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The Boundaries of the Role of Women in Political Life

by Erin Flynn

Each year, the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for Maine high school seniors. We feature here Erin Flynn's 2008 first place prize-winning essay. Students were asked to assess whether the ideals of the 19th Amendment, granting voting rights to women, have been fulfilled and to discuss the social and cultural barriers remaining for women to overcome in the pursuit of political power, long after legal barriers to equal participation have been removed.

American women have come a long way. The movement which began with the nineteenth amendment gave rise to Title 7, sex discrimination laws, the feminist movement, access to birth control, and *Roe v. Wade*. Through this movement, women have gained voice, influence, choice, and opportunity—advantages that would have been fantasy to women living 100 years ago. Not only do the opportunities exist, but they are being exploited. Data reveal that more women are graduating from college, going to professional schools, and getting licensed as professionals than ever before.

It is perplexing, therefore, to discover that it is still largely a man's world. Only a handful of women have the top positions in corporations, schools, and government. Moreover, the change "at the top" seems to be moving at a geologically slow

pace. This causes me to ask: where is the disconnect between training and top achievement? Despite great strides, something prevents women from realizing their full potential.

This is where my analysis moves from facts and statistics to personal observation. American women have more rights and opportunities than they have ever had before. Politically and legally, there is largely equality between the sexes. Women can go to the same colleges, receive the same education, and aspire to the same careers and jobs as their male counterparts. They can, and, indeed, they do. Overt discrimination and sexism are socially taboo. Like racial slurs, they are the pastime of vulgar oafs and buffoons.

At first glance, the playing field seems level. In most modern, middle class homes, American girls are raised with the same expectations as their brothers. I am a good example. I have three brothers and it is clear that we are all supposed to aspire to top schools, find fulfilling and lucrative careers, and be successful. My parents have never "cut me any slack" on grades or achievements because of my gender. With all of the opportunities available to me, I am expected to achieve everything that is expected of my brothers.

It all seems very positive and tenable until the model plays out in real life. The problem is painfully simple: as our new roles expanded, the old roles and expectations remained. This makes the quest for parity significantly more difficult.

In the 1970s, radical feminists thought everything would be better if barriers were torn down and women could get into the workplace on the same basis as men. They did a great job: we now have endless possibilities. Where they were unsuccessful was in modifying the old roles and how society views the role of current-day female. As a result, women face a Herculean balancing act.

Again, I look at my own experiences. My mother is a professional woman who attended an Ivy League college, graduate school, and had an amazing career on Wall Street. Through her, I saw many other professional women—women who attended top colleges and professional schools and entered the gender-neutral workforce. They were talented, ambitious, smart, and hard-working. Unfortunately, only about one in 20 stayed with their career into their forties.

As it turned out, they became wives and mothers in addition to doctors, lawyers, investment bankers, engineers and architects. While men can theoretically share the role of caregiver and homemaker with women, few have fully embraced this notion (certainly not my father or brothers). Maybe when the feminists talked about how demeaning these activities were, men listened and decided they wanted no part of it. I know of many households where the woman is the major breadwinner. In those cases, the man is never the "house husband." He is, rather, an independent, a consultant, a freelance "fill in the blank." He has so many things going on that there has to be someone else to take care of the family and the house. Ultimately, it always seems that the female breadwinner still shoulders most of the homemaker duties either directly or through hired help.

Even in so-called equal marriages, I have yet to see equality. Both parents work and yet, when a child is sick, the plumbing doesn't work, supplies are needed for the house or the school has a special program, the mom is still the primary caregiver—in charge of the household and the kids. She's still expected to have the warm, feminine, and nurturing side, to make certain that the household runs smoothly. She does the "traditional" mother/homemaker duties while doing complicated surgery, arguing cases before the Supreme Court, or closing a major financial transaction.

Also, if a woman does shift the mothering/homemaker roles too much, I notice that men and women are critical. (“Why did she even bother to have kids if she was just going to let someone else raise them” or “She spends too much time at work and her house is a disaster.”)

The traditional role expectations go beyond practical duties to personalities. When a man is strong-willed, he is forceful and decisive—a woman is shrill or confrontational. When a man exhibits emotions, he is sensitive—a woman is “hormonal.” I think this is one of the reasons there are not nearly as many women in politics as men, and of course, no woman has ever been elected as president of the United States. I don’t believe this is because the nation doesn’t think a woman can do the job. I truly believe that most thinking people feel women are just as capable as men. The problem is that most women (and for that matter most men) simply don’t have the capacity to be all things to all people twenty-four/seven.

Take the example of Hillary Clinton. Senator Clinton struggled to gain acceptance from the American public. The media portrayed her as cold, hard, and distant. She could not simultaneously maintain the image of being soft, maternal, and emotional. People held this against her. Yet, if she displayed “softness,” she would have been viewed as weak and unsuited to the presidency.

In contrast, John McCain, the Republican candidate, doesn’t have to show a soft side—he is widely known for his short temper and angry outbursts, but no one holds that against him. Professional women, who should be the most sympathetic, are harsh critics of Senator Clinton. Although they strongly believe that there should be a woman president, they don’t think she is best because she comes off too aggressive for a woman. Ironically, Senator Clinton came from behind to win the New Hampshire primary after she cried in an interview and showed a “softer” side.

If a male candidate cried, would the American public flock to vote for him? When Senator Edmund Muskie broke down in front of the press after defending the character of his wife, his campaign went into a tailspin. Senator George McGovern, who had never won a primary, was chosen as the Democratic candidate over Senator Muskie. Tears saved the campaign of a woman while they destroyed the campaign of a man.

There are few legal boundaries for women in America. Instead, there are crippling social expectations that make her trek a balancing act of virtual impossibility. My mother has a demanding career and makes more money than my father. Despite this, she has made it clear that she had two objectives in life: to raise her family and be successful in her career—in that order. Her mother had one role: housewife. Her father had one role: breadwinner. My mother has many roles: caregiver, homemaker, our family financial advisor, businesswoman, board member, investment banker, and small business owner. My father has one role: breadwinner. I never see my father making dinner or vacuuming the carpets, but I see my mother taking conference calls while making the family dinner or folding laundry. She drafts memos and reviews documents after everyone goes to bed—I see her emails go out at 1 or 2 A.M. This is a difficult path and few women can pull it off. I am convinced that is why so many do not continue in the workforce for their entire working lives.

For women, liberation has been both a gift and a curse. Without liberty and equality, women could never become lawyers or doctors—they would be stuck in the home with their children, fussing over the household chores until their husbands came home for dinner. I am comfortable with the expectations and opportunities for women today. However, at the same time, I know that I am expected to get married and start a

family—not just start but nurture, build, and maintain it. I might find a man who agrees to make the same sacrifices as I will—but I truly doubt it.

Please don’t misunderstand my point. This is not intended as a complaint against the rights crusading women have worked so hard to gain. Women are crippled because so much is expected from them. They inherited the roles of their mothers coupled with the roles of the current day. When the ideal woman strayed from the cult of domesticity to become career woman, informed, participating citizen, as well as homemaker, helpmate, and mother, it bred the ideal of the alpha woman. Few can pull it off. In addition to being time consuming, the role is all but impossible. Our alpha woman is smart but not threatening, charming and engaging but not trite, serious but not humorless, ambitious but not ruthless, sensitive and nurturing but not emotional. She must attain the perfect balance until men evolve to carry more responsibility.

It is not that the public can’t accept the idea of a congresswoman; heck, they’re fine with a female president. She just has to be perfect. 🐉

Erin Flynn, of Hancock, Maine, is a recent graduate of John Bapst Memorial High School in Bangor. She loves writing short stories and hopes to make a career out of it. She is also interested in scientific research, and in the summer of 2008 worked as an intern at the Mount Desert Island Biological Laboratory. Erin is enrolled at Columbia College in New York, where she plans to major in creative writing.