John B. Dilworth's Commentary on "Bringing in the First Woman"

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Bringing in the First Woman

Anyone who identifies (as should we all) with the feminist cause of furthering equal rights and equal opportunities for women will find plenty to dislike in this case. It is not too much to say that it is saturated with various kinds and levels of sexual prejudice.

Fortunately, however, those same features do make the case a useful one for some brief criticism and analysis of the vast, pervasive world of prejudice about women. Some idea of the magnitude of this mixture of social and ethical problems becomes apparent through looking closely at the conventional ways of thinking and talking about women which occur in this case. Sadly, these are indeed all too conventional and common. Sex prejudice is so widespread and ingrained in our culture that most of the time we hardly even notice it.

First, some ethical basics. Surely we can agree that people with unprejudiced views of men and women would treat them both simply as human beings or persons. This means that any special features distinguishing women from men, and vice-versa, would be ignored in making business or professional judgments about a person of either sex. The ethical imperative that women ought to be treated equally with men implies exactly this point, that we ought to ignore sex differences in assessing people in the workplace.

Put in this general form, perhaps most if not all people will agree with this principle. It is exactly analogous to the widely accepted, anti-racist principle that we ought to ignore differences of race among workers. Yet at the same time almost no one is prepared to actually apply our anti-sexist principle to concrete situations such as those described in this case. For if they did, cases such as this one would become utterly trivial.

To see this, try replacing all terms referring to women in the case with similar terms referring to persons, or to men. If the case presented an unprejudiced view of women, the replacement should make no difference to the business problems being presented, but in fact such replacements change everything. Clearly we are relying on all kinds of specific attitudes or beliefs specifically about women (about female humans rather than about humans in general) in our understanding of and judgements about women in the case. Hence we must conclude that the case, as filtered through our conventional understanding of it, is systematically sexist.

It is useful to bring in a comparison to racism once again, because racist prejudices are somewhat more under control in U.S. society than are sexist attitudes. This is not to say that racism has been eliminated, but just that it is no longer so acceptable for most people to unthinkingly adopt traditional racist attitudes in dealing with business problems.

Try a similar experiment of word-substitution as before, but this time use some racial description (such as 'black') in place of the references to women. The result is a revealing intermediate case. Some problems may seem to remain, yet it is embarrassingly clear that they are problematic only because of our residual or latent racist attitudes. (A common explanation of our perceptions in a case such as this is as follows. We have become 'sensitized' through the civil rights movement, etc., to the issue of racism, so it's difficult not to perceive racism and feel guilty about it in such cases.)

These experiments should be sufficient to show the sexism in the current case, and in our habitual perceptions of such cases. But it might be thought that nevertheless we haven't made any real progress toward solving the problems. Even if it is conceded that the 'problems' only seem problematic to people in a sexist society, aren't there still real issues of how to ameliorate or eliminate such pervasive sexist attitudes in the workplace?

The answer to this question is yes, sexist attitudes are indeed serious problems, which do need to be worked on. But note that this issue is no longer about women in the workplace (the overt focus of the current case), but instead it is about attitudes to women in the workplace. Women are the victims of such attitudes, yet our society is so prejudiced that we unthinkingly see the women themselves in such cases as being 'the problem', rather than the sexist attitudes which they (and to a lesser degree all who are 'sensitized' to the problem) have to endure. In effect we are

'blaming the victim' in such cases.

How should we go about eliminating sexist attitudes? That is a big question, but there is one serious trap which must briefly be mentioned and defused. It is all too easy to think that the central problems in sexist attitudes must come from incorrect beliefs or assumptions about the abilities or personalities of women. The cure then might seem to be educational or publicity exercises in which successful, popular women demonstrate their abilities and hence change the beliefs of their audience.

Certainly successful women can act as 'role models' for other women, and help to eliminate a few extreme beliefs in the general populace such as 'no women could ever do X', where X is something that the successful woman demonstrates she can do. However, such approaches are still deeply enmeshed in sexist attitudes, because even the most successful of such demonstrations is still focussed on the woman's abilities as a woman, rather than simply as a person.

To see why this is problematic, imagine that a business demonstration by a woman is so charismatic and successful that the audience come to believe that women in general would make ideal bosses. It should be clear that all we have done is to replace one sexist attitude (women are bad bosses, because they are women) with another (women are ideal or excellent bosses, because they are women.) This latter attitude would doubtless be easier to live with than the former, but a prejudice in favor of women is still, inescapably, prejudice!

What has gone wrong here, in this misguided attempt to eliminate sexism? Most basically, it has confused the moral imperative, that everyone ought to treat woman equally, with a purely factual claim to the effect that women are at least equal in ability, etc., to men. Whether or not this claim is true (or even meaningful) is totally irrelevant to the moral issue of sex equality.

If we do resolve to live up to our obligation to treat women equally, what is needed instead is a quite different educational program from the above. Our obligation is to ignore differences of sex in the workplace. Hence we would not tolerate sexist attitudes, because they are incompatible with ignoring sex differences. We would seek not to reform or 'improve' such attitudes (through the use of positive role models, etc.), but to totally suppress and destroy them, at least as far as any public expressions of them are concerned.

This may sound excessively protective of women, in that we would be out to silence their sexist critics. But the other side of the coin is that women would get no special treatment whatsoever under this simple but demanding ethical approach. If a woman boss manages poorly, she would be treated exactly like any other poor manager, including being fired if necessary. The desire of head office to get more women into managerial positions would also be resisted as sexist interference. Any person of either sex would be judged purely on their own specific abilities to 'get the job done'. Why would any unprejudiced person want anything else?