

Pete Crowley

On Equal Opportunity and Gender Elimination

Equal opportunity still has strides to make in the world's first real modern democracy despite having achieved, in many arenas of life, what women's rights advocates one hundred years ago could only have dreamt. On the other hand, in Congress and in top tier corporate jobs, men still hold an overwhelming majority of positions. But what is at stake? What is the goal? Mandated equality between the sexes doled out from the top? Or aren't we simply "all owed the greatest measure of liberty compatible with a like liberty for all"; in other words an "equal liberty" (Fried, 59)? Through equal opportunity rather than the elimination of gender, which may possess certain inherent qualities, justice will be served.

There are a number of reasons to believe that men and women are inherently different. Beyond the somewhat questionable stereotypical ideas of women being more emotional and prone to being ruled by their passions, and men being stoical and rational, we must remember history. Not merely recent history, that has until recently barred women from important jobs, but to our evolutionary history as a species. Though feminists often decry it, our hunter-gatherer ancestors usually had separate tasks (of equal importance). Men went out to hunt and to war, while women stayed nearby the home, gathering food and keeping an eye on the children.

If one accepts this theory, they may wonder how gender roles ten of thousands of years ago relates to today. Our genes are adapted to conditions 50,000 years ago. For example, because in our pre-historic life we feared "large and aggressive animals that might attack and devour us", every year we "spend millions of dollars to sit in darkened rooms and observe other people being stalked, chased, and eaten" (Smith, 189) – the excitement of reliving our past through cinematic surrogating! The same situation may well apply to gender roles; they may be harder to decode than feminist Susan Moller Okin suggests.

Two years ago, the president of one of the world's most prestigious universities, Harvard University, was forced to resign for suggesting that

innate differences may belie the fact that there are fewer women in the math and science fields (Boston Globe). Did prehistoric hunting by males, from an evolutionary standpoint, favor their acuity of depth perception? By making them hunt more successfully they were more likely, in turn, to reproduce. Has depth perception of pre-historic hunters resulted in innate differences, as former Harvard president, Lawrence Summers, suggested? These are controversial questions, yet they are ones that should be asked and debated openly.

Though today women have gained more opportunities than in times past, society's fundamental building block, the family, "a place where we (children) can learn to be just" (Feminist Philosophies, 317) has become an impediment to women's growth. Beyond the buying of different toys for girls and boys, the family is a place where children are subtly indoctrinated with their parents' culture. If the mother is around more and the father is working a 40 hour work week, the child will continue to see the mother's primary role as the nurturer and perhaps little more. In a certain respect, varying from individual family to family, things have not changed that greatly.

Professional women may also face an uphill battle. While subsidized daycare allowing women to participate in the work world is a good thing (Feminist Philosophies, 316) one must keep in mind that consequential competitive stress may have unintended consequences. Men have historically been the bread winner and in the 20th century have held most of the high stress jobs. The parallel between this and men having more heart attacks and at younger ages than women are likely no coincidence. As women get jobs higher up in corporations and one stands on the precipice of potential presidency, heart disease may subsequently increase in women.

A study of the new working environment, with both men and women competing, published in Internal Journal of Behavioral Medicine, focused on the men and women's cardiovascular reactivity to competitive stress by examining blood pressure, heart rates, and self stress assessments (all indicators of cardiovascular health). Though men and women had similar results during the experiment, when men were told they lost to women, they're blood pressure and stress levels increased; while when

women were told they beat men, they're blood pressure and stress levels increased. This may show that because of historical and evolutionary reasons, in the modern world men need to learn how to lose (especially to a woman) and women may have to overcome their fear of success (especially when successfully competing against a man).

Biologically speaking, there is an innate difference between men and women that will prevent gender elimination: pregnancy. Such an arduous and important task, in prehistoric times, was one of the reasons that disbarred women from hunting. Recent studies have suggested that the extinction of the Neanderthals may be due to the fact that Neanderthal women hunted. Because they were more prone than a Homo sapiens woman to get "stomped, gored, and worse with appalling frequency" (Boston Globe), they were unable to reproduce to sustain their species.

Though today in the West women have an average of one or two children and the competitive work world is not a literal hunting ground, pregnancy is less of an issue. The last month or so of pregnancy, women usually take off including a period of time following birth. While men should get an equal amount of post-birth time off to nurture their child (Feminist Philosophies, 324), in the real world, they often do not. Is there still a subconscious fear in society to keep women safe and protected so that our species will subsist? Or do men feel inclined to remain hunting, so to speak, and leave the woman behind to nurture?

While gender elimination may take another 50,000 years – for then we will have genetically adapted to the present conditions, though then we'll also face a new array of unknown conditions - equal opportunity independent of gender, race, or sexual preference should be the norm. As Susan Moller Okin alluded to, this should begin in the family so that children aren't inculcated with patriarchal visions of how life should be. While gender cannot be eliminated, the country should work towards the goal of ending inequality of opportunity; and move, as Charles Fried said, toward an "equal liberty" (59) that would effectively end a fading patriarchy.

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/1

Work Cited

Clayton, Claudia J., Holt-Lunstad, Julianne, Uchino, Bert N. "Gender Differences in Cardiovascular Reactivity to Competitive Stress: The Impact of Gender of Competitor and Competition Outcome." *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*. Vol. 8 Issue 2 (June 2001). 25 November 2007
<http://corvette.salemstate.edu:2561/ehost/detail?vid=3&hid=120&sid=40964bdc-31c8-4c3a-906c-e3899abc975a%40sessionmgr104>.

Fried, Charles. *Modern Liberty and the Limits of Government*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

Kournay, Janet A., Sterba, James P., Tong, Rosemarie, eds. *Feminist Philosophies*. 2nd Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 1999.

Smith, David Livingstone. *A Most Dangerous Animal*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2007.

"Stone Age Feminism?" *The Boston Globe*. Nov. 10, 2007. 10 Dec 2007.
http://www.boston.com/news/science/articles/2007/11/10/stone_age_feminism/.