

Selling (Out) the Weaker Sex

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I was helping out with the winter festival at my children's elementary school by engraving kids' names on little medallions. To my surprise, there was a striking difference between the requests of the girls and boys who came to my booth. The girls wanted their own names on the medallions. Most of the boys, however, asked me to engrave "Shaq" on theirs, nickname of basketball superstar Shaquille O'Neale.

This image stuck in my mind for weeks: A line of self-confident girls celebrating their own identities, and another line of self-conscious boys relinquishing theirs. Why?

Could it be that while we have been teaching young women about their potential and worth with images of women as doctors and executives, we have at the same time treated boys as a vast market to be exploited by celebrity pitchmen?

A typical American child sees more than 30,000 television commercials each year, making this the most frequently repeated experience in the child's life. Ads for males are dominated by physically intimidating athletes and verbally abusive rock stars. Boys mistake the menacing aggression of these figures for masculinity, that sense of male self a young man is always seeking. Thus, spokesmen like Shaq can successfully sell a wide range of products to a profoundly insecure market. While broadening the horizons and affirming the identities of young women, we narrow the images of masculinity afforded young men to a handful of sports and music icons.

Though profits are gained by this sales strategy, what is lost is more significant: a sense of the masculine sturdy enough to carry male children into mature adulthood with self-confidence, and to allow them to function with civility in a world where half of the residents are not men. And women are not exempt from the sales to males phenomenon. The aggressive, predatory attitudes of the pitchmen can show up in a young man's relationships. Thus, everyone pays a price for the methods used to sell to adolescent males.

We should respect, not exploit, a young man's painful insecurity about his identity and emerging sexuality. Boys deserve and require a wider range of male role models than advertising offers them, and that's where you and I can help. Last night my nine-year-old son and I watched a video on the homes of Frank Lloyd Wright. This morning on the drive to his school I talked with my oldest son, who's eleven, about the flute virtuosity of James Gallway.

Everyone will benefit when we reclaim a broader territory of masculinity for young men. Maybe soon the boys at Longfellow Elementary will, like the girls, ask to have their own names engraved on their medallions.

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