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The Liberation of Women and the Educational System

"There, there, don’t cry about that paper. In a few years, you’ll be washing dishes and you won’t even remember this course."
— Professor to freshman student

I

Any discussion of the relationship between women and the educational system must begin by dispelling the tremendous edifice of erroneous beliefs regarding women in contemporary society. The mythology surrounding the socially normative definitions of women is enough to make any professional anthropologist think he has arrived in a society fraught with a peculiar tendency toward superstition and irrational mysticism. Of course, it should be clearly understood that social norms are not wantonly irrational but invariably serve clearly-defined purposes. As we shall see, the dominant ideology surrounding women functions to maintain a status-quo beneficial to those small social groups — invariably male-dominated — possessing a disproportionate amount of the economic and, hence, political power.

Women in our society are systematically exploited economically and systematically oppressed psychologically and sexually. This statement is a factual, empirically validated description of social reality. Studies on the exploitation and oppression of women would easily fill the proverbial "twelve-foot shelf."* Nevertheless, they have little effect on the majority of adults (of both sexes) who are
forced by the social system and its institutions to ignore this blatant social injustice, doubt its veracity, or accept a variety of pseudo-scientific justifications, usually based on biological or psychological grounds, so that they can avoid dealing with the reality, even if it is dimly perceived through the all-pervasive miasma of conventional doctrine.

In order to clear the ground of the accumulated nonsense so that we can proceed to deal seriously with the role of education vis-à-vis women, let us briefly note the major myths commonly associated with women:

1) Women are biogenetically inferior. This one is hoary with age, but is receiving considerable refurbishing with the advent of "pop-ethology" as applied to human beings. Since this topic has been dealt with in an earlier paper, suffice it to say that there is no way to validate this myth since primates cannot alter their social organization; that the ethological evidence is either highly pre-selected or contradictory; that it dismisses the crucial distinction between biological and human evolution (humans possess culture and thereby "make themselves"); that it ignores the ethnographic evidence indicating a wide diversity of sex roles in various cultures; and, finally, that the crucial underpinning for the wide acceptance of "biological" theories of female inferiority is primarily ideological in character. This is the case because it satisfies the obvious need to "explain" the persistence of female social subservience without having to pay the costs involved in recognizing the real socio-economic and political roots of the problem. As Prof. Tiger, in his catastrophically anti-humane book, *Men in Groups*, devoted to the ill-disguised thesis of biogenetic male supremacy, so aptly puts it:

> It may constitute a revolutionary and perhaps hazardous social change with numerous latent consequences should women ever enter politics in great numbers.

Exactly. But the real question is: Hazardous for whom? Can a social change which liberates 50% of the population, and thus must directly benefit the vast majority of the remaining population who cannot be free unless women are, be considered "hazardous?" The answer to this question will become clear below, but for the mo-
ment, it should be understood that the liberation of women will indeed be "hazardous" — for a select few.

2) The female psyche is innately passive, dependent, nurturant, and supportive. This one is pure, unadulterated mysticism dressed up with the intellectual trappings of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists all the way from Sigmund Freud down to Erik Erikson. As a sophisticated variant of the old "maternal instinct" school of thought it has probably caused more human suffering, agony, self-hatred, and insecurity amongst women in the Western world than any other socially accepted myth regarding the nature of human beings. Indeed, in its total lack of empirical evidence coupled with its reliance on "insight," "sensitivity," and "experience" it is remarkably analogous to another social phenomenon familiar to many anthropologists: the belief in witchcraft.

What makes this myth so terribly damaging is the constant, life-long, intense pressure which is placed on women to become what the myth says they ought to be — and to like it as well! If they don't, then they are "unnatural," "unfeminine" and most probably "neurotic." As one small example, think of the thousands upon thousands of women who have suffered, and still are, from false feelings of guilt, frustration, and "frigidity" because of Freud's classic theory on the sexuality of women, viz., the distinction between the clitoral orgasm, which he associated with adolescence, and the vaginal orgasm which he associated with "maturity." It took fifty years before it was actually tested physiologically and found to be just so much nonsense. Meanwhile, women are still trying to feel what they are told they ought to feel.

Typical examples of the belief in the psychological uniqueness of women stemming from some of the most eminently respectable figures in the field are:

Bruno Bettelheim (University of Chicago) —

We must start with the realization that, as much as women want to be good scientists or engineers, they want first and foremost to be womanly companions of men and to be mothers. (emphasis added)

Joseph Rheingold (Harvard Medical School) —

Woman is nurturance . . . anatomy decrees the life of a woman . . . when women grow up without dread of their
biological functions and without subversion by feminist doctrine, and therefore enter upon motherhood with a sense of fulfillment and altruistic sentiment, we shall attain the goal of a good life and a secure world in which to live it.\(^6\) (emphasis added)

Erik Erikson (Harvard University) —

[A woman's] somatic design harbors an "inner space" destined to bear the offspring of chosen men, and with it, a biological, psychological, and ethical commitment to take care of human infancy.\(^6\)

Now, when one couples the above with the daily bombardments of the multi-million dollar businesses of clothing, cosmetics, and house furnishings, we can begin to get some feeling for the real horror and tragic crippling which this myth, and those who benefit from it, impose upon women. It is enough to make a man wonder how any women manage to escape and become real persons at all. What makes it doubly horrible is that after our social system demands a certain kind of behaviour from women and gets exactly what would be expected, we then turn around and point to that behaviour as "proof" of the validity of the original belief! No matter what one's personal biases are in this matter, it is simply impossible to designate this kind of theoretical speculation as "scientific."

Essentially, there are three fundamental factors which conclusively belie the validity of these psychological conjectures. Firstly, the theory regarding "the nature of female nature" completely lacks any supporting empirical evidence. As if this isn't enough, when empirical testing is applied, the results negate the assumptions upon which the theory is built. Expert clinicians cannot identify or diagnose sexuality, deviant or normal, within the conventional empirical testing framework one would apply to any other theory.\(^6\)

Secondly, the specific assumptions about the psychology of women are embedded within, and dependent upon, general psychological theories which not only are without scientific basis — they don't even work. The classic study on this is by H. J. Eysenck whose findings have never been refuted. On the contrary, later studies have merely confirmed Eysenck's original results. Briefly, these findings are that, of patients who received psychoanalysis the improvement rate was 44%; of those receiving psychotherapy
the improvement rate was 64%; and of those receiving no treat-
ment at all the improvement rate was 72%.\textsuperscript{11} Kwakuitl shamans
used to do better!

Thirdly, and finally, the entire mythology built up around this
nebulous "female psyche" is an attempt to explain human behaviour
completely divorced from social and cultural reality. It literally
exists in a social vacuum. If there is anything in the social sciences
we do know, it is that we simply cannot expect to understand the
behaviour of human beings, or understand how or why that be-
haviour changes, unless it is studied as part of the larger social
context within which it occurs. It is a truism to state that humans
are social beings — and that includes the entire political, religious,
and economic systems which make us the kind of human beings we
are. Since we are here primarily concerned with behavioural dif-
f erences supposedly due to innate sexuality, it is pertinent to note
the work of Money and the Hampsons which demonstrates that pa-
rental role assignment of children into a particular gender, \textit{even if
gonadally incorrect}, assumes priority over any biological criteria.\textsuperscript{13} This and the great diversity revealed in sex roles in the ethno-
graphic data show quite conclusively that there is no such thing as
"innate sexual behaviour"; there is only behaviour which is desig-
nated as socially normative with individual differences ranging
around that norm.

3) \textit{Women's position is rapidly improving and full equality will
be achieved in the near future.} Interestingly enough, this one is so
commonly assumed to be true that those who espouse it never even
bother to go to the trouble of verifying it. And a good thing too —
they would receive quite a shock. The fact of the matter is that
the position of women in our society is worse now than it was forty
years ago and is continuing to decline.

The unthinking acceptance of the notion that women are better
off — even papers in this Journal have been known to express such
views\textsuperscript{18} — is due to a) the concerted business campaign which wants
both to exploit women as consumers, and producers, and at the
same time conceal the reality of their subservient economic position,
and b) the rapid increase in the number of women in the wage-
labour force. Economically, of course, almost all women are in the
labour force. It is simply that the majority of them are engaged in
\textit{unpaid} jobs as housewives and mothers; if their work were in-
cluded it would account for an increase of as much as 44% of the G.N.P. As any economist knows, should a man marry his housekeeper he would reduce the national income because the money he gives her would no longer be counted as wages. In short, almost all women are workers, but in a society based on commodity production for surplus value, i.e. private profit, most of them are not acknowledged as such. The latter factor (b) is the most important. In the U.K., the U.S. and Canada the number of women in the wage-labour market constitutes between 33 1/3% and 40% of the total. This number is generally twice the number of working women during the prewar period and it is generally assumed to be an indicator of women's increasing emancipation.

Unfortunately, while the gross statistics are correct, what is consistently overlooked is the kind of jobs women have been entering: these jobs are low-paid, non-unionized, service and clerical positions. In Canada between the years 1921–1961, the percentage of women in low-paid industrial and clerical jobs increased from 5% to 35% while in the same period their representation in the professions declined from 19.1% to 15.5%.

In the U.K., the situation is so similar that one researcher states: “We have in this country two labour forces, one male and one female... [these] two labour forces exist with little overlap between them." In the U.S. between 1940 and 1967, the percentage of women in professional and technical positions declined from 45% to 37%; meanwhile in the low-paying, low-status service jobs their representation rose from 50% to 55%.

In fact, the economic exploitation of women has been increasing at such a rate that it is still not generally known that the median wage of working women in the U.S. is actually lower than that of black males — and the plight of the latter group is universally recognized.

In short, the myth of the socially and economically emancipated female looming just over the horizon is either deliberately misleading or self-defeating wishful thinking. Women are less of a factor in managerial and professional occupations today than they were previously; their percentage of enrolment in professional and graduate schools is declining; and while more of them work, they do less important work. They are systematically channelled into their filing, typing, and assembly-line jobs and are blocked from advancing out of them. Even after marriage, hardly an "advance-
ment" as we shall see, they are increasingly stuck with the extra burden of two jobs: one low-paid and the other unpaid.19

4) Stereotypes typically associated with minority groups. These myths are a miscellaneous bag of nonsense not worthy of serious attention save for a short mention. For example, the notion of women being less qualified than men as a justification for their lower status makes as much sociological sense as saying that Canadian Indians or U.S. Blacks don't get good jobs because they don't enroll in universities. Another one is that women need less because they have a husband's income to rely on and their income is merely "pin-money." This one is pretty useful in keeping women "in their place," and getting a cheap worker as well. But 85% of the working women in Canada work full-time, almost 400,000 Canadian families rely exclusively on the mother's income, and when both parents work full time, why is the women's income necessarily a supplement to the man's instead of the other way around? Why is either income supplemental at all? One last cliché: women are transient members of the labour force unworthy of serious consideration because they are always quitting to get married and "have a family." This one shirks the whole issue by avoiding the fact that one of the key mechanisms in maintaining the subjugation of women is the institution of marriage (see below) while at the same time it manages to overlook the fact that more and more married women with children — almost 40% in the U.S.20 — remain members of the wage-labour force. Indeed, this process is accelerating at such a rapid pace that in one job category in Canada — teaching — job tenure and the median years of experience for women is higher at all levels than that of men. Nevertheless, women are consistently paid less than men at the equivalent level and are practically non-existent in the administrative levels.21

II

Having reviewed some of the major rationalizations which attempt to justify the exploitation, oppression, and sheer psychic mutilation of women in our society, we must now turn our attention to the underlying social structural basis for these phenomena. The society within which we live is based on an industrial economy in which commodities (in the broadest sense of the term) are produced
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by people who sell their labour for a wage. In fully industrialized societies such as ours, the productive units tend to be:

i) **Single-purposed** — they are exclusively devoted to an economic function and one must usually go elsewhere for recreational, educational, sexual, religious, political or emotional activities of various kinds. Criteria of personnel center around economic skills.

ii) **Large-scale** — they tend to employ hundreds of people and the most important industries are almost all comprised of a very few gigantic corporations.

iii) **Non-reduplicative** — the productive units, being large-scale, do not duplicate the economic tasks of other units. For example, pottery manufacturing in a North England town takes place in a single factory whereas in a Guatemalan village it may occur in numerous kilns attached to individual households.

iv) **Non-kin based** — the people engaged in an industrialized productive unit rarely, if ever, have kin ties with each other. They are linked together by common economic interests and little else.

The point of the above is that in our social system there is a whole category of people — women — who are *normatively* defined as being primarily responsible for activities associated with the home and family; that is, *the household*. Note that the household is a productive unit whose characteristics are exactly opposite to those of an industrialized productive unit: it is multi-purposed, small-scale, reduplicative, and kin-based. While men are primarily defined in terms of their activities in the "real work" of commodity production, women — even though they may be wage-labourers as well — are perceived as being outside the world of the market-place. In a society where worth is determined by money, women, who are *normatively* perceived as engaged in work which is not paid, naturally enough, not judged to be worth as much as men.

In anthropological terms, the normative ideal that "women's place is in the home" (even if she's a university professor or a cab-driver!) places women in a position structurally analogous, *vis-à-vis* the rest of society, to that of peasants or other groups outside commodity production. It is indeed striking to notice that the stereotypically expected behaviour of all economically dependent groups accords very well with the "feminine ideal": docile, intellectually stultified, emotionally unstable, but also lovable, childlike creatures *if they know their place.*
An industrialized, capitalist social system has very strong reasons for maintaining the privatized, pre-industrial household and the ideology of women's inferiority which reinforces it. Firstly, those who own the means of production receive a tremendous amount of very real labour (child-rearing and housework) which does not have to be paid for — the wages pay for the labour power of two people. Secondly, in the present system women perform the crucial function of supplying a flexible, cheap reservoir for the wage-labour force and are always available to keep men's wages down in addition to taking those jobs, usually menial, when manpower demands are high — as in a war-time economy. Thirdly, women act as social stabilizers and ideological guardians of the status-quo as a direct consequence of their enforced parochialism and economic dependency. It is the wife who keeps the husband at his alienating job; it is the mother who forces the children to "behave" and conform; it is the wife who offers a refuge for the unhappy husband; it is the wife who urges the husband not to jeopardize his job by going on strike. And it is these same women who must receive all the brutalized frustration and sexual exploitation of men who also suffer from oppression and dehumanization — for both men and women live in a society which turns everything, including people, into commodities.

As the contradictions women face between their role as wage-labourers within the market economy and the sociocultural definition of them as primarily caretakers of home and family develop, we can expect the tensions and conflicts imposed upon women to become increasingly exacerbated and reflected in the growing movement for women's liberation. If our analysis of the structural roots of woman's subjugation is correct, then what is required is a radical structural transformation of the social system which would remove the home from private production, and free women from the very real constrictions of responsibility for cooking and children. That such changes cannot occur in a society whole-heartedly devoted to the pursuit of private profit by those in power should be obvious. To quote M. L. Benston:

*Equal access to jobs outside the home . . . will not in itself be sufficient to give equality for women; as long as work in the home remains a matter of private production and is the responsibility of women, they will simply carry a
double work-load . . . this means that children should no longer be the responsibility solely of parents. Society must begin to take responsibility for children; the economic dependence of women and children on the husband-father must be ended. The other work that goes on in the home must also be changed . . . when such work is moved into the public sector, then the material basis for discrimination against women will be gone . . . with socialized production and the removal of the profit motive and its attendant alienated labour, there is no reason why, in an industrialized society, industrialization of housework should not result in better production, i.e., better food, more comfortable surroundings, more intelligent and loving child-care . . . than in the present nuclear family.22 (emphasis added)

That this change will be a change for the better is hard for most of us, especially women, to accept. This is partly a result of the ideological factors discussed above, but also because we do not separate clearly enough the emotional from the economic functions of the family. It is precisely the removal of the constricting economic functions that will allow much more rewarding interpersonal human relationships.

III

How does the preceding discussion on the problems confronting women relate to the educational system? It would be best first to dispel the natural tendency amongst professional educators that education is the crucially determining variable in the resolution of basic social problems. Education is essentially epiphenomenal in character and its role and significance is severely held in bounds by the concrete, structural limitations of the sociocultural system within which it operates. Thus, when we look at the kind of education which goes on in our schools we should not be surprised to find that, more often than not, it serves as a mirror reflection and reinforcement of the prevailing norms and dominant ideologies in our society.

Before they get to school at all, children are well aware of the differential behaviour expected from boys and from girls. The schools then play an important part in completing the socialization of girls (and boys) into the roles that they are expected to play later in life. From the earliest reader to the final guidance text-
book, girls are taught that the "natural" role should be that of a wife and mother. Boys are expected to be more aggressive in play and allowed much more freedom in large motor development; girls soon learn to be "little ladies," the importance of being "pretty" and wearing "attractive" clothes, and that all the exciting, active, creative jobs are reserved for boys. Boys grow up to be doctors, engineers, and architects, while girls can expect to fill all those jobs which are ancillary, supportive and "naturally nurturant," e.g. nurses, secretaries, teachers. If there is any doubt that schools socialize girls in this manner, one can always glance at the textbooks for verification. At the very earliest development level in the school system — the kindergarten — there is a marked sexual distinction made in the socialization process, exemplified by the "doll corner."

What is so painful about the functioning of schools in the assignment of these arbitrary and damaging sex roles is that it is women themselves who unwittingly help to perpetuate this oppressive system. We have already noted that teaching as an occupation fits in perfectly with the conventional wisdom concerning women's "nature"; it is a supportive, nurturant, and child-caring activity — a surrogate mother — what could be more suited to the so-called female "instincts"? Women are encouraged to go into teaching; their socialization adapts them to the role. We thus have a vicious self-selection process in education wherein women who are socialized to conform with the normative ideals of the social system enter an occupation only to transmit these same ideals to the following generation. In this manner, women are used by those in power to perpetuate their own oppression.

When one examines how power is really wielded and distributed within the teaching profession itself, the whole idea that we live in a democratic society begins to crumble. Democracy must mean, at a very minimum, equal access to information, equal opportunity, and majority representation: none of these minimal criteria is presently available to women teachers.

In Canada the majority of teachers, 62.4%, are women. Yet it is the males who dominate the profession in everything but numbers. In 1966-67, 78% of those teachers earning over $10,000 per annum were men; 80% of those teachers at the lowest income level were women. Access to administrative positions with authority
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is extremely difficult if one is a woman. For example, in Vancouver the first woman principal since 1935 was appointed in 1969. It is extremely difficult to believe that for thirty-four years the entire Vancouver city school system did not have any women teachers competent to be a principal. In their own professional associations (Canada is one of the few countries left where one can find teachers still refusing to recognize reality by calling these associations what they are — or ought to be: unions) the same discrimination against women teachers exists. In British Columbia, 55% of the teachers are women, yet in the British Columbia Teachers Federation there is only one woman on the eighteen member executive, and all the committee heads are men.

The dismal picture revealed by these figures concerning the subservient position of women in teaching is merely a fragment of the whole position of women throughout the entire social fabric. It is particularly significant, however, because it shows that, even when women are in a majority, they are never allowed, as a group, to have control and hold the positions of authority which would normally be expected to accrue to them from their majority membership in the occupation. For women to have social, political, or economic power in our society would be in direct contradiction to the normative roles women are supposed to have.

In addition, it would also “cost” more. Think of it: what the social system gets is a vast army of cheap labour to run (but not control) a key social institution — the school system; an institution whose primary function is the transmission of those values and skills required to maintain the status quo. It’s really quite a bargain — if you’re a member of that class which controls the corporate economy.

The usual rationalization for the gross inequality of women in teaching is that women are less qualified than men. What is so interesting about this statement is that because it is true it has just the opposite effect of its intention. The fact that women teachers, on the whole, are less qualified than men does not serve to justify the inequality of women, but has the contrary result of showing just how oppressed women really are. For the crucial question is, “Why are women less qualified?” and the answer is “Because they are treated as second-class citizens all their lives.” When incentive is deliberately destroyed because administrative positions
(e.g. principalships) are reserved for males; when it is much more
difficult to get jobs that will pay their way through four years of
university; when elementary school positions are seen as more
"womanly"; and when it is impossible to take those extra courses
because of the additional responsibility of caring for their own
children, it becomes very difficult to understand why people, who
want to deny the unequal treatment women receive in teaching,
persist in using an excuse which simply underscores the existence
of this inequality.

IV

In recognizing that education cannot, by itself, resolve serious
social problems and that real change can only come about when the
structural, material causes of social injustices are removed is not
to say that education is irrelevant. On the contrary, within its
limited sphere, education is crucial in the process of social change.
The major task of education must be to maintain a constant, critical
attack on all the ideologies and norms which justify the exploitation
of human beings. Education can, and should, act as a constant guide
so that when structural change does occur it will do so within the
framework offered by a humane education devoted to social justice,
co-operation and liberation. In short, education is important and
socially worthwhile only when it engages in a conscious and delib­
erate attempt to subvert the dominant ideologies of our society.
Education is subversive or it is nothing.

One of the great weaknesses in educational theory today is the
assumption that nothing much can be done in the way of social
improvement until the "attitudes" of individuals change. This
ignores the fact that social values cannot be transformed until
social roles are redefined and altered. Since social roles are an
integral part of the social structure within which they are rooted,
the conclusion is obvious: a radical transformation of the social
structure is necessarily prior to any real change in social values.
(For example, racism as a "scientific" theory was conclusively in­
validated over fifty years ago, but since the social structure of cap­
itlism has remained basically unaltered, so have racist values
remained undiminished.) It is necessary to repeat, however, that a
critical, subversive education is of the utmost importance in main-
taining the necessary consciousness of the possibility and desirability of social change; education in this sense can be likened to a catalyst which can have profound and wide-ranging effects when the social and economic factors for radical change are present.

Women in the teaching profession are in a particularly significant position to work for their own liberation — and that of men (for none of us is free until all of us are free). The classroom can, and should be, used as a factor in social change which will be directly beneficial to the vast majority.

There are four key areas which must receive concerted and intensive attention if the education system is ever to perform the liberating functions it ought to, rather than the conserving functions it performs at present. It should not be forgotten that since most males receive some benefits (although they are extremely costly ones inasmuch as they ultimately serve to keep them exploited as well) from the fact that females are subservient to them, women will have to organize primarily as women. This in no way should be seen as a "feminist" or "anti-male" position, but merely a rational response to the social realities.

The four crucial areas are:

1) Curriculum — this must be changed so that it deals adequately and seriously with the historical role of women and the contemporary reality of their exploitation. A critical and questioning attitude towards the traditional role of women should be encouraged.

2) Textbooks — the subservient female sexual roles portrayed in the vast majority of children's books is a shocking assault on the defenseless humanity of children, as well as an insult to their parents. Sadly enough, many of these books are written by women.

3) Channelling — while discrimination on the basis of sex occurs in all areas of the education system, we are here primarily concerned with the necessity of challenging the power of guidance counsellors in job channelling. There must be free choice for girls and boys at all levels.

4) Democracy — women in teaching must organize to demand, and get, proportional representation in their professional associations, at all administrative levels, and in all Departments of Education.
The real tragedy of any system of oppression has been that, all too often, the oppressed come to believe they are fit for nothing better; they accept the socially-imposed definitions of themselves as inferior. As long as women consider men better than themselves there is no hope — for them, for my brothers, or for our as yet untainted children — male and female, humans all.

Notes and References


13. For example, see F. R. Wake’s, “Changing Sex Role: Implications for Education,” *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol. III, No. 2, Fall 1968. This is not meant to question Prof. Wake’s good intentions, but to illustrate how deep-rooted is the tendency to assume either the present, or imminent, improvement in the status of women.

14. This estimate by British economist Colin Clark was reported in the *Vancouver Sun*, September 24, 1969, p. 51.


22. M. L. Benston, *op. cit.* This paper is highly recommended.


25. This, and the following statistics are from M. Cohen, *op. cit.*