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WOMEN'S STUDIES COMES TO THE MILITARY:
REFLECTIONS ON A PILOT PROJECT

The overseas U.S. military base presents movement women with a complex and essentially hostile environment. The needs of four very different categories of women must be addressed: (1) women in uniform; (2) wives and daughters of servicemen; (3) wives and daughters of civil service employees; and (4) career civil service women. Since the “daughters” form a psychologically distinct group, they perhaps deserve their own niche. The picture is further complicated (and enriched) by the presence of numerous “host country” women who hold down a variety of jobs on base.

The “dependent wife,” whether from the second or third category, experiences most fully the debilitating effects of the system. The military wife is expected to further her husband’s career by bearing the children he needs to present a properly “stable” image; by living up to the standards of consumption and social propriety set by the base commander’s wife; by “serving the community” in various voluntary activities; and by learning the role of “the beautiful one who waits” which is presented to her from a thousand subliminal sources. But she cannot open her own account at the base banking facility, at least not without her “sponsor’s” signature. Her sexual conduct, drinking habits, personal appearance, and “fitness as a mother” are all scrutinized as part of the evaluations which determine his military promotion schedule. She must learn to speak as the wife of Captain So-and-So when requesting furniture or repairs. She is discriminated against in the use of athletic facilities. Her husband has the right to deprive her of her driver’s license.

In theory, the dependent wife should thus be extraordinarily open to liberating forces. But since massive and expensive institutional structures depend on her willingness to internalize her role, comparable psychological pressures to conform are exerted on her. In sheer practical terms, feminist organizers face the discouraging facts of (1) the nearly absolute power of the base commander over buildings and grounds and (2) the incredible mobility of the military community. For a dependent wife to reach out to her sisters requires an extraordinary amount of courage.

These facts were, naturally, uppermost in my mind when, after much arm-twisting, I persuaded the University of Maryland to allow me to teach “Women and Fiction” in Term III of the past academic year. The course was scheduled for Ramstein Air Base, which is near Kaiserslautern, West Germany.

The (male) department chairman openly doubted that enrollments would be sufficient (15) for the course to be allowed. Against my wishes, the class was set for 5:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday, instead of the usual twice a week evening time. Further, the course quickly became billed as the “Women’s Lib” entry, and enrolling students had to face disparaging comments from both the registrar and their peers.

But to my great delight 21 students enrolled, though after the first meeting (when it became clear that serious and hard work was planned) the number dropped to 16. Astonishingly, one-half of the initial roster were male; we ended up with two-thirds female. Five of this latter group were “dependent wives,” three were “dependent daughters.” Three of the four militant feminists in the class were dependent wives; the fourth was a WAF.

What had radicalized these women enough to enroll? One was a talented college graduate who plainly felt trapped in the military ghetto and was doing all she could to make her environment tolerable, including organizing the area’s “Women’s Equality” group. Because her husband is a dentist, she was partly protected from the punishments which disobedient wives can suffer. Another was the wife of a pilot missing in action, again, an especially protected category. The third was a 40-year-old woman married to a career serviceman. That her husband was near retirement perhaps partly explains her position. But it seemed to me that in her one found a rare example of heightened consciousness arising directly from her own 20 year confrontation with the system itself. At the same time, I continually had to remind myself that this was all happening in an Air Force (read “education-minded”) context and at the most international and pluralistic base in the world. Had it been an isolated Army post, the sacrifices and tensions would have been a good deal clearer.

The class developed in an exciting way, partly because of its curious composition. In addition to the feminists, three dedicated Lawrentians emerged (we read Lady Chatterley’s Lover and Millett and Mailer on Lawrence for comparisons). There were four or five literature majors who claimed never to have read anything by women before, but who were very close and careful readers; a few who needed consciousness-raising (one woman with seven children who had done little outside her family before this course); a French woman; a Dutch woman; and two people who already had degrees, but who had never been able to take such a course before. Our daily class meeting of 1 ½ hours demanded involvement and serious discussion, and after eight weeks together, we were a “real group.”

The center of the common reading for the course was Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook. Other texts included Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, Marguerite Duras’s Moderato Cantabile, Plath’s The Bell Jar, and Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover. For purposes of comparison to the confessional, autobiographical mode, we also read the first volume of Anais Nin’s diary and Anne Moody’s Coming of Age in Mississippi. The students kept journals and also did a special project. The best oral project was done jointly by an Airman and a WAF, who constructed a dialogue dealing with Lessing’s short stories, The Summer Before the Dark and the Notebook.

Although I knew the course was generating great interest both within and outside the classroom, I had not correctly gauged its intensity. At the last class meeting, a party in my apartment, some real soul-searching took place over the wine punch, and the last students didn’t leave until 3:30 a.m. A nucleus of the group decided to continue reading and discussion once a week, and thus formed the “Radical Women’s Reading Group,” now going strong. There is, further, a clamor that the course be offered again, and other students have requested a course on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English female novelists. The “Women’s Equality” group has absorbed all my spare copies of The Golden Notebook.

One must be careful to interpret these manifestations realistically. Women’s groups seem to be prospering best in elite Air Force areas like Ramstein, Wiesbaden, Berlin, and Madrid. The challenging areas are the Army posts, of which there are well over 70 in West Germany alone. As the all-volunteer army comes into existence, more and more women will be initiated into the “dependent wife” role. Their ability to strike out against their status as childbearing, card-playing, alcoholic “adjuncts” to a career will depend heavily on stateside developments. The Army has, true enough, made antisexist education a part of its mandatory “Human Relations” seminars. Ms. is now available in Stars and Stripes bookstores. Some exciting things are happening in the Women’s Army Corps, but signs of resistance are appearing everywhere to the new trends, and those soldiers who joined up “to become men” will obviously not yield without a fight.

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WHO'S WHO AND WHERE IN WOMEN'S STUDIES
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