Fall 1976

Librarians Adopt Proposal on Sexism, Racism

The Feminist Press

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
LIBRARIANS ADOPT PROPOSAL ON SEXISM, RACISM

The American Library Association's (ALA) centennial convention, held in Chicago, July 1976, and attended by 18,000 librarians, will go down in history as a victory in the battle against sexist and racist attitudes in the library world. The Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) distributed more than 5,000 copies of its Bulletin (Vol. VII, No. 4) which carried their proposal, "An Action Program for ALA." In the course of the week-long convention, the CIBC proposal for librarian action against racism and sexism evolved into a formal resolution that was voted upon by the membership and adopted as official policy by the ALA Executive Council.

The first official consideration of the CIBC proposal for ALA action came from the Social Responsibility Round Table (SRRT) Action Council on Monday, July 19. After voting to endorse it, SRRT members made two important suggestions. Brooklyn College librarian Jackie Eubanks suggested that the proposal be put in the form of a resolution and presented at the full ALA membership meeting scheduled for Friday; Wilson Library Journal Assistant Editor Patrice Harper suggested that specific ALA divisions and units be assigned the responsibility for carrying out each of the proposal's far-ranging objectives.

The rest of the week was spent writing and rewriting the resolution and meeting with Third World and feminist organizations within ALA to ask their input and endorsement. At 6 a.m. July 22, it was docketed as item No. 4: The Racism and Sexism Awareness Resolution.

Originally, the proposal had focused on the role of children's librarians, but the Children's Services Division Discussion Group on Sexism in Library Materials objected. Why, they asked, shouldn't adult librarians also be required to develop competence in discerning racism and sexism in books? The wording of the proposal was then broadened to put the full ALA membership on record as opposing neutrality on racism and sexism and mandating all ALA members to develop expertise in this area as part of their professional competence.

REVIEW OF WOMEN'S STUDIES PROGRAMS FUNDED BY FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

At the request of the Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, Florence Howe has agreed to write a short-range review of the current state of women's studies programs. To do that job, she and research associate Dora Janeway Odarenko will travel to 15 campuses from late September through early December 1976. They will gather specific, first-hand information on the shape and development of women's studies programs, the institutional setting and support structure of these programs and their educational goals. An essay-report of 60 pages, written after the site visits and due in Washington by the end of January 1977, will complete the review, which is being funded by the Advisory Council.

The Advisory Council was established by Congress in 1974 when the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) was passed. Composed of 17 regular and 3 ex-officio members, its Executive Director is Joy R. Simonson, its Chairwoman, Bernice Sandler. The Council's charge is to advise the Assistant Secretary for Education and other federal officials about the improvement of educational equity for women.

Howe's review will provide "information, analyses and evaluations of a significant sampling of women's studies programs to enable the Council to make appropriate recommendations." Accordingly, the specific objectives outlined for the review are:

1. To investigate whether (or to what extent) women's studies function as a strategy for changing the mainstream curriculum;
2. To ascertain whether women's studies can function as a strategy to retool teachers;
3. To provide evaluative commentary on key elements of women's studies programs;
4. To evaluate the impact of women's studies on the vocational goals and directions for students and graduates;
5. To suggest areas for research and program support by federal agencies, which may further educational equity for women.

In pursuit of these objectives, Howe and Odarenko will interview the following groups and individuals on each campus where possible:

(continued on page 3)
On Friday, July 23, the final membership session of the convention was held, attended by 750 delegates.

Early in the two-and-a-half hour debate on the CIBC resolution, ALA president Clara Stanton Jones moved that the resolution’s four points be considered separately prior to a final vote on the entire resolution. Passage of her motion, ALA president Clara Stanton Jones moved that the convention was held, attended by 750 delegates. was extremely fortunate. Considerable pains had been taken in writing the resolution to make it broad and yet specific enough so that the various ALA divisions and groups would know precisely what they were being called upon to do. By breaking the resolution down into separate components, these tasks could be addressed at length. Moreover, as it turned out, a snowball effect developed, in which favorable action on one point facilitated passage of the next point and greatly enhanced the chances of the whole resolution.

The hottest debate centered on the second point, which directs ALA to prepare a model in-service program to address racism and sexism awareness. Cries of “censorship” went up, answered by charges that “censorship” mongering was aimed at preventing ALA units from getting involved with real issues. One librarian suggested an amendment—subsequently passed—that would hold all ALA units (not just one) responsible for developing awareness programs. This librarian added that his own consciousness had been raised in a multicultural workshop about Third World cultures, and that he felt such workshops would be beneficial to all librarians.

Then came a bombshell. A member, identified by School Library Journal reporters as “a Councilor from West Virginia,” stood up “to defend intellectual freedom.” He said, “I have the right, just as my staff has the right, to our personal beliefs. We have a right to be racist or sexist.” Pat Schuman, a former School Library Journal editor and now a publisher, shot back: “Not as a librarian paid by public funds, you and your staff don’t have that right. It happens to be against the law.” A woman who identified herself as a member of the Intellectual Freedom Committee stated that in the past she had had reservations about librarians taking an active stand against racism and sexism but continued, “I no longer believe this contradicts the principle of intellectual freedom, and I am now in favor of ALA undertaking this program.”

The third point calls on librarians to assume an advocacy role by educating “library users” to the pressing problem of racism and sexism. As already mentioned, the original CIBC proposal had singled out children’s librarians for this role, but now this was broadened to encompass young adult, reference, adult service, college and research librarians. Passage of this point laid to rest the notion that librarians are passive custodians of information.

The fourth and final point, directing ALA’s Resources and Technical Services Division to develop “a coordinated plan for the reform of cataloging practices that now perpetuate racism and sexism,” was endorsed in its original form. (This point is essentially formal recognition of the innovative cataloging practices initiated by Sanford Berman, Head Cataloger of the Hennepin County, Minnesota Library and Joan Marshall, Associate Professor at Brooklyn College, who is developing a thesaurus on sexist subject headings.)

The debate was winding to a close when Stephen Fulchimo from the Medford (Massachusetts) Public Library made the following statement: “The conservatives have been taking a beating in this Association, and it’s time we strike back. This resolution is another attempt to undermine traditional American values. I hereby call on all conservatives in the ALA to meet with me in this room at the end of the meeting to make plans for countering the radicalization of ALA.”

His call fell on deaf ears. The final vote, endorsing the entire resolution, was nearly unanimous.

An action of membership does not become binding until it is considered by ALA’s 100-member Executive Council, and the Council was due to meet that afternoon in final session for the year. In an unprecedented move, the ALA Council voted both to suspend a rule requiring the lapse of 24 hours before consideration of a membership action and to give the CIBC resolution priority over all other business. The ALA Council then voted overwhelmingly in favor of adoption.

Council on Interracial Books for Children

RESOLUTION ON RACISM AND SEXISM AWARENESS

Whereas, during the last 200 years the United States has failed to equalize the status of racial minorities and of women, and

Whereas, the American Library Association has professed belief in the principle of equality yet has failed to aggressively address the racism and sexism within its own professional province;

Therefore, be it resolved, that the American Library Association actively commit its prestige and resources to a coordinated action program that will combat racism and sexism in the library profession and in library service by taking the following steps:

The ALA will survey library schools to determine the extent to which racism and sexism awareness training form a part of the curricula and urge that such training be added to the curricula in every library school where it is not now included.

The Library Administration-Personnel Administration Section will develop a model in-service training program providing racism and sexism awareness training for library personnel.

The Public Library Association, the American Association of School Librarians, the Children’s Services Division, the Young Adult Division, the Reference and Adult Services Division and the Association of College and Research Libraries will be urged to develop a program to raise the awareness of library users to the pressing problem of racism and sexism.

The Resources and Technical Services Division will develop a coordinated plan for the reform of cataloging practices that now perpetuate racism and sexism.

Be it further resolved, that the President and Executive Board assess the extent of implementation of these steps and report on progress by the 1977 Annual Conference.