

WOMAN'S ROLE: AN ADLERIAN VIEW¹

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In recent years American women have formed the Women's Liberation Movement to fight more militantly for equal rights—socially, professionally, and politically. In view of the fact that Alfred Adler identified the social and cultural discrimination against women as a source of neurosis in both sexes more than sixty years ago, I thought it timely to recall his psychology briefly as it relates to current struggles for equality between the sexes. Adler said:

One of the chief obstacles to marriage lies in the prevailing opinion that the man is functionally superior, which leads men into vain expectations of rulership and makes girls rebel against their feminine function: they naturally reject a role of servitude in a "man-made world." . . . If an individual feels victimized by love or marriage, it disturbs every association of life (1, p. 49).

Despite all the advances that have been made in the rights of women during my lifetime in the various cultures that I have known, woman's self-image is still challenged in a number of ways peculiar to her sex. In the wake of increasing sexual freedom and changing sexual mores inequities become more obvious. While they are not necessarily determining factors for a woman's self-evaluation, they may "seduce" a woman into feeling inferior and resentful of her feminine role, and envying men for their greater freedom in society.

A woman experiences from infancy whether she, as a girl, is appreciated as much as a boy. If her parents are disappointed because they expected a son, she may develop inferiority feelings about her function right from the start.

If her physique does not fit the ideal of her times, this will play a special part in adolescence when her adequacy in her role as a potential sex partner is tested.

Despite equal educational opportunities, she may be limited by social prejudices from full utilization of her talents and training.

The next test comes in her choice of husband. Here she demonstrates to the observer to what degree she accepts her roles as sexual partner, wife, mother, and homemaker.

Her success as mother is demonstrated (*a*) in her ability to involve the father as partner in child-rearing rather than regard him as competitor for the child's favor; and (*b*) in her ability to widen the

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child's interests from the family to friends, school, and eventually the community.

Adler's term, *masculine protest*, was coined to express the methods that both males and females use to compensate for their feelings of inferiority toward each other. This is in contrast to Freud's one-sided view of the female as being the only sex to suffer from such feelings of inferiority. In Adler's words:

The goal of superiority is always more or less identified with the masculine role owing to the privileges, both real and imaginary, with which our present civilization has invested the male. A girl's feeling of inferiority may be markedly increased when she realizes that she is a female, and a boy's also when he doubts his maleness. Both compensate by an exaggeration of what they imagine to be masculine behavior. This form of compensation, which may have the most varied and intricate consequences according to circumstances, is what I have called the *masculine protest*. Its chief symptom both in mind and in outward conduct is a needlessly domineering attitude towards the opposite sex. It is always noticeably connected with a very ambitious style of life, with a goal of superman or of a very much pampered woman (1, p. 42).

Unfortunately, the demands of the radical feminist groups for what they call "woman power," often sound to men like a battle cry which they interpret as a threat to their own masculine roles rather than as a desire of the women to join them in equal partnership.

The goal of equality between the sexes could be more readily achieved if women would try to make clear to men how cooperation, rather than competition for dominance, is of benefit to both sexes. Many men are simply not aware that women still encounter social inequalities. If this is brought to their attention in a noncombative spirit, and if they are shown how equality is of benefit *to men as well as to women*, men would more willingly participate in correcting any existing injustices. We find the following quotation from Adler most pertinent and illuminating:

Any one who understands this [the importance of cooperation] knows also that the problem of love is a social problem and cannot be solved by a person who brings with him little interest in his partner, or by any one who does not have the conviction that he has a part to play in the development of humanity (2, p. 192).³

REFERENCES

1. ADLER, A. *Problems of neurosis* (1929). New York: Harper & Row, 1964.
2. ADLER, A. *Social interest* (1933). New York: Capricorn, 1964.
3. *New York Times*, August 27, 1970, p. 30.

³It is interesting to note that since this paper was read, July 2, Betty Friedan and some other leaders of the Women's Liberation Movement, during Women's Strike for Equality, August 26, expressed their desire to cooperate with the men rather than fight with them. Mrs. Friedan said, "Man is not the enemy, man is a fellow-victim" (3). Such procedure elicited sympathy, understanding and support from many men of various social classes.