Growing Up Sexist

by Keith Hefner

I first heard about Women's Liberation in 1969, when I was in 9th grade. It was often used as the butt of a joke on the 11:00 news. Because I was a man, and because of the media's portrayal of women's liberation, I also took it as a joke, and something to joke about.

In 10th grade I first heard the term "sexism." I wasn't sure what it meant, so I asked someone who I thought would know. She told me sexism was to women as racism was to Blacks. I was shocked. I was against racism. Could those horrible attitudes exist in another form, directed against women? I didn't think so. But something inside me didn't let me joke about "Women's Lib" any more.

Shortly after I discovered sexism, I tried to figure out if I was sexist. As far as I knew I didn't treat women any differently than men, or at least no differently than I thought they should be treated. I called women "chicks," sure, but they liked it. I never consciously tried to oppress women. Therefore, I couldn't be very sexist. Maybe I wasn't sexist at all. That's what I thought. Actually, I didn't even know what sexism really was. It took a long time, and a lot of experience and criticism before I learned how thoroughly sexism had infected my thinking and actions.

SEXIST AT 9

Limited space prevents me from going into my past in any detail, so I'm just going to look at the "tip of the iceberg," from my elementary and secondary school experiences. That will show how strongly male chauvinism developed, even by age 9, and the forms it took as I grew older.

In my fourth grade class, students ran the 600, a race twice around the playground. Boys and girls were about the same size at that age, and could compete on an equal basis in athletics in areas where we'd had approximately the same experience.

We ran the 600 in separate gym classes, and compared times when we got back. It turned out that some girls ran faster than the fastest boy. However, since the race hadn't been run together, it was just the girls' word against the boys'. We argued about who was faster. Then one of the boys came up with the idea that the girls' 600 was shorter than ours. We were so adamant, and the girls so intimidated, that our explanation was accepted as fact. From then on, my class *believed* that the girls ran a "shorter 600."

Sexism showed up in academics too. When a boy did consistently well in class, he was at least grudgingly admired by other students, even if he wasn't good at sports, or socially active. With girls it was just the opposite. A female student who excelled was derided by the boys. "Sure she gets good grades. Anyone could if they studied twenty-four hours a day."

The message was clear. Girls weren't supposed to be achievers. They were pressured to conform to the stereotype of being weak and empty-headed. Most girls fell victim to the pressure. Looking back I can see that between first and sixth grade there was a pronounced slacking off by the girls in every area where they had to compete with boys — sports, academics, leadership and social life.

In junior high the trend was intensified. The cute, dumb-broad image was aspired to by most women, and rewarded by the men. Instead of competing against men, women began competing against each other for the attention of men. That was destructive to women's friendships for obvious reasons. It also took a psychological toll. Women were taught that they needed a man, but not what to expect when they got one.

WHAT MEN THINK

Men don't take close, personal relationships as seriously as women do. The old saying "Women are like busses, if you miss one, there will be another along in 15 minutes," is a good illustration of how men are taught to think.

That attitude often results in a frivolous approach to relationships. Women are supposed to meet men's needs. If a woman isn't meeting a man's needs, he doesn't think twice about breaking up with her. But most men never realize that the woman has needs they should be fulfilling.

In junior high I went with a woman for seven months. During that time it never occured to me that I had any responsibilities in the relationship. If she wanted intimate conversation, or genuine affection, she had to drag it out of me. I didn't think anything was strange about that kind of situation. I was socialized to act strong, analytical, and unemotional. And I thought her only function was to give me emotional support and loving companionship.

Most women have direct experiences with men who don't or won't understand their feelings. But few women realize that men are on their *best* behavior when around women. When it's "just the boys," most talk about women is, er . . . uncomplimentary.

In my entire life I have rarely heard a man comment on a personal quality he liked in a woman, other than "she's nice." These are the same men who can give 15 minute locker

Sex role stereotyping starts early: Boys learn that they're the King, and women are their Queens.

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