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On "Unfeminist Behavior" at the Convention

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On "Elitism" and the Gifted

Dear Editor:

At the recent NWSA National Convention in Indiana, a delegate spoke against the use of the word "gifted" in the title of one of the sessions. She said that the word was elitist. Because there were people applauding her remarks, I would like to clarify the assumptions and blatant stereotypes she used in denouncing the gifted.

Gifted, talented, and very creative children are a minority in the schools. Unfortunately, they are not usually identified early. Sometimes, even if a child can be identified as gifted (or talented or creative), the stereotypes surrounding this identification make it impossible to obtain extra teaching help or challenging surroundings for this child. Holding this child back with her/ his age peers is forced retardation in education. A child who can compose a concerto at age 10 should not be in a music class learning to sing simple tunes. A girl who at age 11 can outscore most seniors in high school on the math SAT should not be placed in seventh-grade arithmetic. Yet the majority of people assume that these children will make it on their own since they are so "smart." Talent in whatever form must be nurtured in order for it to grow and develop. Many teachers have neither the time nor the understanding in some cases to deal with these children. Extra money and talented teachers are now available for individual help for children who are mentally retarded. We should also have the extra help for children who are mentally gifted. Who knows how many artists we have lost because in the early grades they did not paint their pictures "right"?

The problem is especially vital for women because of the socialization process which tells young girls to hide any intellectual abilities. This is especially apparent in mathematics. At Johns Hopkins a special class was held for seventh-graders who scored 600 or better on the math SAT exam. Following that summer class, most of the boys were able to go on to accelerated math classes in their regular schools. Almost all the girls returned to their seventh-grade arithmetic classes. Some of the reasons were administrative (the principals couldn't seem to find classes for them to attend), but most were social (the girls didn't want to be different). Women face, with the "stigma" of being creative or talented or gifted, the added burden of being "different."

Moreover, gifted racial minority students face a double hazard. First, they face discrimination based on their race. Second, their intellectual gifts are not appreciated; are generally ignored, if not discouraged; and most certainly are not developed without great personal sacrifice.

Because the theme of next year's Convention is racism, I would like to urge strongly that a workshop be focused on the problem of gifted minority students and the barriers they face in developing their talents.

Sincerely yours,
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On "Unfeminist Behavior" at the Convention

To the Women's Studies Newsletter:

I left Bloomington after the NWSA Convention both elated and concerned. As one of the Program Coordinators I was generally happy with the Convention and appreciative of the many "thank yous" I had received. Most of the women to whom I spoke expressed satisfaction with the meeting and felt that the time they had spent in Bloomington had been energizing and educational. I want to thank each woman for her support and positive feedback.

Yet, as I left Bloomington, my elation was tinged with anger and concern because I had witnessed a great deal of insensitive and unfeminist behavior. What I am about to say in no way applies to all participants/registrants at the Convention, most of whom were congenial and cooperative. Yet the insensitivity and unfeminist behavior which I saw and experienced were prevalent enough to generate, in me and in several others, a concern for our values and principles.

I am not speaking to the internal politics of NWSA or the various political interest groups within NWSA. (I might comment, however, that these "politics" leave unnamed and unchallenged the real foe—the white male power elite.) I am speaking to a politics which some of us feminists seem to have forgotten or possibly abandoned—namely, our loyalty to women and how we express and live that loyalty in simple everyday interactions.

What I witnessed behind the scenes were demands, expectations, assumptions, noncooperation, and even hostility exhibited by some women toward others. The Indiana University women, who had worked harder than anyone could imagine to create a comfortable environment and smoothly-running Convention, received very little appreciation and, indeed, often experienced the opposite.

On the most basic level, several women assumed and insisted that the women in the Convention Office constituted a secretarial pool to serve their needs. One irate woman claimed that if men had organized this Convention, they (the men) would have provided typists. Well, maybe so—but isn't that the point? We are not men and do not assume that women in an office constitute a servant class! Even so, Convention staffers did type and run the stencil machines, not because it was their job but because they found it easier to do so than to face the hostility of those making the demands.

Transportation to and from the Indianapolis Airport was another problematic area. A few participants expected to be picked up or taken to the airport (and some were!). Many complained that buses from Bloomington to Indianapolis were not scheduled at their convenience.

Many women were incredibly hostile during registration, demanding instant service or preferential treatment. Several others complained about services at IU over which the on-site coordinator had no control: J. P. Stevens sheets on the beds; Taster's Choice coffee in the cafeteria. Numbers of registrants did not turn in room keys when leaving, despite numerous announcements reminding them to do so. There were many
complaints about the shuttle bus fare. We almost did not have the busses: they were arranged to facilitate movement from the dorm to sessions and probably were run at a loss to NWSA.

... Even among the more dedicated, active of us, at some level, we act unthinkingly toward other women. The Coordinating Council, for example, met for a lunch-meeting after the Delegate Assembly. Jean Robinson and Patricia Patrick shopped for the food and set it out for a buffet lunch. When lunch was over, empty, dirty paper plates dotted the room. Jean asked each woman to dump her garbage: no one moved. Finally, Jean took a bag, circled the room, and collected the garbage. Each woman, without comment, or, it seemed, consciousness, handed her garbage to Jean. What was going on?

At one point during the Convention, one woman suggested to me that we were behaving this way because we wanted to be mothered. By this I assumed she meant we were treating each other the way children and adolescents treat their mothers: making demands and expecting unconditional compliance. At first I thought she had hit on something, but on thinking it over I don't believe wanting to be nurtured/mothered had much to do with it. I think we simply forget—without any malice, without any conscious dishonesty—that as feminists we owe something to other women. We owe cooperation. We owe decency. But most of all we owe respect. We need to think about what happens to us and how we behave when we interact with other women.

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On Class Bias and the NWSA

To the Women's Studies Newsletter:

Class is a difficult issue to work with because it has been so well disguised in the United States. Many of us aren't actually sure what economic and social class we come from nor how our class background has affected our values, beliefs, and actions. When I speak of class I do not mean only an economic concept, but also the way we perceive the world, where we place value.

Our perceptions and values form the base of our actions not only as individuals, but as a national organization. For example, the membership form for NWSA reads, "No person or group shall be excluded from membership because of inability to pay." In December 1979 I needed to renew my membership, but could not afford to pay. It was not easy to request membership without payment. My working-class parents/culture had taught me not to take "handouts," and to do without when I couldn't afford something. For four months I struggled with the option without making a decision. As a delegate to the National Convention I finally had to decide. I wrote to the National Office asking for membership without payment. Back in the mail I received a "Dues Waiver Request" form (which explains the tight financial situation of the organization and asks the person to consider this in requesting free membership). This form may be a good idea, and, indeed, a practical necessity for the organization. But it illustrates a class bias. Since I knew of people who had higher incomes but were paying the lower sliding-scale dues, I wondered if they were asked to verify in writing that their payments were a correct reflection of their incomes. If not, then "accountability" is only being asked of those who cannot afford to pay. Many working-class people who receive this waiver form, I believe, would either forfeit membership or suddenly find the money by sacrificing a basic necessity, like a dentist appointment or their food budget. For myself, I felt humiliated—as if my earlier handwritten request wasn't sufficient to verify my honesty. . . .

The problem here is not merely one's signature on a waiver form. The NWSA is a feminist organization which includes women from a wide spectrum of economic circumstances. The deep challenge to us is how we choose to live as individuals and what initiatives, structures, visions, actions, we create as an organization. Some of the questions raised include: How are we to survive financially as a national organization? How, through our structure, as well as through education, can we create new ways of looking at and working with class issues? The challenge is not only how we can make the organization responsive to working-class needs, but, taking it further, how working-class values and perspectives can be integrally incorporated in the decision making, in the base of the organization (otherwise, we cannot expect to encourage the full participation of working-class, community, and community college groups). And for ourselves, what values do we place upon money: How do we earn it? What do we spend it? How do we share it?

One way of working with this situation is to implement a tool of consciousness-raising concerning class. A group in Philadelphia, Movement for a New Society,* uses a process of "cost sharing," involving small groups of people who meet to discuss their class backgrounds, their current situations, and the values they presently hold, which aren't always related to their present economic status. Out of these meetings the individuals decide what contributions they will make, how much they will pay for attending a workshop, or for living in a collective house. This is different from a sliding scale because it not only serves to determine what people will pay, but also deepens awareness and understanding of how our class backgrounds continue to influence our perspectives, our options, and our choices.

It is not an easy task. At the New York Women's Studies Association Conference, at one workshop, participants found it difficult even to say in a group how much money they earned a year. There are a lot of emotions and values tied to money. As feminists working for change we need to work through our fears, guilt, and resentments in order to challenge and support our own choices, to challenge the economic and social structures of society, and to build a strong class-conscious organization.

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* Movement for a New Society, 4722 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19104 (Phone: 215-724-1464), can be contacted for further information and resources.