

EDUCATION AS A PRIORITY

The women's movement as a revolutionary force must turn its attention to the schools. It is in the schools that children are socialized to play the roles essential to the continuance of the capitalist state. It is in the schools that children are deprived of their humanity. Through a relatively arbitrary and inflexible system, personality traits are assigned to girls simply because they are girls, and to boys simply because they are boys. Girls are taught to be passive, submissive and supportive; boys are encouraged to be more competitive, aggressive and authoritative. In concrete terms, these traits are reflected and reinforced in play activity, in school curricula, and channelling.

The little girl playing with her dolls is practising the role that she is later expected to assume. The directing of girls into home economics and boys into industrial arts further reinforces the role differentiation.

Job channelling is most clearly reflected in high schools, in vocational and commercial courses, and more subtly in the expectation that girls will do better in courses such as English and French, and boys will do better in the sciences. The self-fulfilling prophecy becomes realized at the university level, where the majority of women go into arts, education, and nursing. The vast majority of women who do not go on to university, take low-paying service or auxiliary jobs. Whether they are professionally trained or not, many women regard their jobs as temporary, as a stop-gap measure before marriage.

For most women, their primary source of identity lies in their role as wife and mother. In many respects, the kinds of occupations that women take are simply extensions of this nurturing and supportive role: as a nurse rather than a doctor; as a secretary rather than a lawyer; and as a teacher rather than a principal.

Teaching as a Profession for Women:

Even in education, where women are in the majority, their previous socialization affects their status within the profession. Men are considered professional and women are considered service staff. It is the men who control the schools and the women who work in them.

One of the justifications put forward to explain this situation is that women do not stay in the profession as long. Statistics show, however, that women remain in the profession longer than men, even though they rarely get promotions, and in spite of the fact that prejudicial regulations seriously disadvantage women who become pregnant. For example, in Vancouver, women cannot continue to teach beyond their fourth month of pregnancy, and are not allowed to return to teaching until one full year after the birth of their child. During this time, there is absolutely no compensation, nor is there any guarantee of being rehired.

Another justification for keeping women in the lowest echelons of the profession, and hence in the lowest salary ranges, is that men need higher salaries because they are supporting their families. However, the number of women who are heads of family is increasing, and even when married women work, it is often because their husband's salary is insufficient.

It is true that women teachers are often less qualified than their male colleagues. This can only be understood in the context that women find it much more difficult to finance their own education, since they cannot get well paying part-time jobs. Furthermore, they are generally not encouraged to further their education; they "price themselves out of the market" if they become "too qualified". In some British Columbia elementary schools, for example, third-year Education students are hired in preference over graduates.

One other obvious justification is that no one wants to work for a woman. In many ways, this is an understandable prejudice, because many women who have "made it" to the top of their profession have had to take on the worst characteristics of the male role to do so. It is because these administrative roles are defined in "masculine" terms: as aggressive and competitive.

In order for women to achieve a representative voice in the decision-making within the educational system without sacrificing their more positive characteristics defined by their "femininity", it is clearly necessary to organize and work collectively. In other words, they must work together to achieve power not only in the classroom, but in the administration of the schools, and in the union.

It is not enough to fight for control, however, without a clear understanding of the objectives of the struggle. We want to develop an educational system that is democratic, an educational system that emphasizes the integration of knowledge, a system of knowledge that meets the needs of the people rather than the corporations.

Our organization must reflect structurally and ideologically our stated aims. We must convince women that these goals cannot be achieved without a structural change in the educational system. We must convince women that their role within that system cannot materially change without a basic reordering of education.

Why is this so? The channelling of women into the home creates hidden unemployment; channelling into low-paying, low-status occupations provides a source of cheap labour. In other words, the present roles for women serve the needs of the corporate state.

Education - The Priority:

The educational system is important to challenge both by the students within it, particularly the girls, and by the teachers, particularly the women. It is the main avenue through which roles and values are transmitted. In school, students learn who they are and what they are, and what they are to become. Within the system the teachers act out the roles they themselves learned as students, roles which they will in turn pass on to their students.

It is vital that girls be encouraged to organize themselves so that they can effectively challenge the system of channelling into lower status occupational areas. It is important that school curricula should include a study of women in society: their history of exploitation and subordination. All students should be taught to question their assumptions about "inherited" personality characteristics; they should be exposed to biological, psychological, and sociological theories about sex differences, and should debate the functions and dysfunctions of the nuclear family structure.

Teachers must realize the essential role they play in the transmission of values; they must work together to combat these stereotyped roles which so limit both men and women within our society. They must organize to take on the responsible roles within their profession. It is only then that prejudicial regulations against women will be successfully challenged, and more importantly, that necessary structural changes will be undertaken. The problems lie in the structures of institutions serving the few instead of the many, and it is only in working together that we can hope to be effective in changing our environment.

FOR STUDENTS: Focus For Action

1. To organize a Women's Caucus within the school, or within a student union where they exist, to press their demands.
2. To challenge guidance counsellors on their job channelling, and on their position regarding birth control and abortion.
3. To become more informed of the problems they face as women, and to make information more available to others.

Demands for Students:

1. An end to channelling: free choice at all levels.
2. A curriculum that deals with the historical and contemporary reality of the exploitation of women.
3. The right to control one's own body: free birth control information and facilities.

FOR TEACHERS: Focus For Action

1. To organize a Women's Caucus in the B.C. Teachers' Federation, to press their demands.
2. To support and encourage student demands on channelling and curriculum changes.
3. To encourage, within the classroom, a critical and questioning attitude towards the traditional view of women's role.

Demands for Teachers:

1. Proportional representation in the B.C.T.F., in the schools, and in the Department of Education at the administrative level.
2. An end to time regulations on maternity leave; guaranteed rehiring; and compensation for time away from work.
3. With the students, a curriculum that deals with the continuing exploitation of women.