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Yes, but isn't it all over now?

Joan Chittister | Jan. 7, 2014 From Where I Stand

The Shriver Report, the multimedia effort by Maria Shriver to document one of the most important social trends of our time -- the emergence of women into all areas of society -- will issue its third set of findings in a few days. The new report examines the alarming economic insecurity of American women and their families and leads with three tantalizing issues: First, "Here's Why the Success of Business Lies in Gender Equality"; second, "How Are the Evolving Roles of Women Shaping Men's Modern Realities?"; and third, "Is This One of the Reasons for the Wage Gap?"

With the Jan. 12 release of The Shriver Report [1], both the men and women of the United States will get new news about the age-old question of equality and justice for women. And trust me: We need the information because the question is still raging.

In England, Fraser Nelson, blogger for *The Spectator*, announced in July [2]: "Women under 40 have won their battle. It's the young men we now need to worry about."

In the United States, on June 29, 1998, *Time* magazine hinted about the death of feminism -- much as they did about the death of God on April 8, 1966.

And even some women think feminism is against men, a distortion of the natural magnetism and need of each for the other.

Nevertheless, Feministing.com, an e-zine for young feminist activists, treats the feminist topics of this generation without apology and with gusto.

Author and editor Courtney E. Martin in a 2010 TED talk [3] clearly noted that feminism is very much alive. The difference, Martin says, is that this generation uses a different feminist language.

This generation "still cares about equal pay, but they also see immigration as a woman's issue," and "they don't talk about protest marches much; instead, they organize online."

Martin points out that this generation doesn't have a single feminist icon as an older generation did in Gloria Steinem, for instance. Rather, this generation, she reminds us, has thousands of young women -- and men -- who now take the feminist vision of the world for granted.

So what is the answer to the question of whether or not the struggle is over for women?

I gave both perspectives a lot of thought. I couldn't help but wonder -- conscious of the loud cries of those who still decry it -- if feminism as it once envisioned the world might not have found itself cooled and gone dry, successful to a point but indeed, now over.

Then I thought back to how it had been, back before this new generation began to proclaim the woman's movement over. Back to John F. Kennedy's creation in 1961 of the Presidential Commission on the Status of

Women. Its Peterson Report called for the end of workplace discrimination of women, for affordable child care to make it possible for women to work and care for their children at the same time, for equal employment opportunity for women, and for paid maternity leave.

It is 50 years later and lo, three of those four issues have yet to be resolved.

That means, of course, that women are hired, yes, but are promoted more slowly and to lesser positions than men.

It means that women can still be paid less for doing the same job as a man.

It means that much of the money women make goes to pay for child care, affecting the overall financial security of the family despite the double-jobbing.

It means that in the United States, maternity militates against a woman's ability to be both a healthy mother and a healthy employee. Instead, she goes back to work sleep-deprived and exhausted. But most telling of all, perhaps: Lesotho, Swaziland, Papua New Guinea and the United States are the only countries in the world that do not mandate paid maternal leave. Not to mention paternal leave, as many countries do as well.

Or look at it this way: We love to argue how much better off American women are than are other women around the world.

In Yemen, a rapist is not prosecuted if, to save the family "honor," the girl is forced to marry the man who rapes her. But in the United States, an adult man, a teacher, can rape one of his 14-year-old high school students but because she looks older than 14, a judge may decide that she was "as much in control of the situation" as the man and give the rapist nothing but a 30-day jail sentence.

In 28 countries, approximately 140 million young girls have been subjected to pharaonic cliterodectomies, the excision of a woman's genitalia, to increase her husband's sexual pleasure and to control what men have decided is a woman's raging sexual drive. Which, of course, they argue is God's will for women.

In the United States, college administrators refuse either to investigate or to prosecute campus rapes. The purpose is to preserve the reputation of the college rather than the integrity of the girl. Or better yet, to protect the stars of football teams that bring big money and national attention to the school.

In the United States, the lack of gender equity is still very cleverly masked: In every arena, women are still paid 20 to 25 percent less than a man for the same work, despite the fact that a loaf of bread or a tank of gas or heat for the house or a trip to a doctor's office still costs a single mother exactly what it costs a man.

And finally, the agendas and laws of U.S. society are still devised, defined and determined by male majorities in every major institution -- civil, social and ecclesiastical -- despite the fact that that one country after another has established quotas for lawmakers to assure gender balance in the kinds of views, concerns and issues dealt with in national assemblies.

No doubt about it: Gender equity is the bog of gender equality.

According to the World Economic Forum, of the top countries considered best for women in 2012 -- measured by the metrics of health and wellness, education, political empowerment and economic participation -- the United States ranks No. 22 of 135, after the Philippines, Lesotho, Latvia, South Africa and Cuba. Go figure.

On Jan. 12, 50 years after the first report of the Kennedy commission on the economic and social circumstances confronting American women, Maria Shriver, President Kennedy's niece, has taken up these unfinished issues

for all our sakes. Maria will present to the nation the third and summary segment of her groundbreaking Shriver Report on the condition of women in America. Now. In our time. Today.

The Shriver Report will answer the question of whether or not this feminist stuff is really passé and so the last generation. It is a life-changing question for all of us.

From where I stand, it seems important for women and men of all ages -- and institutions of all ilk -- to follow this report closely. But it is especially impacting for the younger women of this generation before -- unknowing and unprepared, full of hope and ready to shine -- they find that there is an invisible ceiling hanging over their heads, too. A ceiling made of ancient attitudes and roles taken for granted, not to be challenged, never to be admitted and now unspoken but still very much in place. And still affecting both women and men deeply.

Otherwise, this new dome, however artistically camouflaged, will be the one this generation isn't even able to see, let alone prepared to confront but will suffer the limits of in ways that diminish us all.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a frequent *NCR* contributor.]

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