The Dilemma of Working with Minority Female Students in Canadian High Schools

by Goli Rezai-Rashti

Les conséquences des politiques multiculturelles sur le système d'éducation canadien demeurent nébuleuses et problématiques. Dans cet article, l'auteure analyse la complexité des liens qui existent entre racisme et sexisme à l'intérieur du système éducatif, en particulier, au sein du discours antiraciste officiel.

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Canada's policy of multiculturalism was introduced more than two decades ago. Yet, the meaning of the term and its implications for education remain obscure and problematic.

Multiculturalism was to depart from the cultural assimilation ideology practised prior to 1971, to a national ideology that accepted and tolerated cultural diversity. In practice, however, the policy had little of the impact that was anticipated. If anything, it has been found wanting. Since the early 1980s, state sponsored multiculturalism came under considerable criticism by educators and social scientists. These critical views of multiculturalism are not unique to Canada. In the United States, and especially in England, similar criticism has arisen. In both societies, a growing number of educators have taken issues with the traditional approaches to multiculturalism. They came out with a more novel model of pluralism: one that is geared to bringing about a greater degree of egalitarianism in society while giving greater relevance to issues of class and gender. Similarly, this new school of thought, known as the anti-racist approach, made a radical theoretical departure from mainstream multiculturalism. The latter's emphasis had been on the transformation of individual's attitudes and prejudices; the former, however, shifted that focus to the study of institutionalized forms of racism. It maintained that racism is manifested in the policies and practices of larger institutions. Henry Jiroux, a well-known representative of this new critical approach, said it bluntly: "multiculturalism should mean analysing not just stereotypes but also how institutions produce racism and other forms of discrimination" (10).

Multicultural education also came under criticism for its liberal rhetoric, its additive and supplementary character and, more importantly, for its lack of analysis of power relations. Critics stressed the point that multicultural education failed to integrate itself into the school curriculum and everyday educational activities. For them, such activities as Black History Month and Heritage Week were attached to, but not part of, the educational experience.

In my own work as a practitioner in the field of anti-racist education, I have become fully aware of the marginal nature of such programs. After all these years, they still have not become an integral part of the ongoing, mandatory school curricula.

The contributions made by anti-racism educators are to be commended. They certainly touched a cord with their criticisms of the conceptual shortcomings of multicultural education. To discuss those valid criticisms go beyond the scope of this article though. My goal here is to initiate a debate on an important issue ignored by both multiculturalism and anti-racism advocates: the analysis of the complex interrelationship between racism and sexism in the education system. True, anti-racist educators can claim to be concerned about gender issues; however, their concerns have not developed into a comprehensive and convincing argument. Race, class, and gender are categories that have been used in a rhetorical sense, as categories which can be studied and discussed separately. The exception to this theoretical vacuum in what is otherwise a very sound approach, has come from the works of two Canadian scholars. In effect, both Himani Bannerji and Roxana Ng have concerned themselves with this issue, but only at the level of institutions of higher learning or within the context of immigrant communities. Roxana Ng has helped to develop a framework in which race, class, and gender are not exclusively used because of their theoretical value but are treated as relations that are discoverable in the everyday world of experience (50). A similar analysis is needed of the ways the interrelationship between racism and sexism is approached in the official discourse of anti-racist education within schools, boards of education, and the Ministry of Education.

As a feminist and a practitioner in the field of anti-racist education, I constantly find myself dealing with complex issues involving racism and sexism. These issues are largely problematic in my work with minority female students. These students not only have to deal with the institutional racism present in the school system and in society at large but, sometimes, with sexist practices prevalent within their own communities and the racialization of the gender issues at the school level.

My intention in reflecting upon

my experiences with minority female students does not aim at providing an essentialist perspective. I am fully aware that students' existential reality varies greatly in accordance to their social class location and national origin. It is possible, however, to find some striking similarities within that greater diversity.

On the one hand, there is the racialization of gender issues as practised at the school level by school administrators, counsellors, and teachers. Here we find that in many respects the ways in which the education system looks at third world female students is permeated by the remnants of what I would call "colonial discourse." This discourse has a long history which dates back to colonial domination in which the issue of women and culture were fused by the colonizers.[1] On the other hand, there is also a manipulation of the policies of multiculturalism by some of the families of minority female students. Reflecting the sexism within their own communities—which is usually hidden under the rubric "culture"—there are parents who are demanding special provisions for their daughters from the school system. Not surprisingly, some educators who still cling to a colonial past appear too willing to comply with those parents' demands.

In brief, to attribute the discriminatory situation faced by minority female students only to the racism of the school system and society, while remaining silent and ignorant of the sexism present within the student's community, is to be found wanting. Such a narrow focus fails to provide a meaningful explanation of what is, by all means, a very complex process. The complexity of the lived reality of minority female students, accompanied as it is by the marginal nature of the work of the practitioner, makes the latter's intervention and advocacy on behalf of such students a very difficult task. In order to understand this better, it is necessary to discuss first the racism present in the school system and then provide an analysis of the mechanisms by means of which racism and sexism become articulated in the lives of minority female students.

Racism and schooling

The research demonstrating the existence of racism in the education system is both exhaustive and compelling. As a practitioner involved in the field of anti-racism education for the past decade, I have come to recognize the existence of structural/institutional racism as well as a form of common sense, everyday, cultural racism. Racism is embedded in the normal individual interactions and institutional practices of schools. This fact has been acknowledged by the Ministry of Education in Ontario. On July 1993, in the Policy Memorandum Number 119, it claimed that:

> There is a growing recognition that the educational structure, policies, and programs have been mainly European in perspective and have failed to take into account the viewpoints, experiences, and needs of Aboriginal people, and many racial and ethnocultural minorities. As a result, systemic inequalities exist in the school system that limit the opportunities for Aboriginal and other students and staff members of racial and ethnocultural minorities to fulfil their potentials. Educators, therefore need to identify and change institutional policies that are racist in their impacts, if not in intent. In this regard, anti-racist and ethnocultural equity education goes beyond multicultural education, which focuses on teaching about the cultures and traditions of diverse groups (45).

As of now, it is still too early to evaluate the success of the new government policies. But if experience with previous attempts is as good an indicator as any, then it can be claimed that those Boards of Education that have had an anti-racist policy for a number of years do not appear to have had much success in implementing them. This is confirmed by the research conducted by Carol Tator and Frances Henry:

> There appears to be a significant increase in the level of activity as it relates to the policy development over the last few years. This is reflected in the number of policy documents produced by different educational institutions...However, both the review of the documents and dozens of interviews suggest that little in the way of concrete, measurable programs and organizational change has taken place (117-118).

Equally important in terms of highlighting the limitations of government-sponsored policies is the fact that in the new guidelines for the development of anti-racism policies, the Ministry of Education failed to include issues of gender and social class in the school curricula. Once again, anti-racism is devoid of gender and class connotations in the official discourses in the same ways that class and gender were glaringly absent in the official discourse of the old multicultural education policies.

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The articulation of racism and sexism

In dealing with a large number of female students mainly from the Middle East, South East Asia, and Africa, I have found that the actions of many school principals, teachers, and guidance counsellors are still very much influenced by the ideology of colonization. There is a strong belief in western superiority among some educators at all school levels. Their image of third world countries is still stereotypical and ethnocentric: poor, underdeveloped, and uncivilized. Likewise women from such countries are constructed as individuals who are truly oppressed, powerless, and submissive. They are seen as victims who must be rescued from the oppressive influences of their families and culture. Often, that implies suggesting that they adapt to the western way of life. In pursuing this approach, educators seem bent on racializing gender issues pertaining to minority students. This perspective creates several interrelated problems.

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Sometimes, problems that are perceived by school personnel as being related to a student's "home culture," in fact have little to do with specific cultural practices. They could well be the types of problems encountered by any typical adolescent. I was once called to go to a school and talk to a Muslim student who, according to her counsellor, was experiencing "cultural conflicts." Upon my arrival to the school, the school principal introduced me to the student in question. Before leaving the room the principal looked at me and said that the girls' parents wanted to follow the "old country's rules." Then, he added that the parents needed to learn that there are rules and regulations in Canada which work against sexism. After talking to the student for an hour I found out that her problems had nothing to do with her country of origin or culture. Her school failure was the result of jealousy among siblings due to the preferential treatment that her parents gave to an older sister. That is, nothing different from a situation that could also be found in any Anglo-Saxon household. There are numerous cases such as this one that are uncritically attributed to the cultural inferiority associated with a student's background.

A correlate to this ethnocentric attitude occurs in those cases when minority female students go and talk to school administrators, teachers, and guidance counsellors about the conflicts that they are experiencing with their parents. These conflicts usually involve dating, going out after school hours, and/or instances of physical punishment. Rather than bothering to ask parents to come to school, much less offering to visit the student's home in order to discuss the student's complaints, the individuals in authority accept the students' claims as a matter of fact. Again, this view is largely related to the preconceived ideas about the inferior status of minority culture in relation to gender issues. In numerous cases that I have dealt with, I found out there was more to the story than what appeared at first. Students can be very skillful at pitting their parents against the educational system. Consequently, it has always been my recommendation to school authorities that every situation should be investigated and worked out cooperatively with the students' parents. Doing this does not imply denying that there is no sexism within minority communities. On the contrary, it implies rejecting as simplistic, if not ignorant, the tendency to interpret the student's problems as arising exclusively from the sexism attributed to the student's racial and cultural background.

I agree with the assertion made by Avtar Brah, who, in studying the women of South Asian origin in England, said that there is no evidence to suggest that conflicts among South Asian families are much more different from those in white families. Asian parents tend to be portrayed as "authoritarian," "conservative," and supposedly "opposed to the liberating influences of schools." Yet, there is as much variation among Asian parents on issues concerning the education of their children as it can be expected in any other group of parents (74).

In my observations of the school system, I have come to understand the tremendous amount of pressure that is placed upon minority female students to assimilate into the dominant western culture. I see such demands as the result of systematic racism resulting from the colonial experience. Sometimes, the attempts to assimilate may lead to students' alienation and a loss of identity (i.e., the anglicization of one's name, the rejection of one's first language or of the language spoken at home, the contempt held for one's parents because of accent, religion, and/or culture, the need to date boys in order to prove that one is different from one's parents, and so on.) This, in turn, may lead to conflicts between the students, their parents, and their larger cultural community. When these conflicts reach the school, educators are likely to see students as rebelling against the perceived repressive culture of their communities. Seldom are students' problems seen within the context of the systemic racism present in the relationship between educators and students. There is, in short, a need to explain the difficulties of minority female students by engaging in a more comprehensive analysis that situates their lives in the two worlds that constitute their existential reality: that of their communities and that of society and education system at large. Both worlds exhibit racism and sexism. Both

worlds are not without contradictions and conflicts.

It is very common, when dealing with minority female students in Canadian schools, to see how the discussion concentrates on the oppressive sexist nature of their culture and religion. The sexism prevalent in Canadian society suddenly leaves centre stage and is placed on the backburner. The discussion then proceeds in a way that indicates that Canadian women have somehow already achieved the equality that is eluding their sisters in the third world. This perception has little to do with the reality faced by Canadian women. In discussing how western feminists present third world women as underdeveloped and economically dependent, Mohanty has said that there is an underlying implication that western women are secular, liberated, and in control of their lives. She argues that this is a discursive self-presentation and not necessarily the material reality. If this were a material reality, there would be no need for western women to organize in the strong political movements that one sees emerging in almost every country nowadays (1991, 74).

It is important for educators engaged in the discourse of sexism across different communities (especially third world women) to give serious consideration to a statement made by Marnia Lazreg. This author has brought the subject of intersubjectivity into the analysis of women studies on a cross-cultural basis. She argues that when studying third world women, it is important to see their lives as meaningful, coherent, and understandable instead of their being infused "by us" with doom and sorrow. What this means is that their lives, just like "ours," are structured by similar economic, political, and cultural factors. It means that these women are, just like us, involved in the process of adjusting, shaping, and, at times, resisting and transforming their own environments (81-107).

In the anti-racist workshops that I often conduct in schools, typical concerns of teachers and administrators revolve around gender issues in different cultures. Questions will be asked as to why women from such and such culture walk a few steps behind their husbands and whether or not "we" should prevent our students from learning that "behaviour," or, what can "we" do when a student or a parent from such and such culture has no respect for "us" because "we are" female teachers. These questions bring out, once again, the alleged passivity attributed to women from those cultures and makes issues related to sexism culture specific. It, moreover, oversimplifies the whole range of possibilities that may be open to women within a given culture. By taking into account intersubjectivity, we can challenge the sexism of any community because it allows us to see the expressions of society's hidden colonialist, Eurocentric, and racist attitudes.

An excellent example, from which we Canadians can learn a great deal about the shortcomings in anti-racist literature in dealing with gender issues, can be found in the debate among educators that took place in England in the 1980s. The debate surrounded the opening of segregated schools for Muslim girls, as demanded by Muslim communities. Although Carrington and Troyna provided an excellent analysis of the various expressions of racism, misunderstanding, and stereotyping of the Muslim culture by most of British society. They were not able, however, to fully grasp the issue of the sexism present within the more fundamentalist Islamic community. In combatting racism, they and others, forgot or ignored the sexism that Muslim women and girls face within their own cultural milieu. The emergence of an organization such as Women Against Fundamentalism in England is probably a result of such inconsistencies in the analysis of gender issues by anti-racist educators. It calls our attention to the fact that reducing problems of sexism to forms of institutionalized racism and/or individual stereotypes does not, in any meaningful way, help minority women who are the subject of discriminatory practices by some radical elements within the fundamentalist movements (see Gita Sahgal and Nira Yuval-Davis). In discussing the fundamentalist groups' demands for an only-Muslim girls' school, author Saeeda Khanum, shows with great lucidity how male Muslim leaders abused England's policy of multiculturalism to achieve their goals. She decries the fact that anti-racist educators and practitioners failed to acknowledge the "hidden agenda" behind the demands of religious fundamentalists: an attempt to stifle dissent and exert absolute control over the lives of Muslim women within the Islamic community (138).

Since Canada is by no means immune to the spread of religious fundamentalism and given the fact that increasing numbers of students come from families who have migrated from third world countries, it is essential to be aware of situations similar to those developing in England. In our interaction with third world students, we need to develop the techniques needed to successfully challenge both the racism and sexism of the education system as well as the sexism, tensions, and conflicts present within the minority female students' own communities. As religious fundamentalism[2] rises in many parts of the world, it

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becomes more and more important that everyone concerned with the negative impact that such a movement has on women's lives be ready to challenge fundamentalism head on.

An example of this occurred not too long ago. A request was made by a father that his 13-year-old daughter be exempted from participating in physical education and music classes, as well as from attending school assemblies. The man stated that his request was in line with the Canadian policy of multiculturalism which guarantees respect for diverse religions and cultures. Since the school authorities did not know how to respond to the father's request I was asked to intervene as a mediator because my cultural and religious backgrounds are similar to those of the girl's family. I met the father who gave me a very rigid interpretation of his religion which, according to him, specifically forbids girls from becoming into contact with boys, and from listening to music or attending school assemblies. Interestingly enough, the same man had no qualms whatsoever with regards to his 12-year-old son who attended the same school as his sister. The boy was not constrained by any of the demands that the father was imposing upon his daughter. School administrators were quite willing to accommodate the father's request and minimize the daughter's contacts with boys during physical education classes but the father was in no mood to compromise. He threatened to keep his daughter at home because, according to him, there was no need for her to go to school if school was not willing to comply with his demands. He was told that his daughter must attend school in accordance with Canadian law but he remained adamant about upholding his religious beliefs. I suggested to him that his interpretation of his religion was not shared by other religious scholars who do not see the learning of music as a sinful act. I even referred him to a religious authority in the city with whom we could discuss the problems, but he would not listen. A few days later I found out that he had placed his daughter in a religious school. This example clearly shows that the public education system should be better prepared to deal with fundamentalism across a variety of religions.

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To successfully meet that challenge, a more democratic education system is needed. This is the site where the struggle to resist racism, sexism, and classism must be situated. It is there that the tensions, conflicts, and the gap that characterize the relationship between the school system and the home environment must be bridged. As discussed earlier, our education system is found wanting when it comes to the ways in which minority female students are treated. The presence of a colonial discourse among some of our own Canadian educators signals the need to completely uproot institutionalized racism and sexism. Only through the elimination of the old colonial attitudes will the education system be able to deal with gender issues pertaining to minority female students and develop the knowledge and understanding needed to identify and successfully challenge the demands of the more religious fundamentalist groups.

Where is the dilemma?

Anti-racist practitioners do the kind of work that is not part of mainstream education. In fact, their work is seen as marginal to whatever the business of education is supposed to be. Accordingly, anti-racist practitioners are faced with insurmountable difficulties when dealing with the racism and sexism present in institutional structures. While anti-racism is becoming mandatory, there appears to be little concern with anti-sexism education. Only a few boards of education offer programs and policies regarding gender issues. There still are no mandatory requirements for anti-sexist education. Moreover, it appears that, at the structural level, a distinct separation between the work of anti-racist and anti-sexist educators continues to be made.

As I mentioned earlier, in the new guidelines for the development of anti-racism policies there are no references to gender issues. Each specialist is expected to work within his/her own boundaries. For some of us who are interested in combining anti-racism and anti-sexism work, the crossing of those boundaries is a must. Yet, when we cross the boundaries we are likely to face some other contradictions and tensions in our work. The workshops that practitioners lead in order to sensitize school personnel are not sufficient (usually not more than two hours) to deal with complex issues such as colonization, capitalist expansion, school knowledge, power, and curriculum reform. In addition, the clear differentiation between anti-racism and anti-sexism, does not allow the practitioners to provide the necessary input to bringing about needed changes at the structural level. On the contrary, given the nature of their work, they are more likely, although unwillingly, to facilitate and reinforce the normal state of affairs that characterize the existing larger structure. This is not to say that structural constraints completely disable practitioners from doing progressive work in the area of racism and sexism. They still find the means with which to overcome some of the limitations and resistance that they constantly face from the education system. Under extremely difficult circumstances, they are constantly looking for allies in order to be able to carry on the business of making the school system more democratic. Much of their en-

ergy is consumed by their choosing words that won't antagonize their audience or hiding the fact that if they could they would be providing a more critical analysis of the education system, one in which words such as capitalist exploitation and colonial domination are presented within their real historical dimensions. The reality of the context within which practitioners operate is very different: the dominant ideological discourse is still so strong that some teachers and administrators believe that Canada is a socialist country because of the existence of the universal health care and welfare system. Time constraints and the marginal nature of anti-racist work do not allow practitioners to take issue with such misinformation. All that some "educators" want is to talk mainly about individualized forms of racism and what kinds of "prescriptions" the practitioner can give them so that they can be used right away in the classroom. Any attempt to bring into the discussion other crucial issues such as institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, capitalist exploitation, colonialism, and so on, are found to be "too academic" (i.e., useless) and of no practical relevance to their classroom experience.

Practitioners can take solace in the fact that the most rewarding part of their jobs is the contributions they are making towards student's empowerment. Unlike the uniformity of the educational bureaucracy, which continues to be mainly Anglo-Saxon, the diversity of the student population makes it possible to work consistently with large number of students who are eager to understand—and who can relate to—those complex interactions between racism and sexism and the ways of dealing with them. Concerns about racism and sexism among Canadian students have a sense of urgency that neither the institutional structure nor educators appear able to grasp at the present time.

The growing number of immigrants to Canada, the increase in racial and ethnic diversity, and the growth of religious fundamentalism are making the diverse Canadian student population ever more aware of the challenges that many of them face in dealing with the scourges of racism and sexism. Sahgal and Yuval-Davis put it excellently:

> Issues of racism and sexism are intricately interwoven. However, this is no reason always to prioritize one struggle in favour of the other. The task ahead is to find ways to confront the contradictions and conflicts within minority communities as well as oppression and racism in the state and society at large. To find ways to resolve the tension between autonomy and tolerance, diversity and equality. To have the right to dissent and oppose both racism and sexism—and, of course, fundamentalism (25).

Goli Rezai-Rahti, Ph.D., is currently working as a practitioner in the area of anti-racist education for the Etobicoke Board of Education. She teaches part-time at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and York University in the areas of anti-racist education and women's studies.

[1]Leila Ahmed (151-153) provides a very good account of this discourse in regard to Muslim Middle East. She states that the discourse of patriarchal colonialism captured the language of feminism and used the issue of women's position in Islamic societies as the spearhead of the colonial attack on those societies. Imperialist men who were the enemies of feminism in their own societies, abroad espoused a rhetoric of feminism attacking the practice of other men and their "degradation" of women. They used the argument that the cultures of colonized peoples degraded women in order to legitimize Western domination and justify colonial policies of actively trying to subvert the cultures and religions of the colonized people.

[2]My use of the term fundamentalism departs from that often used in the mainstream media. In the latter, the word is usually used in relation to the Islamic world. My understanding of fundamentalism is closer to the definition used by the organization "Women Against Fundamentalism" and to the meaning given to it by Edward Said in his recent work *Culture and Imperialism.* The rise of fundamentalism should be seen in relation to colonization and the search for an original, authentic identity. The Women Against Fundamentalism organization identifies fundamentalist groups in accordance to two traits: They believe that their version of the religion is the only correct one, and therefore, feel threatened by any pluralistic system of thoughts; and, they use political means to impose their version of the truth on all members of their religion. These beliefs, in turn, translate in their attacking the notion of secularism since the very idea of a public sphere not controlled by organized religion is unacceptable to them.

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SANDY SHREVE

Marbles

Perhaps it is spring, the air clear, an after-rain morning
Friends gather in the street, take for granted the slip
of distant ocean scent into their lungs
the hint of first green in its chill
One among you begins to grind her heel in the dirt
tentative at first

It is a casual question, when you crouch
for another turn, the edge of your forefinger stained
mud embedded in gravel scratches
So, what do you want to be

You remember your father, your mother
insisting: anything, anything at all, whatever you want
So today you say, *lawyer,* tell your friends
one of your aunts thought of it because
you are talkative, always arguing, and for some reason
this reminds you of your mother saying she can't stand
women's voices on the radio
how that soprano-sound grates on her nerves

and you can't imagine a day thirty years later
when the newspapers you don't read yet
will report that women's voices are lower than thirty
years ago
because of all their new careers
Reading that story you will remember

today, your mother working at home
you and your friends dreaming up a different future
for yourselves while you play marbles
in a small Maritime town on the edge of an emptiness
when the thought of your mother's dislike makes you
think
of cheddar cheese, how it ribbons against steel
to a shredded pile for the soufflé she makes
how its sharp flavour will rise to mysterious heights

Your friends are laughing now, one has already
lost all her marbles, the game barely begun
you want her to stay, scoop a handful from you bag

Sandy Shreve is the Departmental Assistant for Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University. Her poetry collections are, The Speed of the Wheel Is Up to the Potter, *Quarry Press (1990), and* Bewildered Rituals, *Polestar Press (1992).*