

GOOD WILL TOWARD MEN



**WOMEN TALK CANDIDLY
ABOUT THE BALANCE OF
POWER BETWEEN THE SEXES**

JACK KAMMER

Karen DeCrow

Karen DeCrow was president of the National Organization for Women from 1974 to 1977. She is a constitutional attorney and a co-author, with Robert Seidenberg, of *Women Who Marry Houses: Panic and Protest in Agoraphobia*. She was born in 1937, is single, has been married twice and has no children. She lives near Syracuse, New York.

Jack: In public buildings across the nation, there are now diaper-changing facilities for men who want to take care of their babies. You played a major role in that. How and why were you involved in making these facilities available?

Karen: In late 1983 I was at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. I had just come out of the women's room, where there's a whole nursery, when I saw a nice young man changing his child's diaper on the floor. I had never really thought about it before, but I went up to him and said, "You know, you have a federal case, because this is a public facility and there's a wonderful changing room for women," and then I just went off and looked at paintings.

What did the guy say to you?

I think he had a mouthful of safety pins. I had no conversation with him that I recall. But then I wrote a newspaper column on the subject for Father's Day 1984. Then the Fathers' Rights Association of New York State approached me and said they wanted to bring a lawsuit. At first we did a survey; the men's movement sort of spread its tentacles, and we canvassed facilities all over the place. We concluded that changing facilities did not exist in men's rooms and yet they did exist in women's rooms. So we brought the lawsuit in federal court in Syracuse against the city of Syracuse and the local Department of Aviation. It never went to trial, because in pretrial motions the judge indicated he was

going to find in our favor. I'm condensing the legal details. At any rate, the city agreed to our demand.

We gave the city a choice of having a gender neutral changing room or simply putting in equal facilities for men wherever they existed for women. My personal choice is always gender neutral facilities, but the alternative is clearly legal. In the Syracuse airport right now, as a result of the lawsuit, there is a gender neutral changing room. The airport administration added a big sign that said, "This is a changing facility for mothers and fathers." We urged them to put it in alphabetical order, "for fathers and mothers." That sign is still there to this day. We also have a new wing in the airport, and in every men's room there's a facility equivalent to what's in the women's room.

We held a press conference that attracted over a dozen media outlets. We had not only one of the plaintiffs changing his child, but the lawyer who had represented the city in the lawsuit had become a parent. His baby was about eleven months at the time, and he was changing his baby, too. We had two men at two different tables, former adversaries, simultaneously changing their babies. Everybody was happy.

This is pretty obvious, but why was this good for the men involved?

It turned out to be good for men all over the country, because no one would have to spread out a blanket on a wet, dirty floor, to change his kid, because in an activity that they clearly participated in, i.e., traveling with children, men now were treated as equal citizens. It was good for women because, prior to the lawsuit, anytime a man and a woman were traveling with an infant, the woman would always have the responsibility of changing the child. What woman would expect her husband to put a kid down on a wet floor if she had a nice nursery? And it was beneficial to children because they would notice their fathers were full participants as parents.

There's a larger issue involved here.

Much larger.

Can you lay it out for us?

A lot of newspapers were writing humorous stories about the lawsuit, but actually it had very significant, wider implications. In our entire culture, we assume that parenting is to be done by women. This case involved the traveling public, but more significant is the whole employment situation. I've been on this campaign now for twenty-five years: anytime we talk about mothers in the work force, anytime we're talking about provisions for babies and children, time off, et cetera, we have to think about fathers also.

Does this automatic assumption we have, about mothers being the ones who take care of children, have anything to do with women's difficulties in employment?

It has everything to do with women's difficulties in employment. As long as an employer thinks "Here is a woman of childbearing age," the employer will automatically think "Here we have big trouble." It makes women a suspect classification during two decades of their work lives. If flex time, part time, parental leave, accommodations for children who get sick and for baby-sitters who quit are only for women, then women will be "the mommy class," or a potential mommy class.

[C]laims charging sex discrimination in promotion are... on the increase....

"Salary inequity and pregnancy discrimination are among the most common forms of sex discrimination in the workplace," according to Helen Norton of the Women's Legal Defense Fund....

"These days, companies are more aware of laws protecting pregnant employees," says [Ruth] Jones [staff attorney for the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund]. "But instead of eliminating this type of discrimination, employers' tactics are just becoming more subtle."...

[E]mployers can disguise pregnancy discrimination as layoffs, downsizing, or corporate restructuring.

Oftentimes, the discrimination occurs after a woman has returned to work with inferior job assignments, negative performance evaluations, or lesser job responsibilities.

Christiane N. Brown
Good Housekeeping, March 1993

Would it be good for women, then, if the employer had no more reason to suspect the woman than the man?

It would be essential for women that the employer not be suspicious. We shouldn't think in terms of "women and children." You and I have talked most about the very real discriminations against men in our society, because I believe they're there, no question about it, but on this whole children's issue, every time I hear that a man wants to have some connection with his children, whether it's time off or a place to change diapers, or whatever, I always think, "This is great for women," because children are, in the final analysis, the major issue in women's difficulties in combining work and personal life. You can always let the laundry pile up, and if you don't have time to cook you can do takeout. But taking care of children can't be postponed; they have to be watched twenty-four hours a day for many years.

Two points I'd like to pursue here. One is that we know about men's attitudes that contribute to the idea that women's work is to take care of kids. On the other hand in that Father's Day column, you wrote about a client of yours, a divorced mother of three. You said, "She was desperate for a sitter so she could fulfill her professional responsibilities. Because of the unusual hours involved, it was difficult to find a person to fill the job. 'What about the father?' I asked. 'Is he willing to take them during those hours?'" Do you remember her response?

"That's just what he wants." Is that right?

Yes. "'Their father?' she exclaimed. 'That's just what he wants!'"

One of the real sorrows of my life is that in the battle between the sexes, men and women will go practically to the ends of the earth in illogical, irrational ways to give each other pain. It's just amazing. I'm not a matrimonial lawyer, but I hear from friends who are. And a lot of my clients in employment cases are getting divorced, so I hear this all the time. Both men and women will do anything to cause pain to the other person. And of course a parent's relationship with the children is the best point of all, or the worst point of all, for inflicting pain, because that really will create misery.

Let me pursue another aspect of this issue. The Family and Medical Leave Act is ostensibly gender neutral, but...

It's not applied that way. Maybe it will be, but in my experience many, many, many employers have a policy that's written in a gender neutral way, but when people go to take advantage of the policy, males and females are treated very differently. Although the policy says "parental leave," men who apply for leave are considered not heavy hitters, are considered, if not flaky, just not serious about work. Women are not looked down upon for wanting to take time off. Of course, they may be fired. I have a lot of cases of women who took parental leave and trained their replacements, and were just told that their replacement worked out so well that they were out of a job. That happens to a lot of women. At least now, though, people are *hearing* about fathers taking leave. I thought the law was needed, but I preferred a version that was much more definitively gender neutral.

Do you think that it might be a good idea to have some type of an affirmative action program so that men get the message that it's not just legal, it's not just tolerable, but it's really okay, we really want you to take advantage of this?

Absolutely. And whether it's seminars or films—this is on a very different subject, but they could do a movie on it. That

would be great. Did you see *Men Don't Tell*, the movie Sunday night about a husband who gets beaten up by his wife?

I sure did. I saw everything but the first twenty minutes.

It was fabulous that they broadcast it, because, of course, anybody who talks to men knows that family violence goes both ways, though the image is that it only goes one way. People get caught up in the statistics: is it fifty percent men or forty percent? It doesn't matter. The fact is family violence is ubiquitous and it goes both ways. So here was a movie that did well in the ratings and it made a point that people going around lecturing ten years couldn't make. Everybody saw it. And I would guess an awful lot of battered men are now thinking, "Oh my goodness, I'm not the only one; this happens."

Now you mentioned an affirmative action program. I think that kind of thing about fathers taking family leave would be great.

As I was getting ready to talk with you today, I went to the library and found an article published in The New York Times Magazine almost exactly twenty-five years ago, March 10, 1968. It struck me that there was a time when feminism was very badly ridiculed.

[W]hen pink refrigerators abound, when women (51 per cent of the population) hold unparalleled consumer power, when women control most of the corporate stocks, when women have ready access to higher education and to the professions, when millions of women are gainfully employed, when all the nation is telling American women, all the time, that they are the most privileged female population on earth, the insistence on a civil-rights movement for women does seem a trifle stubborn.

Martha Weinman Lear
The New York Times Magazine
 March 10, 1968

Who wrote this article?

Let's see. It was by Martha Weinman Lear.

Oh, I remember that. I remember that article.

What do you remember about it?

I remember that we were all furious about it. That's about it. (*Laughter.*) I can't even remember if she dealt with NOW, I just remember we were enraged, as we always were about everything that they wrote about us.

Do you see any similarities between the way the media treated feminism twenty-five years ago and the way the media have been treating men's effort to get their act together? I mean, the women's movement was reduced to bra-burning, and men are portrayed as doing nothing but beating drums and hugging trees.

You know, we never burned a bra.

It was just a false image? Nobody ever burned a bra?

No. Nobody ever burned a bra. And we were called bra-burners. In other words, someone invented that, presumably as an image that would terrify everyone. I'll tell you how it started. I was there. Do you remember when there was a demonstration in front of the Miss America Pageant?

Yes. In Atlantic City?

Right. We had something we called the Freedom Trash Can—our media images were kind of sweet and innocent in those days—one of these metal cans that they have on the boardwalk. We threw into the Freedom Trash Can artifacts that we felt oppressed women and then we were going to burn them. Most of the artifacts had to do with so-called glamour stuff because we were protesting the Miss America Pageant. Some of us brought hair spray and curlers, and makeup, lipstick. Somebody brought

pages from *Vogue* that showed women as vacuous models—and somebody brought a bra, as being uncomfortable or whatever. We were going to burn this stuff, but the cops told us that if we had a fire, the aerosol hair spray would be dangerous, it could explode. So, militants that we were, we said, “Well, then we won’t have a fire, we’ll just have a trash can.” If we had burned the contents of that trash can, a bra might have been included, because somebody did bring a bra. No, I think it was a “merry widow,” maybe. A corset. But nobody ever burned anything.

Your story makes me wonder how many men actually hugged trees. When you were trashing these artifacts that you viewed as representing the oppression of women, were you seeing men, specifically men, as being the oppressors?

I don’t think so, not in the early days. God knows, in the last twenty-five years, man as “the enemy” has certainly emerged; the separatist wing of the feminist movement is definitely present, no question about that. But in the early days, I think sexism was considered more a general societal problem.

You were the president of NOW during much of the effort to have the ERA ratified.

Right. But Ellie Smeal, who was the president of NOW after I was, devoted much of her effort to ratification.

Do you think it is fair to say that men opposed the ERA, that it was male chauvinism that was responsible for the failure of the ERA?

I would prefer to say that it was some male-dominated state legislatures that didn’t vote yes on the ERA. We got thirty-five states. We needed thirty-eight. There were tiny numbers of women in those legislatures, but they were overwhelmingly voting yes on the ERA.

Do you think that those male legislators were listening to a certain woman from Illinois?

You mean Phyllis Schlafly?

Yes.

I think it's wrong to believe that men defeated the Equal Rights Amendment. I'm not a great believer in public opinion polls, and I think they were wrong in saying the majority of people supported the ERA. But even so, all the polls that I ever saw showed that more men supported ERA than women, which you might say is curious if you didn't understand what the issues were all about.

Phyllis Schlafly
interviewed by Jack Kammer on *In a Man's Shoes*
WCVT (now WTMD) radio, Towson, Maryland
January 5, 1989

I think Phyllis Schlafly managed to play into people's fears. She talked about unisex bathrooms; she talked about homosexual marriage. She spoke of women in combat. Now we will have women in combat, but no ERA! It's very hard for me to use the phrase "male chauvinist," but I think if we had a fifty-fifty ratio of men and women in the state legislatures, I think we would have had the Equal Rights Amendment ratified, no question about it.

Of course, that's almost by definition. The women who get into state legislatures have to be sort of nontraditional women, whereas the men who are in state legislatures have to almost by definition be traditional men.

That certainly was true. It probably to some extent is true right now, but certainly was in the 1970s when we were doing this. Yes, that's a good point.

You have said that men have a lot of things in their lives that could stand some improvement.

Oh, absolutely. I don't know if this is your question, but the thing that interests me, if one does the laundry list of areas of men's lives that not only are different than women's but where they clearly seem to get the short end of the stick, it's my experience that most men don't see it as a problem. Let me give you a couple of specifics.

I do a lot of college speaking and I often raise the issue of compulsory draft registration. It would seem to me that men should be protesting draft registration. "My country can take me off and kill me" is what filling out that form indicates. Every time I mention that on a college campus, there will be maybe one or two guys who will say that they had considered this unfair, or that they hadn't thought about it, but after I mentioned it, they considered it unfair. But there certainly is not much response to that.

Another issue—less hypothetical, since we don't have an actual draft right now—is in dating. At the college level, of course, most of the people are dating. I talk about how unfair it is that usually the financial responsibility for dates is on guys. Many women are going to law school, or medical school, or plan to be architects or engineers, but somehow if they go out to dinner, it's still for the most part assumed the male is going to pick up the bill. Women may object to this on grounds that maybe it prevents impecunious but utterly delightful young men from seeing them socially, or because of the old idea that if somebody took you out to dinner, you were then expected to "put out" sexually. But mainly, if you go out to dinner, it's nice if somebody else pays the bill, right? I would think men would object simply on the grounds that it's unfair; why should they have to pay the bill? Lots of excuses are given. Men make more money, for instance. But college students don't make very much money whether they're male or female, and when people of the same gender go out socially, rarely do they prorate the bill to their IRS returns. But most men don't respond when I mention this.

What do you think might be getting in the way of men taking action on these issues? What needs to be done to get men to say, "You're right; this is wrong"?

Well, you mentioned the hugging and the drums, which a lot of people think is silly, but the general idea behind the hugging and the drums is a very valid one. In other words, men should start thinking about their role. And Bly's book, *Iron John*, was on the best-seller list for a long time, right? That meant somebody's reading it, and thinking men's roles have to be changed. Certainly many women don't want to change men's roles, but mainly I think it's men who don't want to change men's roles or they would make more effort to do so.

So what do you think is preventing men from doing something that would directly benefit them?

Well, this is a speculation and may be incorrect, but men with a lot of power in our society—who are a teensy fraction of the men—might not want to rock the boat, because things aren't going so badly for them. In other words, if I'm a powerful man and I'm making a fortune, and I don't have any responsibilities at home, and I don't care how much we pay for help, and I want my wife to take care of all the details of my life, and I have my secretary and my assistants, maybe I don't want a change; I like the way it is. But the vast majority of men, especially in the recession, are not in such comfortable shape—nervous wrecks, about losing jobs and so on. But maybe those men don't have a lot of power to change things. I don't know. There is also rampant homophobia among men: fear of being thought to be a sissy.

All the women who changed things didn't have a lot of power to change things. They got together and developed the power to change things.

It was mostly because of the numbers. At the beginning there were very few of us so-called leaders of the feminist movement.

But we definitely struck a chord. Most women agreed, and agree, with us.

As you suggested, there are millions of men who are not very powerful. And even men who are making big bucks aren't necessarily happy. I get the idea that a lot of them feel aloof, alienated, distanced from their families, from their friends. They're very locked into narrow channels.

[Of 1,349 male senior-level executives interviewed] 68 percent are happy in their professional lives, but feel their family life suffers as a result. Of this group, nearly half admitted they regretted spending so many hours at the job and if they were to do it over, they would spend more time with their wife and children from the onset. Many brushed aside my questions with varying rationalizations, such as: You can't look back, You only have one chance to live life, or, I did what I had to do.

Jan Halper, Ph.D.
Quiet Desperation: The Truth About Successful Men

Often they don't have "friend" friends. They have golfing buddies, but not friend friends.

So even those guys would have some reason to say, "Hey, you know, money ain't all that life is about."

It's a good question. I don't know what's keeping most men from exploring their gender issues. Happily, I think, more men are thinking about the male role, about how restrictive it is. I do know it's hard to have a sex-role revolution when only one sex is participating.

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