

# Two Cheers and a Sigh

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*L'auteur traite de superficiel le changement d'attitudes de la société envers la participation de la femme dans le marché du travail. Pendant les années 80, des changements structuraux au sein de la famille feront en sorte que disparaîtront les traits oppressifs qui font que la femme continuera à être mal rémunérée.*

Recently I participated in a program planning session in my capacity as a program planner for a forthcoming May 1980 Conference of the Northwest Association of Adult Education. Its theme is Issues for the Eighties. I had suggested that one of the topics might be 'What is So Special About Continuing Education for Women?' Hopefully, I thought, we would try to anticipate the educational needs of women during the next decade and begin to develop innovative responses to those needs.

My co-planners, two American women from the state of Washington, made a counter suggestion. They had read Betty Friedan's latest article, 'Feminism: A Blueprint for the Second Decade,' where she suggests that feminists must now recognize that the Women's Movement can no longer go it alone. The new-found ability of women to make choices cannot be realized until, in Friedan's words '... we face these unanticipated conflicts between the demands of the workplace and professional success on the one hand, and the demands of the family on the other.' My American colleagues, agreeing with Friedan, argued that feminist educators in the Eighties should indeed shift their focus to the family, because women's studies programs per se often ghettoized women and did not equip them for the real world and so forth—arguments that had become familiar to me in the past ten years. The topic finally decided on was 'Will We Still Need Special Programs for Women in the Eighties?'

The incident had an astringent effect on me. I had read Friedan's article with considerable confusion. While I under-

stood her clearly in 1963—in fact, she helped launch me and thousands of others into 'the Movement'—I was not sure I understood her in 1979. Certainly the conflict between home and work needs to be addressed. It always has. But had we accomplished as much as she suggested? Are choices really being made in the workplace, in education, in politics, in social policy? In anticipation of writing for this issue on the decade, I had been attempting to assess my own experience with feminist education and its accomplishments during the Seventies. I have concluded that I cannot give three cheers for the accomplishments, considerable though they are. Rather I feel I can give two cheers and a sigh.

My own journey into feminism began actively with the death of a young husband in 1961 and the responsibility for two small children. Being a 'single parent' was not so acceptable at the time—the phrase had not even been coined—nor was getting a full-time job, which I did almost immediately. I went to work in Continuing Education at the University of B.C. It was during that time I met my earliest mentor, Dr. Elda Lindenfeld, a Viennese psychiatrist who studied with Adler and was a firm feminist in the European tradition. She provided a historical context for me as a woman and as a sociocultural being. Elda and others (Friedan among them) helped me articulate my personal experiences and gain a sense of collectivity.

My own process continued and, after resigning my job in 1966, I enrolled at Simon Fraser University as a mature student to take a degree in sociology. Here I studied Third World liberation move-

ments and learned the importance of social structures. The most recent women's movement as we know it grew out of these very liberation movements. When, after graduation early in 1971, I joined the faculty at Douglas College demanding to organize courses for women, I did so waving a hot-off-the-press copy of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. It was the *zeitgeist*, an idea whose time had come. The college administrators, particularly Sheila Thompson, who headed the counselling division, were sympathetic. The women in the community responded to our offerings in large numbers. From those early beginnings the program at Douglas grew until in 1973 we had a relatively comprehensive women's studies program consisting of continuing education, academic courses and supportive counselling services.

Other programs for women were in existence or just starting in B.C. and following a newspaper story about the new women's studies program at U.B.C., it seemed time to get together. A phone call to Dorothy Smith and Helga Jacobson at U.B.C. and Cindy Nagel at Vancouver Community College culminated not long after (with the involvement of others), in the formation of the B.C. Women's Studies Association. More than 150 feminist educators and students throughout the province met in Vancouver to discuss mutual concerns. The association continues actively to this day, holding conferences on educational issues.

By 1975 numbers of innovative educational programs for women existed across the country. On several trips to eastern Canada I was able to establish invaluable

personal contacts with other feminist educators. Talking together in our now undoubted capacities as colleagues we discovered that women, especially part-timers, were coming to educational institutions across the country in large numbers. It was equally apparent that our programs existed on an ad hoc and peripheral basis and that badly needed services for the women students were not forthcoming. We realized we needed to develop strategies which would give our programs a sound institutional base. The next period was one of 'growing up' and sharpening our institutional skills.

When, in May of 1978, the Ministry of Education in B.C. requested me to provide a background paper for the possible development of educational policy for women in B.C., this sharpening-up phase proved valuable. Marsha Trew of Capilano College joined me and the Zimmerman-Trew report on *Non-Traditional Learning Programs for Women at B.C. Post-Secondary Institutions* was published. It showed that although women learners were in the majority, the bulk of continuing education offerings were in traditional program areas while the number of needed non-traditional offerings for women were few indeed—in the two per cent range. Services and policies for women's programs were, to say the least, scant. Pressure from other concerned persons undoubtedly influenced the issuance of a policy statement from the ministry shortly thereafter on access for women to educational institutions. From my purview the policy fell far short of what we recommended or what was required. Its efficacy has yet to be determined. Nevertheless, for me personally, it was a long way from the early gropings of 1971.

Have I forgotten what I was going to cheer about? I think it is already apparent. The cheer is for what I feel was the Great Coming Together in the Seventies. First, the Coming Together in ourselves individually made it possible to recognize the validity of our experiences as women and to understand our commonality with other women's lives in that inseparable process of the personal with the political. For the first time in my life I experienced a holism in which my emotional, intellectual, ideological and professional self were fully integrated. The cheer is also for the Coming Together of so many women in the educational cornucopia of the Seventies, in groups, courses, workshops and centres. Hopefully, our personal integration informed the programs we sponsored so that the women who responded could similarly enhance

their own lives.

My second cheer is for the proliferation of research, books, journals and other publications of feminist issues. The breadth of topics including politics, health, labour, religion, ecology, the arts and of course, education, is indicative of the need, as Smith eloquently phrased it 'to re-invent the world of knowledge' to include women's lives and contributions. The intellectual currents generated by the Women's Movement have given us in a few years an unprecedented body of new knowledge which I think will continue to nurture our intellects in the foreseeable future.

What, then, is there to sigh about? For myself there was the new syndrome of burn-out and a need to step aside and do some assessing. I did so by taking a Master's Degree at U.B.C. last year, doing my research on women re-entering the labour force after years working in the home. It was a sobering experience. I interviewed 51 women at Canada Employment Centres between the ages of 30 and 60. Over two-thirds of them were divorced, widowed or separated and many had children to support; they had few skills and their self-esteem was rock-bottom. A salary of \$750 per month was considered a desirable goal! Support services and adequate training, or the opportunity to acquire recent work experience are virtually non-existent. In addition to the sexism the women were experiencing, I found that they had to endure what I can only term virulent ageism. Such is the status of these women, and there are an estimated one-half million in Canada, who have spent between ten and 35 years doing societally sanctioned work as wives and mothers! Although they have in effect 'lost their jobs' they receive no unemployment insurance or pension benefits.

Thus my sigh is for the contradiction between the reality of the many and the success of the few. True, women are undating the work force, they are studying, breaking into male-dominated professions, practising non-sexist child rearing and more. But these changes, enormous though they are compared to the beginning of the decade, have mainly been in attitudes towards roles and not to the underlying structures. Thousands of women may be reading *The Women's Room* but the majority of them are still working in the commercial and service sectors of the economy. Moreover, it is an irony that feminism itself has become a major growth industry. Films, popular books and magazines feature the Liberated Woman or the 'how-to's' and cash in on

the enterprise at the same time. Newspapers are a familiar example. The sections which used to be called 'The Woman's Page' are now more likely to be 'Lifestyles' or 'Living Today' but they increasingly carry features which smack more of femininity than of feminism. Articles abound on the New Career Woman or the Executive Woman, on appropriate colour coordinates for board meetings, or how to pay the cheque assertively when going out for meals with male colleagues. Such is the efficacy of co-optation. It was Barrington Moore, I believe, who said that those who plan the revolution, those who fight for it and those who profit from it are seldom the same persons.

Not that I suggest for a moment that there has been a revolution, and that brings me back to Friedan and my opening comments. I agree it is important to look at the family. But the problem as I see it is not the conflict between career and work. The problem for feminists in the Eighties is the nascent blurring between real structural issues and surface appearances. Friedan herself expresses the dilemma, 'Is the women's movement surrendering, then, to the forces of reaction by retreating to the family? Or is feminism truly entering a new stage?' I suggest the problem is an old one and remains that of asymmetrical structures—whether in the home, in the workplace or in education.

If the family is first on the agenda for the Eighties, then the goal should be those structural changes which will permit the establishment of what Young and Willmott call the Symmetrical Family. We need to look at those oppressive features of family structures which make Canadian housewives vulnerable as reserve pools of cheap labour. When our department stores and menial service jobs cease to be staffed by housewives working for low wages with little security, when we have adequate day care centres, when our educational institutions offer subsidization for part-time training and drop-in child minding, then my sigh will become a cheer. Until then the uncritical eagerness to join the latest Friedan bandwagon, or to shift from women's studies and focus on the family instead, suggests that a lot of old, sour wine will be readied for new co-optating bottles.

As to the panel on 'Will We Still Need Special Programs for Women in The Eighties?' I agreed to the topic with one proviso—that there will be a number of challengers, amongst whom I hope to be one. I can hardly wait.