Why Discuss Men in Sexist Society?

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Feminists' activities at the University of Texas at Arlington have received official sanction in two areas: first, the Women's Studies Center completed its second year by offering five courses and conducting a research project; second, reports for the Status of Women Committee have drawn attention to inequities in salary and promotion policies.

In October 1971, as a direct result of the feminist movement throughout the nation, the former president of the University appointed six faculty and six staff members to the Status of Women Committee, currently seven women and five men. While no student is presently represented on the Committee, the new president is sympathetic to that idea. The responsibilities of the Committee are twofold: (1) to study all areas of the University structure—faculty, staff, and student—for possible sex discrimination and to advise the President of its findings and cooperate with him in finding ways to avoid or eliminate such discrimination; and (2) to serve as a hearing committee for individual or group complaints of sex discrimination from faculty, staff, and students and to report to the President those cases which, in the Committee's judgement, are indicative of discrimination.

Findings which the Status of Women Committee reported to the President have exposed and helped adjust a number of inequities. At the beginning of the school year 1973-1974, for example, 24 faculty women were given upward salary adjustments; 4 women were appointed to middle level administrative positions; more women have been appointed to standing university committees; and promotions of women faculty have been more equitably distributed than heretofore.

In the area of women's athletics, the Committee recommended that a separate budget be established for women's intercollegiate activities. This has been accomplished, and a woman has been hired to coordinate and coach the intercollegiate sports program. In its initial phase, the athletics program has concentrated on five sports—softball, volleyball, basketball, swimming, and badminton—and in its first year, the volleyball team progressed all the way to national competition.

The Women's Studies Center at University of Texas, Arlington began its second year in the fall of 1973 by offering five courses and conducting a women's research project. A complex and multi-purpose institution, the Center coordinates women's studies courses and works with the Division of Continuing Education in the presentation of noncredit courses. In the fall of 1974, the first interdisciplinary course, "Women in the Modern World," will be offered for credit through the history department, with lectures as well as informal discussions directed by Women's Studies Committee members in their areas of specialty.

Research for the Center will focus on continuing education and on sex-role development and reeducation. It will concentrate on the mature woman who may be returning to college for the first time or resuming an interrupted career or considering changing careers. The research will involve the investigation of the mature woman from a psychological, sociological, economic, and historical view with consideration of the role of women as depicted in literature, art, and music from a cross-cultural perspective.

In addition, the Center will continue to sponsor institutes, seminars, workshops, speakers, and films of interest to the campus, the community, and such special groups as public school and junior college teachers and members of women's organizations and labor unions. It will provide a speakers' bureau and consulting services to individuals and groups interested in women's studies.

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WHY DISCUSS MEN IN SEXIST SOCIETY?

Can we ever stop worrying about men? When we teach women's studies courses, work with women's caucuses in professional organizations, or speak to various groups about feminism, we often do more than our duty. In addition to dealing with the problems of women, we also consider those of men. Recently, however, both of us have begun re-evaluating our efforts. Our experience with a particularly bothersome workshop, "Women and Men in Sexist Society," started us thinking.

As co-chairwomen of the Midwest Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages, we were responsible for organizing five workshops for the 1973 Midwest Modern Language Association meeting. At one of the Caucus working sessions the previous year, someone had suggested that we sponsor a workshop on men in sexist society. To give those of us present some slight credit, we objected to that exclusive topic, and we did progress from "men and women" to "women and men." But that was superficial progress for which we need not congratulate ourselves. We did not even approach the conclusions both of us have come to since then: specifically, that women's organizations do not necessarily need to sponsor workshops concerning the problems of men; and generally, women are far too ready to acquiesce not only to men's demands for inclusion in the women's movement, but also for extra compassion, warm understanding, and impeccable fairness.

While our conclusions are negative, we think the reasons for them are well worth discussing since they relate directly to our professional lives. We especially question the deference and readiness to apologize to men that we have observed in both ourselves and other professional women. We might do better to allow men to work on their own problems rather than treating them with such exquisite consideration and tact that we are still sometimes like mistresses and mothers in classrooms and professional organizations: our rhetoric is different, we don't light their cigars or blow their noses, but we still worry about men's feelings excessively.

Our deference to men is closely related to our admirable wish to be fair. Having suffered from male chauvinism, we are afraid of being considered female chauvinists. Nevertheless, this desire for fairness often leads us to dismiss our own interests and commitments. It leads us simply to waste time.

Our experiences in organizing "Women and Men in Sexist Society" will help to illustrate our point. The suggestion for the workshop came from a man—a nice man, a feminist, someone whose ideas we wanted to treat fairly, but also someone whose feelings we did not wish to hurt by suggesting we would rather work on something else. Other women were equally indifferent to the topic of men in sexist society; two Women's Caucus—Midwest Newsletters appealing for volunteers to chair or participate in the workshop brought no response. Nevertheless, we proceeded through a long series of letters, phone calls, and personal conversations, attempting to find some male participants. With one exception, all the men declined, including the one responsible for the original suggestion.

Curiously, neither of us suggested canceling the Workshop. While pushing the vacuum cleaner on a Saturday afternoon, one of us finally thought of discussing our recruiting problems and subsequent misgivings with those attending the Workshop. She pulled the plug, called the other, and soon it seemed to both of us not only appropriate but necessary. By persistence and ingenuity, we had finally discovered how to give men their expected due. But we had also discovered a pattern.

We believe that our wish to be fair to men and the consequent waste of time and straying from more important matters can be observed in classrooms, social gatherings, talks to civic and church
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groups, and professional activities. A number of incidents come to mind immediately. At a party a few years ago, a pipe-smoking, suave, history professor tried to impress upon us how with-it he was.

"I discuss sexism in all my classes," he said. "Are you for or against?" we objected. "Oh, I present both sides, of course," he answered proudly. We fumed about the absurdity of his answer, and since analogies were popular then, asked him if there were two sides to racism. Eventually we came to regard him as an inconsequential ass.

But we remembered the incident as we were thinking about the over-scrupulous fairness we show to men in our women's studies classes. One of us recalled a male student in an American Studies course she teaches, "Women in American Culture," who wrote in his journal that he did not care much about the reading. With the exception of Dickey's Deliverance, it was either by or about women. He did not care for her discussion of the sexism of the English language and its effect of making women invisible, either. "Come to think of it," she observed, "he did not care for me as a teacher." "You are almost always talking about women and only giving one side, your side," he wrote. It is our practice generally to ignore irrelevant criticism: we do not bother to deal in class with such ridiculous suggestions as that Kate Chopin should have joined the Campus Crusade for Christ and written about a woman who is happy being a wife and mother. But instead of discussing the reading, 25 minutes of class time were spent explaining that the title of the course was Women rather than Sexism in American Culture; documenting the fact that students learned thoroughly about men in other courses; pointing to some future assignments in which the class would deal with men; and congratulating the class in general for being so open and honest in raising basic questions.

On occasions like this, many of us overdo it, and we know it. When we discussed the experience with women colleagues, several of them noted similar experiences: giving disproportionate introductions to using By and About Women but not Black Voices; grading leniently ungrammatical and illogical papers attacking "Women's Lib" for fear of being unfair; bringing up a long series of examples of the distorted images of men in advertising while reading "The Image of Women in Advertising": always demonstrating that actually men will benefit from an improvement in the status of women; and thanking, thanking, male students every time they suggest sexism hurts them.

We remembered the male student who "just couldn't understand" the problems of Hedda Gabler, Esther Greenwood, and Edna Pontillier. And so more than an hour was spent patiently explaining it all to him again, instead of telling him he'd jolly well better try harder. After all, we had spent our whole academic careers understanding the problems of Stephen Dedalus, Ernest Pontifex, Julien Sorel, Raskolnikov, Humbert Humbert, Portnoy, Tristram Shandy, Tom Joad, Paul Morel, J. Alfred Prufrock, George Babbitt, and Huckleberry Finn, not to mention Oedipus, Ulysses, Job, Faust, King Lear, Hamlet, and Jesus Christ.

We know that male colleagues are all too eager to use us as "resource people." Last summer we were both asked to speak to two classes about the women's movement. The first wasn't bad: the students had read a semi-relevant article, their questions were courteous and intelligent, and their professor bought us a cup of coffee afterward. Not real compensation, but we felt a little like missionaries. The Westbeth Playwrights Feminist Collective will present Seattle playwright Gloria Albee's feminist Medea, directed by Patricia Carmichael, at the Westbeth Gallery Theatre, 155 Bank St., January 17-19, 24-26, 31; February 1 and 2. Friday and Sunday performances begin at 8:00 PM, Saturday at 7:00 and 10:00 PM. Admission is $2.50.

Gloria Albee is a new regional writer discovered in Westbeth's nationwide search for women playwrights. Her Medea was produced earlier this year at Western Washington State College. Medea's director, Patricia Carmichael, has directed previously with the Augusta Civic Theatre and the Caravan Theatre, where she has been producer and director since 1949.