Calling for a more authentic equality between men and women.

The willful blindness to basic biological difference under the mantra of equality ultimately disempowers women,” Ashley McGuire writes in her new book, *Sex Scandal: The Drive to Abolish Male and Female*.

“When we deny sex,” she writes, “we cast ourselves into the most brute state of nature: a battle of strengths that pits men and women against each other as rivals and enemies.”
“But sex doesn’t need to be a fault line in a battle, or a source of national scandal,” she continues. “The difference between the two sexes should be the starting point for a more authentic equality. . . . Only when we can say *vive la différence* can men and women truly begin to live as equals.”

Kathryn Jean Lopez: How exactly are we scared of sex?

Ashley McGuire: We have become afraid of something that has been obvious since time immemorial, namely that we are either male or female. It is not an exaggeration to say that in certain quarters (college campuses being an obvious one), that truth has become an offensive statement. There have even been attempts to pass laws that would make it a civil-rights violation to say as much. Society is increasingly scandalized by two concepts: 1) that our sex is established (from conception, no less), and 2) that it entails differences that are important and often immutable.

Lopez: Does this misunderstanding hurt women in a particular way?

McGuire: Women have the most to lose in a world that denies sexual difference, or that denies sex as a category outright. For starters, women cannot make claims on the basis of their sex, such as workplace discrimination, if sex is not a legitimate category to begin with. This is where you will see radical feminists lining up alongside social conservatives in expressing concern about the gender-identity movement. But as I argue in my book, when we talk about a “gender-neutral” society and make such a society our cultural ideal, we wind up defaulting to a world where the male stereotype becomes the baseline for measuring equality and rights.

For example, women are only equal with men in the military if they can serve in combat roles, which assumes that macho strength is what makes a good soldier. Women are not equal with men unless they can eradicate their fertility through contraception and abortion, which assumes the womb-less male body as the
paradigm. We even have a pill now, female Viagra, to help women perform sexually more like a man. Rather than force society to recognize and adjust to what makes women unique, we just tip the needle more in the male direction.

Lopez: Why should men — who aren’t exactly over-appreciated as it is — care about this? What right do they have to intervene?

McGuire: Men are also in a very difficult position in a world that denies sex difference. As I point out in the introduction, men can’t really win. If they do something chivalrous, they are patronizing; if they don’t, they are chauvinists. But I argue in the book that men and women help each other to be our better selves. For example, women help draw virtue out of men by requiring them to subvert and channel their desires and strengths in heroic ways.

Lopez: Is the Midwife Alliance of North America (MANA) really calling pregnant women “birthing individuals”? And is this really something that should disturb us?

McGuire: Yes, and yes. One author decried the blowback that MANA received for this statement, lamenting the fact that some women had the audacity to “assert that only women have the ability to give birth, and that such capacity is what women should celebrate about themselves.”

How dare we!

And this is not an isolated incident. Just a week or two ago, the British Medical Association published a leaflet encouraging people to use the phrase “pregnant people” in lieu of “expectant mother” and “chestfeeding” instead of “breastfeeding” in order to be more “inclusive.” This example perfectly illustrates the thesis of my book: that in the quest to be gender neutral, we end up erasing woman. What we wind up devaluing is the uniquely female
contribution, including the most patently obvious contribution of bearing and birthing children.

Lopez: Why does Fifty Shades of Gray bother you so much? The movie makes it into the first full page of your introduction!

McGuire: I think the popularity of Fifty Shades — and especially the fact that two of its movie adaptations were released on Valentine’s Day weekend — really sums up what happens to romance in a “sex-blind” society. We wind up with the basest stereotype of male sexuality exalted as romantic, even when that sexuality is forced on women. Romance and chivalry (and even consent) start to disappear quickly in a world that tells men and women that women should be treated exactly like men. Sex, as we see in Fifty Shades, starts to take on an aggressive and even violent theme. It’s the exact opposite of what women are looking for in a relationship.

Lopez: Would you want to turn back the clock on women in the military?

McGuire: No! In fact, there is so much room to rethink — not just in the military, but in so many different career paths — how we can use the unique talents of women without forcing them into a male model that sets them up to fail. One of the things I keep hearing in conversations with members of our armed forces is that women are often hitting their professional stride in the military right as they are entering their peak childbearing years, as well as that it is hard to advance in the ranks without combat experience. The military has already instituted different physical standards for men and women. Can they do the same thing with the way men and women advance in the ranks? Because their approach of telling, say, female midshipmen they can no longer wear their skirts, or telling would-be moms they can freeze their eggs to climb the ranks, or sending women into combat when we know they are less likely to survive without injury, doesn’t cut it.
Lopez: How have universities and colleges, as you write, “become the primary engines behind making sexual difference scandalous”?

McGuire: Women’s-studies and gender-studies departments have, for decades, been pushing the notion that our maleness and femaleness are socialized and that gender is a social construct invented by the patriarchy to oppress women. They have been arguing that women need to liberate themselves from these social constructs in order to attain equality with men. I argue in the book that they undercut themselves from the get-go when they use masculine standards as the baselines for measuring equality — such as when the womb-less male body and the male model of breadwinner who works full-time are held up as the ideals. And here we are in 2017 celebrating abortion and the fact that four in ten households are run by single women.

Furthermore, colleges and universities have been experimenting with forced sexual integration since long before the rest of us were paying close attention. I think co-ed dorms, bathrooms, and now increasingly, dorm *rooms* are the perfect example. This is an acceptable arrangement if the sexes really are no different. And yet we know that something like three-fourths of assaults happen in campus housing. But schools have tied their own hands when it comes to doing anything about it when their own writing centers are publishing guidelines suggesting that even grammar doesn’t apply when it comes to the differences between men and women!

Lopez: And yet you write that “social conservatives and radical feminists increasingly line up together.” What could be some common-ground efforts for the common good?

McGuire: I think the common ground here is the shared concern over how to handle the issues of violence against women, trafficking, pornography, and actual discrimination when sex is redefined to mean nothing. We saw this when a senior official at the ACLU, a mother, resigned over her concern about
allowing men access to women’s bathrooms. I also document this common ground in my interview with left-wing feminist Kathleen Sloan, who told me about her friend who runs a rape-crisis center in Canada that was forced to appeal to the highest court in the country to defend its right to preserve itself as a safe space for women. And we can see this on full display at a panel held recently at the Heritage Foundation with feminists across the spectrum, all in agreement with the statement that “biology is not bigotry.” All of the panelists argued that women lose when we cannot make claims on the basis of our sex, because we women are uniquely prone to being the victim of certain evils such as rape.

Lopez: What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned as a wife and mother?

McGuire: I have been most struck as a mother by just how early children begin to understand their identity through the lens of their maleness or femaleness. I marvel at the clarity with which my daughter, for example, can see the things that our society is trying to muddle. As a wife, I’ve found that marital happiness is often found in doing the opposite of what our society tells me to do. I’m not going to sit down and make sure that my husband and I have a 50–50 split of chores and childcare in a given week, and I am not going to quantify my contribution in our home based on whether our paychecks are the same. We know that women want very different things than men, but we first have to free ourselves from society’s insistence that we live our adult married lives exactly as our husbands do in order to be equal with them. Modeling that freedom and happiness to my children is what I strive for.

[Read more from our interview here.]

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