

Mike Pence Dining with Women Rule is Backed by Women Themselves

Three months ago the twittersphere and liberal press sniggered at US vice-president Mike Pence and chided him for a statement that he once made (dug up by the Washington Post) about how “he never eats alone with a woman other than his wife and that he won’t attend events featuring alcohol without her by his side, either.”

That prompted the New York Times to commission a survey on what men and women think about this issue. And guess what: a whole lot of people agree with Mike Pence.

Many men and women are wary of a range of one-on-one situations, the poll found. Around a quarter think private work meetings with colleagues of the opposite sex are inappropriate. Nearly two-thirds say people should take extra caution around members of the opposite sex at work. A majority of women, and nearly half of men, say it’s unacceptable to have dinner or drinks alone with someone of the opposite sex other than their spouse.

Note that: a majority of women think it’s unacceptable to have dinner (53 percent) or drinks (60 percent) alone with someone of the opposite sex (wonderful, old-fashioned, binary phrase that) other than their spouse. And women were more likely, over all, to say that one-on-one interactions were appropriate.

... Lunch and car rides were less objectionable, but more than a third of people said they were inappropriate. Fewer than two-thirds of respondents said a work meeting alone with a member of the opposite sex was appropriate; 16 percent of women and 18 percent of men with postgraduate degrees said it was inappropriate.

This is reassuring. We hear constantly about “gender equality” in all areas of life, and endless complaints from women about sexual harassment – in the

workplace, especially – but little about commonsense rules for avoiding inappropriate or demeaning behaviour. But here's some common sense from a young (29) construction worker, quoted by The Times, who wants, among other things to avoid "false accusations":

He said he avoids any solo interactions with women, including dining or driving, as does his girlfriend with other men. When he needs to meet with women at work or his church, he makes sure doors are left open and another person is present. Others described similar tactics, including using conference rooms with glass walls and avoiding alcohol with colleagues. "Temptation is always a factor," said Mr. Mauldin, 29.

"Very religious" people (Evangelicals, 57 percent) were among those more likely to say that one-on-one interactions were inappropriate, but also people who lived in rural areas, people who lived in the South or Midwest, those with less than a college education (61 percent) and Republicans (62 percent). Some of those polled said they kept "separate spheres after couplehood," as a safeguard, and/or out of respect for marriage or Christian values. "That often meant limiting opposite-sex adult friendships to their friends' spouses." For example:

Cindy McCafferty, 60 and Catholic, is single, but said she would do so in a future relationship. "The Sixth Commandment is you don't commit adultery, and you don't want to do anything that would jeopardize that," said Ms. McCafferty, a mental health caregiver in Appleton, Wis.

A seminary president thought protocols were good but worried that such a practice – not required by the Bible – "really can appear to treat women in really dehumanizing ways, almost as if they were a temptress."

Perhaps, but it is a simple fact that men and women are tempted by one another and we have ample cultural evidence, ranging from the Bible to television soaps (where this is taken for granted) and divorce statistics, that it is so.

And here is a bit of hard-won realism from a progressive:

Kathleen Raven, a science writer at Yale, considers herself to be progressive in many ways. But she does not have closed-door or out-of-office meetings alone with men, because she was previously sexually harassed. She also tries

to avoid being too friendly, to ensure she doesn't give the wrong impression. "Women are taught to believe that we are equals while we're growing up, and that's not a good message," said Ms. Raven, 34. "We have to make a lot of efforts to protect ourselves."

There are those who say they could not get on in their careers without working late with the boss – and there is research, of course, to show that “When men avoid solo interactions with women ... it puts women at a disadvantage.”

The college educated may think they are grown up enough to cope with the risks, but the more conservative instincts evident lower down the educational scale are a sign of greater realism. It is difficult enough for people in the middle and lower ranks of society to find a marriage partner these days; why would they not want to protect their relationships?

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