Feminist Perspectives

We Haven't Reached Post-Feminism Yet

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I just read the Spring column by Sarah Scanlon, who dates the feminist movement to 1960. I felt so old, so Second Wave, and so happy about how much has been accomplished since I first encountered Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique in 1963, my senior year at Knox College. I have much for which to thank my little circle of progressive friends, who encouraged me at that time to think beyond my liberal concerns about race and class to see the impact of the 1960s version of a gender system that Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Mott, and Susan B. Anthony had so eloquently described in the mid-1800s. Their movement didn't get the vote for women in the United States until 1920. My mother was seven.

At Knox we saw this gender system up close in the gendered college rules that allowed men to roam free while ‘girls’ had to sign into their dormitories by eleven o’clock at night. One of my best friends, class valedictorian, a woman who later became one of Anita Hill’s lawyers, a law professor, and author of books on sex discrimination and the law, was informed that she would not be allowed to graduate because she had accrued too many “late minutes” after the eleven o’clock curfew. The college eventually backed off, but she and my other women friends recognized that this relatively trivial rule was situated within the wider context of a gender system that encouraged men to roam free among all of the occupations, while “girls” were to aspire to clerical work, or an “MRS” Degree, or nursing, or elementary education. A study of children’s books around that time found that the boys in the books were engaged in 172 occupations, girls only 13, including princess and mother. There were separate help-wanted columns: Men Wanted. Women Wanted. “Stewardesses” were fired if they got married or pregnant. “Ms.” was not part of our vocabulary, nor was “date rape,” or “sexual harassment.” Domestic violence was believed to be rare and a personal problem. There were no shelters or Rape Crisis Hotlines. In the United States, fulltime working women earned 59 cents for every dollar a fulltime working man earned. Many universities and colleges in the United States, including Penn State, had quotas on the number of women they would accept. Women’s studies didn’t exist.

Now, I’m a retired professor of women’s studies. Penn State’s Department of Women’s Studies offers bachelor’s, Master’s and Ph.D. degrees. Women are more than half of the undergraduates in the United States. I volunteer in one of over 1500 shelters across the United States. ‘Flight attendants’ can continue to work when they are married or pregnant. In the United States, fulltime working women earn 77 cents for every dollar a fulltime working man earns. The United States has just moved up from 31st to 19th in the Global Gender Gap Report. I suppose that’s good news, but it certainly could be better. Canada is number 20. Things are indeed much better, but everything is not good on the gender front.

In Canada, only 22% of members of Parliament are women. In the U.S., the figure is 17%. We still haven’t had a woman President. Canada’s got us on this one with Kim Campbell, who served as Prime Minister for 132 days in 1993. Three percent of the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are women. In the U.S., over 1000 women are murdered by their intimate partners every year. In 2008 there were over 89,000 reported rapes, probably over 350,000 unreported. Yale fraternity pledges march around chanting “No means Yes.” This summer soldiers raped over 500 women in villages in east Congo. Rape as a weapon of war is now part of our view of the way the world works. Worldwide, over 340,000 women die in childbirth every year; most of these are preventable.

I could go on, but let’s not forget the progress. Rape rates are down dramatically in the United States. Murders of women by intimate partners have been declining since 1994. Hillary Clinton made a good run. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Let’s rejoice about the progress but never lose sight of the work still to be done. In April 2008 Barack Obama quoted Dr. King and added, “It bends towards justice, but here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways puts our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice...”

My favorite definition of feminism is this: “You’re a feminist if you believe that (1) men are privileged relative to women, (2) that’s not right, and (3) you’re going to do something about it, even if it’s only in your personal life.” I have been fortunate to be able to devote myself to this goal in both my personal and professional lives. If each of us will do our part wherever and whenever we can, some day we may be able to talk about a post-feminist era—but not yet.