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# On Class Bias and the NWSA

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## READERS' SPEAKOUT

complaints about the shuttle bus fare. We almost did not have the buses: 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? Where 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, guilts, 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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