

Looking Beyond a Victim Mentality

In presenting her research proposal, a graduate student explained that universities discriminate against women. She said that society gives responsibilities to women such as housework and child rearing that interfere with getting a university education. As a result, it takes women longer to get degrees and once they get them they cannot put the same time into publishing as men with the result they are not as likely to become recognized or promoted. The suggested answer was an affirmative action program that would fast-track women into secure tenured teaching positions at the university. I shared with the speaker the fact that I am a single-parent dad, and that I delayed returning to university while my daughter was young so that I could better parent her. I asked the graduate student if her proposals would benefit me by giving me a secure tenured position. Her angry response was that it wouldn't because, as a man, I could not be a victim of gender discrimination. Yet the delay I experienced in my getting a doctorate puts me at the same competitive disadvantage as the women for whom she was advocating.

As a director of the Saskatchewan Association on Human Rights during the 1970s, I was involved in bringing affirmative action to this province. The original idea was that if a group of people are under-represented in a workforce, for example, aboriginal people in nursing or teaching, research would be done establishing why this so. If the answer were lack of education, then educational programs would be offered aboriginal people specifically to cover this need. If the problem were lack of awareness or interest, then career education and advertising would be directed toward aboriginal youth. If the problem were racism, then the racists would be disciplined to encourage hiring on the basis of qualifications. At no point was it intended that aboriginal people would be hired just because they were aboriginal.

The first question to answer when applying the affirmative action model to gender issues at universities, is whether discrimination is occurring. Since a clear majority of students at Canadian universities are women, no discrimination is occurring at that level. If university educated women were losing job competitions with men with lesser qualifications, then that sexual discrimination to be taken before a human rights tribunal. But the graduate student was not suggesting that this was happening. She was suggesting that the majority of university professors were men because women were prevented from attaining equal qualifications due to family commitments.

The majority of the university educated used to be men. It may be that as the older male professors retire more women will be hired to replace them in the normal course of events without the need for any affirmative action plan. If, however, some people are choosing to delay their careers while they raise children and this puts them at a competitive disadvantage, then we have to decide whether this amounts to discrimination.

I chose to make raising my daughter a priority, and I do not feel discriminated against because I made that choice. Women can choose to empower themselves in the same way. In this day and age, fathers have the same parental responsibilities as women; there is no legal expectation that women must sacrifice their careers for their families. If the problem turns out to be that women, generally, do not realize they have the power to choose their careers as an option, then an affirmative action program could be designed using career education, role models, and advertising to assist in empowering them to make such decisions.

On the other hand, we may want to create a society where family and career can go hand in hand and this may be difficult at the university level. We may wish to provide more support to people with families to attend university. This does not mean that we discriminate against people without children – the same amount of work should be required in any case – but it may mean better day care, financial subsidies based on the costs of raising children, and flexible hours for those students and professors with families. Such steps need not be genderized – they can be made to apply to any parent based on need.

There appears to be a series of in-groups, who feel victimized, and out-groups who are then demonized: French against English, aboriginal against non-aboriginal, women against men. I think that we can do more to create fair rules that apply to everyone, and that we can reject the victim mentality and all the disempowerment that it implies. By refusing to identify yourself by some group based on mutual victimhood, you will have help create a healthier mutually supportive society, and you will have opened more possibilities for yourself.