

THE RULES OF GENDER

GenderPAC assesses how far we need to go

by Bob Roehr

In 2005, the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition is celebrating 10 years of activism around gender politics.

"Ten years ago no major corporation, no member of Congress or jurisdiction had laws banning gender identity expression discrimination," said GenderPAC executive director Riki Wilchins. "Now almost a third of Congress, 60-plus major corporations, 70 local jurisdictions and 23 states have said that is illegal."

"That's phenomenal progress. In general, the whole discourse on gender rights has become much more mainstream and broader than we could have ever anticipated."

Still, there are cultural currents that run so deep that it is difficult to disabuse society of them. There are unwritten rules about being a boy and being a girl that children quickly master in social settings, said Betty Spence, president of the National Association for Female Executives. She kicked off a provocative panel discussion at the 10th GenderPAC conference May 22 in Washington, D.C.

"In boy world, boys have got to hide their emotions; they have to disdain any signs of being vulnerable; they have to find aggression acceptable; power over weaker boys determines status. In girl world, popularity and looks create status; aggressiveness and independence can get you ostracized; and name-calling against weaker girls can improve your status."

Spence said the gender straitjacket and the bullying that is used to enforce conforming are affecting kids' performance in school and the way they see themselves.

"We live in country that has been violent from the beginning," starting with the "discovery" of the New World and the conquest of

students asking, "Why do you sit like a girl?"

He explains that the custom was tied to girls wearing dresses and not wanting to expose themselves, but when people wear pants, they can sit any way that makes them comfortable. Heins said, in his classroom, "it is all about respectful behavior and presenting them with options outside of the norm."

Crooms felt that the media's focus on the most extreme issues of violence in schools has worked to desensitize us to lower levels of violence. "It ignores the reality that for years, so many kids' days have started with walking through a metal detector or pat-down.... We have written off the possibility of peace and safety in certain schools. The ordinariness of it is the most appalling."

Susan Wefald, director of institutional planning at the Ms. Foundation, said: "As a parent, talking about these issues in school is important. One of the root causes of violence against women is adherence to narrowly defined gender roles and straight definitions of masculinity within families. We need to free boys and men from those narrow definitions so that they can be whole people."

Heins added: "One of the worst things we can do is not talk about it. The pressure [on kids] to conform is huge." He quoted Elie Wiesel, "Silence always helps the oppressor, never the oppressed."

Spence said: "The workplace is not a level playing field for men and women, largely because of gender expectations and preconceptions. Gender, by and large, determines career experiences. It was doing it 20 years ago; it is still doing it today."

She said that is changing, slowly. "When



Elementary school teacher Eric Heins addresses GenderPAC on the subject of bullying.

native people by Europeans, said Lisa Crooms, a professor at Howard University School of Law. It is reinforced by the fact that the United States is the only superpower in the world today.

"So, in many ways, kids are learning to bully at the knees of people who have perfected bullying," Crooms said. "Until we deal with that larger social-cultural context, we won't get to the root causes of bullying. It's endemic to our culture and the way things work in the United States."

Eric Heins, an elementary school teacher from the Bay Area, said: "Bullying is a very serious problem. I see it in the classroom, but it mostly happens on the playground. [The bullies] tend to be successful, according to their peers."

"There is a girl thing and a boy thing for just about everything," Heins said, illustrating it with the way he chose to sit—crossing his legs. That invariably results in one of his young male

mothers and fathers work together, and when they work in the workplace, kids see it and accept it. They think it's natural. When a parent decides to stay at home, the kids should see it as a choice."

Fatherhood is seen "primarily as an economic thing" in U.S. society, said Crooms. "Men are primarily economic providers; they may have domestic dependents but not domestic responsibilities. Women are domestic caretakers."

While companies have parental leave on the books, essentially it is material leave. Men don't take it because that puts them on "the daddy track" and is likely to result in the lower income and slower promotions that are the lot of women. **JR**

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