

Civic Minded March 2017

I grew up in a generation that was never told, at least I wasn't ever told, that I couldn't do something because it was a "man's job." I think I often take for granted the groundwork laid by the generations of women before me that has allowed me to have this selfish naivety that women today don't experience sexual discrimination in the workplace.

On March 8th, International (Working) Women's Day, Women on Wednesdays was held at Assisi Heights and featured a panel of local women who spoke about their experiences being employed in a role that has previously been thought of as a "man's job." I was pleased to hear that in general most of these women have had positive experiences in their non-traditional roles. As with all things, there are always a few "bad eggs" that caused trouble for them along the way, and unfortunately, often these are the ones that stick out in your memory the most. In general, it seems that gender discrimination is less than what has been experienced by previous generations of women interested in non-traditional roles.

One of the things that stuck out the most for me was the panelists' comments about the shared struggle of being caught between two worlds essentially. They aren't one of the good ole' boys club, but they also don't fit perfectly with the female staff, especially those in more "traditional" female roles. It was also stated more than once that perhaps women themselves are the greatest hindrance to women in non-traditional roles. Our own stereotypes about gender roles, women needing to be family focused, and what it means for a woman to have work-life balance versus a man to have work-life balance are holding us back. I personally, am conscious of the views of other women more so than the views of men. I find that the opinions of my female peers have a great influence on me, and I don't think I am alone in this. It increases all women's chances to succeed when we support each other.

The opportunity for success in a non-traditional role is there, but perhaps it requires a little more work and creativity to gain this success than would be required if a man was in the same role. Is this fair, maybe not, but can we still succeed, yes! Women have to often rely more on their communication skills and be more aware of their emotional responses in order to convey strength. Also, there is still a great imbalance of gender in many non-traditional roles at the management level. While there is still work to do to achieve this balance, it is encouraging to hear the successes of these women and the great diversity in skill and ideas they can bring to the table.

There was one thing that troubled me about the discussion of women in non-traditional roles, and it came up when the topic of men in non-traditional roles was addressed. While it is great for women that access to non-traditional roles is more widely accepted, why are we still so behind in our thoughts relating to men in non-traditional male roles? Do we, as a society, value masculinity that much more than femininity? This thought about masculinity and how we value certain traits in men carried on to the second session of the month held on March 29th titled *Our Experiences Raising a Son*.

For this second session of the month, we gathered back at The Civic where four local parents spoke about their experiences in raising boys. The panelists included a stay-at-home dad, a mixed race couple with four young boys, and a single-mother raising a pre-teen.

Our Experience's Raising a Son touched on several important topics relating to raising boys in our community. We discussed the nature vs. nurture aspect and whether boys are different because they are different biologically or they are different because society treats them differently than girls. Probably a little of both.

As one of the panelists was also a teacher, there were several new and forward thinking strategies discussed in regards to educating to the individual versus educating to the gender. We need to re-train adult influences such as parents, teachers, and coaches with new schools of thought regarding how people learn and developing strategies based on the individual versus gender stereotypes.

All of the presenters shared that while they were confident about what was being expressed to their children at home, it is when those outside influences start trickling in from school friends and from the media and elsewhere that they have seen changes in behavior in their sons. It is so important that children have support and guidance, so when they are met with challenges, they have the skills and knowledge to do the right thing and stand up against sexism and racism and injustice.

While the speakers were great and shared great insight, these aren't the parents I am worried about. These are the parents who are already forward thinking and accepting, and their children are good kids whose parents feel will be successful members of society. Their kids will know it is okay to be sensitive, are allowed to be vulnerable, and will feel safe in their life choices. Unfortunately, I think these types of parents, while growing in number, are not the majority.

I want to hear more from the other side. I know, it's hard to get people to speak at an event, especially about experiences of a personal nature, but we need to find a way to get more diverse opinions in the room.

While I appreciate that the panelists are raising kind, caring, and sensitive boys, I also want to hear from the booster club mom and the high school coach who are raising boys who like sports and competition and "traditional boy stuff." What are their struggles in teaching those boys who have competition engrained in their lives to also be sensitive and respectful?

I want to hear from a family whose boys grew up in the "streets" and around gangs and the struggles with raising those boys to be kind and expressive.

I want to hear from the LGBT community, both LGBT parents and those raising a LGBT child. What are their struggles in trying to break out of traditional gender stereotypes?

I want to hear from the rural community, an educator or a church leader perhaps, who can comment on the difference between sons raised in the city versus the country and the value of masculinity.

I want to hear from parents who raised their children in a different country or community and how that differs from how we raise our sons here in Rochester.

The bottom line is I want more. The big question is how. How do we get the message out to those who aren't hearing it elsewhere? I think it has to start with the audience. People of all beliefs, all backgrounds, and all points of view need to attend so we can get the most well-rounded and complete picture about the selected topics. Ideas for future topics are also suggested by the audience.

Women on Wednesdays has been such a great experience for me. It hasn't always been easy and I am often outnumbered in regards to my political and social views, but a forum of this nature doesn't work when a group of like-minded individuals gather to discuss things they all agree on. I plead with you and challenge you to attend. Even if you think it doesn't apply to you, even if you don't agree with every topic or opinion expressed – just come and participate. You don't have to speak, you don't have to present, you just have to come and listen. Come eat the free food and have a cocktail and listen.

You will have one more chance to attend this season with the final Women on Wednesdays session titled *Rape Culture is Real*, being held on May 31, 2017 at The Civic. I hope to see several new faces at this final forum of the season.