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The Flexible Woman

Keynote speech by Dr. Cora Stephan, publicist and author

It's obvious: Women rule the world. Here in Germany we've rapidly grown accustomed to a woman premier, there was a female U.S. secretary of state – and although there won't be a woman American president after the coming election, there may possibly be a female vice-president.

But whatever happens, Woman Power is growing; these days even a pregnant defense minister can review the troops without arousing an outcry in the male world. Such an outcry would be pointless in any case, since the word has reached even the ears of our (predominantly) testosterone-controlled menfolk that women are simply the superior sex: smarter, more peaceable, friendlier, strong and lovely and always on the right side. They easily manage both career and children, they are fit and hip – even with wrinkles, excessive avoirdupois and gray hair (the latter reportedly now a status symbol in the USA, which is prompting some natural blondes to get a silver rinse). Yes indeed, in every respect and at every age we're simply unbeatable.

Even during our school days we do better than the boys, and later on at university too. Yet we're always nice; it's only in the criminal statistics that women are in a minority. That would appear to be the only shortcoming of this splendid sex; we're not much good at violence and murder.

Aren't we a class act! And isn't it boring!

In recent years the image of Woman has moved into the generally positive, yet it remains only a cliché. Those who aren't convinced, or can't get enough, can read all about it in the countless biographies of outstanding women under which the bookstore shelves are groaning these days. There they all are, a regular lineup of them, in which we can reinforce our own self-confidence – especially because their less-than-splendid characteristics are generally glossed over. All of them, whether painter, poet or muse, were apparently smart, cultivated, self-confident – in short, disgustingly virtuous. The shriller women get passed over, especially those whose attitudes and aggressive intelligence don't fit well into the current pro-feminine world view. A proper woman doesn't rub people the wrong way – except in humorous fashion, examples of which may be found on bookstore shelves under the silly heading «Fresh Females».

But why look to the past? For some time now, even the financial pages of our newspapers have been carrying photos of handsome, smart career women who also maintain a happy family life, women who serve as examples to the rest of us of how things are supposed to be. Superwoman is no illusion. She lives among us.

In brief, there's an expectation that females can, will and should heal the world. What a triumph for feminist ideals! What a victory for common sense – even that of men. But it takes a strong personality these days not to regard the recent outpouring of praise for womanhood as a persistent violation of reason and good taste. Cynics suspect that

behind the flood of acclaim is a strategy which has less to do with genuine insight into the equality of the sexes than with the human, and especially the male, ability to calculate. The honeyed wooing of women may well arise from the cold calculation of politicians, marketing chiefs, program directors and opinion makers who in recent times have begun to recognize a valuable majority on the distaff side.

Most consumer decisions are taken by women, who incidentally, here in Germany at least, constitute at least 70% of book buyers – and hence largely determine their content. In the realm of politics it is axiomatic that you can't win an election without women's approval. This turns out to be especially tricky in my country, since many women there are interested primarily in child care, while others prefer to stay home and accept child subsidies from the government. No wonder Germany's political parties can't rightly decide for one camp or the other.

In the corporate world the situation is more obvious, which is why its pro-feminine folklore tends to be handled more discreetly. There is no longer any commercial enterprise without women, not today and certainly not in the future. There is an urgent need for well-trained people who are willing to work, and focused recruitment of high-quality, well-trained young women. Today a woman desiring to train as an engineer has a splendid future before her. And it is even possible that the old boys' clubs at the head of Germany's corporations may gradually have to rethink things. Future business management is another thing that can't get along without women.

And what do the women being wooed make of the big opportunities open to them today? They hesitate, they procrastinate. They don't trust themselves. They hear that notorious biological clock ticking. They don't want to be like the men – on the one hand. And on the other hand, totally over-committed with kids and career, they pay the piper for the faithless ex who has hooked up with a new, less-stressed female companion. Women's new freedom is also a new freedom for the New Man. But he handles things much more cleverly: sensibly enough, he joins in the chorus of praise for the New Woman, but otherwise keeps silent and enjoys his autonomy. No one any longer expects him to be the household's sole support; Superwoman goes off to work quite voluntarily, leaving the state to care for the children, if need be. Or else she lets herself be fobbed off with part-time work in order to better care for everyone and everything – which gives the men an opportunity to balance out the advantage once enjoyed by the smart feminine achievers with their superior grades in school and college. This explains why German men, on average, still earn more than women.

If you think my picture of things so far is somewhat pessimistic, I must agree. It is not easier today, but harder, to combine work and family – harder, at least, than it once was in agrarian societies. The era of the «housewife», in which not only the elite could afford to make a family member available for housekeeping and «family work», is relatively new in human history, and not likely to go on for very long. Certainly recent German family law does not encourage that model. Given today's enormously prolonged life expectancy, it is no longer «done» to advise any woman to leave the support of the family entirely to her husband during the short span of years when children are growing up.

Yet despite some shining examples, the dream of combining family and career has long been exhausted, even though politicians and opinion makers still sing its praises. Especially in Germany, it has been bought out by part-time work, which women find an especially effective tool with which to release themselves from the career path still dominated by masculine professional biography. This is compounded by the perversion of an old pattern of age discrimination in which people over 40 are considered difficult to place in the labor market – which hits women especially hard. Especially for highly skilled women, a return to their former professional lives is generally accompanied by a loss of status.

I must emphasize that much of this is a distinctly West Germany phenomenon. In other nearby countries, people are less suspicious of nursery schools, kindergartens and all-day schools as vehicles of state indoctrination. Not everywhere do women have such bad consciences about being «step-mothers» just because they are not available to their children around the clock. Only recently, the ambitious Hessian SPD politician Andrea Ypsilanti was asked, somewhat accusingly, whether it was true that her son had had to feed himself during school vacation. And indeed, between breakfast and dinner the 12-year-old boy had indeed had to make his own sandwiches. What a profound example of child neglect!

It may be that the Germans exaggerate the situation. But recent studies about Britain and the USA – where a helpful infrastructure for working women is often lacking – have also indicated a growing disillusion with the goal of «having it all». Things are a good deal better in the Scandinavian lands. But in almost all countries, something appears to be still missing which for years has been longed for, evoked, lauded – yet seldom seen: the New Man.

Not that the editors of our women's magazines have given up all hope of setting an example by avidly discussing the few examples of the New Man that are to be found out there. So these days you can read a great deal about him: he gladly accepts government-paid paternity leave, accompanies his little daughter to the sandbox, kicks a soccer ball around with his young son. And unlike his wife, who tends to extend for as long as possible the time that she can spend with her small children, when his paid paternity leave is over the gentleman is more reliably likely to return to his job. The lure of money is too strong, at least temporarily.

This may be seen as the good news. The not-so-good news is that the New Man will continue to be an uncertain option in future. Young men today are by no means automatically more open and liberal; on the contrary, they seem to increasingly harbor the idea that there is a God-given division of labor between the sexes.

Academics, pedagogues and politicians alike insist that great effort – along with all manner of social policy measures – must be expended to overcome that archaic viewpoint. That's certainly a good thing for the advertising and PR agencies and pedagogical institutions that are supposed to generate the desired new attitudes; they will collect heaps of money for their efforts. But whether they, or even financial incentives, will succeed in creating a critical mass of New Men, is highly questionable. It

is very difficult to fight against deeply ingrained patterns of behavior which, moreover, have a certain biological underpinning.

I fear that this also applies to the women for whom a change of attitude is being recommended.

Permit me to indulge in a brief personal digression: I myself am the daughter of a couple who lived out the ideal of equality of the sexes back in the 1950s. My father supported my mother's career by cooking our lunches at midday and taking care of us children. But we learned independence quite early. It was taken for granted that I would walk to kindergarten on my own – and of course there were women in the neighborhood who regarded me as a poor «key child» and found my mother's professional ambition inappropriate.

Was my father, then, a New Man, gentle and sensitive? Not a bit of it! The meatballs he served up for our lunch were mighty fine, but he could also be as nasty a tyrant as those of his colleagues who had their wives wait on them as if they were pashas. His unique quality was something else: he was totally without ambition, a man uninterested in his own career.

Thus he demonstrated all those qualities which women still tend to avoid when they are looking for a man with whom to start a family. Consciously or unconsciously, most women still prefer men who are at a «higher level» than themselves, at least as far as education and professional status are concerned. For university-educated women, this attitude is often a trap: not only does it narrow the field of potential candidates, but career-oriented men are often more interested in a partner who will take care of things at home, rather than a woman with ambitions of her own.

However it is not just masculine attitudes that would have to change, but also those of women, who should look not just for a potent bread-winner, but for a man willing to undertake a swap of traditional roles. In other words, a «softie», a man of feeling. Yes, dear ladies, it is time to say farewell to «Me Tarzan, you Jane». And for men, this exchange of roles harbors a not inconsiderable risk, one which women have been taking for a long time. Under this «new order», it may well be the career wife who, after he has served his function, abandons the docile house-husband in favor of a fresh, attractive younger man.

Such cultural shifts still take a good deal of time. But there is another change for which we don't have much time: in Germany as in other countries, the greatest obstacle to joy in having children is a bizarre idea about how to plan our lives, imposed on us by a totally obsolete view of aging which can only be viewed as discriminatory. These days, many well-educated women first bear children at an age when other women are already climbing the career ladder of which they hope to reach the top (unless, that is, they give up the idea of having children at all, whether because it is already biologically too late or because they do not have the right partner). But even then, they generally have a period of hesitation behind them which often prevents them from grabbing the career opportunities that come along. That's what happened to me, and I know many women in similar circumstances.

But after a break in one's career for child-rearing, it remains difficult today to return to one's chosen professional path. There's a silly saying that by the time you reach the age of 40, you've become something – but you won't become anything else. There is a certain logic behind that statement: No employer will willingly invest in workers who will be retiring in the foreseeable future.

In Germany, until just a few years ago it was the government-supported fashion to pension off even highly trained people in their early 50s, under the mistaken impression that this would make room for the hiring of younger workers. But research into aging has long shown what most of us feel and see: that people do not stop learning after the age of 40; that the wisdom gained from experience is worth at least as much as youthful energy; that only in a few occupations nowadays are there legitimate physical grounds for forcing people into early retirement; and that the short span of time between the start of a career after lengthy preparatory training, and the day when an early retiree begins drawing a pension, is not enough to enable an aging society to provide security for its retired workers. All this has been acknowledged for a long time now. Another factor is that a sufficient flow of children who are in turn potential payers into our social systems (social security, universal medical care, etc.) depends largely on the non-discrimination of older workers, especially women.

Since our society places greater value on freedom of choice for men and women than it does on the wisdom derived from age and experience, this may provide the likeliest leverage through which flexibility will become the province not only of women, but of men as well.

One can only hope.