

# THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD/ EDUCATORS' FORUM ON WOMEN'S STUDIES IN SECONDARY SCHOOL

*Olga Denisko*

*Cet article décrit brièvement un Forum de cinéastes et d'éducatrices de l'ONF à travers le pays, parrainé par l'ONF pour faciliter la production de films destinés à l'enseignement des études de la femme dans les écoles secondaires, et pour promouvoir l'utilisation efficace du film dans les salles de classe. Les éducatrices ont tracé un portrait des adolescentes qui suggère que très peu de changement s'est effectué. Les images des média jouent, il semblerait, un rôle central dans l'image que les adolescentes se font d'elles-mêmes, leurs attitudes, et leurs attentes. Le Forum a stressé les démarches optimum dans les films, pour rejoindre les assistances des écoles secondaires et contrer les influences des média, et aussi les domaines critiques où les films sont nécessaires.*

At the same time as the much publicized conference on international peace and security was being held in Montreal (April 20-22, 1986), a much quieter, not unconnected event was taking place: an NFB-hosted forum of women filmmakers and educators from across the country, on the theme of women's studies in secondary school.<sup>1</sup> This exploratory working session focused on major factors affecting the self-image, attitudes and expectations of today's female high-school students; the status of women's studies in secondary schools; and how filmmaking and film utilization can help generate attitudinal changes and challenge the status quo.

Some of the Forum's findings may dismay thinkers/researchers/educators who may have thought equity was almost "in place" and assumed that life for young women was already quite "different." Such is not the case. On the other hand, the clarity that emerged from the two-and-a-half days of dialogue, and the pinpointing of steps that filmmakers and educators can take, give cause for hope. The "Report on the National Film Board/ Educators' Forum on Women's Studies in Secondary School" will be

invaluable to filmmakers and audiovisual producers who wish to reach teenagers, and to educators looking for a succinct, up-to-date summary of women's studies and female-student issues. This short article gives individuals a sense of what they can expect to find in the "Report," copies of which can be obtained by contacting JoAnn Harrison, Education Officer, The National Film Board, D-5, P.O. Box 6100, Montreal, P.Q. H3C 3H5.

## Forum Findings

Some of the Forum's findings will likely surprise many readers; for example, despite the formal endorsement of sex equity and the importance of women's studies by ministries of education, there is an abysmal gap in implementation, compounded by pervasive, unofficial resistance from others in the education chain, including parents. Sexual discrimination continues to be perpetuated in schools and classrooms, often in subtle ways. Like teenage female students themselves, much of society assumes that equality is in place. Such a disheartening picture is brightened by the commitment of individual teachers and by the positive efforts of teachers' federations and societies.

According to educators' observations and several major research studies, the "reality" of today's female teenagers is deeply tinted with myth.<sup>2</sup> Mass media images, usually absorbed indiscriminately and without discussion, are considered to be a major causative factor. For example, a stunning number of female students holds that a relationship with a man is the key to their security, in a "forever" marriage. Despite statistics revealing the contrary, a fair number of female students believe they will never have to work. Those who envision careers tend to cast themselves as "super moms" who can easily juggle home, family and job, and also afford nannies and annual European vacations. Educators felt that our society underestimates or is ignorant of the immense power of the mass media to influence and create

what is accepted as reality.

Forum participants recognized that the teenage years are a particularly vulnerable — even volatile — period of physical and emotional upheaval, and of search for self-identity. Peer pressure and media images appear to be particularly influential for this age group. Female teenagers attempt to mould themselves into the day's pronounced ideal body image, often struggle internally with critical problems related to early sexual activity, are caught in shaky self-esteem issues, and, unable to understand their own psychology and today's world, easily retrench to assimilate unquestioningly the traditional stereotypic roles of women perpetuated by the media.

On the other hand, educators feel there are ways that educational filmmakers can counteract the pervasive mass-media influence. Much of the "report" summarizes their discussion about optimal filmmaking approaches for secondary school audiences, including vital general guidelines that take into account school structure. They helped pinpoint twelve crucial areas in which films are needed, and stressed that male as well as female populations must be reached if there is to be change. Further, participants "unanimously agreed that films portraying women in all aspects of life must be integrated into *all* curriculum areas during the formative elementary years."

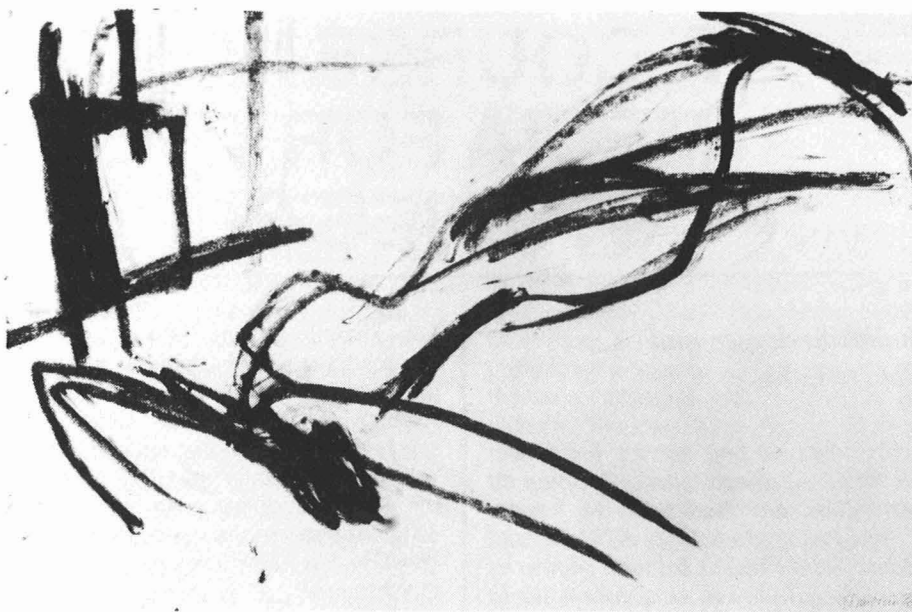
<sup>1</sup> Participants from the field of education were Marion Dodds, Status of Women Coordinator for the British Columbia Teachers' Federation; Donna Stephania, Staff Officer for Economic Welfare, Personnel Services and Status of Women in Education at the Manitoba Teachers' Society; Betty Lamont, Women's Studies Consultant for the North York (Ontario) School Board; Dr. Carole-Anne Bennett, Education Officer, Curriculum Branch, Ontario Ministry of Education; Jacqueline Riley, Family/Women's Studies Consultant at the Ottawa Board of Education; Monica

Maloney, a resource teacher with the Halifax City District School Board; and Revital Marom, a film and media studies educator, filmmaker, and doctoral candidate in Curriculum Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

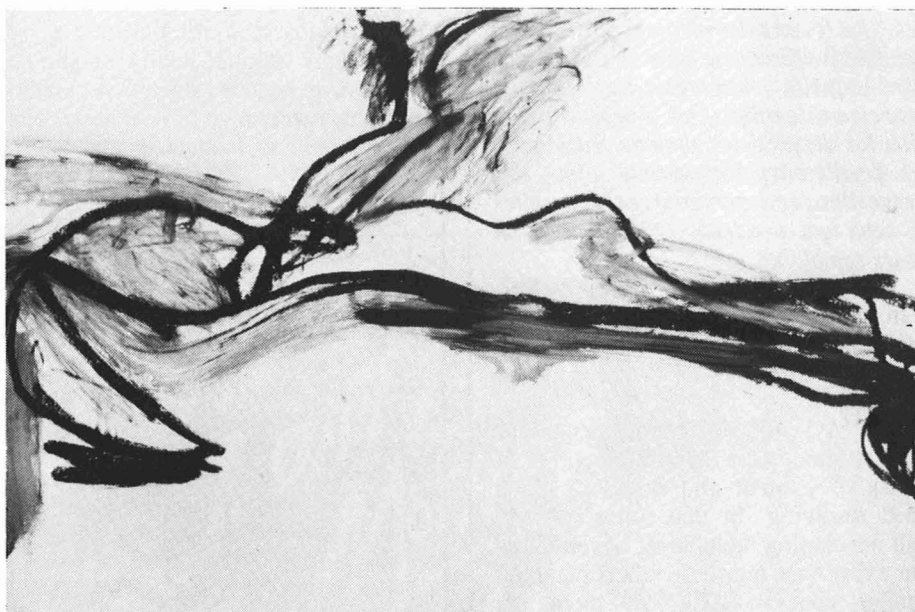
NFB participation included, from Montreal, Kathleen Shannon, Executive Producer of Studio D; producers Barbara Janes (Studio D), Tamara Lynch (Multi-Media Studio), Signe Johansson (Studio D), and Margaret Pettigrew (Studio D); producer/director Eunice Macaulay (Animation Studio); director/producer Bonnie Sherr Klein (Studio D); director Beverly Shaffer (Studio D); National Education Officers Anne Taylor and JoAnn Harrison (Acting); National Marketing Coordinator (Community Sector) Terry Richmond; and freelance film researcher/writer Sally Bochner. Representing NFB regional production offices were Silva Basmajian, producer at NFB Toronto; Shelagh Mackenzie, producer/director and currently Acting Executive Producer of the NFB Atlantic Region, Halifax; and producer Jennifer Torrance from Vancouver, who is also director of the NFB Pacific Region Women's Program.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Maureen Baker, *What Will Tomorrow Bring?...A Study of the Aspirations of Adolescent Women* (Ottawa: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1985).

*Olga Denisko is a Montreal psycho-therapist and a freelance researcher/writer. Sally Bochner, who was the Forum Coordinator and who wrote the "Report," is a freelance film researcher/writer.*



Francine Simonin, *Pavane II*, huile sur papier, 80 x 120 cm, 1986



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Photos: David Steiner

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