIH to increase studies using women, and it was signed by President Clinton. Even so, Schroeder is not optimistic.

*"But watch out, they will take it away in seconds. Our goal was to know as much about women's health as we do about men's health by the year 2000, and we're not going to make it."*

There is still much to be done to get women's health care to match that of men. One example relates to heart disease. Half of women diagnosed with heart disease die within a year of their diagnosis. However, under the same conditions, only 30% of men die. Why is the death rate so much higher for women?

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*"...but you still have a long way to go."*

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As her last act in Congress, Schroeder will introduce a Safe Motherhood Act. It will mandate studies on maternal health to set standards on maternal health care. This was previously addressed by Congress in the 1920s. According to Schroeder,

*"When the suffragettes got the vote, one of the first things they focused on was maternal health. More women were dying of childbirth than anything else, yet the federal government was spending more on hog inoculations than women's health."*

Schroeder backs up the need for this legislation with some statistics.

- Of births – both vaginal and Cesarean section – 25% result in serious complications for the mother.
- Over age 40, pregnant women are nine times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications.
- For women over 40, the unintended pregnancy rate is 77%. For teens, it's 82%.

To gain the equality they desire, women need to become more vocal in politics. If women – or any other minority – don't push for changes, those changes will never occur. This is best summarized by Schroeder.

*"In the past, they said, 'We created this for you, now fit into it.' As we move to the next millennium, we have a chance to create the culture for the first time."*

*"Think of all the things we can do now that we couldn't do 100 years ago, and think how hard it was to open those doors to get us in there. Shouldn't we be energized by how far we have come? You can't wring your hands and roll up your blouse sleeves at the same time."*

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\* Adapted from Sara Martin's "Women must fight to maintain gains," *The APA Monitor*, November, 1996, page 40.