

STEINEM: 'A little thing called sexuality'

Renowned activist headlines Women's Center anniversary

Estelle Gwinn/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

Women, influential feminist Gloria Steinem told a crowd of thousands in the Kibbie Dome Thursday night, "have so, so much more to go and our dreams need to be big."

Outlining several issues women have faced throughout history, Steinem said that not the least of these was "just a little thing called sexuality."

She headlined the UI Women's Leadership Conference Thursday night with a speech on the struggles of the past, the accomplishments of the present and dreams for the future.

Her speech was the highlight of a semester-long celebration for the Women's Center's 40th anniversary. The theme of the celebration is "Women's Legacies, Inspiring Our Future," which Steinem captured in her speech by measuring how far women have come and suggestions for the future.

"I'm often asked why it is that the very same groups oppose lesbians and birth control," Steinem said, explaining the groups are one and the same because they share the opinion that sex can only end in conception.

"The idea that human sexuality is only OK if it ends in having children is the reason why women are punished for controlling our reproductive lives," Steinem said. "We have a very long way to go."

She said our society has a long way to go in many respects: its emphasis on the importance of masculinity, its obsession with age, its perception of women's bodies as instruments not ornaments and its unequal pay for men and women. Ultimately, she said, it needs to normalize the idea of gender so all are equal.

"Race is a fiction, in the same way that gender is completely made up," she said.

Steinem emphasized people need to recognize themselves as part of a shared humanity, which is only possible by "doing away with the inferior/superior idea that is most deeply ingrained by gender."

Earlier in the day, Steinem had discussed gender with a select group of students. In the more intimate setting, Steinem referred to transgender individuals as prophets for surpassing the strong divide gender creates in society.

"It feels strange at first when I see them going through the femalization, but then I realize I went through the same thing," she said, recalling the fake eyelashes, make up and heels she wore in the 1950s.

The discussion with the students covered topics such as discrimination against Muslim women, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender movement, abortion rights, and advice for young feminists.

"One big issue is student debt," Steinem said. "This is so wrong for everyone. When you graduate you should be free to explore, not indentured."

Steinem recognized that student debt would be a problem for everyone, but especially women and minorities.

"On average, women will make \$2 million less than men" in their lifetimes, making it more difficult to pay back substantial debt, she said.

Violence was also a strong topic in Steinem's speech, which she considered timely since October is domestic violence awareness month.

"We have words now like 'domestic violence.' It used to be just called 'life,' " she said.

According to Steinem, since Sept. 11, more American women have been murdered by their husbands or boyfriends than the total number of people killed in 9/11 plus the Americans killed in Iraq plus the Americans killed in Afghanistan. This trend is something she believes can be changed by de-polarizing the gender roles.

"The emphasis on masculinity is a major cause of violence in the world," she said.

Stifling the importance of masculinity, she said, will be left to the young feminists present at her events. When one student asked for guidance, Steinem encouraged her to simply take a stand and be heard. Their voices are particularly needed at UI, she said, because of its strong engineering and agriculture programs, which women do not typically dominate.

"Bring a new perspective to the classroom," she said. "You can't control the reception, but you can control what you do."