

GUEST EDITORIAL

by M. J. HARDMAN

White Woman's Burden

"White man's burden" was a favorite phrase used to justify colonialism; it was, after all, the "white man's burden" to "civilize" the rest of the world. The fact that sexism was a major item in the agenda of that "burden" is very slowly being recognized—so much so that we now see a new version of that "burden," which I call "white woman's burden."

A few years ago, the Association of Women Faculty invited Gloria Steinem to the University of Florida at Gainesville, where we celebrated her presence with an elegant dinner. A friend of mine arranged for me to sit next to her and directed the conversation so that we spent a good portion of the time discussing the Aymara.

The women of all the Jaqi cultures enjoy the same position in their society. So, without going into too much detail, I talked about experiences in Jaqaru as well as Aymara. I told Steinem how, when I first went there in the fifties, I had actually believed the nonsense about women's frailty. And then, as I sat on a hillside one day, a little woman, reaching just about as high as my shoulder and carrying a load of potatoes on her back, asked me to please place a second bundle on top of the first for her. Although younger and bigger, I couldn't lift it. By using a rock and the steepness of the hill as a fulcrum, and with a good deal of effort, I finally did get that second load on her back. And then, with twice the load that I could not lift, she bounced down the mountain, crossed the river on stepping stones, and disappeared up the other side. As I watched her, the truth that my own culture had sold me a bill of goods came home with a force that has left a permanent impression on me.

I told Steinem about the loud, strong voices of the women. My voice, developed from a childhood of being told "Stop shouting," "Lower your voice," and "Nice girls don't shout," is only average. But these women are listened to—the first time they speak.

I told her about the cultural division of labor wherein the women are responsible for all the money and, while the men always consult their wives before making any purchase, women may or may not consult their spouses—although either sex may assume the tasks of the other when convenient, with no opprobrium either way.

I told her about the individual property holding, where nothing is held in common in marriage and where each partner disposes of his or her land as each sees fit, with the expected norm being that all children shall inherit equally but with some bias toward a child of the same sex.

I told her how the Aymara women controlled the markets that fed all of La Paz, Bolivia. I told her how the Aymara women even ran international concerns. I told her of how, when I moved from Bolivia to Peru, it was an Aymara woman from whom I hired the truck, and she hired a man to drive it to Peru.

I told Steinem of how, within the Jaqi languages, the major primary distinction is between human and non-human, not between female and male, and that they had only vocabulary words relating to sex and gender. This means that they may discuss sex and gender when relevant but are not obligated always to keep it in mind—as we are in English, with "he" and "she" a required distinction even if all we are discussing is insects.

I told Steinem a wonderful story about taking my children's godmother and godfather to a mountain village in Peru. I introduced Marie, and the people had a lot of trouble with her surname but at last got out some sort of approximation. Then I presented Bob. They were all braced for a new difficulty. When I uttered what was clearly the same surname, they looked at me in astonishment and disbelief. You see, the most logical explanation for such an anomaly among the Jaqi is incest. So, I explained the English naming pattern. There was that ominous silence that follows an unbelievable and unpleasant

revelation, and then a woman spoke up. "But what then," she asked, "about inheritance?" What indeed!

I told Steinem about the great difficulty I had had in getting people to believe my own experiences in the United States, about the man who declared, after one of my accounts, that such behavior on the part of the populace of the United States was impossible because, as he said, "The United States is civilized!" Actually, I had news for him.

Thus, I said to Steinem, what exists among the Aymara is a functioning culture in which women and men are equal—a culture that has managed to retain that equality at least among themselves in spite of nearly five hundred years of oppression from a sexist culture trying very hard to turn them sexist. We could, I suggested, learn a great deal from Jaqi women, as I had personally.

With my friend's encouragement, Steinem asked me to write an article for Ms. magazine on the information I had just been telling her. I've been burned rather badly before with verbal requests; in fact, I have experienced not only indifference but outright hostility from feminist circles to my accounts of Aymara women. Therefore, very shortly after the dinner, I wrote to Steinem to confirm the request for the article. My letter was never answered, so I never wrote the article.

Not long afterward, I heard Steinem speaking on the radio on the "Cambridge Forum." In an otherwise superb talk, she said:

Though we can look at a few of the societies that didn't have racial and economic class systems to such a degree—for instance, Sweden or Iceland or even the early Israel or perhaps some pre-colonial African or native American societies—we can look to them for some less punishing systems of sexual caste and patriarchy. We really have no models for a feminist and therefore a truly democratic society. We are on the

edge of history, dreaming of societies that have never been.

That sexism has been a major export of both European and U.S. colonialism is very slowly being recognized, although one still finds sporadic references, mainly in regard to Africa. Most depressing is the fact that there are authors who recognize such an imposition but don't wish to rock the boat. For example, one researcher wrote about an Aymara community in which men had the upper hand; however, she wrote about it as though it had always been thus. When I spoke with her, she stated most clearly and categorically that the sexism she had described had been introduced by the Spaniards.

I find it depressing that, by swallowing the cultural myth that all progress is linear and that all elements "progress" equally, one reaches the conclusion that the world must learn everything from us. Thus, it logically follows that the women's movement must first help our men oppress other women by carrying

their "white man's burden" to "civilize" everybody else, so that we, with our "white women's burden," can go in and rescue them, claiming that what is our unfortunate ethnohistory of sexism is also theirs!

Would it really hurt us so badly to learn from other women, even if they don't have quite so many machines? Maybe there could actually be reciprocity, which is, after all, the only way to equality.

Postscript: The Jaqi languages—Jaquaru, Kawki, and Aymara—are spoken in the Andes mountains of Peru, Bolivia, and Chile; Aymara is spoken in all three countries by approximately 3.5 million people, while Jaquaru and Kawki by only a few thousand in Peru.

Most of the people are farmers and use an "archipelagic" form of farming; in other words, they cultivate a large number of fields scattered up and down the different ecological zones, from, say, two thousand feet to fifteen thousand feet above sea level. Most people are

also engaged to some degree in trade, some exclusively so.

Reading and writing and education have always been valued by the Jaqi people, and they take advantage of whatever opportunities are available to build schools and seek teachers. Therefore, there are now many Jaqi professionals, including schoolteachers, veterinarians, dentists, physicians, lawyers, and engineers.

As a conquered people, they have had to develop a lot of survival strategies to maintain any degree of cohesion in their own culture. And they have suffered all the disadvantages of a minority perceived by the overlords as being good only for unskilled labor and taxes.

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