AMCAP Men and Women: Together in Mutual Respect and Unity

Della Mae Rasmussen
AND YE WILL NOT HAVE A MIND TO INJURE ONE ANOTHER, BUT TO LIVE PEACEABLY, AND TO RENDER TO EVERY MAN [AND WOMAN] ACCORDING TO THAT WHICH IS HIS [OR HER] DUE.” THESE WORDS FROM MOSIAH 4:13 EXPRESSED MY MAJOR GOAL AS PRESIDENT-ELECT AND PRESIDENT OF AMCAP.

I DESIRED THAT THERE BE A GREAT SENSE OF CARING, RESPECT, AND UNITY AMONG OUR MEMBERS. I HAVE FELT VERY CLOSE TO SOME OF MY COLLEAGUES THROUGH ACTIVITIES IN AMCAP OVER THE YEARS, AND I WANTED THAT SAME BOND TO EXIST FOR EVERY MEMBER OF OUR ORGANIZATION.

FOR THIS REASON AN EXPERIENCE I HAD JUST BEFORE THE AMCAP MEETING IN THE FALL OF 1983 WAS DISTRESSING TO ME. I WAS DELIVERING THE TENTATIVE PROGRAM MATERIALS FOR THE MEETING TO THE NEWSLETTER EDITOR WHEN I CHANCED TO MEET A PROFESSIONAL WOMAN, ADMIRED BY MYSELF AND WELL-RESPECTED IN HER FIELD. IN OUR CHAT I MENTIONED HOW EXCITED I WAS ABOUT THE AMCAP CONVENTION. “WILL I SEE YOU THERE?” I ASKED. SHE STOPPED ME SHORT WITH HER REPLY, “I WON’T BE THERE. I’M NOT A MEMBER ANYMORE. I CAN’T PUT UP WITH THEIR CHAUVINISM!”

I WAS SHOCKED AND ALSO SADDENED, FOR SHE IS A PROFESSIONAL WOMAN OF GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENT, AND I KNEW THAT AMCAP HAD BENEFITED FROM HER MEMBERSHIP IN THE PAST. THAT EXPERIENCE PROMPTED ME TO ASK FOR FEEDBACK IN THE NEWSLETTER FROM MEMBERS OF AMCAP REGARDING THEIR PERCEPTION OF MALE–FEMALE ATTITUDES. I RECEIVED A FEW LETTERS, WHICH I APPRECIATED, BUT ONE HIT WITH SPECIAL IMPACT. THE LETTER WAS WRITTEN BY A MAN, AND I QUOTE, “PERHAPS THE MOST EMBARRASSING AND DISAPPOINTING EXPERIENCE THAT I OBSERVED OF BLATANT SEXISM (IN MY ESTIMATION) OCCURRED DURING THE AMCAP MEETING A FEW YEARS AGO WHEN SEVERAL WOMEN PRESENTED A PROGRAM ON WOMEN’S CONCERNS. SOME AMCAP MALE MEMBERS WENT TO THE REGISTRATION DESK Afterwards AND DEMANDED A REFUND OF THEIR DUES BECAUSE OF THE NATURE OF THE PRESENTATION.” THE WRITER HAD PERSONALLY FOUND THE PRESENTATION EXCELLENT AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING, AND CONSIDERED THE ACTION OF THESE MEN DEMEANING TO THE WOMEN. HE ALSO FELT THAT AMCAP HAD NOT SINCE BEEN WILLING TO EXPLORE TOPICS RELATED TO WOMEN THAT SHOULD BE IMPORTANT TO LDS COUNSELORS AND PSYCHOTHERAPISTS.

THIS PARTICULAR WRITER ALSO MENTIONED THE VIDEO PRESENTATION AT AMCAP OF THE KSL SPECIAL ON MORMON WOMEN AND DEPRESSION. HE BELIEVED THAT THE DISCUSSION THAT FOLLOWED INCLUDED STATEMENTS DEMEANING TO THE WOMEN INVOLVED WITH PRODUCING THE FILM. HE BELIEVED THESE ACTIONS TO BE A MANIFESTATION OF THE MALE EGO AT STAKE, FOR THERE WAS NO DOCTRINAL BASIS OR PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY FOR THE NEGATIVE EXPRESSIONS FOLLOWING THE PROGRAM.

IS IT TRUE THAT THESE EVENTS HAVE RESTRICTED AMCAP’S ABILITY TO DEAL WITH SENSITIVE ISSUES IN FUTURE MEETINGS? ARE WE NOT MEMBERS OF A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION IN AND THROUGH WHICH WE SHOULD BE FREE TO DISCUSS PROFESSIONAL ISSUES? DO SOME “POWERFUL MALES” CONTROL THE TENOR OF THE ORGANIZATION? I WOULD HOPE NOT.

I, MYSELF, FELT SOME NEGATIVE EMOTIONS WHEN THE VIDEO ON MORMON WOMEN AND DEPRESSION WAS PRESENTED. I HAD THE FEELING, ACCURATE OR NOT, THAT IT CLAIMED MORMON WOMEN WERE MORE DEPRESSED THAN OTHER WOMEN. I TOOK
issue with that notion since my own experience had been quite the opposite. However, the women in both cases, and in all cases, had every right to say what they thought and how they felt. Perhaps in attempting to present their strong feelings an attack was perceived. Some of the listeners, both male and female, heard their pain as stridency, and reacted defensively.

It is generally true that we become intolerant when we feel vulnerable or sense a threat to our personal or professional identities, but might we not all sincerely try for greater acceptance and understanding of one another? Allen Bergin, AMCAP president in 1981, wrote an editorial pleading for tolerance. He had heard negative, emotional remarks following a certain program presentation. Dr. Bergin said, “I don’t object to people aggressively asserting their views. I think it is healthy. But I do object to the use of prejudicial and absolutistic judgments in evaluating each other’s viewpoints. I don’t expect differences to go away; but I do expect that a mature tolerance will foster more progress than intolerance.” I agree completely.

In this matter of acceptance and tolerance, there is another area of some concern to me. I have personal knowledge of several formerly active LDS women who completed their master’s or doctoral degrees, and then fell away from the Church. Some of them have become involved with friendly Friday afternoon get-togethers where there is wine and lots of good talk. They enjoy the intellectual stimulation in such collegiality. Surely, our Mormon professionals are also able to engage in stimulating talk. Why do these women leave the church? Could part of it be a lack of acceptance between professional Mormon men and women, and that such an atmosphere of collegiality does not exist in sufficient degree? When these women reject their faith, it is my belief that the Church and the women lose a great deal.

We live in an age of confusion for both males and females. Dr. James C. Neely in his book *Gender, The Myth of Equality* (1981) sees “the terrible, the unnatural differences that have come between the sexes in recent years. These differences have been tearing our families, our very social fabric, apart.” Divisive forces are obviously at work. Just before the recent national elections, I saw a headline and an accompanying article stating that one of the candidates of a major political party had a chance to win if he exploited the gender gap. That is, if he could draw the battle lines between men and women, he could win. To divide and conquer is the way to win. For me, a gender gap victory in any area is a way to lose. It is clear that the gender gap issues are very much with us. An army of writers continue to tell of the disadvantages of being a woman. Statistics are readily available:

1. Fewer women are getting married. In 1970, of women age 25–29, 10.5 percent had never married. In 1981, that figure was almost 25 percent.

2. Since 1960, the birth rate has been cut almost in half, while divorces have more than doubled.

3. About one-third of all children will spend some of their growing up years in a single-parent household and more than half will have working mothers.

4. Only about 15–20 percent of families fit into the category of nuclear family with working father and full-time housewife mother.

5. Men are playing a greater role in the home and in parenting, yet surveys show that working women still shoulder the prime responsibility for housekeeping and child care. Women in the workplace are running into more stress in their dual role of juggling job and family.

6. The most galling issue is the economic disparity between sexes. Few major firms have women as chief executives. Surveys show that women with a doctoral degree earn about $8,600 a year less than a man with a doctorate. Overall, women earn about 62 percent of what men make—a ratio that has been constant for 30 years—
only 3 percent higher than when the first statistics were collected in 1939.

7. One of every seven families is headed by a woman, and roughly 40 percent of these families are below the poverty line (U.S. News and World Report, March 19, 1984). Jeanne H. Block in Sex Role Identity and Ego Development (1984), claims that the ways children—especially girls—are treated by parents, teachers, and others may limit the development of a strong sense of self. For example, although assertive behavior may be essential to one's development, society tends to approve such conduct in boys, but censures it in girls. She also maintains that the socialization pattern, reinforced again by the educational system, provides much more encouragement for boys than for girls.

Franks and Burtle (1974) write, "Recently it has been argued that women, by virtue of sex role definitions, face a daily routine that is more repetitious, frustrating, emotionally exhausting, and narrow in scope than their masculine counterparts." The generalization: women are depressed. The social roles allotted to women in their subservient posture as secretaries, nurses, and assistants, and especially those duties that attend housewifery and motherhood in the current American social scheme are inherently depressing, according to Frank and Burtle.

Phyllis Chesler (1976), feminist clinical psychologist, writes that women are always mourning for what they never had—namely, a positive conception of their own possibilities. She asks you to picture the educated young woman still nourishing plans of graduate school and career, but faced in reality with the "low status tasks" of housekeeping and child-raising and submissive attention to her husband's needs. Her mourning, that is, her depression, is merely an intensification of traits which normal socialization processes induce in women: passivity, dependence, self-depreciation, self-sacrifice, naivete, fearfulness, failure. It is a woman's style of responding to stress."

Sociologist Jessie Bernard has argued that depression, among other problems of women, can be attributed to the "bad deal" they get in marriage and that more married than unmarried women tend to be bothered by feelings of depression, unhappy most of the time . . . sometimes feeling they are about to go to pieces. Marriage makes women increasingly helpless, submissive and conservative, demands more adjustment on the part of wives than of husbands, and "neuters" women sexually. Rarely, she says, has a woman had the opportunity to direct her own life, to realize her personal conception of happiness and fulfillment.

Other writers state that it is undeniably true that women have been offered throughout history only the narrowest range of alternatives in choosing their lifestyles. Many feminists maintain that a woman's biggest problem is overcoming dependency. Stereotypically, women are viewed as emotional, submissive, excitable, passive, house-oriented, not at all adventurous, and showing a strong need for security and dependency.

But there is some encouraging news, for there is evidence that women are generally happier and healthier than their counterparts of 20 years ago. According to a study at Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, the incidence of depression in women ages 35 to 55 has declined. But as women have become less depressed, men have become more so, according to the same studies. Among the most content, according to research on women lawyers, are married mothers holding down challenging professional jobs.

I smiled a little as I read a recent newspaper article citing an unnamed Nevada prison psychologist who asserts that "sexism" in the courts protects most women from prison unless they are diagnosed as psychopaths. Many female career criminals stay out of prison by playing on the sympathies of the courts, blaming their situation on abusive men or the children they have at home. A man accused of the same
offense would go to prison. Apparently, women generally have better verbal ability and can use this with the sexism to stay out of prison!

Now, more specifically what is being said about Mormon women? I have either read or heard the following statements in recent months:

"The Mormon woman . . ."
1. . . . is taught to be subservient to her husband, her father, or her brothers.
2. . . . is confused because she is supposed to fit into the stereotype of the Miss Patty Perfect, yet these characteristics she is supposed to acquire are less valued by the culture in which she lives than are those of the opposite sex.
3. . . . is taught that she is less important than the male.
4. . . . has been brought up to be respectful of and obedient to the priesthood, but too often has internalized that to mean being subservient to all men.
5. . . . has been acted upon, told what to do, and when and how to do it most of her life.
6. . . . is conditioned to be silent: "Don’t complain, you are the key to your family’s happiness." Standing up for their rights or voicing their ideas or opinions is not acceptable.
7. . . . believes she is not really a human being until she becomes a wife and mother; without a man and/or children, she is incomplete.
8. . . . is taught that she is worthy only as an adjunct to someone else.
9. . . . is taught all her life that if a relationship isn’t working, it is her fault.

Ponder for a moment. Do these statements strike you as accurate for most Mormon women in your acquaintance? If they are true for some, are they true for all?

It is the generalizing, the stereotyping, that offends me—not only because, like all generalizations, they are not universally true, but because they have not been true in my own experience. Some Mormon women may fit some of the above generalizations, but I do not believe it is even close to the majority, let alone "all." I have asked myself this question many times as I have listened to statements such as those cited: "Where are all these docile, unhappy, subservient, brow-beaten women?"

The women in my life have been very different. For example, at a recent family reunion, they told of my grandmother as representing a large family of sisters. This grandmother pioneered, with my grandfather, a small town in Nevada. At the reunion they said of her, "She was the town midwife, delivering hundreds of babies. She, with her eight-year-old son, the eldest child of six, ran a farm and a dairy while her husband was serving a mission for three years in England. She also pulled teeth for the townspeople, as needed. She was the president of the Church auxiliaries and town council, and she started the state 4-H program. It was said of her that she could have organized the Saints and led them from Nauvoo to the Great Salt Lake Valley as effectively as Brigham Young himself." Subservient? Silent? Denied her rights? I’d like to see anyone try.

And she was not at all unique. Mormon pioneer women were the first real feminists. They cast the first official female vote in 1870, formed the first international women's organization and the first public health service program, and elected the first female state senator in the nation as well as the first town mayor. We could list hundreds of examples of Mormon women whose spunk, courage, fortitude, and self-reliance played a crucial role in our history. A friend who lectures frequently about our Mormon women assures us that they did more than quilt. They built homes, dug irrigation ditches, sheared sheep, grew and harvested wheat and other crops, and established Utah’s first silk industry, department store, and a school for the deaf and blind.

My question is: Did their daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters turn into wimps somewhere along the line? I cannot buy it; espe-
cially since that description does not fit the women I observe day after day in my neighborhood, at school, at Church, at work, and at social gatherings. My women colleagues at BYU seem assured, successful, and happy. Most of them aren't mad at men, as far as I can tell. I observe the women in my ordinary, middle-class neighborhood, and each woman distinguishes herself in some way. They are in mostly intact families. Their husbands do not subjugate them. To be honest, statements made about "Mormon women" have been puzzling to me.

I have thought of myself as a fairly typical Mormon woman. I can never remember being silent, subservient, or fearfult. My father thought I could do anything and often said so. My uncles, brother, and teachers from first grade through graduate school were all supportive. My husband has encouraged me constantly. I do not see myself so differently from other Mormon women. I am, if you will on the soapbox for the Mormon woman who does not fit the silent subservient, depressed stereotype. But to be fair, perhaps my experience is the aberration. Could I be deluded? In an attempt to gather some data to determine if my perceptions were indeed peculiar, I prepared a questionnaire which was designed to tap some of the attitudes and experiences of a number of Mormon women. The questionnaire was anonymous, so the women had no reason not to tell the truth. One group was composed of 44 single adult women, ranging in age from 22 to 48. Virtually all held jobs. Another group comprised 38 adult females, mostly married, a few single, from ages 21 to 76. Some of the married women also held jobs.

I was seriously trying to ignore my own biases and learn more about Mormon women. These are some of the results:

In your opinion do men generally treat women as equals? Sixty-eight percent of the singles said "usually" or "sometimes," while marrieds said "usually" 67 percent of the time.

Do men have it easier than women? Sixty-four percent of the singles said "occasionally," while 55 percent of the marrieds agreed.

Do you wish you had been born a man? Sixty-six percent of singles and 87 percent of marrieds answered, "Never."

Do you feel encouraged by Church leaders to develop fully your skills and abilities? Eighty percent of singles and 89 percent of marrieds answered "usually" or "always."

Have you felt the need to hide your intellect and talents to be accepted by a man or men? Eighty-five percent of singles answered "never" or "occasionally," while 87 percent of marrieds answered "never" or "occasionally."

Were you taught by your father to like and respect yourself? The singles answered "never" 18 percent, "occasionally" 27 percent, "usually" 25 percent, and "always" 20 percent. Seventy-nine percent of the marrieds answered "always."

Do you feel pressure to fit someone else's idea of the "ideal woman"? Fifty-five percent of the singles answered "occasionally," while 53 percent of the marrieds answered the same way.

Other questions indicated that for the most part this group had not been mistreated by men, had not been criticized for their goals and aspirations by men or women, and that both their mother and father had positive attitudes about the talents and capabilities of women.

In addition to my questionnaire, I have also taken opportunities to have numerous conversations over the past few months with women, both in and out of AMCAP, both in and out of our profession, both single and married. One friend, a single woman, well-liked by both her female and male colleagues, said: "We need to help men respond to us in more effective ways. Women should express feelings and ideas openly. As a single woman, I believe men are confused as to how to respond to me, and perhaps to most other women these days. Many single women know that friendship with male co-workers is
sometimes misinterpreted. For many years in my work I was extremely lonely because the men didn’t understand the acceptability of just dropping into my office to talk.”

Another said, “I think it is very difficult for men to know what to do with regard to women. They sometimes feel threatened and misunderstood. I believe these are far more wrenching times for men than for women.”

I recently read a plaintive letter to the editor in a newspaper from a newly divorced man: “I am so lonely. When women are in my position they can read a dozen self-help books, designed just for them. Their friends and family gather around to help them through it. I have no one. I don’t feel strong at all.”

I talked to a married woman who is a very capable graduate student with a large family. Her experience in life was similar to mine. She had never felt resentment for her intelligence and achievements, only encouragement and support from her husband and family members. Yet, this woman’s daughter, in her twentys with a master’s degree, does not feel she always received the recognition and support she should have from the men in her career situation. This young woman is evidence that there is certainly cause for concern and some Mormon women indeed have had experiences very different from my own. They have some valid information to report and, again, they have every right to say how they feel and what they need. But they are not the spokeswomen for all of us.

In the recent issue of BYU Today, Sue Bergin writes of “The Expanding Role of Women in Education” (October 1984). She interviewed some 25 BYU faculty, staff, administrators, and students and turned up an almost unanimous feeling that substantial progress has been made at BYU in giving women every opportunity to excel in any field and in viewing women on campus as serious students and professionals. Mary Ann Q. Wood, BYU professor of law, said, “I’ve never had a negative experience in terms of being a woman. It just isn’t an issue.” I take this as evidence of my own view. Marilyn Arnold said, “Everybody knows that women should have equal opportunity and also equal responsibility.” The writer quotes another bright young professional woman on campus who noted that 15 years ago, when she was an 18-year-old freshman, there was incredibly intense pressure to find a mate, but said she had seen a dramatic difference in the past few years. The policies of the top administration are not the remaining problem, but rather the more subtle discrimination felt from some teachers and male students. Many of the women interviewed and quoted are confident, accomplished persons who have secured a place of esteem at the university.

Now, I can fit all this nicely in my own biases and life experiences, but one woman I interviewed added an interesting dimension. I have asked her to come today. Her name is Pamela Bell, a mother, wife, and graduate student at BYU. She speaks from a different point of view than I do, but nevertheless she has something to say of importance in, perhaps, understanding the stereotype of the “subservient, frustrated Mormon woman.”

Pam Bell

As a young girl I was raised to believe that the talents needed to be a career woman and self-sufficient were to be prized. When I joined the Church, I saw it as a choice to forego that lifestyle because I heard the Church saying that a woman’s place is in the home while the husband’s duties were to provide and protect. I did not realize that being a wife and a mother would require totally different skills and talents for which I had neither training nor inclination.

Although I was bewildered when my bishop and stake president got the giggles when I told them my major, which at the time was math and engineering, I was amazed when my fiancé, who was then on a mission in cold, wintry Wisconsin, wrote me, “Why don’t you knit me a scarf?” and meant...
it. What made him think I knew anything about knitting?

After we married, I went through a whole loaf of bread trying to get two unburnt slices of toast for our first breakfast.

For ten years, I drove myself crazy trying to fit into the new mold. Finally, I realized I’d been trying to put a size 7 foot in a size 5 shoe. I just didn’t fit. At first, I felt it was because I just wasn’t celestial material. Then, I began to understand why I wasn’t “her,” that fictitious ideal I’d composed for myself, why I could never be her. My experiences, my personality, my talents—all that I was—combined to make me different, unique—not just different from that ideal, but different from every other living creature. I discovered something wonderful; I was me, and that wasn’t so bad. Ever since, I’ve had a pretty good time being me. I’ve had a lot of success at it too. For me, there seems to be three important issues:

1. Equality vs. individuality
2. Competition and conformity in women
3. The Cinderella syndrome.

Egalitarians say we should all be able to be equal in our expectations of life and our ability to experience it. Can we believe this ideology of complete equality, or is it, after all, a fantasy? I say it is a fantasy. No two people are equal, not in genetic composition, body development, life experiences, reasoning, socialization, talents, or interpersonal skills. Even if we do share some things in common, perceptual differences would surely separate us, for none of us are born into the same circumstances nor do we see things exactly the same.

And yet, there are those who continually encourage us to deny our own uniqueness in favor of striving for some false conformity towards “normality.” This kind of external pressure often puts women in competition with other women, which is the second problem.

Who dictates the rules of the competition? It is the proverbial “they.” “They” who tell us what we ought to be, how we should live, what we must do and what we have to be like to be called “normal”—and all with “No questions, please.” No one wants to explain why, because chances are “they” don’t know. “That’s just the way we do things around here.”

The best example of “they’s” are advertisers, fashion merchandisers, politicians, movie producers and their stars, educators, and other spokesmen in our authority-ridden culture.

Thirty people work with lighting, and make-up, making sure everyone stands in the right place, wears the right color, and gives just the right effect. Yet we look at television and say, “That’s what I need to look like and be like.” Well, they don’t even look like “that.”

We do this to ourselves with real people too. By looking at people we admire and judging ourselves against them at their public best, without knowing what’s going on inside them or in their lives, we build a false normality by which to judge ourselves.

Too many women feel this competition toward an ideal in the way they present themselves to others—not only in the way they perform, but how they look.

One summer I watched commercials, studying them to try to get an idea of what they were saying to women about themselves. One soft-drink commercial said it all. As a voice-over said, “It looks . . .” (the camera focused on a girl in a bikini, from neck to knee and you heard whistles), “and it tastes” (then you saw a man from the neck up drinking the product)“ . . . great!” The message: What women look like is important. What men do is important.

In my opinion, because of this competition between women to perform and to look good, too, women find their friendship circles dwindling, their support systems weakening, and their social and business networks less functional than those of their male counterparts.

Many women experience stress and disillusionment because life hasn’t met their expectations.

This is the Cinderella syndrome—
a woman's beliefs that some Prince Charming will take care of her and her children so she'll never have to worry. He'll provide economic security, spiritual strength, priesthood direction in the home, and she'll do her part (as Patty Perfect) by being supportive, happy, and creative. When these expectations are not met, Cinderella experiences "stress," and the feeling that she has very little immediate control over what's happening in her life. Some LDS women react to this "stress" by inactivity or passivity in the Church. The women's list for a Mormon man has three items: priesthood, provider, and protector. "All he has to do is live up to these three things and my dreams will come true," she thinks. But her list for Mormon women is enormous, and every time he doesn't do something on his list, her list gets longer. Then when she goes to Relief Society and hears that everything depends on her, she sees her list getting longer again. She's thinking, "I'm surviving on the border of insanity now. I can't do one more thing. Don't ask me." One way of handling it is to stop going to Relief Society.

When women find themselves in stressful situations, their perceptions change. They become more sensitive to issues that strike close to their wounds. They often feel as if other women are not dealing with reality if they don't acknowledge the same stresses. Even worse, they sometimes believe themselves to be the only Mormon woman who does not have a perfect life.

We have a tendency to write out roles (mentally) like job descriptions. We carry a whole list of expectations with each new role—all I must be if I'm a doctor, a bishop's wife, a woman in Church, etc.

In Utah County with the reduction in the work force at Geneva Steel, many men in my ward who had provided well for their families found themselves out of a job with no hope of finding another for a long period of time. Most businesses would not hire them because everyone felt that Geneva would call them back to work and then these men would, of course, return. With their men out of work, women were forced to go on assistance programs or get jobs themselves—which most of them eventually did. Now the men found themselves at home where they felt of little worth. Because it was not their "role" to help with parenting or homemaking, they left everything from the wife's former role still up to her. The woman came home from a work situation she hadn't bargained for to a husband who had left everything for her to do and children who did the same. Needless to say, women felt great anger and resentment because they saw themselves as victims with no choice, having made no decisions about a commitment to this new life. The depressed husband and the overburdened wife both developed a high level of guilt which left them vulnerable to the reactions of others around them. One Relief Society president in our stake, where we had a high percentage of Geneva layoffs, said stake leaders were trying to figure out how to help these women because they were all cracking up, and no one could understand why.

How did this happen? I think the inflexibility is part of the issue. Last year, I noticed this for the first time, probably because I myself was in a situation where I had to be out of the home. For Mother's Day, our ward had the most elaborate program you've ever seen. They had the chapel decorated with flowers and gave the usual plants and presents. But along with that they sang songs and had a child of every age carry a beautifully wrapped package to the pulpit to tell what gift their mother had given to them, right up to a man 30-some years old, whose mother was in the audience visiting. It was a real tearjerker. You should have heard all the mothers were given credit for. In contrast, on Father's Day, the last speaker before the prayer reminded the congregation after sacrament meeting that it was Father's Day and to say something nice to their dad. I could have cried. Then we wonder why we cannot get men in the Church to feel that anything
they do in the home, including parent­ing their own children, is of worth.

The General Authorities tell us we are partners; they enumerate the im­portant duties of life as being the same for both partners. However, my experi­ence has been that the culture dictates and rewards another pattern. We often forget that the gospel is for the individual.

Della Mae Rasmussen

There you have it! On the one hand, we hear that Mormon women (with no qualifier, such as some Mormon women) are subservient, quiet, obed­i­ent, depressed. On the other, some of us are heard to say, “Things look fine to me. No man ever made me feel down­trodden. What’s the problem?” The truth for the majority, no doubt, lies somewhere in between. Generalizations are made by both sides. This is de­structive, in my opinion, to all relation­ships: male to female, female to female, and male to male.

I asked Pam where she got the idea, after she joined the Church, that she had to become a totally different person. She said she didn’t really know. I guess “they” said so! The experiences of Pam Bell have apparently shown her more frustrated, depressed, over-worked women than has my own. Certainly, there are all types in the lives of all of us. True, there are striving, over-structured perfectionists among us, trying to do everything right. One young woman client said to me recently, “I am so glad I have come to the point where I don’t have to be wonderful every minute of every day. Tell them at AMCAP that the Pursuit of Excellence program for the Young Women was the worst thing that ever came into my life.” For her, that was the last straw, because she forgot the “pursuit” part! She was indeed trying to be everything for everybody. But all these overwrought perfectionists are not Mormon women. They are to be found everywhere. But let’s not gen­eralize about the sorry lot of Mormon women. Believe it or not, many of them feel wonderful, they like themselves, and are free to make choices and be responsible for them! Let us see in­dividuals, not stereotypes.

One more issue of some impor­tance might be the question alluded to by Pam Bell of whether women support women. A close friend of mine in the Utah State Legislature states in no un­certain terms that men support women far better than women do. Men listen, she says. “They respect women’s ideas, they are willing to work together to solve problems and do committee work.” She has not found other women nearly so easy to work with.

How can we build bridges between men and women? One way that appeals to me is that women do not take on the role of put-down, subservient female. Sonya Friedman’s Men Are Just! Desserts (1983) argues that the best a woman can ask for herself is the ability to take care of herself. She maintains that “all [note the overused generalization again] women, at one time or another, blame men for what’s wrong with their lives, and as a result, don’t do for themselves. No man can give a woman her life or live it for her. To expect it is to be disappointed. To live our own lives with control and direction means an end to the fantasy of being cared for and the beginning of the reality of taking care of ourselves. Then, can the best possible relationship be built between men and women.”

Women outlive men by more than seven years on the average, so any woman would seem foolish if she did not prepare herself to be self-sufficient.

Let us seek more understanding and unity, as well as confidence in one another. Again, I quote from Neely (1981):

This is a period when men and women are more than ever in need of a deeper understanding of each other. Within the past decade or so, the subject of gender identification has become one of enor­mous controversy. In the pursuit of sexual equality and in the attempt to abolish sexual stereotypes, the very real differences between men and women
have been ignored, suppressed, denied, and disputed. Now, we are compelled to take a serious second look at these distinctions and to accept and understand them for the sake of our cultural values, emotion health, and our sexuality itself.

It is popular to say that one sex was always oppressed or punished or exploited, when the more accurate truth is that people lived life the best they could and dealt with a historical imperative. Cultures endure and survive when there is a rather distinct division of sexual labor. Might we not pause and say to ourselves once more, Vive la difference? Each needs the other during life’s journey if we are to become whole. We need each other terribly.

Now, more specifically, what can we do as AMCAP members as we seek more understanding, unity, and confidence in one another? Importantly, I think we could elect more women to offices. Only a few women in proportion to men have been elected to office in our AMCAP organization. In every case I know of, if a man and a woman opposed each other on the AMCAP ballot, the man won. Even women do not vote for women. But I want to tell you that my experience with the advisory board has been totally positive. A man on the board even suggested at one point that we change the by-laws of AMCAP so that it was a requirement that women hold a proportionate number of offices. The men have been totally supportive and a pleasure to serve with. Yet, we cannot simply assume that things are going along quite well and “don’t rock the boat,” because many of our intelligent, competent female colleagues are not now counted among our AMCAP numbers.

What other steps might we take to promote greater unity and mutual respect?

1. Let none of us, male or female, feign weakness. If you dislike being ignored in staff meeting, say so. Do not accept less than excellent treatment. Don’t pout. Speak up firmly and kindly.

2. Let all of us examine our male-female attitudes as professionals. Do you honestly believe that men and women can be equally as effective as professionals? Do you refer clients to one gender as often as the other? Would you prefer one over the other if a family member needed help? Why?

3. Let each of us make a positive attempt to fulfill friendship–comradeship needs for one another in personal, Church, family, and professional life.

4. Let us lower our voices and reason together, not judge each other.

5. Let’s encourage each other to actively participate in discussions, presentations, research, particularly in AMCAP, for we have so much to learn from both men and women.

6. Let us extend an invitation to those we know to join or rejoin us in AMCAP.

7. And above all, let us cease to generalize about “Mormon women” or anyone else.

The actor, Peter Ustinov, says it well:

The relationships between the sexes are so inextricably fouled up by wits, cynics, wiseacres, philosophers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and finally, Women’s Lib, that it takes the best part of a lifetime to find out that the general has no bearing whatever on the particular. Those who maintain the link exists between generalities and the individual are like explorers who lose heart in the face of a natural barrier and never penetrate into the hinterland where people are people, and not merely slaves to a physical apparatus which has slanted minds into channels dictated by convention. (Quoted in Neely, 1981, p. 22.)

As often as not we can throw out all the data and start from scratch to deal with one person, whether male or female. St. Paul wrote in Corinthians 7:5 and Ephesians 4:25, “Do not deny yourselves to one another...Then throw off falsehood; speak the truth to each other, for all of us are parts of one body.”

I feel so strongly that we have wondrous opportunities in our lives and our profession, on an individual
basis, to ask our fellow beings, male or female, how they feel and really mean it.

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References