

"Why Can a Woman Be More Like a Man?"

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One of the funniest songs in My Fair Lady is when two men, a professor and his best friend deplore the situation that women are not like men. Men are so easy, so uncomplicated, so decent. "Why can a woman be more like a man?" they ask.

George Bernard Shaw was making fun of them, of course, because at the end, the misogynistic professor finds that he cannot do without the woman that he considered at first a scientific experiment and learned how very special she was. No, she was not like him. She was better, but she loved him anyway.

A Google engineer stirred up a hornet's nest when he claimed to know why a woman cannot be more like a man: emotions. His observations were not scientific, nor should anyone have taken them seriously. But the issue of women's place in a world where men have ruled for 10,000 years is not yet resolved.

One of the most important revolutions of our century (and one primarily due to Western civilization) was the political emancipation of women. The scientific invention that made this emancipation possible was contraceptives, which freed women for the first time from their biological imperative: involuntary pregnancy. Pregnancy has largely become voluntary for modern women, and with emancipation from endless childbearing, women are free to do other things. And they have indeed, done other things, from participating in all modern professions (many with distinction) to actually presiding over countries. Israel, Great Britain, Germany, Norway, and Iceland, have done very well with women presidents or prime ministers. So far, although we came close, a woman has not yet managed to rise to the level of president, although every other avenue of power is open to them.

However, the feminist revolution, which I greatly admire, does have some unanswered dilemmas. Women are not the same as men. Women have wombs and can give birth, and, in general, women are not as physically powerful as men. In ancient Greece, some men considered women "defective men" who were obviously lacking in men's sexual equipment. Perhaps they got it wrong: perhaps men are defective women, lacking the ability to bring forth life. At any rate, one ancient Greek, Plato, speculated that women could be as intelligent and accomplished as men if they were given educations. That was a revolutionary idea indeed.

The problem that modern societies face is that if men and women are the same, who will rear children? Until we follow Aldous Huxley's ironic suggestion that all children be created in test tubes and that motherhood be eliminated altogether, we have not yet solved the societal problem of childbirth and child rearing. For the moment, stressed out women are trying to do it all: get an exacting education, enter a vital profession, have a child or two, and then try to do it all.

Despite the stress of being a modern, accomplished woman, I certainly would not trade my position with that of, say, tribal Afghanistan, where the very idea of female existence is a nuisance to men. In that culture, women do not even possess their own name; they are always referred to as the wife of their husband (master) or the mother of their son. They exist only because they are a wife or a mother, and if it were possible for Pashtoon tribal men to bear children without needing a woman, they would do it.

Under Taliban rule, women were ordered to wear rubber-soled shoes (so that their steps could not be heard); forbidden to laugh or sing in public (punishable by lashing); and have no recourse against domestic battery or being used as an involuntary bride (slave) to resolve a feud of two rival families.

The most recent horror (again, a Pashtoon village in Pakistan) was a verdict by village elders to have a girl gang-raped to punish a boy who had raped a rival family's daughter. The gang-raped girl was the offender's sister.

How amazing it is that women are so different from the men who owned them. Few of them ever considered poisoning their tormenters. Too bad.

684 words

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