

How Does a Man Tell a Liberated Woman That She's Too Fat?

By JUDY KLEMESRUD

Seven men sat in a circle in a high-rise apartment in Greenwich Village the other evening, sipping coffee out of blue mugs and trying to deal with their "male chauvinism."

The men, most of them in their late twenties and members of the National Organization for Women (NOW), are participants in a men's consciousness-raising group that has met three times a month since last October.

The sessions were started by Warren Farrell, a 27-year-old Ph.D. candidate in political science at New York University, who is also the only man on the board of directors of the New York chapter of NOW.

"At NOW meetings, I saw that men were very low in their awareness of how they were keeping women in their place," he said, in explaining why he formed the men's group. "The men would actually tell the women how to conduct their own meetings."

The session, which lasted three and a half hours, was a rousing and candid free-for-all, with much psychoanalytic jargon bandied about. Among the subjects discussed were whether a man should allow a woman to go first on a bus, how to tell a wife she has gotten too fat, how to break the habit of calling women "girls" or "chicks," and whether a man should ask a woman to pay for a date.

David F., a 23-year-old commercial artist from Manhattan, who didn't want his real name used, spoke first. He said he was troubled by the fact that he didn't think his girl friend, Lila, was intelligent enough for him, but that he didn't want to lose her because then he would be "out in the cold sexually and socially."

"If she were a man, would you be friends with her?" asked Jordan Hornstein, a hirsute 26-year-old bookstore clerk from Brooklyn.

"Absolutely not!" David replied.

"I think this is the root of your problem, David," Mr. Hornstein said.

Several of the men then suggested to David that he was treating Lila "like any other male chauvinist pig" would, and that he should start looking around for a woman whom he would consider his equal.

Charles Cogen, 28, of Manhattan, who is separated from his wife and is the father of two children, asked the group if he had done the right thing by letting a woman go ahead of him on the bus that morning.

"When I go in front of a woman, I say, 'I'm treating you just like I would treat any other person,'" Mr. Farrell said. "I also see the necessity of sitting down and talking with her about it. I feel badly about leaving the impression that I've insulted a person as a person, even if I feel justified in doing it."

Arthur Reber, 31, of Brooklyn, a bearded professor of psychology at Brooklyn College, told how he had refused to give up his seat on a bus to an overweight woman standing in front of him who had obviously had a hard day.

"She kept reeling back and forth, giving me hints," he said. "I said to myself, 'Would I get up for a man?' The answer was no, so I pulled my jacket up and pretended to go to sleep."

The session, held in the Farrell apartment on Bleeker Street, often became heated. At one point, one of the men stomped to the bathroom because he thought he had been needlessly interrupted by another grouper. (Mr. Farrell's wife, Ursula, who sells computer systems for International Business Machines, remained in a bedroom all evening.)

Irving Freeman, 23, of Livingston, N. J., a hip-talking, unemployed graphics designer, said he sometimes found it

difficult to refer to all members of the female sex as "women."

"There are times when certain women are 'broads' or 'chicks,'" he said. "I find it much easier to call a woman I respect a woman. But if you're talking in a locker room conversation, you don't call them women."

Mr. Reber: "You wouldn't call black people 'spades' or 'niggers' would you? You should respect what people want to be called."

This conversation led to the smacking noises that some men make at women who are walking down a street. All of a sudden, all seven men puckered their

lips and jokingly practiced smacking.

Michael Roth, 32, of Manhattan, a burly ambulance driver who formerly played defensive tackle for the old New York Titans, said he recently saw a man who was digging in the street make a smacking noise at Lauren Bacall as she walked by.

"The guy really thought he was going to get a girl that way," he said, incredulously.

Mr. Roth's main problem, he said, was how to suggest to his girl friend, who likes W. C. Fields movies as much as he does, that she should pay for their dates same of the time. He said he couldn't afford to take her out as often as he would like to on his salary.

Mr. Farrell, who is currently writing a book called "Beyond Masculinity," suggested that he tell her, "Would you feel more at ease, Barbara, if you paid for some of these dates now that I know you want to go there, too?"

The men seemed to be unanimous in

agreeing that they preferred liberated women to ones who weren't. "A liberated woman is much more interesting and titillating," one man said. They also seemed to favor natural-looking women who use little or no make-up, and who don't, as one man put it, "spend a lot of time beautifying themselves in front of a mirror."

Perhaps the most poignant problem was posed by Rick F., a thirtyish school teacher from Brooklyn. He said he had always had an aversion to fat people, but didn't know how to go about telling his wife that he was repulsed by the 20 pounds she had gained after the birth of their second child.

"I'm upset with myself for even caring," he said, on the verge of tears.

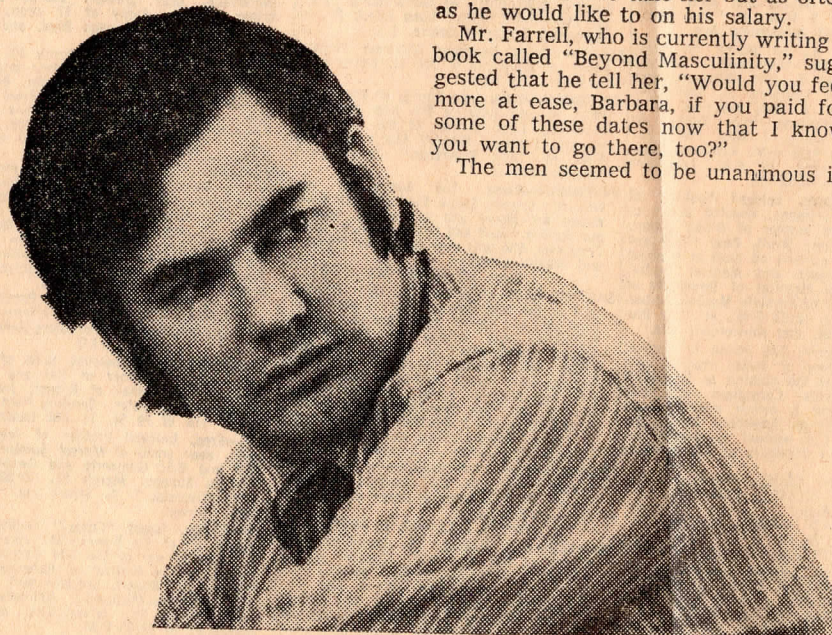
He said that part of his wife's "liberating experience" was to chuck all of the things that were supposed to make her look beautiful according to the standards of Vogue magazine and other media.

"I find her sexually unattractive," Rick said. "She sits down on the bed and she's got a roll that hangs over. And when she's sitting in the bathtub, I think, 'My God, she's fat?'"

Mr. Farrell suggested that Rick should look for other things in his wife that are attractive, now that she is a liberated woman. Another man pointed out that in American society, a man who puts on a beer belly is accepted, whereas a woman who becomes fat is not.

"You just have to deal with it, I suppose," Rick said, shaking his head sadly. "The breasts fall, the hips fall, the waist expands, and you no longer have the 17-year-old nymphet that you married."

The session ended after Rick reluctantly decided to tell his wife that he wished she would lose weight, even though dieting was not a part of her "liberating experience."



The New York Times/Michael Evans

Warren Farrell, only male board member of National Organization for Women (NOW), has also been leading a men's consciousness-raising group since last fall.