

The Elephant in the Political Room: What Progressives Can Learn from Regressives

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There's an invisible elephant in today's political debate: a crucial "women's issue" that's getting hardly any attention. Sure, there's some recognition that behind many attacks on Hillary Clinton lie traditions of sexism. But so devalued is anything stereotypically associated with women that key matters that directly affect our lives and our families are not even mentioned – from the disproportionate poverty of women even in our rich nation, to how the U.S. is way behind countries that have paid parental leave, stipends for caregivers, and even social security credit for the first years of home childcare.

This relegation of "women's issues" to a secondary place is not only terrible for half of America (actually the majority, since women are 52 percent), but for the political and family health of our nation.

Let's start with politics. For the Nazis in Germany, the mullahs in Iran, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the rightist-fundamentalist alliance in the United States, "getting women back into their traditional place" in a "traditional family" has been a top priority. There's a basic reason for this. Rigidly male-dominated societies are also authoritarian and violent. Along with the imposition of a brutal dictatorship by the Nazis, their mantra was returning women to their "traditional" roles in a male-dominated family. Nor is it coincidental that the 9-11 terrorists came from cultures where women are terrorized into submission. Or that regressive fundamentalists in the United States (who also believe in top-down rule and "holy wars") first organized as a powerful political block around a "women's issue": the defeat during the 1970s of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

By contrast, in Nordic nations such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland, the move toward gender equity (for example, women are 40 percent of national legislators and are frequently heads of state) has gone along with more political and economic democracy. Not only that – and this takes us to how "women's issues" are also key family issues – as the status of women rose so also did funding for activities stereotypically associated with women. These nations have far less stressed families because they support child care, health care, paid parental leave, and other family-friendly policies.

Yet in the United States, many people who consider themselves progressives still view anything to do with women as secondary. They fail to recognize what regressives do: that the ranking of male over female is a basic model children learn early on for equating difference with superiority or inferiority, with dominating or being dominated – a model that can then easily be generalized to different races, religions, ethnicities, and nations.

In recent years, American regressives have vigorously promoted a family where fathers make the rules and harshly punish disobedience – the kind of family that prepares people to defer to "strong" leaders who brook no dissent and use force to impose their will. Not coincidentally, over these same years aggressive wars were launched, gains for women and minorities were lost,

and a “strong” executive branch held itself above the law.

Surely we can learn a lesson from this history: that progressives urgently need a political agenda that no longer relegates “women’s issues” to a secondary – indeed, invisible – place. We need a politics of partnership that recognizes that questioning “traditional” gender roles and relations is foundational to the movement to more democratic and egalitarian relations across the board.

The equal valuing of the two halves of humanity – women and men – will obviously vastly improve girls’ and women’s quality of life. But it’s also essential if we are to move to a more democratic, peaceful, and sustainable future for us all.

This is an election year. Let’s join together and change the political conversation. Let’s make “women’s issues” integral to the progressive agenda.

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