

## A Season of Silence?

Amy Condra-Peters

When woman complains about the unjust inequalities placed on her by man she is wrong; this inequality is by no means a human institution or at least it is not the work of prejudice but of reason." Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote these words in 1762, and in so doing joined his voice to those who have engaged themselves in the endless task of justifying



woman's inferiority to man. For thousands of years men have sought to establish that women are biologically determined and thus ineligible to participate in the basic human right of self-determination. This essential freedom has been desired by feminists as varied as Mary Wollstonecraft, Clara Zetkin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Gloria Steinem, all of whom, although living in different times and motivated by different causes, have fought for the right to exercise free will in societies which tenaciously denied them this privilege. Women are still relegated to a lesser economic and social status than are men and remain vastly under-represented in our government. Although I anticipate that all people in this country will ultimately achieve real and effective equality, they currently do not, and this fact should not be concealed from our daughters.

My eldest daughter has entered a new stage of needing to have the various aspects of her life validated by her father and me--"Barney's real, huh, Daddy?" "I know how to tie my shoes, huh, Mommy?" These are the tangibles that fill her thoughts. She fully

intends to marry Barney, but attempts to soften this separation by affirming that she will still live with us under the condition that I drive her to Barney's house for a daily visit. It is easy to smile at the sweet naivete of these statements (although I suspect she realizes this is merely a happy fantasy), but occasionally they prompt me to realize that she will leave us one day, and she won't be venturing out to the security of a life with Barney.

I would like to be able to teach my two daughters that they will have every opportunity to prove their potential to the fullest, that they will only encounter obstacles that through hard work can be overcome. But is this lesson as simple, and as false, as my agreement that yes, of course they can marry Barney someday? The inescapable reality is that being a woman, and especially a mother, is not easy in contemporary society. We live in a country in which it is fashionable to speak of "family values." So why does there seem to be such an absence of public concern that although one half of U.S. mothers of young children work, child care is scarce and not well regulated? These working women find themselves most often in lower-paying



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administrative support and service jobs. Why is it that although single women head the nation's poorest households, "welfare mothers" are attacked more viciously in Congress than are "deadbeat dads?" Rape is committed every three minutes in this country and domestic violence is the number one health problem for women. It is easy to read these statistics, sigh, and then delegate them to a far corner in the back of my mind. Upon reflection, however, these statistics alternately anger and sadden me, and they cannot help but color my attitudes toward the rearing of my daughters.

Is it preferable to teach them that they will always get a fair shot to prove themselves in this world, or would it be kinder to gently prepare them for the inequities that they may be forced to contend with? I resent that the choice is even there, that my daughters are even involved in society's gender inequality. But since the statistics and the choice do, in fact, exist, then I believe that the issue should be addressed by all mothers of daughters. Telling our daughters in a cavalier fashion that they can be anything they aspire to be, without explaining the challenges they may face due to their sex, is irresponsible. I do not want my daughters to grow up believing that they have the same probability as a boy does to become a federal judge, for example, when as of 1994 less than 1/8 of seats on the federal judiciary were filled by women. I would rather reveal to them the inequality there. Then my daughters can use their anger at this obvious discrepancy to their advantage, and channel it into striving even harder to achieve goals that may indeed be more elusive for them because of their gender. Teaching girls that they will always have an equal chance is unfair because at the present time it is just not true. Imparting such dishonesty deprives our daughters of the opportunity to enter the world with their eyes open and their wits about them-- it deprives them of the confidence of knowing where the pitfalls lie, so that they can leap over them rather than falling in headfirst.



*Amy Condra-Peters editor and publisher.*