

Subtle Sexism By David Gallagher

The more observant amongst you will have noticed that Mrs Gallagher seems to be getting a little... well... a little podgy. Despite initial suspicions of excessive gorging on her favourite white chocolate, it turns out that there's actually a miniature Gallagher on the way, at the end of October all being well.

Even four-and-a-bit months before the big day, I've found that my life is already changing in strange ways. My own mother has now completely bypassed me and goes straight to source so that rather than being told that I'm her darling beloved schnooky-wookum son, I get told that I should be doing a better job looking after the mother of her grandchild. Where once my browser history was full of football gossip it's now dominated by mumsnet forum topics like "what colour should my baby's poo be?" Where I used to fixate on awesome gadgets like robotic exoskeletons, I now find myself reading about exciting new products like nappies which play a tune when the baby pees or breast-feeding bras for men.

Being a philosopher, or perhaps more accurately a procrastinator, I've also found myself thinking about the big decisions we're going to face bringing up this child. At what age will it attend its first Liverpool match? How much of our budget should be set aside each year for a Liverpool kit? Is it morally justifiable to disown the child if it decides to support another club? etc etc

But perhaps the biggest change has been in my views about the old enemy, namely: girls. Where once they were simply the hyper-emotional bearers of girl-germs, now not only am I married to one of these creatures but there's a 50-50 chance that I'll be jointly responsible for the creation and wellbeing of another one. A frightening prospect, and that thought made me pay more attention than I might otherwise have when a UN specialist recently stated that out of all the countries she had visited so far the UK had the most pervasive, in-your-face sexism.

Did I hear that right? When the #Bringbackourgirls campaign has highlighted such low educational expectations for and value of girls in some countries? When a woman's testimony in a Yemeni court is only considered valid if backed up by a man's account? When a woman can only drink alcohol in Abu Dhabi if they carry a "pass" signed by their husband? Am I really about to bring a child into the world in one of the most sexist countries or is this just "political correctness gone mad"?

We've certainly come a long way since, in a moment of hilarious irony, an advert placed by the Irish Government in 1976 for an equal opportunities officer proposed different salary scales for men and women. Thankfully, the legal structures which supported sexism have mostly been torn down. But being a mathematician, I look at the stats and here are just a few:

- In the world of work, women receive on average between 10 and 15% less money than men doing exactly the same job

- Still only 1 in 5 executive board members of FTSE 100 companies are women
- and only 1/4 of MPs are women
- In terms of wider society attitudes, a recent survey found that 1/3 of brits think that a woman should be held partly responsible for being sexually assaulted if she was drunk
- 71% of 16-18 year olds say they hear sexual name-calling of girls on at least a daily basis
- and about 1 and a half thousand people seek help each year while being forced into marriage against their will, of whom the vast majority are women

The evidence goes on and on... There's no doubt that many women have to fight hard for any kind of equality. But why would this be?

Perhaps it's to do with the bizarre lack of promotion of female role models. From times past, how many stories are there like that of Rosalind Franklin whose work was critical to the discovery of DNA but who was sidelined for her male colleagues Watson and Crick. Even Florence Nightingale is portrayed as the soft and gentle "lady with the lamp" when she was more accurately a tenacious, highly intelligent, forceful, imaginative and sometimes troubled campaigner and letter-writer, hardly a gentle benign soul. Even in modern times men and women are portrayed very differently in the media. When men are "the boss", women are simply "bossy", when men are "driven", women are "pushy"... And how many disney princesses or film floozies are so busy being beautiful that they get themselves in trouble and have to wait to be saved by an all-action prince charming?

It might seem strange for me to talk to a hall full of young men about this, and my point is certainly not to try to inculcate some kind of inherited masculine guilt complex. The more positive point is that truthfully, us men are perhaps in the best position to do something about this, to challenge sexism from other men, to change the everyday culture of objectification and warped expectations of girls and women and to celebrate the tremendous qualities of our sisters, mothers and friends. Because each and every day, each one of us, each one of you, is either complicit with or active against what we might call "everyday sexism". What ends in poorer job prospects and society status, surely starts in everyday comments and attitudes - you know the sort... "You run like a girl", "stupid woman"... not necessarily intended to be sexist but reinforcing the association of women with weakness, submission or shrill pushiness. I believe passionately that for us men there is no neutral position on this - we make a decision to either let it happen or take a stand against it.

Whether baby Gallagher is a boy or a girl, I don't want it to grow up with the sense that the page 3 girl is the model woman or that science is really the domain of boys. I want them, like all of you, to have whatever opportunities match their talents. And it's up to us all to challenge what we know to be unfair and belittling both institutionally and on a small scale. Equality means equality all the time, every day, with no exceptions.