

EDUCATING WOMEN A Feminist Agenda

Many participants in contemporary feminist movement are college-educated. It is easy to assume our educational status and privilege are common among women and as a consequence we have not stressed the need to make education, especially basic literacy, a feminist agenda. Although feminist activists have focused on struggling against sexism in educational institutions and childhood socialization, they have not explored deeply the connection between sexist exploitation of women in this society and the degree of women's education, including the lack of basic reading and writing skills. Feminist activist and scholar Charlotte Bunch emphasizes the political importance of literacy in her essay "Feminism and Education":

Revolutionary movements have almost always seen developing a general literacy as one of the most important tasks. Yet in this country, where we assume that most of us can read and write, it is often overlooked...

Reading and writing are valuable in and of themselves, and women should have access to their pleasure. Beyond that, they are vital to change for several reasons. First, they provide a means of conveying ideas and information that may not be readily available in the popular media. For example, the idea of women's liberation first spread through mimeographed articles.... Second, reading and writing help develop an individual's imagination and ability to think.... Third, an individual's access, through reading a variety of interpretations of reality, increases that person's capac-

ity to think for herself, to go against the norms of the culture, and to conceive of alternatives for society—all of which are fundamental to acting politically. Fourth, reading and writing aid each woman's individual survival and success in the world, by increasing her ability to function in her chosen endeavors. And finally, the written word is still the cheapest and most accessible form of mass communication.... When we recall why literacy is important to movements, it becomes clear that we should neither assume that women are already literate, nor ignore the value of teaching women to read, write, and think as part of feminist education.

Class biases led women organizing feminist movement to simply assume that feminist theory and strategy would be best disseminated to masses of women via written materials. The focus on written material actually prohibits many women from learning about feminism. There are places in the United States where feminist literature is not available, where women and men have never heard the word "feminism" or have heard it and do not know what it really means. Had feminist activists engaged in charting the movement's direction considered the issue of literacy, they would have known that the emphasis on written material would make feminist ideas accessible to certain classes and groups of women. They would have known that a movement depending on the written word to carry its message would need to stress programs enabling all women to learn reading and writing. The political importance of literacy is still understressed in feminist movement today even though printed material has practically become the sole medium for expression of theory. Many theorists do not even intend their ideas to reach a mass public, and consequently we must take some responsibility for the superficial and perverted versions of feminist ideas that end up in the public imagination, via TV, for example. It is not too late for feminist activists to emphasize literacy and to organize literacy training programs for women. Through feminist-headed literacy programs, illiterate women from all classes, and especially those from poor and working-class backgrounds, could learn to read and write in conjunction with learning how to think critically and analytically.

Given the bourgeois class biases of many feminist activists, attention has been given to women in higher education, both as students and teachers, with little or no attention given to the need to educate women who lack basic skills. Time and money have been expended creating resources for women scholars and academics to pursue and promote their work. While this effort is important, it should not have greater priority than the struggle to ensure that all women read and write. Given the many financial cutbacks taking place on all levels in the United States, it is unlikely that women could rely on public funding to establish literacy programs. However, programs could be sponsored by financial contributions from women and men in academic institutions who are committed to radical political change. Even if funding were not available from any source, small literacy programs could begin in neighborhoods and communities where politically committed, skilled individuals could teach women reading and writing.

Until masses of women in this society read and write, feminist ideas must also be spread by word of mouth. Many women will not leave or are unable to leave their homes to attend feminist conferences and public talks; door-to-door contact would serve as one way feminist ideas could be shared. This contact could be made by groups of women who are already participating in feminist organizations. Many women's studies students at universities all around the United States grapple with the issue of whether or not their intellectual and scholarly pursuits are relevant to women as a collective group, to women in the "real" world. Were these students to go into communities and discuss feminist issues door-to-door, they would be working to bridge the gap between their educational experiences and the educational experiences of masses of women.

Many women are frightened by the thought of approaching women who are strangers. One semester I taught a course in a women's studies program called "Third World Women in the United States," and though the ethnic background of the students varied from semester to semester, this particular semester the students were almost all white. All the students lamented the absence of larger numbers of women of color. I assigned them the project of

talking to non-white women on the campus about their reasons for not taking women's studies classes. They were encouraged to invite students to visit the classes. At first students were uncomfortable with the assignment. They were uneasy about approaching women they did not know. Most of them found that the women they spoke with often gave lack of information about courses and teachers as their primary reason for never taking a women's studies course. After the students reported their findings (some did bring groups of non-white women to class), we discussed ways all students could learn more about the women's studies program. While everyone agreed that printed publicity (ads in the school newspaper or posters) was a good strategy, we decided that talking with women about the courses was the most effective method. In dialogues, women could ask questions and thus dispel stereotypes or fears they might have about feminism and the women's studies program. The importance of verbal communication holds true for the dissemination of feminist ideas. In a door-to-door campaign to reintroduce feminist politics to a wider audience, women would have the opportunity to ask questions, clarify issues, give feedback. If, in a single year, women stopped spending thousands of dollars to organize conferences that are attended by only a select group of individuals, the goal of that year could be mass outreach in every state, with the intention of taking feminism out of the university and into the streets and homes of this society.

Feminist education has become institutionalized in universities via women's studies programs. While these programs are necessary and are an extremely effective way to teach college students about feminism, they have very little impact, if any, on masses of women and men. There are very few corresponding women's studies programs that make the same knowledge and information available to people who are not college students. Many students, female and male, find they do much of their rethinking of sexist socialization in women's studies classes. Usually the information they receive radically alters their perspectives on reality and changes their view of the nature of sex roles. This kind of information needs to reach more people. As part of her or his political commitment to feminism, a

positive praxis for any academic would be offering women's studies courses at a local community center, YWCA, YMCA, church, etc. Even if they did not teach as many hours or days as they did at the university, any amount of time spent making women's studies available to the public would be significant.

During this past year I returned to the small Kentucky town I grew up in to give a talk, "Black Women Writers: The Vision of Community," during Black History Week. The talk was meant to highlight the way in which black women writers draw on elements of everyday life experiences in black homes and communities. Accustomed to teaching college courses where students are familiar with the literature, I found it challenging to devise a lecturing strategy that would make the same knowledge available to women and men (mainly African American) of all ages, literate and illiterate, many of whom were unfamiliar with the works and authors to be discussed. I relied heavily on reading passages from various texts—poetry, fiction, drama—using passages that involved unusual, exciting descriptions of everyday events. While I was preparing the talk, I was conscious of the desire not to "talk down" to the audience in any way. I wanted to keep the same intellectual level I would have in the college-classroom lecture. With this in mind, I began to think in terms of translation—giving the same message, using a different style, simpler sentence structures, etc.

The ability to "translate" ideas to an audience that varies in age, sex, ethnicity, and degree of literacy is a skill feminist educators need to develop. Concentration of feminist educators in universities encourages habitual use of an academic style that may make it impossible for teachers to communicate effectively with individuals who are not familiar with either academic style or jargon. All too often educators, especially university professors, fear their work will not be valued by other academics if it is presented in a way that makes it accessible to a wider audience. If these educators thought of rendering their work in a number of different styles, "translations," they would be able to satisfy arbitrary academic standards while making their work available to masses of people. Difficulty of access has been a problem with much feminist theory. A feminist essay with revolu-

tionary ideas written in a complicated, abstract manner using the jargon of a specific discipline will not have the impact it should have on the consciousness of women and men because it will probably be read by only a small group of people. While feminist scholars should feel free to write using complex styles, if they are sincerely concerned with addressing their ideas to as many people as possible, they must either write in a more accessible manner or write in the manner of their choice and see to it that the piece is made available to others using a style that can be easily understood.

The value of a feminist work should not be determined by whether or not it conforms to academic standards. The value of a feminist work should not be determined by whether or not it is difficult reading. Concurrently, works should not be dismissed simply because they are difficult. If feminist writing and scholarship aim to promote and advance feminist movement, then matters of style must be considered in conjunction with political intent. There will be no mass-based feminist movement as long as feminist ideas are understood only by a well-educated few. The educational needs of the undereducated woman must be considered by feminist activists if the written word remains the primary medium for the dissemination of feminist ideas.

Another reason education has not been of primary concern to feminist activists is the tug-of-war that has existed within feminist movement between feminist intellectuals and academics, and participants in the movement who equate education with bourgeois privilege and are fiercely anti-intellectual. This tug-of-war has led to the formation of a false dichotomy between theory (the development of ideas) and practice (the actions of the movement), with one group privileging "practice." As a consequence, there is often little congruity between feminist theory and feminist practice. This intensifies the feelings of some women engaged in activism (like organizing a defense committee for a woman jailed for killing an abusive spouse) that they are superior to or more "politically correct" than women who concentrate their energies on developing ideas. From the onset, women's liberation movement participants have struggled to unite theory and practice, to create a liberatory feminist praxis

(defined by Paulo Freire as "action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it"). That struggle has been undermined by anti-intellectualism and by elitist academics who believe their "ideas" need not have any connection to real life.

Bourgeois class biases have led many feminist theorists to develop ideas that have little or no relation to the lived experiences of most women, theories that are not useful for making feminist revolution. Annoyed and angered by these ideas, many women dismiss all theory as irrelevant. Yet women need to know that ideas and theories are important and absolutely essential for envisioning and making a successful feminist movement, one that will mobilize groups of people to transform this society. Ironically, lack of knowledge about revolutionary politics leads women to see ideas and theories as unimportant. In their chapter "Dialectics and Revolution," Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs discuss the importance of ideas to revolutionary activists:

Revolutionists seek to change reality, to make it better. Therefore, revolutionists not only need the revolutionary philosophy of dialectics. They need a revolutionary ideology, i.e. a body of ideas based on analyzing the main contradictions of the particular society which they are trying to change, projecting a vision of a higher form of reality in which this contradiction would be resolved, and relating this resolution to a social force or forces responsible for and capable of achieving it. It is only after you have arrived at the correct ideology that it makes sense to develop your revolutionary politics, i.e. the programs necessary to mobilizing and organizing the revolutionary social forces. If your ideology is wrong, i.e. misdirected or limited, then all the most brilliant programs for militant activity must be absolutely clear about this sequence—from revolutionary philosophy, to revolutionary ideology, to revolutionary politics.

Support of anti-intellectualism in feminist movement is a good example of ideology that undermines and impedes progress. As a group, women have been denied (via sex, race, and class exploitation and oppression) the right and privilege to develop intellectually. Most women are deprived of access to modes of thought that pro-

mote the kind of critical and analytical understanding necessary for liberation struggle. This deprivation leads women to feel insecure about intellectual work and to fear grappling with new ideas and information. It may lead us to dismiss as irrelevant that which is relevant because it is challenging.

Often women of color active in feminist movement are anti-intellectual. Many of us have not had access to university educations and do not hold advanced degrees. We may equate white female hegemonic dominance of feminist theory and practice with educational status. We may not attack that hegemony (which stems from class and race hierarchies) but instead "put down" intellectual work. By dismissing theory and privileging organization work, some women of color are able to see themselves as more politically engaged where it really counts. Yet by buying into this dichotomy between theory and practice, we place ourselves always on the side of the experiential, and in so doing support the notion (too often fostered by white women) that their role is to do the "brain" work, developing ideas, theories, etc., while our role is to do either the "dirty" work or to contribute the experience to validate and document their analysis. Women of color need to develop intellectually. While we need not be ashamed of not having certain educational skills, we need to assume responsibility for urging and helping one another combine organizational, practical skills with intellectual expertise. We need to examine why there are so few images of intellectual women who are non-white. Those of us who are educated, who hold advanced degrees, need to examine why we devalue intellectual activity. Women of color and all women from non-privileged backgrounds who are well-educated, who understand the value of intellectual development, the extent to which it strengthens any oppressed person who is seeking self-recovery and radical political change, must share their awareness with all women. We must actively struggle to rid feminist movement of its anti-intellectual bias. We must continue to criticize meaningless intellectual work and promote the kind of study and scholarship that is itself a feminist praxis.

In her writing, Charlotte Bunch encourages women to accept the challenge of education, whether it be the basic struggle for read-

ing and writing skills or the struggle to develop critical and analytical skills. Writing about women's negative attitudes towards theory, Bunch comments:

When teaching feminist theory, one must counter such attitudes and find ways to encourage women to think systematically about the world. Our society (and indeed all societies today) trains only a few people to think in this manner, mostly those from the classes it expects to control the social order. Certainly most women are not expected to take control, and, in consequence, are not encouraged to think analytically. In fact, critical thinking is the antithesis of woman's traditional role. Women are supposed to worry about mundane survival problems, to brood about fate, and to fantasize in a personal manner. We are not meant to think analytically about society, to question the way things are, or to consider how things could be different. Such thinking involves an active, not a passive, relationship to the world. It requires confidence that your thoughts are worth pursuing and that you can make a difference.... My goal in teaching feminist theory is to provoke women to think about their lives and society in this way.

Encouraging women to strive for education, to develop their intellects, should be a primary goal of feminist movement.

Education as "the practice of freedom" (to use another Freire phrase) will be a reality for women only when we develop an educational methodology that addresses the needs of all women. This is an important feminist agenda.

FEMINIST MOVEMENT TO END VIOLENCE

Contemporary feminist movement successfully called attention to the need to end male violence against women. Shelters for abused and battered women were founded all around the United States by women activists dedicated to helping victimized women heal themselves and begin new lives. Despite years of committed hard work, the problem of male violence against women steadily increases. It is often assumed by feminist activists that this violence is distinct from other forms of violence in this society because it is specifically linked to the politics of sexism and male supremacy: the right of men to dominate women. In Susan Schechter's thorough study of the battered women's movement, *Women and Male Violence*, she continually emphasizes "that violence against women is rooted in male domination." Her chapter "Towards an Analysis of Violence Against Women in the Family" examines the extent to which the ideology of male supremacy both encourages and supports violence against women:

Theoretical explanations for battering are not mere exercises; by pinpointing the conditions that create violence against women, they suggest the directions in which a movement should proceed to stop it. Woman abuse is viewed here as an historical expression of male domination manifested within the family and currently reinforced by the institutions, economic arrangements, and sexist