

Engineering Week

Sexism, aggression and oppression

This is the second part of the post-Engineering Week interviews. Britt Griffin is a first year U of A law student and a volunteer at the Rape Crisis Centre. by Nina Miller

Gateway: What do you think of the article that was printed in the *Godiva*?

Griffin: The article is definitely child pornography. I think it reflects a parallel trend in society of escalating sex exploitation and violence against women and sex exploitation and violence against children. It's all on the same continuum.

Gateway: Do you think that somebody with the remotest sense of responsibility would have printed that article unless they thought it reflected to some degree the general tone of Engineering Week and would therefore be acceptable?

Griffin: First of all, to reply to the line that it got in there by mistake, I don't think anyone is going to believe that. The article was not all that inconsistent as it very much follows from the kinds of things engineers have done in the past. I was not surprised - it was shocking in that the content was really offensive but it wasn't like it came out of nowhere.

Gateway: What is your definition of sexism?

Griffin: I would say sexism reflects a male ideology which suggests women are inferior and deserving of oppression. It sets up two very distinct and polarized roles, men being the aggressive, dominant hunter mentality and women being the female passive and submissive mentality. I think sexism very much engenders the notion of misogyny, which is the hatred of women.

Gateway: What do you think it means to call somebody a sexist?

Griffin: I guess I use the term sexist in two ways; one is to describe people who express an indifference, a lack of concern and an ignorance of the issues concerning women. But sexism on a more profound level engenders an entire attitude and ideology about the way the world should be and how the relationship between men and women should be. I think when I would call someone sexist, and would do so with a very serious tone, what I would mean is that they manifest hatred towards women or towards the things women represent. I think what the ideology of sexism does is, sets women in a role defined by men, forces women into that role, and then holds women in contempt for it. For example, women are taught from a very young age to be attractive. They have to wear high heels, tight clothes, or whatever happens to be the style, and yet often you see men ridiculing women for wearing high heels and not being able to walk in them or for wearing too much makeup. And so women are always caught in a double bind. What men do is say, "women have to be a certain way, since we run the world and can make them be that way, and then we hold them in contempt for it." Stemming from this is man's perception of his sexuality. I think women have an easier time defining their sexuality because there are two very obvious things that make us women; we can have children and we menstruate. Men can often only identify their sexuality in reference to women and therefore women become mirror images of how men judge themselves. If women don't do it properly men get mad and I think this is partly what causes sexism. Men want women to reflect back to them a favorable view of what men should be like and what men should be like is dictated by an ideology which says men should be tough and in control and sexually aggressive.

Gateway: Do you think parts of Engineering Week are sexist? If so, why? Sculptures?

Griffin: I think the one thing I noticed about some of the ice sculptures is the use of sex to portray situations which are humiliating and disgusting. It seems to me we do that in our language as well. All our swear words and language of violence and aggression is sexual. The same thing happens in Engineering Week; sex is used as the channel to express a lot of

different kinds of things. They might be commenting on some political situation but the ice sculpture that was torn down shows that they use sex to express it. The message there was sexuality in an ultimately humiliating, embarrassing, and disgusting situation.

Gateway: The songs?

Griffin: Well, after reading the *Godiva* song the thing that hit me was the talk about her "white hide." I thought, "of course," hunters go out and catch animals and take their hide and that very much sums up the whole mentality of these activities. Men getting together, having very boisterous boyish activities centered around this very static, passive, beautiful woman. It is very primitive in that it is like men going out on the hunt and having all these games together and

Griffin: I would suggest that kicklines represent standard tradition of women being there to entertain men and to be beautiful. For some women involved I'm sure there is the positive feedback of male approval for their female bodies but I don't know what else could be displayed there except a women's body. And I think that is a really fragmented approach to females.

Gateway: Queen contest?

Griffin: The Queen contest is very interesting. The Queen contest, and all the other kinds of beauty contests like that play very interesting roles in dealing with women and how they relate to each other. What happens is men say, "if you want our approval you have to compete against each other." It sets up a division among women. It not only divides

centered on aggression, competition or ego. It is not enough for women to struggle merely to become like the men who formerly oppressed them.

Gateway: Why do you think the ratio of women in engineering is not increasing at the same rate as it is in other faculties (for example medicine and law)?

Griffin: I think in part, at least on the surface, the Engineering Faculty is the last bastion of male dominance. And for that reason it may be unappealing to women. Also, the reason so many women especially went into the field of law was to instigate social change in relation to women and that was one of the best ways to do it. Medicine, in part, has also played that role, because there are some fundamental medical and women in health issues that could be solved by women entering the medical field.

Gateway: Do you think the general attitude of the engineering faculty towards women is conducive to increasing the ratio of women in the faculty?

Griffin: No, I don't. It would sure keep me out if I was interested in going into engineering... I think their attitude suggests that women in the faculty have a very token stature and it is a stature that is in a very precarious position. Because, for a woman in engineering it must be very difficult to be in a faculty with that many men. The pressure must be incredible. I think it is very brave of women to go through it but I just hope that in the future enough women will come into the faculty to make it worth women while to take a stand. I think right now women in the faculty might very well be in too much jeopardy to take a stand because the peer pressure would be enormous.

Gateway: Do you think the current attitudes of engineers towards women are perpetuating the role of women as a second class citizen?

Griffin: Oh, for sure, and not only as second class citizens, but as the mere objects of male sexual attention.

Gateway: Why do you think so many people outside the faculty are upset by Engineering Week?

Griffin: I think Engineering Week presents a very visible example of sexism. Sexism is so pervasive and so widespread that it's difficult to deal with on a day to day basis. It becomes very tiring, very overwhelming. But if you all of a sudden have this thing dropped in your lap, this huge enormous chaotic week - it becomes very easy to single it out and take objection to it. Also, because it happens on a university campus, and it's been said, universities are supposed to be an atmosphere where there is progressive thought and some sort of cultural awareness, this just flies in the face of that. It's very much of an embarrassment to people involved with the university community that there are still people around who have attitudes toward women that are just reprehensible.



Hordes of people crowd to watch Engineering Week activities in CAB

coming back and having women as the trophy. The "white hide" really makes clear women is a trophy and so does the fact that the engineering club gets points for their Queen.

Gateway: The *Godiva* paper?

Griffin: Well, I don't think there is any doubt about the fact that the *Godiva* is sexist. It reflects, again, a continuing degree of sexism. The article on child molesting was as far as they were willing to push it this time around. But I think a lot of the jokes and cartoons are really offensive. They are standard tacky, anti-women Playboy-type fare that are dismissed as good fun but ultimately hold women in ridicule. The bodies of women are caricatures of what women really look like or represent what men would like them to look like.

Gateway: Kicklines?

women who compete against each other but separates different kinds of women, so that the princesses are really isolated from the women who are feminists. There is never a cohesiveness of women allowed. Whereas, Engineering Week represents a very archetypal example of male bonding, but not allowed for the women, who are kept apart by the male bodyguards.

Gateway: Do you favor equal rights for women?

Griffin: Equal rights is not enough. We have to begin to understand that being a feminist or being liberated doesn't mean being like a man. We do not merely want the opportunities men have. We do not want to share male privilege and partake of a system that is ultimately bound to oppress somebody. The aim of feminism, for me, is a new value system, one not

photo Bill Ingles

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