



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

women's health

This topic is so dear to my heart, so tied to my personal journey and my life work that this has been one of most challenging columns I have ever written. There is just too much to say in far too little space. Women's physical, emotional and spiritual health is dependent on economic, environmental, and political factors; and—I believe—the economic, environmental, and political health of our society is dependent on healthy, empowered women.

1972: I was a teacher, in my early twenties living in San Antonio, Texas, when I went to my first NOW meeting—the newly formed National Organization of Women. We had consciousness raising groups where we could share experiences and support each other. We felt solidarity with the suffragists who had begun the fight for women's rights 100 years before and for those who had finally won our right to vote in 1920. We wanted to make the world a different place for our daughters.

Men held the power—economically, politically, and socially. At the time, the job want ads were still separated into male and female jobs. There were a handful of women in traditionally male occupations. Women's high school or collegiate sports were almost non-existent. Abortions were still illegal and the threat of unwanted pregnancies was an unspeakably dark cloud that lurked in the background. Sexism was so much a part of the air we breathed that it was hard to recognize it in all its forms.

But we had a new sexual freedom! The recently published *Our Bodies Ourselves* gave us information about our bodies that many of our physicians didn't have. Awareness of the prevalence and devastating effect of rape was growing. Our NOW chapter was involved in setting up a rape crises center, educating police and forming self defense classes. We were making great strides, but I really didn't have a clue about how far we had to go, how hard the journey would be, and that I would likely not see the end in my lifetime.

In the intervening almost 40 years there have been many changes, but unfortunately many things remain the same and some I think are worse. Far too many women and young girls still have not found their voices. The emphasis on appearance


has not shifted: anorexia and bulimia are rampant as women and girls strive to achieve bodies that look like the models they see everywhere. I fear the sexual freedom we celebrated has led to young girls feeling pressured to engage in sexual behaviors before they are ready.

Far too many young women are still hesitant to speak up in relationships, much less claim their equality. Abusive relationships are still far too common. Some men continue to use religious beliefs as grounds for subjugating their wives. Rape continues and incest devastates the lives of children. The number of women and children living in poverty continues to grow. I just read an alarming statistic that one in three families with young children now lives in poverty.

While things are still difficult in this country, it is far worse in many others. Female babies are put to death or left to die in some countries. In some places families with limited resources provide health care and education to boys but not girls. Rape is even more common and is often used as a weapon in war. Most women in the world have few of the rights that we take for granted here. When times are difficult, they are always worse for women.

Economically, politically, and socially men still hold most of the power. As the old Chinese adage states "Women hold up half the sky" but unfortunately women do not hold half the power. And the whole world suffers for that fact. Our world is out of balance.

I believe in my heart, know in mind, and feel in my spirit that when women take their rightful place as full and equal partners with men in all areas of life, the world will be a better place. Until then, traditionally feminine values of cooperation, compassion, and care will continue to be dismissed. Until those values play a role in determining environmental and economic policies we will continue on our same misguided path to the detriment of all of us.

The good news is that women everywhere are speaking up and demanding their rights. In 2009, at a peace conference in Seattle, the Dalai Lama said "Western women will change the world." I think that women everywhere are changing our world. I still have hope that I will live to see full equality become a reality! 

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. Web address: www.stewartpsychologists.com