

The Bernard Schwartz Program in Competitiveness and Growth Policies

“Changing Course: Women in American Society”

Book Discussion at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Thursday, September 26, 2013

Discussion

This discussion at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace brought together Debora Spar, author of the recently released book *Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection* and President of Barnard College, and Ambassador Susan Esserman, partner at Steptoe and Johnson and former deputy U.S. Trade Representative, for a discussion on Spar’s book and the role of women in American society. The discussion was moderated by David Rothkopf, CEO of Foreign Policy and Visiting Scholar at the Carnegie Endowment. The discussion addressed why the women’s movement, which had so much momentum in the 1970s, has stalled, and what women and men can do to ensure that we continue to make forward movement with regard to the issues and challenges that women face today.

Mr. Rothkopf began the discussion by pointing out that women’s issues tend to get kicked off into an intellectual and policy ghetto. He pointed to the example of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and noted that in Washington, there are many who argue that her work was not that important, that it was “just women’s issues.” However, Mr. Rothkopf argued that the systematic suppression of women throughout history is the most grievous set of wrongs in all of human history, and that these issues, ranging from the presence of women in the policy apparatus to the political participation of women in developing countries, are central to economic, security, and political considerations. They should not, he warned, be considered to be “soft issues.”

President Spar continued by giving a brief summary of the arguments she makes in the book. She argues first that American society is never going to solve the “women’s problem” unless men take an interest and are invited into the conversation. Most men are no longer sitting in the corner office

plotting to keep women from advancing in their careers – they also have wives and daughters and sisters and other women in their life, and they want to see them succeed. We must acknowledge that the “women’s problem” is a societal problem, not just a women’s problem. Globally, women are stalling out at a level that is much lower than what would have been predicted fifty years ago. Women are 50% of college and business school graduates, but they make up only 16% of executives of major companies. If you look at the education of women as a social investment, this is a low return on investment.

The premise of the book began to take shape when President Spar noticed that most of her friends from college, who are as smart and ambitious as she is, had not remained in the workplace. As a professor at Harvard Business School, she realized that none of the women who had started with her as junior professors received tenure. She further noticed that her students at Harvard Business School were having divergent experiences – the men were graduating and advancing swiftly in their careers, while the women were not. This caused her to realize that first of all, there *was* a “women’s problem,” both at Harvard Business School and in society generally, and that second, it was very difficult to solve the problem. She noted that while well-intentioned people have been asking women to solve the problem, we have to understand that the problem that women face today is much more subtle than the problem they faced fifty years ago. The brilliance of the feminist movement was that it turned societal norms upside down, got rid of the most obvious constraints on women’s lives and choices, and made it acceptable for women to be ambitious enough to want to be athletic, start NGOs, and become scientists or Supreme Court justices. Yet at the same time, society never got rid of the old expectations. So women are still aspiring to be good wives and mothers, to take care of their children and partners, and to maintain their homes, all while trying to advance their careers. As a result, rather than freeing women from expectations, we have arrived at a place where women are facing a multitude of expectations, which we capture by the phrase “having it all.” Upon closer examination, this idea of “having it all” is just a lie and an illusion. Nobody has it all – no man, no woman, no human being, by definition can “have it all.” And yet, the bar is set so high for women that by definition, they are going to fail. If what you are supposed to have is “all,” then by definition, you are failing if you have anything short of “all.”

We must recognize how damaging this message is for women. Through her research for the book, President Spar realized that these expectations are being thrust on very young girls. For example, women’s appearances, should theoretically, after the progress made in the feminist movement, be less important today. Yet, if anything else, how a woman dresses and looks is perhaps even more important today than it was fifty years ago. The book also examines the sexual norms for young women. President Spar argued that women have a much greater degree of sexual freedom today, but that these cultural norms are quite damaging, because they create yet another set of expectations for women, which runs counter to how many young women would otherwise choose to be. She pointed to the myths surrounding love and marriage and noted that women today are supposed to be carefree and promiscuous for some number of years and then fall hopelessly and forever in love with someone at the age of 35, just in time to have children.

President Spar also suggested that in broader discussions of these issues, we tend to minimize them into workplace issues, and while that is a large part of the problem, the root of the problem is that women face a multitude of impossible expectations. While trying to navigate the workplace, women are trying to figure out how to raise their children, how they look, how they handle their marriages, and at the same time trying to maintain a perfect home and household. That is not to say that these problems are not solvable. Theoretically, these problems can be resolved. Part of it is bringing men into the conversation, but the other part of the solution is resetting the dialogue to move away from the conversation about “having it all,” and recognizing that we have to allow women to make choices about what they want in their lives, and what they do not. Lastly, Spar said that part of the solution will be recognizing that men and women are physiologically different, and that this matters a great deal when talking about children.

Putting these issues in a Washington context, Ambassador Susan Esserman noted that one of the reasons that the book has been so well-received in Washington is that young women want to get these issues out on the table and begin the discussion about them – in the workplace and with their partners. Washington is a perfect place to see these issues in action, because it is a city where many men and women are in high-powered jobs, whether in government or in the private sector. Many women in Washington are pressed with deadlines and incredible schedules. Ambassador Esserman noted that within her own field – law, women make up 50% of law school graduates and 45% of associates, but only 16% of partners. As a society, Ambassador Esserman argued, we need to have a better support structure for having a career and family. We know that for society to perpetuate, women need to have babies, and yet we do not plan for it in any organized way. We have not done what we need to within the institutions to change and support family life. The change has to be institutional, but it also has to come not only from women, but their partners as well.

President Spar agreed, pointing out that the explanation for this “16% ghetto,” or the phenomenon that women max out in top-level positions between 15% and 20% used to be that there were not enough women in the pipeline. However, history no longer allows us to make that argument, because the pipeline has been full for at least one and a half generations. The best case is that women tend to rise to the VP level, or to the position of associate professor, or to an associate in a law firm, but then start to trickle off, particularly when they start to have children. Studies suggest that it is actually the birth of the second child that forces women to make tough decisions about their career, and when the juggling of career and family becomes too difficult. These challenges are compounded by the exclusivity of the boys’ network. It is a combination of women encountering environments, which, while not overtly hostile, are still male-dominated, with the fact that the juggling gets increasingly difficult, which leads to this drop-off of women at the highest level. The fact that institutionally, we have not built in truly family-friendly policies, only serves to make it more difficult for women to rise to the top.

Mr. Rothkopf pointed to an article that President Spar had written, in which she argued that the U.S. financial crisis might not have been as severe if more women had been involved in a decision-

making capacity in U.S. financial institutions. President Spar elaborated on this, pointing to the differences, in the aggregate, of leadership and decision-making styles between men and women, noting that while men tend to engage in more risk-taking behavior, women tend to embrace risk-moderation, which, in a place like a bank, may not be entirely negative. She also pointed out that male-dominated workplaces feel different from female-dominated workplaces, and that both bring positives and negatives. The important thing is to validate each leadership style and bring some balance to the workplace, while acknowledging the benefits and drawbacks of each.

Before turning to questions, Ambassador Esserman and President Spar discussed the role of mainstream media in perpetuating these damaging messages about women. Ambassador Esserman lamented that during the 2008 Democratic primary campaign, there were things said about Hillary Clinton that were shocking, and they were said in the mainstream media, and none of these news outlets were held accountable for their role in perpetuating the misogyny. President Spar gave the example of Christine Quinn, who recently ran for mayor in the Democratic primary in New York City. She noted that there were constantly comments in the media about her hair, and her pantsuits, and her fashion, while none of her male counterparts were asked where they purchased their suits. The problem is rampant; mainstream media finds *nothing* wrong with commenting on women's appearance. President Spar cited an even more egregious example of the problem – when Christine Lagarde came to the IMF after Dominique Strauss-Kahn's resignation amidst allegations of rape, the front page of the New York Times featured an article discussing Lagarde's handbag and shoes. These sorts of comments are embedded misogyny, because they make clear that women are always being evaluated on things other than their professional qualifications.

This is especially true in business. President Spar pointed to Marissa Mayer as the best example of this – mainstream media is constantly discussing both her parenting style and her commitment to social change, while no one would ever think to discuss Bill Gates' career in the same fashion. When articles are written comparing Lloyd Blankfein and Jamie Dimon, they do not even mention their family lives. And yet, when writing about a woman in business, journalists always raise the issues of her children and her family life. It is a very damaging trend that must be reversed.

Ambassador Esserman agreed with President Spar, arguing that women especially need to be supportive of other women's choices. She pointed to the debate between Sheryl Sandberg and Anne-Marie Slaughter, and asked, "Why did that have to get so heated?" She noted that they are both strong and smart women with different perspectives on the same issue, and that rather than trying to find one template to solve the whole problem, we should validate both views. Mr. Rothkopf concurred, stating, "There is no one right answer – it is different for everyone, and we have to find a way to coalesce these various elements of the movement across society."

Questions

One audience member asked, “How do we talk to men, and how do we bring them into this conversation?” In response, President Spar stated that everyone has to do it in a way that is natural. But one thing that women must do as they ascend up the career ladder is to pull men aside from time to time and say, “I’m sure you didn’t mean to do this, but here is what just happened,” when something inadvertently misogynistic has happened. Another change that has to be made is that women have to be bolder about bringing their male bosses into the conversation. Women have to go to their supervisors and tell them what flexibility they need in order to balance things in a way that works for them. And ultimately, in order to have the leverage to have those conversations, they need to be really good at their jobs.

Another audience member said, “It’s great to engage men, but a lot of working moms really struggle with how to relate to stay-at-home moms. How can we engage with other groups of women when every group thinks that the choices they are making are ‘better’”? President Spar acknowledged that this is a significant problem, that these conversations are rampant on the playground, that women turn to each other and judgmentally ask, “Do you work? I work.” However, she recalled a financial forum she once attended where half the women were stay-at-home moms and half were working moms. And it shortly became clear that the reason that the working moms were able to work and ascend up the career ladder was because the stay-at-home moms were taking care of the PTA and the bake sales, and the school fairs, and the volunteering at schools. So if instead of criticizing, women acknowledge what the other group is doing for them, and how that supports their own work, that will be a really positive change. Women need to validate each other’s choices, not criticize them.

Lastly, an audience member asked, “What is the value of women’s colleges?” Ambassador Esserman, a graduate of Wellesley College, said that women’s colleges teach camaraderie, help women build a network for life, and teach important skills in a nurturing environment. She stated, “It’s a powerful way to learn in a very supportive environment.” President Spar concurred, noting that it is a form of protection for four critical years, and literally teaches women how to put their hand up in class. At a women’s college, students do not worry about their social lives inside the classroom, which gives them an innate confidence to “put their hand up” when they enter the workplace.

Conclusions

Ambassador Esserman concluded by saying that the book is very important for young women, who want the issues out on the table, and want to live lives in which they can discuss these issues with their partners. We have to let men get involved and stop the intense mothering that at times excludes men from the process.

President Spar concluded by noting that both women and men have an obligation, particularly if they have been successful, to tell the story of their lives to younger people without burnishing them overmuch to make them look too easy or too seamless. The best thing that mentors can do for the younger generation is not to diminish their ambition, but to tell them, "Hold on to that ambition, but be prepared for the bumps in the road." Be honest about the challenges you have faced, and ask them how you can help them get through their challenges.