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Mills College Conference on Women's Education

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MILLS COLLEGE CONFERENCE ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION

A national conference, "Beyond Sexism: Educating Women for the Future," was held November 9, 10, and 11 at Mills College in Oakland, California with the purpose of sharing new ideas and new questions on the future of women's education. Approximately 500 women (and a handful of men), many of them from the California state college and university system, attended the Ford Foundation sponsored conference.

I arrived in Oakland with luggage consisting for the most part of boxes and folders of papers, newsletters, and brochures from the University of Massachusetts School of Education Women's Caucus and the University's Everywoman's Center, a tape recorder and eleven two-hour cassettes, and my fist-in-symbol button. It was too soon apparent that the button was inappropriate, the tape recorder superfluous, and the paper stuff from home uniquely innovative. I was disappointed by a general absence of feelings of sisterhood and by the trappings of a hierarchical star system that is characteristic of women seeking room at the top. Mostly I was disappointed by the absence of women asking hard questions. There was, for example, minimal exploration of the relationship of educational institutions to the cultural and economic structures in the society or the validity of the university as it now exists.

It is inconceivable to me that we can move beyond sexism toward an androgynous university before we have an understanding of the nature of sexism in its more subtle as well as overt forms. Without asking these hard questions we can at most expect a shift of those in power without any corresponding change in the quality and nature of education itself. To move beyond sexism requires a strong commitment to feminist action. I rarely heard the word. To move beyond sexism entails dealing with such basic issues as language, process, personal change, and role conflict. And if we are to change education, a hard look at the roles played by schools in society is essential.

The tone of the conference was set very early by the key-note speaker Estelle Ramey, professor of psychology at Georgetown University and President of the American Association of Women in Science. Ms. Ramey's concern with the lot of professional women seemed to me to belittle the seriousness and complexity of the issues facing all women. She expressed total insensitivity to the issues of class in her suggestion of what one must do to get ahead: one must have, of course, domestic help. This issue was not raised in such a way that showed awareness of larger, basic problems facing most American women today: the problem of finding meaningful work. Consequently it was hard for me to make the leap from the text of her speech to her closing remark, "We are our sisters' keepers."

My friend and colleague, Margaret Fuller Sablove, and I compared notes on the eight workshops we were able to attend (there were eleven two-hour cassettes, and my fist-in-symbol button. It was too soon apparent that the button was inappropriate, the tape recorder superfluous, and the paper stuff from home uniquely innovative. I was disappointed by a general absence of feelings of sisterhood and by the trappings of a hierarchical star system that is characteristic of women seeking room at the top. Mostly I was disappointed by the absence of women asking hard questions. There was, for example, minimal exploration of the relationship of educational institutions to the cultural and economic structures in the society or the validity of the university as it now exists.

The issue of Black women's relationship to the women's movement was of course explored. In its statement of purpose the NBFO points out that "the distorted male-dominated media image of the Women's Liberation Movement has clouded the vital and revolutionary importance of this movement to Third World women, especially Black women." Activist lawyer, Florlynce Kennedy, like many of NBFO's charter members, has been extremely active in the women's movement, but recognizes the need for a separate Black group. She pointed out that "We [Black women] have all the smartness of being abandoned and left on our own which is different from being liberated." Welfare, for example, is a woman's issue, but the women it affects most directly are the ones most likely to act for its meaningful change.

Conscious and unconscious racism among white women, despite their radical feminist goals, also led NBFO founders to begin an independent organization. Kennedy stated that the racism of white women is an essential issue to which white women must address themselves. NBFO's coordinators, however, consider the organization a part of the entire feminist movement and will continue to form coalitions to work on shared issues.

The Regional Conference in New York was the "historical" counterpart to the Seneca Falls Convention. The level of excitement and emotional warmth throughout the meetings was tremendous. Barbara Smith

BARBARA SMITH
Emerson College, Boston Member, NBFO

Women interested in finding out more about the National Black Feminist Organization and in organizing local chapters, write to: NBFO, Room 601, 370 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

Black Feminists Organize Nationally

On Saturday, December 1, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm declared to a jubilant group of listeners: "I am so glad to be here this morning. I said that if there were only six of us here this morning, it would be a beginning." Over four hundred Black women had gathered in New York to hear and applaud Ms. Chisholm as she gave the keynote address for the First Regional Conference of the National Black Feminist Organization.

All of us who were there, despite our abundant numbers and far-flung geographic origins, knew why Ms. Chisholm had anticipated a turnout of under ten. Never had significant numbers of Black women publicly gathered to explore the issues of being both Black and female from a feminist perspective. The consensus of the participants was that five or even two years ago such a conference would have been impossible.

The central core of the conference's activities were the Saturday morning and afternoon workshops. The subjects were varied, but were consistently crucial to Black women's experiences. They included: "Black Women and Welfare," "The Image of Black Women in the Media," "The Black Woman Addict," "Abortion and Sterilization," "The Triple Oppression of the Black Lesbian," "Black Women and the Cultural Arts," and a day long consciousness-raising session called "Stepping Out to Sisterhood." Out of these workshops came proposals for the national organization as well as inspiration for organizing at the local level.

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her workshop on changing the elementary and secondary schools by engaging the group in a process of problem identification and solution. This provided both a working model and a platform for the needs and issues present in the group itself. Pamela Roby, chair-elect of the Sex Roles Section of the American Sociological Association, dealt with sex bias in research, in a manner especially relevant to the participants in their roles as teachers and researchers in the social sciences. Again, the uniqueness of this session rested in the facilitator's sensitivity to the concerns of the participants along with her meticulous examination of methodological assumptions.

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SUPERINTENDENTS (continued)

With this awareness, I recently undertook a study of sexual discrimination in the leadership roles of elementary and secondary education ("The Dimensions of Sexual Discrimination in the Leadership of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Potential for Legal Redress," a qualifying paper, Harvard Graduate School of Education, May 1973). Available from the author). What was significant in doing this research was what was not there. The New York Times had almost no articles on the topic; it was not even worthy of note in its Annual Education Review (January 8, 1973). The same was true of other publications. The most dramatic conclusion of the paper was a single small statistic depicting the very tiny number of women who have achieved the position of chief administrator of local education agencies. It is a very tentative statistic based on fitting together many conflicting bits of information and talking with literally scores of people around the country. The more startling revelation was why this material was not more readily available and sought after. Why could I not look at statistical tables, research documents, scholarly articles, and find out all I wanted to know? Surely, people have been collecting statistics about schools for a long time, and writing about schools for even longer. I finally—painfully—had to accept the fact that the role of women in public school administration is really not an issue for very many people. Commissioner Marland's "Task Force on the Impact of Office of Education Programs on Women" aptly describes the situation:

With respect to collecting information on women, OE [U.S. Office of Education] has not fulfilled its oldest mandate. Despite growing concern about sex discrimination, information concerning the status of men and women in education is still limited. Few national statistics have been collected to supplement piecemeal information on sex discrimination that has come to light in recent years. (p. 58)

So I was only able to identify eighty-four to ninety women who were superintendents of local school districts out of the estimated 12,986 superintendents in the United States. I could add very little to this statistic. Size of district, salary, region or state distribution, age, years of experience, highest degree held—all of the crucial variables which might tell us something about why these eighty-four or ninety women are where they are and, hence, allow us to make inferences about professional women educators who have achieved such positions—are not reported by sex. From incomplete data, I can speculate only that women superintendents are older, more thoroughly trained or experienced, and paid less than their male counterparts. Yet, no adequate statistical picture of women superintendents can be drawn from reviewing the data; nothing significant can be said about variables which might reveal why so few women are in these positions at all.

Specifically, we need information about the number of women who have aspired to administrative roles and failed; the conditions under which more women are likely to aspire; situations in which women are more likely to succeed; the dimensions and range of success (to be a deputy superintendent in New York City or an assistant superintendent in Chicago differs qualitatively from being a superintendent of a school system of 400). We need to know the incentives and rewards for not aspiring; the attributes of "male-ness" that are perceived as essential to competence in administrators; the actual performance of women administrators and men administrators; the specific job description which detracts from its desirability for women and from its feasibility for married women; how single women fare vis-a-vis married women, single men, and married men? What are the specific social mores that discriminate against women public school administrators? What characteristics of women—age, race, training, marital status—are relevant to "success"? We need to evaluate the social and geographic factors, if any, that lead to failure. What are the professional aspirations of women entering as teachers and how do their aspirations differ across such variables as type of institution offering professional and post-secondary training, academic achievement, socio-economic status, geographic region, ethnic background? In short, we need to know what is in the decision-making functions of the educative process that makes the superintendency appear to be a male job.

Additional information, however, may do little to disturb the public apathy which surrounds the problem or to implement existing legislation aimed at altering the status quo. Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 (The Higher Education Act) applies to all institutions receiving any form of federal aid. Few educators seem aware of this legislation which became effective July 1, 1972—or of its potential for changing behavior toward women. Yet its provisions explicitly prohibit virtually every educational facility in the United States from engaging in sex discrimination. A February 1973, memorandum to Chief State School Officers and School Superintendents from the Office of the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, attached to a copy of the law, alerted school officials to the fact that sex discrimination practices were illegal.

Since the passage of Title IX nearly eighteen months ago, school administrators have not yet received specific guidelines for implementing this legislation. Compliance criteria and affirmative action programs from higher education are, however, available as models to those local agencies who wish to plan for action in this area. But I could find no evidence that any had begun to do so in a systematic way.

School administration is now a very secure, male monopolized by custom, professional organizations, and governmental agencies at all levels. The institutional structure of the public schools, combined with the experiences of women in business and higher education, suggests that women will have to work very hard indeed to attain occupational mobility in elementary and secondary education. The larger society in which the schools exist apparently feels no compulsion to extend career options for women. Men and women who believe that schools, like other organizations, should offer students a variety of role models and recruit talent from a diversified pool of qualified applicants will have to press this minority point of view. Changes are needed—in the socialization process which defines woman's place and limits her aspirations; in the training programs that prepare teachers and administrators; in professional organizations; and in a society which prevents over half of its population from acting on its cherished values of achievement and equality of opportunity. Women, themselves, must take a leadership role in effecting these changes through legislation, through supporting other women, and through demanding adequate public information about given situations in their schools.

The author is Assistant Superintendent of Schools in Hanover, New Hampshire. She is writing an article for a forthcoming issue of the Newsletter about her own story of becoming a school administrator.

MILLS COLLEGE CONFERENCE (continued)

One final observation on the conference as a whole. I heard participants refer to each other as "girls," "gals," and "ladies," with an apparent lack of consciousness about language as a prime shaper of ideas and attitudes.

My chief concern in reviewing this conference is the failure to fulfill the tremendous potential for change which women in education are building both individually and collectively. Self-criticism may help to organize future conferences more optimally. This is not to lose sight of the fact that the gathering was important. At the very least it established a network of communications and contacts that begin to parallel the male-dominated channels of higher education.

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