

How "Equal" are Women?

By Amram Scheinfeld



While women argue among themselves about legislation for their rights, Nature stands pat on some legislating she did a long time ago

AT THE last Congressional elections, fifty-three per cent of the votes were cast by women. At the next election, the women are certain to have a much larger majority. Even when all our soldiers come home, women in the United States will be able to outvote men. They can get anything they want for themselves—if they can get together on what they want.

That's why our worried lawmakers, facing the problem of what to do about the proposed Equal Rights Amendment now before Congress, are asking, "Just what do women want?"

That question has a lot of angles.

In America today, the old boundaries between the sexes are constantly being broken down, and the importance of biological sex differences is being considerably diminished. Women—even mothers—have vastly more opportunity than ever before to participate in the outside world of work that once belonged exclusively to men. More and more women are becoming their own providers and protectors; they are choosing to earn their own livings.

This new group of women has every right to challenge the outmoded laws, rules and codes of conduct that stand in the way of their happiness—which is exactly what they are doing. But when they ask for "full equality," the questions arise: How far can this be achieved through legal action? And, do *all* want it?

First is the fact that most of the discriminations or "inequalities" against which women protest are in jobs, professions, or in the social world, and cannot easily be attacked or overcome through legislation.

Next, the attitude of individual women toward "equality" with men, or their desire for it, may depend largely on whether their chief interest is in a job or career, or in their home.

The best illustration of how women are divided among themselves is furnished by their reaction to the Equal Rights Amendment. As originally proposed, it read:

OldMagazineArticles.com

How Equal Are Women?

"Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States." A great many professional and "career" women, such as Congresswoman Clare Luce, Author Pearl Buck and Educators Florence Sabin and Mary E. Woolley, saw in the act a welcome end to all existing statutes which deny their sex equal rights with men in ownership and management of property, authority over children, election to certain offices, service on juries, etc.

But a vociferous "No!" came from hosts of other women, led by Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt (who earlier did much to put over the Suffrage Amendment), and many heads of women's unions, clubs and church organizations. They pointed out that a sweeping amendment, while wiping out laws obnoxious to women, would also wipe out much hard-won protective legislation for women workers, and many family and social laws which are eminently desirable.

Clearly the amendment, as proposed, didn't have a ghost of a chance. Back it went for alterations, and its sponsors are now working hard to frame a more acceptable measure. They're discovering, however, that some of our best legal minds can't agree on exactly what is meant by "equality of rights under the law for both sexes."

This isn't surprising, in view of the fact that old Mother Nature has done considerable prior legislating of her own with regard to different rights for women and men, and that so long as her laws stand in the way, "complete equality" for the two sexes can never be achieved—or even be clearly defined. For example:

Nature has made women less suited than men for a great many activities where physical strength, speed, endurance and body toughness are essentials, or where overstrain or injury might threaten a woman's childbearing capacities. So special protective measures are required for women workers, and a steady stream of bulletins from government agencies keeps reminding employers of this.

Nature causes girls to mature from two to three years earlier than boys. Laws everywhere recognize this by permitting young women to marry earlier.

The Burden of the Sex

The biological brunt of parenthood has been placed on women. So, to even up matters, our laws place on men heavier social and financial responsibility to provide for their wives and children.

Again, in time of war, the physical differences must be recognized in draft laws calling up men, and not women, for actual combat duty.

Whether these natural discriminations add up to favoritism toward one sex or the other can never be established. Nevertheless, it is obvious that some of our legal statutes go beyond the natural factors and take a one-sided turn. Nature has nothing to do with denying women the right to serve on juries or to hold certain offices or positions of trust, or with continuing to treat them as "perpetual minors," which is the practice in some states.

These inequalities might well be corrected by a federal amendment, whereas other discriminations, in laws governing marriage, family relationships, divorce,

How Equal Are Women?

property settlements, etc., could be adjusted quite easily by action in the separate states.

But what must be recognized is that many of the laws which discriminate unfairly against women are merely outgrowths of our social attitudes, of our everyday thinking and practices, and it is these which are responsible for the major inequalities to which women object. Only by much education and many changes in our social system can we overcome such discriminations as that of paying women lower wages for equal work, putting obstacles in the way of their entering or advancing in certain professions and skilled trades, or treating them differently from men in various other respects.

But even if we should succeed in outlawing these discriminations, there will always be major inequalities in our social or economic system that can never be entirely abolished, for again we come up against Nature's edicts.

Take the "double standard" for example, a sore point with many women. The biological dangers and consequences of "running around loose" have been made much greater for females, whether they be domestic pets or women; the effects of a woman's misbehavior, excesses, or bad habits may be communicated physically to her children; hence, the rules for feminine conduct will always have to be stricter.

It's the Man Who Pays

On the other hand, if the double standard gives men more freedom in behavior, it holds them more accountable for their misdeeds. Formal punishment for crimes is generally more severe for the male than for the female offender. Further, society places upon men a great obligation to "make good" or maintain their status. This is one important reason why suicides average four to five times as high among men.

Finally, at the other end of the double standard, there are many social rules which today favor women—the custom of the man's paying the check, of seeing a woman friend home after a date, of defending her when occasion demands, of letting women get into lifeboats first and of showing them deference in other ways. Plainly, etiquette and equal rights don't mix.

Our basic rules of etiquette for the two sexes are not, as some think, purely artificial. Chivalry of the male toward the female was not invented by man. It was established by Nature. Among almost all lower animals, where males will readily attack one another or fight to the death, they instinctively refrain from any aggression toward the female. If there is an intersex fight, it is almost invariably the female who starts it; and this applies also to human beings.

There is no evidence that men have ever made it a practice to use physical violence against their womenfolk. In man's primary stages, the basic animal instincts would have restrained him from beating up his female. Later, with increasing social awareness, he would have learned that harming her would boomerang against his own interests. For, the more elementary the society, the more indispensable are a woman's services.

In fact, a black eye on a woman, bestowed by her husband or boy friend, is a badge of the "higher civilizations." Only

How Equal Are Women?

among the so-called "advanced" cultures, where women are easy to get and men aren't forced to depend upon individual women directly, is wife-beating a common sport.

On a larger scale, the whole idea of a constant "Battle of the Sexes" is in many respects a myth. Nature designed the sexes not to oppose each other, but to complement each other. Most of the conflicts in our modern world between women and men are largely due to the breakdown of rigid barriers that hitherto separated them in their activities and responsibilities. But women still have to do the childbearing, men still have to be the warriors and do the very heavy labor, and various sex differences must continue to stand in the way of there ever being a complete sameness in their jobs, obligations and rules of conduct.

There is no reason why this should be resented or even regretted by women. One of our biggest present-day fallacies has been that happiness and success for a woman lie in her being as much like a man as possible. The resulting tragic dramas in many cases, retold every day in the dim-lit chambers of psychoanalysts, might well be called, *The Imitation of Man*. Instead of striving for the fullest expression of their own special abilities, capacities and qualities, all too many women have thought that what was most masculine was therefore also most desirable for them.

It isn't hard to see how this attitude originated. Constant harping on the greater importance of everything that men do has left many women with the feeling that being successful as women isn't enough. A woman will say apologetically, "I am *only* a mother," or "I am *only* a wife," as if being a good mother and wife meant nothing. Too many women seek to play men's games by men's rules, while ignoring the importance of their own jobs and contributions.

Men Can't Be Mothers

For women to want to be able to do everything that men do, in the way that men do it, is not only futile and foolish, but unnatural. Men can't do everything that women can do. Most important of all, they can't have babies and launch them safely into the world. In fact, this has been given as a reason why men feel impelled to turn their drives so strongly in other directions.

As Doctor Karen Horney, the psychoanalyst, has put it: "Is not the tremendous strength in men of the impulse to creative work in every field precisely due to their feeling of playing a relatively small part in the creation of living beings?"

Motherhood is not an infliction, a burden or a discriminatory tax levied on women by Nature. You won't get this reaction from the women who long for children and can't have them, who every day throng doctors' offices, desperately seeking means to make their dreams come true. Nor is motherhood just a biological accident. Having a baby may be, but preparing for it properly, and carrying through the successful rearing of children and running a home constitute a profession—one which requires an infinite amount of aptitude, wisdom and understanding, plus training. Good wives and mothers don't just happen. They never did.

How Equal Are Women?

But whatever the situation may have been in the past, woman's place is no longer in the home—if by "home" you mean "house." Today the walls of the home have been broken down. Where once there were a thousand and one things inside the house which a woman had to know, today there are thousands of things outside which she must know, to be a successful wife, mother and woman.

The boundaries of the modern home are almost as far-flung as the wide world. To pursue home activities properly, women's interests must spread into the factories, shops, mills and farms which supply and provision her family; into the clinics, the social centers, the schools, the churches, the theaters, the courts, the newspapers, the legislative chambers, into every profession and activity which may in any way influence the lives of her children, her husband and herself.

That puts no limit on women's jobs, nor should there be any. Freedom and democracy demand that no profession or career which a woman wants to pursue, and can pursue successfully, be closed to her by reason of her sex. And if a woman can be happiest in a career that excludes marriage and motherhood (as is not infrequently the case, psychiatrists tell us) there is every reason to believe that she can contribute most to society that way.

Yet the truth remains that the big majority of women are quite content to be "just wives and mothers," in the large sense, given any sort of fair break at these roles. Hard as is the lot of many housewives, there's often much more variety and interest in their own routines than in the daily grinds of their husbands, and plenty to challenge their maximum abilities. Any man who has ever tried to take over his wife's job has learned how complex and demanding her duties really are.

One of the chief reasons men are inclined to discount feminine intelligence is that they can't possibly measure, by their own practical standards, the special qualities of mind which women must develop—the social intelligence which women are likely to possess in a higher degree than men. In innumerable ways, any average woman normally thinks straighter than men. Often, the very kind of intelligence needed to make a woman most successful as a woman may be opposed to the phases of intelligence required for great achievement in men's fields.

And if men have always blandly assumed that, in the sum total, they are more intelligent than women, science has stuck a lot of pins into their egos.

No intelligence test yet devised offers any proof that a woman's mental powers are inferior or, for that matter, superior or precisely equal to man's. Nor can any test ever be devised which will measure the I. Q.'s of both sexes equally and fairly by the same yardstick.

In view of their physical differences, women and men can never be quite the same in their thinking, behavior, capacities or contributions. And we should be glad this is so. You don't need a psychologist to tell you that a child reared by two parents usually has an advantage over the one reared by only a single parent. Carrying this principle further, the world can be enriched by our having two active strains of thought, emotion and behavior contributed by both sexes, instead of either a cultural stream dominated by

How Equal Are Women?

masculine contributions, as in the past, or one without any sex differences, as some extreme feminists advocate for the future. one without any sex differences, as some extreme feminists advocate for the future.

Woman's Place in the World

What most women are best prepared to offer, and do offer, are not tangible commodities or pay checks, but human services and qualities. These cannot be measured easily in terms of dollars and cents. By the nature of things, women's contributions will always be less spectacular, and given less credit on history's pages (especially so long as history is written by men). But if we are to have a better world, we'll have to have more than sensational exploits, and we'll have to do a lot more than swell the production of machines and gadgets, foodstuffs and commodities. We'll also have to people the world with children who can produce a better human society. That will be chiefly women's job.

There will be and should be more and more equality in the influence women exert on men in public life and world affairs. But men, for the most part, will always build the houses, and women will make the homes. If women use their full capacities to endow those homes of the future with more warmth, sympathy and understanding, the children that grow out of them will be a lot abler and happier human beings than most of us are today.

THE END