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Black Feminists Organize Nationally

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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 keynote 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 manner as to be developed in economically depressed areas, neither the facilitator nor the agenda allowed for the exploration of this concern. The suggestion was allowed to drop as irrelevant to the workshop.

My friend and colleague, Margaret Fuller Sablove, and I compared notes on the eight workshops we were able to attend (there were more than thirty altogether). Our experience was that, except for two workshops which I'll mention below, the leadership either failed to discuss or to recognize the significance of the assumptions from which they built. The task was made to seem one of redecoration, a changing of faces, rather than the extensive redesign and rebuilding which, from our experience in education, seem essential to genuine change in women's lives. In the session on changing the curriculum through women's studies, for example, the issue was how to achieve academic respectability, rather than the nature of that respectability.

A workshop on psychoanalysis as a profession focussed on sexist training practices rather than the assumptions upon which that mode is based and some alternatives to it. In the workshop on women's centers, when several women suggested that such institutions might be developed in economically depressed areas, neither the facilitator nor the agenda allowed for the exploration of this concern. The suggestion was allowed to drop as irrelevant to the workshop.

There were two exceptions to what I've already described. Edna Mitchell, chairwoman of Mills' Department of Education, focussed 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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