Bad Midwest Feminist Podcast - Episode 6

00:05
HOST: Hey, Bad Midwest Feminist listeners. For today's episode, the final episode, I spoke with Dana Hydo, a Councilwoman for the city of Beatrice, Nebraska. It's a small rural place, south of Lincoln, and Dana just wrapped up her first year as the sole female council member. She is only the fourth female city councilor in the history of Beatrice, and proud to serve a community that she's lived in all her life. But though she fundamentally believes in gender equality, she doesn't much identify with the term feminist. Let's find out why. Let's get into it.

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HOST: Do you personally identify as a feminist?

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COUNCILWOMAN DANA HYDO: No. Not really. I don't think I would say I'm a feminist, but I probably am in many ways. You know, I like, believe in equality, and my life has been vastly different than expectations, you know, expectations that are put on us from a young age. And, so I would say I probably am, but I haven't, I haven't been, not even, aggressive is the wrong word, but it's not like I've gone to things and said, 'I'm a feminist, and we need to do these things,' or whatever. I guess it's more been the actions that I've taken.

It is interesting because I do see things a lot differently than others. I'm not sure that that is necessarily all because I'm a woman. But I think it's maybe your experiences. And so maybe that is because I'm a woman. And, you tend to have different experiences than men. Our city council is made up of older white men for the most part. And so they tend, we all tend, to think kind of the same.

01:51
HOST: Yeah.

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HYDO: So it has been different that way.

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HOST: Do you have a personal definition of feminism?

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HYDO: Probably not. I don't know that I'm the feminist you should be interviewing. Maybe, I don't know. I would say the equality issue and being able to do whatever to me, being able to do whatever you want to do. Not feeling like you're trapped or you can't do something because someone tells you you can't. You're a woman, you can't do that.

02:18
HOST: Yeah.

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HYDO: C'mon! Of course, we can do that. So, to me, equality in the workplace, equality in salary, you know, those kinds of things, and being able to be different, and not fit into what I consider a mold that has been given to us and pushed on us. From a very young age, that this is this is the way you're supposed to be, you know, you're supposed to... For me, it was, you know, go through school and, you know, you go to college, and you find whoever you're going to marry and you get married, you have kids, and hopefully you get to work, a career, you know, that you went to school for.

And, you're allowed to do that and all of that. But it is still rare to go beyond what that expectation is. So that's still rare for a woman then to work their way up to being a CEO or being in charge, or so to me, I guess that's what feminism is, is just saying we should be able to do all of that. And it shouldn't be odd that we are. I mean, how, why is it odd that I'm on the city council?

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HOST: Is there, is there a reason that you, that you kind of dislike, or seem, to seem, to dislike the label of feminist?

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HYDO: I don't really. It's not a dislike or a like, it's just not, I guess, people don't say that. Maybe they do. Quietly. 'Oh, she's a feminist.' I guess. I think it's, maybe in the Midwest, I don't know, maybe at least here. Maybe in a bigger city it's a little more said, but here it's just not, it's just not a word we necessarily use. 'I'm a feminist.' You know, I know women who are. I mean, they sit around and chat, and that's the direction we are. It's just that I guess we don't label it.

And I guess we don't give speeches about it or collectively get together to have a discussion about it or whatever. It just is. And I've been fortunate to have a lot of very strong women around me, business people, mainly, they work the business with their husbands, and they were as much to do with the success of that business as their husbands. And it just kind of that equality just was part of it. But I guess it, it's not that it's a bad word. Though I have a feeling if I went around and said, 'I'm a feminist,' some people would think that was a bad word.

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HOST: Yeah. Why, why do you think that is?

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HYDO: I don't, I don't know. Because I think you see on TV, maybe. Well, probably a little sexism there, you know, that, you know, maybe they shouldn't be as vocal as they are, and they're not really saying much of anything that's not, that shouldn't happen, right? Or whatever. But yet when it kind of just happens, and nobody is really talking about it, they seem accepting

of it, right? I mean, it just is. But if you actually started labeling that this was feminism or whatever. I don't, I don't know, I think that then you'd get pushback. And it could be generational also. You know, we're in a small community, small city, that also, we're still dealing with a pretty high population of older people, and again, I think, of course, that's some of it. You know, as people get younger, their beliefs are a little different.

05:47
EMMETT MCMENAMY: Have you ever tried to go to a sports game, but it's too expensive? Or maybe you've tried to watch a game on TV, but it's inaccessible. These money barriers threaten the future of fandom in the Midwest. Our sports haven in the heartland is in danger. Read more about this issue in the written story, “The Cost of Belonging in Sports,” by Emmett McMenamy.

06:10
MCMENAMY: Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

06:20
HOST: Do you feel pressure, or a sense of responsibility, to represent female interests and issues on the city council?

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HYDO: I wouldn't say that I feel like we have to, that I have to serve that. But I do feel a responsibility to women in general. I mean, yeah, I'm the only woman, one of four in the history of Beatrice, so there is, well, there is some pressure. Not a lot of, I wouldn't say tons of pressure. But there is there's this thought that you want to represent your sex well.

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HOST: What are some ways that you think that you've represented your sex well?

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HYDO: I, honestly, it's just being at the meetings. Simple as that. Talking at the meetings, I find myself sometimes like, ‘Oh, you really need to decide what you want to talk about.’ I think it's funny because I always said that sitting in the audience, you just don't know very much, but you have all the information when you're going in, so you kind of forget that not everybody does, right? So, actually saying things, giving my opinion, which often is a little different than their opinion, showing up in the community.

I said that, I hated that, as people who were... You'd get invited, you'd invite the city council, men at the time, to events and things, and you wouldn't get anybody to show up. And not that you can be at everything, but that's important to show up and say who you are and be active and do all of those things. To me, that's what you need to do. And encourage people to run. It's not just; it is having people run for all of the seats, I mean, it isn't a woman or a man. It's encouraging people to run for these offices. But it definitely is encouraging women to run for these offices. And it's why haven't they, you know, why? Why do women not want that?

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HOST: What misconceptions about women in leadership, especially in the Midwest, do you encounter most often?

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HYDO: I guess that, you know, you said it. What are the women's issues, or that's what you're going to be, I guess, interested in or talk about? And, it's interesting to me because I think we all bring in something that maybe we're passionate about, and I suppose some of my passions would fall into that woman. Like, in my ward, we really need a playground on the west side of town, is what we call it. We lost a playground to one of the elementary schools' closings.

So, we need a playground on this side of town. So, some people say, 'Oh, well, that's a very, you know, woman thing to be for,' right? Because you are pro like kids in playgrounds and whatever, that it has to be a woman's, considered a woman's issue for you to be knowledgeable or interested in it. I guess that is just unusual. I mean, I, I, you know, it's a bit crazy to me that it's odd for women to be in leadership roles still.

09:22
HOST: Can you tell me a story or multiple stories when you felt particularly aware of being the only woman in the room?

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HYDO: I laugh about that all the time, about how nice it is to go into a meeting and have women in the room. It's like, oh wow. Some more of us. I think it is from the very beginning. All of a sudden, everybody has to say council member rather than councilman. That seems to be hard because they weren't saying council member, even though they probably should have been saying that. The men forget, and they're not doing it intentionally. They'll just say something about gentlemen or whatever. And it isn't just gentlemen now. So, simple things like that. But I always know that I'm the only woman in the room, you know?

I mean, you walk in, and you're the only woman in the room. And again, I do look at things differently. Whether that's because I'm a woman or whether that's just because of my age, or whether that's just because of my upbringing. I know it has some things to do with being a woman, because you just see things differently. You've lived your life, they've lived theirs, they've lived a white male life, right? I haven't. I've lived a white female life. So, there's always going to be differences. I always feel it. I always feel like, you know, when you walk into a room, and you're the only one.

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HOST: Does it make you feel uncomfortable or sad?

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HYDO: No, no, no. You can't. You just you just go forward. I have a job to do. People gave me the job. That's what I always said. The people gave me the job. So, I need to go in, and I need to do it now. There is a little bit again, I think, after now, we're a year in, we all know each other a little better, right? Our city administrator knows. Our mayor knows. We all feel pretty comfortable with each other. And not that I ever felt that I wasn't one of them or part of them or whatever, but I think it took a while for us to kind of get to know each other. I'm never been quiet about my beliefs, and I will just flat out say it. I don't feel intimidated. I guess my intimidation may be for those that have been there for a while and no more. So, it's not that intimidation of you're a man, and I'm a woman. It's just knowledge-based.

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HOST: How do you think your leadership style differs from your male colleagues?

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HYDO: I think as a woman, you tend to sit back and listen more. Maybe that's just always the expectation, right, of women. And so I would say that's the biggest thing, just kind of that sitting back and taking things in a little bit more. It is frustrating, I will say. I mean, I think about all of the years in town and I think about it, and it's not just city council, one of my favorites, this has happened in the 90s, I'm going to tell you this because a bunch of the women, who got together and we were trying to bring an organization to downtown Beatrice, and it was all women. But when we were creating this organization, there's like an acknowledgment of our first president has to be a man. Just had to be. And we all, and here's a bunch of women that are, you know, they're running their businesses and, and whatever.

But there's this realization that no matter where we are, that first president needed to be a man to have, I guess, a little more, that the rest of the town would be more accepting. If I was doing some of that today, I think that would be in the back of my mind still. You know, again, how many years later are we still saying, you know, how do you set up an organization to be accepted? It's kind of crazy to think about that, because I would have all of these women, I would say, are feminists. I don't know if they identified that way. But again, they were equally the reason why. They were successful in their businesses with their husbands.

But you, you cannot, I guess you cannot change things just because you want them to change, right? I mean, that I guess I would take that away from it. And as frustrating as that can be, it is what it is, right? So again, I'm not saying you don't work on it. I'm not saying you don't work towards that or whatever, but there is still this feeling, and I would say still here now, not just in the 90s, I think those that decision might have been the same one now. There's just this, it's just there.

14:02
HOST: Do you think that that's special and particular to the Midwest and Midwest leadership, this gridlock? There is the possibility of changing things, of moving forward. Do you think that's Midwest-specific?

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HYDO: That might be a bit of a Midwest, I think it's also a rural-urban issue. I would say I and I don't know if that's true across the country, but I would say, you know, you've seen women mayors, we have a woman mayor in Lincoln now, Omaha had one, and so I think you do see, you know, women in leadership in a bigger city. I do think it's different in rural America and at least rural Midwest America. I feel very respected in my position from everybody that's on the council. And they respect their wives a lot. But I don't, I'm not sure if that respect goes, you do see things. I mean, I just, I see things that are a little sexist sometimes, a little. Not in a horrible way. I don't they have no idea it even exists, right? It just is.

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HOST: Do you ever wish that you were on, that you were a city councilwoman of a bigger Midwest city?

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HYDO: Not really. I have been given an opportunity because I grew up in a small community, right? I'm happy where I am, you know? And again, I've been given, I was able to do things being part of a small city that I wouldn't have been able to. I'm not a politician, right? So, we're nonpartisan in our city council. And we're all just working for the good of the community. Yeah. And I don't know that I can say that in bigger cities, and I don’t know that again, in a bigger city, would I even be on the radar of people? No. That wouldn't have been my trajectory in a big city.

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HOST: Is it a bigger deal being a city councilwoman on the small, small Midwest city than Omaha or elsewhere?

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HYDO: Yeah, it is. Because again, say in Omaha or in Lincoln, that's normal. That's not strange. But it was a news story that I was the first woman in 20, I don't remember how many years, that won a city council seat. So it is. It is a big deal here. I mean, it is unusual. Should it be? No. But it is.

16:29
MELODIE YANG: Hi. I'm Melodie Yang, the web director for Urban Plains. This year, I have been working closely with the brand team, as we partnered up with Beaverdale Books, the oldest independent bookstore in Des Moines, and a proud supporter of Urban Plains. Because when local storytellers thrive, our whole community grows. From Iowa authors to Midwest makers, Beaverdale Books keeps creativity on the shelves, and Urban Plains brings those stories to life online. So, stop in, shop local, and support the voices shaping the Midwest. Beaverdale Books. Proud sponsor of Urban Plains.

17:05
MCMENAMY: Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

17:16
HOST: How is your career on Beatrice City council? How is that different from maybe a woman or a woman city councilor that's not based in the Midwest? Like someone from, I don't know, Washington state? How do you think that your experience and that person's experience would be different?

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HYDO: It's funny because I am a proud liberal Democrat. I just am. I've always said if I ever move, I'm going to go somewhere blue. I do think it's different, I think it's more different to me that way. And again, and it may just be, women in Washington state may say, 'I'm a feminist,' or I'm a, whatever. I just, we just, at least here, don't say that.

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HOST: Do you wish that you could be more vocal about being a feminist, being a liberal Democrat?

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HYDO: Yes. Because I'm not. I mean, again, we're a nonpartisan, organization. It would, it could impact whether I could get elected or reelected. I mean, we're worried, you know, do you, do we have to raise electric rates? Because that's a big issue right now across the state for us, I think probably across the Midwest as a whole. We have an industrial site that needs to be cleaned up. So again, it is, it is, but it's not, right?

I mean, it it isn't, you're just doing what you think is best for Beatrice, and it's not really an issue of what party you're part of or what your belief system is. Because at this level, that really doesn't happen. It does happen in bigger cities. I always say that even in our unicameral here in Nebraska, that there there is a divide between Republican and Democrat. But I think the bigger divide is between urban and rural America. Do I feel like I would want to say it? I think, you know, we can all go and give speeches and say whatever. But I think the bigger impact is doing it.

19:20
HOST: And that concludes the final episode of Bad Midwest Feminist. I'm not crying, you are. Special thanks to Councilwoman Dana Hydo for lending us some of her time. It was extremely fun, and I hope she and the rest of her council colleagues continue to push for support in the Beatrice community for years to come. I must say this conversation felt quite reminiscent of my first episode with Iowa Representative Jennifer Konfrst. Konfrst spoke a lot about how feminism has indeed reached rural areas in Iowa, but if you call it that, it won't go over well.

Feminism in rural Nebraska seems to be similar. Iowa and Nebraska are neighbors, after all, but that hasn't stopped Dana from speaking her mind and sharing different perspectives with her male colleagues. She wants to see her community improve and thrive, and she tries to deliver. But why are we still afraid to use the word feminist? Why does Dana almost use the adjective 'aggressive' to describe feminism? Why does James struggle to even say the word? Why does

Jennifer describe herself as a lowercase feminist? Why does Sister Myra Faulkner say I'm a feminist, but... I personally think we still need to keep chatting about it. Sister Mara became a nun, partly to distance herself from conservative gender norms. Jennifer openly advocates for female interests. James built a retaining wall with his niece. Dana is advocating for a new playground in her ward. Does feminism in the Midwest boil down to a label or an action? Is one better than the other? Because whether or not someone claims the word as their own, you can very well still engage with feminism no matter what corner of the Central Midwest you dwell in. Perhaps the Midwest needs its own feminist definition.

I'll get the ball rolling. Midwest feminism is small moments of advocacy and resistance that encourage women to take up greater spaces in their communities. Insert/add to this definition as you will. Dana Hydo, James Huster, Sister Mara Faulkner, Dr. Jesse Swan, Alicia Hurtado, and Representative Jennifer Konfrst, while all in different fields with different backgrounds, abilities, and dreams, they all want to see women succeed and have no intention of deliberately holding them back. I suppose you could say that that's my word of wisdom, but Dana has one, too. “It doesn't matter if people use the word feminist. It matters what you do.” So do with that what you will. And until then, I'm Caroline Siebels-Lindquist with Urban Plains Magazine, signing off the Bad Midwest Feminist podcast, and always asking you to just keep talking.