

# Men's Resistance to Women's Education

## *The Personal is Political*

by Norma Husk

*L'auteure examine le défi spécifique aux femmes qui entreprennent des études tardivement, plusieurs d'entre elles étant en relation de couple ou élevant une famille.*

Women who return in later life to pursue undergraduate and graduate studies are making their presence known academically. Life experiences have enriched these women's perceptions and attitudes toward the value of education and the learning process itself, contributing to their academic accomplishments and affecting the nature of their relationship to their studies. Many of these women, including this author, bring with them particular issues for feminist inquiry based on these life experiences. Dominant patriarchal ideologies have insisted that "women's place is in the home" and "education is wasted" on women. These attitudes are viewed by many as outdated and women's increased enrolment in universities serves as evidence of changed world views. But, have these attitudes really changed, or has their articulation merely "gone underground," finding expression in more covert or subtle practices? This article is an attempt to expose the resistance of women's male partners to their education.

I conducted three interviews with returning women students. Each student had attended a small Canadian university within the past two decades and came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. In the interviews, I concentrated on the lived experience of these women's marital relationships and some of the changes their relationships underwent over a specific period

time. I attempted to ascertain the nature and the meaning of the changes both during the period of study and subsequent to the women obtaining degrees. The women's narratives give voice to a number of ideological concerns and illustrate both the deep entrenchment of traditional, gendered roles and women's determination to eliminate or circumvent the restrictions inherent within those roles.

Contemporary notions of the family and male and female roles are in flux. A multitude of studies have examined various aspects of these changes, however, and the socialization process moves tortoise-like away from the traditional roles. For women in heterosexual relationships returning to university, the salience of socialization's influence is particularly poignant. The men in their lives are, as likely they themselves are, older and thus no doubt socialized into traditional male scripts. Many of the

women, too, have trouble seeing themselves other than as good wives and mothers. With the rise of feminism, however, many women have questioned the ideology imbedded in these traditional roles, and some have sought to free themselves from the constraints of female domesticity, and attain equality of status and power in both their private and public lives.

Through access to work women have gained greater financial independence. Through increased access to higher education, women are embracing the awareness that knowledge is power. These gains in independence directly challenge traditional male authority and power.

Kate Millet's theory of sexual politics urges us to consider sex as a "status category" with political implications as salient as those of class or race (496). In our society, we are told, there exists an "ingenious form of 'interior colonization'" granted by the

"birthright priority whereby males rule females" (497). As a form of segregation, Millet contends, sexual domination is "more uniform, certainly more enduring ... [and] the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (497). It is this birthright priority that is so difficult for many men to cede in both their public and private lives.

Equally difficult to relinquish is the traditional notion of female roles. To change one role necessarily interjects the need for change in the other.



Gail Geltner, "Caryatid Opts Out," 1982

Thus, as Millett makes clear, "sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialization' of both sexes to the basic patriarchal policies with regard to temperament, role, and status" (497). Patterns of oppression, dominance, and submission are maintained through these aspects of feminine and masculine socialization. Intimidation through the use of physical or verbal force, actual or implied, is the reason women have learned, and con-

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***"If he asked me to be present for a dinner, I felt that in order for him to continue to pay for courses, it is important that I also make this happen—because he was paying all my courses and my materials from the family budget."***

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tinue to learn, to consent to their own subordination. Ruth Sidel comments:

While some women may be wary of undermining their own needs and desires and may be seeking more egalitarian relationships, many men—and, indeed, the larger society itself—automatically assume that the man's needs, wishes, and professional obligations take precedence ... [what we have then is] a culture lag: a gulf between feminist attitudes of self-worth, self-determination, and self-preservation and the attitudes and expectations of much of the rest of society. (158)

Over time, we have begun to appreciate that one way in which women subordinate themselves to men is through the division of labour within the home. Full-time housewives spend 52 hours per week on household work. Employed wives contribute approximately 20–26 per week, while husbands engaged in only eleven hours per week of household work (Steil). According to a 1989 study by Hochschild, "women's 'second shift' is equal to an extra month of 24-hour days per year" (150).

Other studies cited by Steil indi-

cate that "the distribution of responsibility at home and at work was the most salient indicator of the relative equality or inequality of the relationships" (152). Perhaps not surprisingly, employed mothers reported having less equality in their relationships than did those women without children. Steil tells us that several studies have indicated that the more hours of housework that are contributed by men, the more likely the couples are to fight about the housework. Symptoms of psychological stress apparent in these women, then, suggest that the benefit of partners' increased work is undermined by the stress of fighting (154).

The evidence presented by Steil puts to rest popular notions that time availability affects the amount of household work done by each partner. Indeed, we note that "even if a husband is unemployed, he does much less housework than a wife who puts in a 44 hour week" (154).

How do women deal with the inequality evident in these role comparisons? Steil tells us that women stop comparing the work they do and their responsibilities relative to their husbands' and instead compare their lot with those of other women. This tactic has the advantage of improving self-evaluation and reducing dissatisfaction with their relationships. Most women—72 per cent in Hochschild's study (cited by Steil)—were not attempting to change the division of labour. Instead,

They accepted the burdens of the "second shift" as "their" problem. They lacked a sense of entitlement to equal sharing and consequently lacked the moral outrage necessary to sustain the press for change in the face of their husbands' resistance. (159)

Decision-making is another indicator of the relative equality of the

couple relationship. Steil presents us with evidence telling us that egalitarian decision-making is not the norm, though approximately 60 per cent of respondents in one study reported relatively equal input in decision-making. The perception of equality in decision-making has also been linked with higher degrees of marital satisfaction. The author stresses, however, that "the more a [working] woman earned, the greater her influence" (151). Indeed, access to resources do indicate marked differences in rewards for men as compared to women. We are told that "the higher a husband's income, the more likely his wife is to endorse the legitimacy of his power" (155). Males' access to financial resources does, then, result in greater power within the home. Women, in contrast, do not fare as well. Greater responsibility for household tasks and child care remain for women, while men retain greater financial responsibilities even if women earn one-third more than their spouses.

In assessing the division of labour of returning women students, we must acknowledge the similarities between their lot and that of working women. One major difference is obvious. The returning student is not earning a wage which, as noted above, is likely to increase her power in the heterosexual-couple relationship. Instead, the returning student is "costing" the couple financially, as well as in terms of the woman's availability for household and social "obligations."

*I have to work studying around the household. That's why I only took one course per semester. One semester I took two courses and I felt too much pressure because of the household and also, too, since it was my source of livelihood and if he asked me to be present for a dinner, I felt that in order for him to continue to pay for courses, it is important that I also make this happen—because he was paying all my courses and my materials from the family budget. I did try to support him in every avenue possi-*

ble. (Carla) [Note: All the interviewees' names have been changed.]

Carla accepted the traditional gendered notion of the wife's social, housekeeping, and child care services in exchange for the lifestyle her husband's income sustained.

*He provided the income so that I could be at home and there was never any question that I'd return to work, but that I would run the house and that he would give me the means to be able to do it. I had been conditioned because I had been brought up that way, that the woman stayed at home.... I chose to take care of the family....*

Carla seeks to legitimize her unquestioned acceptance of her role by presenting this acceptance as her "choice." Carla's husband's income reinforced his power within their relationship. When Carla returned to university, in the early 1970s, her husband's response to her request for help in looking after their five young children in the evening was: "I'll look after them, but don't expect me to like it." There is an element of intimidation within this statement, which she acknowledged in our interview:

*I made it as easy as I could so he wouldn't be "bothered." I felt sorry for him [having to take care of the kids at the end of his day while she attended classes]. So I ended up putting it [her education] on hold. I was also concerned that with an attitude like that [referring to his comment "don't expect me to like it"], how is he going to be with children when I'm gone?*

Carla's acknowledgement of his tactic serves his purpose: she relinquished her education for nine years, until the children were older. When she did return, she described the effect of her return as follows:

*I didn't allow it to affect my home*

*life.... The children were not affected... they were still my priority, my schedule worked around theirs. The division of labour didn't need to change to accommodate one course per term.*

Carla restricted her education's progress in order to assure the smooth functioning of her family's life. Her husband did and continues to type her papers "with some resistance," she states. She must plan to complete her work in order to allow him time to fit the typing into his agenda. It will take her more than 15 years to complete her degree.

The resistance of Carla's husband to her education has been played out in the mostly unspoken world of each partner's role expectations.

*I didn't register any resistance [on his part toward her education]... not really, ... the one thing I never experienced was continual encouragement, which I would have preferred to have had, but that's just not part of his personality. He would never or very rarely say anything positive about something I do or want to do. He doesn't say how he feels about my being almost finished [her degree]. He doesn't seem to take an interest. (Carla)*

His lack of interest in her pursuits

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***"He was indifferent as long as it didn't change his life one iota. But it put a lot of pressure on me because, you know what it's like when you have a paper due and your husband says, 'Well, we haven't had so and so over for quite a while, how about Saturday night?'"***

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serves to devalue her work. Though her marks are often in the 80 per cent range, he often comments, "Couldn't you do better than that?" His disdain for her efforts is always at the surface of their relationship. And, as Carla points out, "Money was a big thing, it was power, it was a tool."

Anne's story is similar. She completed her BA in about 12 years, re-

turning at age 37 years. The most courses she took per session was three.

*I waited to return until all the kids [three] were in school, because I felt then, I wasn't taking away from their needs. I always made sure my school schedule related to the kids' schedule. I always took day courses. I had to be home by three o'clock. I couldn't take any early morning classes, because I had to get the kids off to school. I never took any night courses. So I divided my time into "my time" and "family time" and my time was only the time when the kids were in school.*

The resistance to Anne's education seems not often to have been made explicit, but rather took place, as it did in Carla's experience, at the unspoken level of role expectations and the unspoken consent which these were given.

*My husband didn't mind me going back to school. He was sort of neutral about it as long as everything stayed the same for him, as long as when he came home, supper was ready and as long as if the kids were sick, I'd be home with them ... as long as I was free to socialize when he wanted to go out or when he wanted to have friends*

*in. He was indifferent as long as it didn't change his life one iota. But my life changed and it put a lot of pressure on me because, you know what its like when you have a paper due or an exam coming and your husband says, "Well, we haven't had so and so over for quite a while, how about Saturday night? You know, they could come for*

supper." And I'd say, "Are you crazy?" ... What happened was slowly over the time I went to [school], our social life decreased and decreased. I hated accepting invitations because I knew I'd have to reciprocate and I knew it would be difficult.

Anne credits her husband for his role as provider of the family and as the one who gave her the opportunity to complete her education.

*I think subconsciously, there was resistance [on his part, to her education]. He didn't show much interest in my accomplishments ... no great interest at all. I never expected ... you know. I was very happy that I didn't have any physical obstacles ... that I was able to save up for my tuition, happy that I had the time and really grateful. I often said, "You made it possible!" Well, yes, I didn't have to work full-time like a lot of moms. So in a way, he has really contributed a lot. I didn't expect much emotional support from him. I was determined to get my degree and I don't think anybody would have stopped me from doing that.*

Money was an issue in this relationship as well. However, Anne's husband never offered to pay her tuition, nor did Anne expect him to, partly to minimize any possible antagonism from him regarding her desire to complete her degree.

*I never asked him to pay tuition or books. I would save the money out of the grocery money. So, in that way, it wouldn't impact on him.*

Although Anne actively resisted the constraints of the role imposed upon her by both her own and her husband's expectations, she did consent both explicitly and implicitly to her husband's attempts at intimidation. "Nothing changed except for more pressure on me," Anne comments. "This was the '70s, but my life was a '50s life: the housework and the kids

were totally my responsibility." Her acquiescence to the limitations of the role society has prescribed for women eliminated, for Anne, the element of choice.

*What's sad for me and maybe for other women my age, is that I've never been able to work and it's hard enough for young people just graduating to get into the work market, but imagine a woman at 50 years old, trying to do something with no previous experience in that line, in that field. It's too late. It was too late for me. There's a little bitterness and sadness involved with that. But, you know, I had no choice.*

The third interviewee, Lynn, worked most of her married life prior to her return to school at age of 39. As the mother of a developmentally-challenged child, she had limited her work to the ten months per year that he was in school. Lynn's husband was always "on the road" with his job.

*We never had a couple relationship. He was always gone, sometimes for weeks at a time. He did not have a regular job [when she returned to school] and was working under the table, so he had no schedule but his own. He promised to help, and for the first year, he did.... I guess he thought I wouldn't stick it out, he saw the agreement as short-term. All of a sudden, the second year, everything was questioned: "[When] will you be home?"*

Lynn's experience shows that her husband's resistance was not always subtly expressed.

*He never told me that he resented having to be at home for our son, but I overheard him telling others. My return to school aggravated our relationship considerably. He had to take my schedule into account and he had never had to before. He took a job at night and the responsibility for our son fell to*

*me again. He just gets into the car and leaves without telling me where he's going or when he will be back. I will make arrangements with him when I have to go to Montreal and he'll agree ... but at the last moment, he makes arrangements to work or go somewhere and I'm stuck. When I was accepted for my Masters' in Ontario, he said, "What do you mean, you're going to Ontario, who will look after [our son]?" In my head, I thought, what do you mean, I've looked after him for 20 years, why can't you look after him for two?*

The resistance Lynn's husband has shown over the years has created resentment and bitterness. Yet, Lynn was determined to complete her degree. Money, in contrast to the previous students, did not play much of a role in this couple's power dynamic. Lynn had always worked. The power dynamic in this relationship played itself out in the struggle over whose schedule was more important. Though it was apparent that Lynn's left less room for negotiation, he tended to win out by virtue of his overtly defiant behavior. Nevertheless, Lynn completed her BA in four years.

## Conclusion

Men's resistance to women's education stems from the perceived threat to their position of power within the relationship. Intellectual competition did not come into play in these three interviews, rather, what was at stake was the power attained from their financial position. In Lynn's case, her work history and independence in decision-making throughout the early years of their marriage served to increase her power relative to his. Rebecca Leavitt has suggested that "well-adjusted, happy couples" manage the stress of women's return to university quite well. It is in those couples whose marriage was already under some pressure that conflict arose. This might well be the case for the women that I interviewed, however, I believe issues of control re-

main salient to some women's return to education. As with many aspects of our gendered lives, we need to be aware of resistance to our access to education, of our own participation in our continued subordination through our willingness to transform this subordination into the more acceptable notion that it is our "choice" to live our lives in ways that have traditionally been dictated by society. Solutions for change need to be explored with these crucial aspects in mind.

*Norma Husk is herself a "returning student," who, while continuing her work as a registered nurse and mother of two young children, completed her BA with Honours in Sociology at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec. She is currently continuing her studies at the PhD level at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec.*

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## RENEE NORMAN

### Handshake

i am a poet  
 i use words to paint metaphors  
 let others build roads and bridges  
 mend fences  
 unveil plans and programs

i am a teacher  
 we sing about spring  
 the cuckoo's call  
 and fly musical kites  
 over piano keys and the clatter  
 of a workman repairing a broken window

i am a mother  
 in between the sandwiches  
 i write at the kitchen table  
 remember the feet i covered up last night  
 sticking out of blankets  
 the gap where a tooth used to be  
 a hand covered with an allergic rash  
 slips its roughness into mine

*Renee Norman is a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia, a part-time teacher, a writer, and a poet. She has had poetry published in Contemporary Verse 2, Prairie Fire, Women's Education des Femmes, Room of One's Own, and Dandelion.*

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