

Women Need...

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Le Retour aux études: les besoins des étudiantes et la réponse des femmes-professeurs

L'auteur de cet article décrit les obstacles qui confrontent les femmes moins jeunes qui décident de reprendre la route des écolières. Ses constatations sont fondées sur une enquête menée par le Canadian Committee on Learning Opportunities for Women (Le Comité canadien sur les possibilités d'apprentissage des femmes). Elle propose diverses solutions, parmi lesquelles des efforts sérieux à fournir par les enseignantes.

In 1976 the Canadian Committee on Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW) made a survey of women educators across Canada. These educators were asked to identify the barriers that women experience in their efforts to get an education. From the material collected, we concluded that the major barrier to a woman's attempt to learn is her concept of herself. She has a poor self-image; this kind of low self-esteem affects virtually all women at one time or another. In my own travels across Canada as a co-ordinator for CLOW, I had first-hand experience of seeing many courageous and hard-working women who had little belief in themselves and no concept of themselves as independent self-determining individuals. And this low self-esteem is reinforced by the society in which we function. Women's concerns are considered peripheral to the 'real' concerns of society, and the contributions that women make are completely outside the decision-making and policy-making apparatus of Canada. Since women are outsiders to the mainstream of society, it is obvious that their image of themselves is, to a certain extent, realistic.

Educational institutions always reflect the values of the society at large, and the colleges and universities in Canada seldom meet the needs of adult learners. For too long colleges and universities have considered their primary mission to be the education of the younger student, to the detriment of the adult learner. The education of the young is regarded as a right, while the education of adults is regarded as a privilege. Yet many adults never received the educational services to which they were entitled as young people. Often it is difficult for these people to gain access to educational services as adults. The concept of life-long learning is accepted ideologically but very little practical support has been given to make it an operative principle.

It is one of the ironies of the educational system that those who need the services most are those who cannot afford to take advantage of them. This applies particularly to women. The statistics around the earning power of women are well known. But even if a woman comes from the middle class she may not have access to an income, or she may not realize that she has the right to use family income for her own learning. And the majority of poor people in this country are women. Many women have incomes below the poverty line. Of the female labour force in 1975 almost thirty-seven per cent were sole supporters of themselves or of their families; and the number has grown. Women are often caught in a vicious welfare cycle, and the opportunity to take advantage of educational services becomes virtually non-existent. Yet women need these services in order to upgrade their skills to a level sufficient to remove them from the destructive cycles in which they find themselves.

What Steps Can be taken to Overcome these Barriers?

If women are to overcome their inhibitions and fears about functioning in the world outside their homes, they need some support in order to take control of their own lives. There are two basic forms this support should take: practical counselling, and 'first-step' courses that have confidence-building as their main focus. But not many colleges and universities provide educational counselling on a drop-in basis for women in the community. And very few first-step courses are held at times and places that are convenient for women. Women need courses offered during the day, while their children are at school. They need to have these courses offered in accessible locations such as local libraries or churches. Finally, the whole issue of child care must be considered. Few educational institutions provide child care for part-time students, yet this is a major stumbling block to the return of women into the classroom.

Some educational institutions provide some of these services, but unless they are *all* provided as an intrinsic part of programming services for women, the courses will be under-subscribed and hence will not be offered. At a time of lower enrolment, why are educators slow to react to these obvious needs? Is it because the needs for women students are not perceived as 'real' or 'important' by the people who make educational policy? Most policy-makers and/or educators see programs for women as being 'frill' courses. They fail to take into account how essential these courses are for restoring the lost dignity and self concept of women. Counselling, child care, and financial aid are often considered costly extras which are the responsibility of the 'social-service' agencies rather than the college.

Women educators

Women who work in women's programming face a difficult uphill battle. Let us examine their position. For the most part, they are deeply committed to improving the situation for women learners. Yet they are operating within an institutional structure which does not give validity to their priorities. Their concerns remain outside the mainstream of what institutional policy-makers sanction. Further, most women educators have not learned how to work 'successfully' within institutions which are competitive, hierarchical, and bureaucratic. Books such as *The Managerial Woman* and *Men and Women of the Corporation* show how the socialization of women works against them. Women teaching women's programs must recognize the obstacles they face and work towards creating a collective and collaborative response to these obstacles. Most of them who are developing programs for women are operating alone, in a vacuum. They are isolated even within their own institutions. Their positions are often slighted or at best considered to be a magnanimous gesture on the part of the administrators. Caught in this bind the woman educator inevitably adopts the 'rules' of the institution in which she works. In short, she becomes institutionalized. She falls into the trap of working competitively, and refuses to share information with other women educators as freely as she could. She may be reluctant to challenge some of the structures of the institution in order to improve the situation for women learners. In short, if she operates within the institution and adopts the institutional style of operation she will fail in her effectiveness as an educator of these women students with their unique needs.

It is difficult for women educators to counteract all the pressures caused by institutional structures as well as a tightening economy. As the economy gets worse, the 'special' funding which many women's programs have been getting will be cut back or cut off. In fact, all over Canada this is beginning to happen. Again, this is because such services are seen as 'frills'. It was fine to indulge women while the funds were available, but when funds are tight women's programs are the first to go. However, the declining enrolments of the school-aged population is working somewhat to the advantage of women. Educational administrators are beginning to realize that women can be a potential 'market' to fill empty classrooms. But they must also realize that these classrooms cannot be filled unless women learners have the necessary support services to free their time and energy for studies.

What can women educators do?

They have a significant contribution to make to the mature woman student who is re-entering the learning situation. It is extremely important that these educators work together. They must collectively design support systems and actively co-operate with each other to overcome barriers and to design strategies for change. Such lateral supportive 'networks' may appear counter-institutional, but in my estimation they are the only methods that will work.

If women can work together as teachers and students — and for most of us that means we are simultaneously teaching and learning — then we will help women to take control of their lives. More importantly, women teaching women in first-step programs will effect changes in society that will benefit us all.

A Dwelling Place Revisited



I walked there today
to retrieve valueless cellar belongings
abandoned in our lonely quarrelsome haste
at leaving
I walked there
among the lilies of the valley
aborting
the bruised
anguish of
a budded sapling
twisted in sudden savage uprooting

I stopped there
in the neglected
seedy
garden
while memories of
seven lean years
in that crowded tenement
flowed from the land
through my sorrowing feet
like an electric current
not reaching
the mind but
echoing
within my body

O mocking
mocking
echoes

Shirley Lynn



Realism



It is the barren season
that heralds the long
sleep of winter

then the soft
pure snow shroud
muffles the polite
protests of the dying

animals slumber
content in unhallowed
winter graves
mindless of the bitter pattern
of renewal

Yet now
now
old scars open in shrill winds
limbs falter and fall apart
in acid rain

weary share-croppers
reckon up the dreaded cost
of summer's love
and autumn's yield

encircled by rods
of stubble
I am
wary of the ploughman

Shirley Lynn

