

A CASE OF TRICKLE-DOWN FEMINISM

Kari Kendall Cameron

“Trickle-down feminism,” a notion that rights and privileges enjoyed by an elite group of women will trickle down and benefit the majority of women, is wholly ineffective in promoting positive social change. It should be replaced by the principles of equalism, a belief in the value and responsibility of all people. Social workers, through our professional experience and knowledge of family dynamics, can play a pivotal role in promoting equalism over trickle-down feminism.

This spring, the most skilled golfers in the world met at a prestigious golf club in Georgia to play in the Masters Golf Tournament. The club, Augusta National, does not allow women to be members. Recently, the National Council of Women’s Organizations (NCWO) led a public relations campaign to shame the television network that broadcasted the event and the event’s numerous corporate sponsors into pressuring the private club to accept women as members. The NCWO (2003) has declared that these sponsors “sanction sex discrimination” and that “the Club has a moral obligation to open its doors to women.”

This attempt by the NCWO to break down a gender barrier only reinforces a socio-economic one. There is a waiting list to join Augusta National Golf Club and an undisclosed initiation fee for new members. The NCWO regards Augusta National’s policy as a symbol of how women are still denied the opportunity to participate fully in society, and of how men, namely corporate leaders and policy makers, deem this acceptable.

I take the NCWO’s initiative as a symbol of the skewed priorities of the feminist movement. This campaign embraces “trickle-down feminism,” the idea that a benefit given to the elite will trickle down the socioeconomic chute to benefit all women. Author Anna Quindlen (2002) uses the term to credit the far-reaching positive effects of feminism in this same manner. I, however, see trickle-down feminism as ineffective. The expectation that feminism will trickle down to benefit all women is unrealistic, and excludes those of lower socioeconomic status. It belies that feminism is not integrated in the lives of most women and must flow downward from the privileged top. This is precisely the problem I have with the NCWO’s campaign against Augusta National; its highbrow criticism draws energy and attention from the more appropriate goal of working to earn equality for all members of our

society.

Social workers can appreciate the rich heritage of the feminist movement and benefit from its concrete gains. However, the natural evolution of ideas suggests that we become much more than feminists. Demanding more social, personal, and political freedom for women to make their own choices is still relevant and necessary and has been a hallmark of feminists' aims. Yet, only one-quarter of women identify themselves as feminists (Hymowitz, 2002). Perhaps a new designation is necessary: one that is inclusive and captures the essence of the quest for fair opportunities and equitable choices for both sexes, across socioeconomic status. Those who acknowledge and respect the importance of equality in our society, as well as support policy initiatives to strengthen it, may call themselves "equalists." The call for equalism as an alternative to feminism is beginning to gain momentum in popular culture as a means of clarifying the often contradictory and confusing connotations of the term "feminist" (Minx, 1999). For those men and women disillusioned by the association of feminism with the practice of trickle-down feminism, the concept of equalism could serve as a unifying remedy.

The NCWO's agenda includes many legislative initiatives that aim to improve the quality of life for millions of Americans; however, the attention showered on Augusta's policy has defined the purpose and mission of NCWO for the public at large. It is striking how much media attention the NCWO's campaign has received and how many of the organization's resources have been put into it. In business, wise investments generate capital and poor investments set a company back. This is also true with political capital. The NCWO has squandered resources that could be used to advance the rights of members of our society. Equalism, rather than the elitist approach of trickle-down feminism, is more in line with a utilitarian approach to facing problems that keep socioeconomic segments of our society separate. Attacking a prestigious golf club's membership policy ultimately benefits only a handful of wealthy women.

Equalists must protect the underrepresented and underserved. Social change drawn from the spirit of equalism reflects an inherent respect for men and women in all segments of society, a level of respect that is already a part of our social work heritage. Equalist social workers know the power of labels and language. They resist labeling problems as "women's" or "men's." An equalist social worker acknowledges the common etiology of a problem, draws solutions from men and women, and does not try to address social problems affecting both genders by only looking at half of the equation.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), the 18th century feminist philosopher, included in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, her opinion of

national education: "It is not for the benefit of society that a few brilliant men should be brought forward at the expense of the multitude" (p. 168). Her view that educational rights should not be limited to a few also applies to the civic and social rights we wish for women to enjoy. Our clients will not realize the benefit of a female millionaire playing golf at a private club, yet we are spending precious political capital on this campaign. Our future is not at a golf course for the wealthy. In fact I, and many women, want no part of the effort. It simply has no relevance in the lives of most women.

In addition to the practice of trickle-down feminism, the pervasive notion of "women's issues" undercuts the commonality we share as humans. We are discounting our inter-gender relationships and reinforcing a segregated world. By labeling such things as childcare, reproductive health, and welfare as "women's issues," we are severing men's vested interest in these issues and, in effect, absolving men of their roles and responsibilities. Social workers know the dynamics and interconnections of male and female members of the family. We see the family in its entire ecosystem, and have a duty to present the integrated nature of problems affecting families we serve. A grieving father, brother, or son facing the loss of his mother, sister, or daughter to breast cancer would not consider it only a "woman's issue." Men and women are in this society together, and the struggles of one will be felt by the other.

Trickle-down feminism should be replaced by an agenda that carries the traditions of the trail-blazing feminists who contributed much to our society and touched people of all socio-economic levels. Another classic example of trickle-down feminism is the movement to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. The agenda should instead include a long-run lobbying effort to see the confirmation of Supreme Court Justices who will rightfully interpret "all persons" as written in the 14th Amendment of our Constitution.

According to Simon (1994), "Social workers' empowerment is, in part, contingent upon recognition by the public and its officials of the contributions being made to the social whole by members of the profession" (p. 192). As social workers, we are a crucial part of an informed debate, working and witnessing the dynamics of individuals and families in hospitals, public health clinics, foster care agencies, and countless other critical social service organizations. Our profession has the knowledge and experience to contribute to social policy instead of once again being sidelined as others dictate the direction of key policies affecting our clients. Trickle-down feminism will not perpetuate the changes necessary to advance all members in our society; moreover, it disregards those who are on the front lines of discrimination. Social workers in all capacities are critical to the promotion of equalism.

Allowing women membership in the Augusta National Golf Club will be

an easy way out of responsibility for the influential men in the club. They will have offered this symbolic accommodation while continuing the clubby, restrictive culture that permeates too many companies, public agencies, and organizations. They will succeed in placating a few vocal feminists with an empty gesture void of any meaningful social change. Feminists would be no less complicit in this sham. Real social change cannot be sold for a membership card at a millionaires club.

References

- Hymowitz, K. S. (2002). A new feminism? *Public Interest*, 149, 116-121.
- Minix, M. (1999, October 21) Equalism, not feminism. *Indiana Daily Student*. Retrieved April 13, 2002 from the World Wide Web:<http://idsnews.com/news/10199/opinion/102199feminism.html>
- National Association of Social Workers (1996). *Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Washington, D.C.: NASW.
- National Council of Women's Organizations (2003). www.womensorganizations.org
- Quindlen, A. (2002). Transcript of speech at Women and Girl's Third Annual Grant Awards Luncheon. Fairfield County Community Foundation, April 10, 2002.
- Simon, B. L. (1994). *The empowerment tradition of American social work*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1996). *A vindication of the rights of woman*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Kari Kendall Cameron is a second-year MS student at the Columbia University School of Social Work concentrating in Clinical Practice within the World of Work. She is currently an intern at the Musician's Assistance Program, Local 802 AFM in New York City. She holds a BS from Georgia Southern University in Education and English.