

4.22
doctrines
(sexism)
discrimination

Taking the floor

I am a professor in the College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. This year the South African Forum (a group that organises fact-finding missions for foreigners) invited my husband and me to visit your beautiful country. We welcomed the chance to see South Africa first-hand but after our short visit we've come away with fewer answers than we anticipated. The situation is far more complex than we had understood it to be.

What worries me most is that the focus on racism has deflected attention away from other concerns, like sexism. I have been most surprised at how women are treated here. The sexism I encountered would be considered socially unacceptable in America where there's a veneer of equality for women in social and business situations which makes women feel more human and less invisible. In South Africa I was introduced as my husband's wife, not as a person in my own right, even though we hold the same educational qualifications and teach in the same university department. There was an assumption that the men were the knowledgeable ones.

All questions were directed to the men in our group, despite the fact that the women were qualified to answer. Men were introduced by their titles and women by their first names. At one memorable dinner party no-one said a word to me until the dessert course when the man next to me turned and said, 'Now what can I ask you about? Oh yes, do you have any children?'

These are the fairly blatant examples of sexism, but what is perhaps more damaging is subtle sexism in the wider society. Equality for women is important not just for women themselves but for the society at large. Cuba is an example. I visited there in the mid-Eighties and found Cuban women in positions of power in agriculture, education and government. This was not the case before the revolution. But during the

social upheavals there was a massive brain drain as the Cuban intelligentsia left the country. This resulted in a major human resource problem and the government was forced to turn to women to help solve it. If they had discriminated against women they would have lost 50 per cent of the potential they had. Instead, by developing women, Cuba has managed to attain a 97 per cent literacy rate and has very good health care.

I believe South Africa can learn from this. A country shouldn't reach crisis point before it recognises the power of its women. That's why it is important that South African women lobby for themselves and their daughters now. To women who feel hampered by sexist attitudes, start in small ways and build up. Speak out against a sexist comment in your office or home. In this way you gain momentum and confidence. Once you start believing you have power, you will have it. We should learn to see ourselves as a powerful sisterhood, not as isolated individuals.

Power comes with collectivity. Women need to get together and talk about the mutual constraints they face. Women of different classes and skin colours should get together in their neighbourhoods to share experiences. They might find they have fewer dissimilarities than they imagine. Eventually, this kind of communication becomes more global and formal.

Women should also enlist men sympathetic to their cause and who will help them get meaningful roles in government. I grew up believing I could do anything I wanted to. I believe it was harder for me as a woman to become a professor. The battle has not left me unscarred, but it has not deterred me from wanting to minimise the struggle for my own daughter and for other women all over the world.

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Fair Lady June 5, 1991