

Do we still need knights in shining amour?

By Laura Sasman

Sister Namibia recently ran a number of feminist activities with students in local institutes of higher learning. While we thought that women students were generally excited and interested in the presentations, we thought that we detected a sense of genuine worry from many of the men who attended our activities. It seemed that what worries these still very-young men is that they have the sense that they are responsible for protecting women's decency and morality. They seemed especially worried about the fact that women are rejecting their attempts at gallantry and chivalry. And their concern seemed to be echoed at social-networking platforms as well.

All this made me wonder what it was about the education of men in our society that made these students react in this way. This was when one word popped up in my mind. "Chivalry." Having (o)tttered the word, other images that jumped to mind included old fashioned gentlemanliness, the rescue of a fragile woman (the damsel in distress,) and courteously pulling out of chairs and holding of

doors. So what is wrong with this? I recently attended a conference on engaging men in women's right work and one of this issues that were discussed to some lengths was the (changing) concepts of masculinity in southern Africa. What shocked me a bit was that it appeared that most of the male participants seemed to still be clinging to "traditional" concepts of masculinity. In other words, the man as the paterfamilias, the decision maker, head of the household and the primary provider. Also as the defender of family honour.

In contrast, the "new" masculinity was presented as chivalrous – as men holding doors open for women, even making tea for women. Except, all participants presented as "new" (read chivalrous) men were in agreement that because they are holding doors open for "their" women, that the women should feel honoured and respected and that they – in return – would "know their place and role." This, they felt, meant that women would have their meals ready on time, that "their women" would see that they needed to relax after returning home from work and of course, that their women would intuitively understand when their men are in need of sex and take care of their men's needs. What a trade off! Of course, we know that the benefits of chivalry to women are only short term. The problem with the concept and practice of chivalry, is that it is rooted in the medieval feudal system. It was about knowing your place and duties in the court relative to the monarch and higher ranking nobles, as well as understanding your loyalties to that court. Thus the notion being "courteous." Yes it was also about protecting the weak, in other words, having responsibilities to your "subjects." After all, the peasants were the slaves of nobility and protecting the weak meant the knight's interest (his manor and his fields) were protected in return. In short chivalry was about a hierarchy of powerful men who ruled over others.

This leaves us with the question, what is the role of chivalry in the 21st century. The only conclusion we can come to, is that it is still about power and power relations, this time between men and women. The implication being, that because men behave chivalrously, that women understand that there is a social ranking and that everybody understands their places, duties and roles in this hierarchy. Over stepping the social boundaries might still be met with appropriate punishment.

To conclude, while I can understand the worry of young male students when confronted with talk about women's equality and issues pertaining to women's autonomy, it clearly is time for a paradigm shift. We, the women and men living in a 21st century democracy, have to start relating to the other sex as equals worthy of equal respect and dignity. That, women are not asking for "special consideration" or protection reserved for the weak in society. Of course, this also means that gender-based violence - like class violence of the middle ages - is addressed decisively. It also means that we as women stop expecting men to hold a door open or pull out a chair and that men are also entitled to such treatment from women.



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