

It's Not Enough to Wear Pants



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Not long ago, a colleague turned me onto a book called *Women Don't Ask*, by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003). It suggests that, for historical, cultural, social, and psychological reasons, women have great difficulty telling other people what they want. And the problem, according to the authors, costs our society plenty.

Historically speaking, Western women were a long time getting the right to own property, to attend college, to vote, and to control their reproductive capacity. For millennia, women's lives were controlled by external forces. The tradition of subservience permeates social customs to this day, because the old-time gender roles, being familiar, seem correct and appropriate to everyone.

For eons, women were supposed to let men handle invitations on a date and the proposal of marriage. Men, not women, were widely seen as heads of household. Even now, when children are born, they usually take the surname of the father, not the mother, suggesting that he rather than she principally shapes the family's collective identity.

The chores assigned to girls usually emphasize dependence, are performed daily or routinely, and tend to go uncompensated; examples are cooking, cleaning, and washing dishes. In contrast, those given to boys encourage independence, are less frequently performed, and are more likely to command pay; examples are leaf raking, snow shoveling, and washing the car.

And just think of all the things American children may see fathers but not mothers doing—carpentry, plumbing repair, financial planning, woodcutting, and automotive work. (If your family includes kids, do they see their parents as equally willing and able to do all or most of the same kinds of work?)

Despite significant gains by women, domestic tasks are still generally theirs; employee jobs are more often men's territory. Disproportionate numbers of

women teach school, nurse the sick, do word processing, and provide child care. Men fill the ranks of corporate officers, construction workers, financial managers, and engineers. Workplace etiquette and protocols continue to echo time-honored stereotypes.

Men are regarded as stronger, more rational, and more independent; women, as weaker, more emotional, and more interdependent. Independent types focus on individual achievement and are less concerned with how their actions affect the people around them. Interdependent people are keenly aware of others at all times; for them, a primary goal is to develop and protect strong relationships.

In negotiations, men think the issue at hand is "just business," gone and forgotten once agreement is reached. Women, in contrast, tend to worry about possible damage to the parties' future relationship. As a result, women—but not men—may feel uncomfortable negotiating because of fears about promoting conflict. Women generally accept employers' initial salary offers without negotiating, whereas men more often up the ante right away. (The gap in pay widens later.) Like other cultural and ethnic groups, women see themselves closed out of most positions of power and governed by forces outside their control.

The problem? It's women's sense of entitlement and self-esteem. So why don't women get together and demand their rights? Wasn't that what the twentieth-century feminist movement was all about?

The answer isn't so easy. Assertive women may be treated as bitchy or aggressive. They may be excluded socially or on the job, or they may be criticized until anxiety undermines their ability to make requests or deters them altogether from doing so. Women who resist the stereotype pay a big price. But rigid gender-based standards aren't just imposed on women. They are also perpetuated by women. And we all tend to ignore or forget evidence that is inconsistent with our beliefs.

For one thing, women often don't realize that change is possible. They don't know that they can ask for more. Worse, they have been taught, and have come to believe, that women

- *are not entitled to receive more* than they have been getting,
- *should be content to receive less* than men do, and
- *should give away more* than men would in their shoes.

Even in the bedroom, according to the supermarket magazines, women's needs are likely not to be met much of the time!

Overall, Babcock and Laschever tell us, the gender role divide carries huge costs for everyone. The undervaluing of women, by themselves and by society, is bad

for women's psychological and physical health--and in the United States today, health care costs are skyrocketing. Second, when women are unequally rewarded for their work, they receive inadequate benefits--social security, disability insurance, pensions, unemployment insurance, and the like. At retirement age, women in the United States are twice as likely to be poor as men. The economic burden on society of caring for indigent elderly women is substantial.

Then too, when employers routinely assume that applicants with better salary histories are more capable, and when women are systematically denied better pay and better jobs at all levels of all businesses, the losers are not just women but society as a whole. Business growth and related gains in productivity are hampered when more than 50 percent of the citizenry is underemployed.

The authors ask, "Why should we tolerate a society in which half our citizens are arbitrarily undervalued and underpaid? Fairness . . . must be safeguarded and promoted even when its beneficiaries don't realize what they are missing" (pp. 54-55). When women's talents are underutilized, those talents are wasted and women are prevented from reaching their full potential. Last and particularly disturbing, some researchers have found that people who are not appropriately rewarded for their efforts cease to aim high (p. 57).

There are even more powerful reasons why women should assert themselves and why society should accept more assertive women. As we rub shoulders more often with virtual neighbors who live farther and farther away, it makes sense to heed new research showing that the best way to negotiate or to resolve conflict is to collaborate. We need to focus not on win-lose but on win-win. The parties' respective positions are less important than their needs, for there may be a way to accommodate everyone.

In this area--reconciliation and compromise--women's relationship skills have particular value for society. Women

- try to understand the other side's problem as the other side experiences it.
- report on the problem as it appears to them.
- analyze the issues to see whether a compromise might suit everyone.
- brainstorm solutions instead of insisting on one particular course of action.

Before women can realize these and other talents to the full, however, they must understand the historical, cultural, and psychological obstacles confronting them.

The authors offer a few helpful tips designed to facilitate change.

- Acknowledge that a negotiation almost always has both issue-related and relationship goals.

- Trust other negotiators to take care of their own needs (just worry about your own).
- Recognize that emotions needn't be completely absent from negotiations; while yelling and tears aren't recommended, a smiling and calm demeanor can be an asset.

In this area, as in so many others, society needs to ensure that everyone's voice is heard.

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