Women in Non-Traditional Fields and Feminism: An Uneasy Connection

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WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL FIELDS AND FEMINISM: AN UNEASY CONNECTION?*

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the last fifteen years, while contemporary feminist thought has gone through a rich and impressive development and growth, remarkable changes have taken place simultaneously in the participation of women in the work force. One of the most remarkable changes in women's employment is the dramatic integration of women into fields once thought to be the exclusive territory of men. Female pioneers, in all areas of contemporary employment, have challenged occupational segregation in American society. This integration by women has occurred, however, within the context and as a result of an unprecedented intellectual evolution in feminist theory. Yet, there exists a palpable tension between women who integrate "male

* This paper is based on a paper delivered at the National Women's Studies Association's National Meeting, June, 1986, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

jobs" and those who actively participate in the women's movement. The purpose of this paper is to explore this uneasy relationship and to identify the reasons for the tension.

II. GOVERNMENTAL EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE SEX DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT AND THEIR RESULTS

Beginning in 1963 with the Equal Pay Act\(^1\) amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act,\(^2\) there has been significant legislative progress toward the goal of eliminating sex discrimination in employment in the United States. Subsequent breakthroughs include Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,\(^3\) as amended by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972,\(^4\) the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978,\(^5\) and Executive Order No. 11246,\(^6\) as amended by Executive Order No. 11375.\(^7\)

All of these legislative initiatives bar hiring based on stereotyped characterizations of the sexes, classification or labeling of "men's jobs" and "women's jobs," and advertising under "male" and "female" headings. The executive orders require that federal contracts include language which constitutes a pledge by contractors not to discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment on the basis of sex, race, color, religion, age or national origin. The contractor must further pledge an undertaking of affirmative action to ensure non-discriminatory treatment. Such affirmative action must occur in the areas of employment, promotion, demotion or transfer; recruitment or recruitment advertising; layoffs or other forms of compensation; and selection for training, which includes apprenticeships.

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Partly as a result of these legislative developments, women have not only entered the work force in increasing numbers, but they have also applied for and obtained jobs once thought to be the exclusive domain of men. Since the early 1970's, women increasingly have taken what scholars define as "non-traditional jobs . . . those predominantly held by men and considered atypical for women, such as managers, machinists, and craft workers."8

Looking at the new occupations for women, one finds that they fall into six basic areas: high technology, the arts, the trades, public life, the professions, and the remaining fields, which include sports, management, and the clergy. Some of the job titles women now hold include astronaut, judge, composer, ironworker, engineer, jockey, electronics technician, mayor, dramatist/playwright, printer, trial lawyer, umpire, pilot, state trooper, rock musician, construction worker, surgeon, rabbi and bodybuilder.9 Thus, virtually no fields remain that have not experienced some integration by women.

These developments signal a process of permanent social and psychological change in the United States. The consequences of this change in the workplace demonstrate that some gender barriers have been challenged and broken. For example, the popular media occasionally reflect images of women at work in occupations only recently made accessible, such as astronaut and carpenter. The developments have also come to the attention of a variety of academic disciplines as the history of this transformation is charted. Of course, the numbers of women involved in this transformation are still relatively small,10 but there is reason to conclude that even this much change is significant.

III. OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM OF VALUES REGARDING GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS

In spite of their mutual interest in the expansion of employment opportunities for women, the relationship between the women who

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are occupational pioneers of the 1970's and 1980's and those actively involved in the women's movement is accompanied by misunderstanding, suspicion and open clashes of values. While the existence of this uneasy connection between women who integrate "male jobs" and those in the women's movement is generally recognized, the reasons for the tension are not as evident. If in the future, however, the barriers between women can be overcome, social progress for all women may become easier.  

A. Contrasting Leadership Styles

The different styles of leadership employed by two international political figures serve as a useful introduction to an analysis of the tension under discussion. Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of Britain, is a woman operating in a man's world, but whatever level of gender consciousness she possesses is not integrated into her political performance. Thatcher pleases many people by conducting the affairs of state in Britain without challenging the sex role stereotypes for men and women. Outwardly, Thatcher seems to deny that she is female and conducts herself as a conservative male might, particularly in matters of war and fiscal policy, by integrating herself with the prevailing mores which are male-dominated.

While her approach is comforting to many people who like the status quo and do not wish any changes in the social order, Thatcher concurrently angers many others. Those whom she angers may say: "It is not progress for a woman like that to be Prime Minister of Britain! It does not matter if she is a head of state, she has not changed anything for women!" Thus, she is disregarded, particularly by those women who desire that she use her political power to alter the social order for women in some constructive way as she manages the government.

In contrast, Gro Harlem Bruntland, Prime Minister of Norway since 1986, leads her people in a much different fashion. Integrating women into her cabinet immediately after taking office, Bruntland

11. See Smith, Ferree, & Miller, Short Scale of Attitudes Toward Feminism, REPRESENTATIVE RES. SOC. PSYCHOLOGY, January, 1975, at 51.
functions in a traditional male arena by providing opportunities to women. Her social policies take women into consideration, and the country’s decisions are made in a relatively gender-neutral atmosphere. Some may say: “This is progress!” Many women think she is the right kind of woman in a man’s world. They feel that Bruntland is doing what she can to balance the concerns of women and men while she leads and manages her country’s affairs. With more women like her in public office, they reason, it eventually will no longer be a man’s world. The contrast between these two powerful women who are heads of state is instructive. The public image of Margaret Thatcher is one of a woman who totally accepts an older social order. To some, she is merely an extraordinary example in a long line of women who have achieved success as individuals without gender consciousness. Gro Harlem Bruntland is a feminist in office who integrates her womanhood into the power she exercises in the political life of her country. Thatcher and Bruntland represent opposite ends of the spectrum of women who have chosen to work in fields where at least seventy-five percent of the participants are men. Often, women constitute, at most, between three and five percent of those working in male-dominated fields, and, as Thatcher and Bruntland demonstrate, each woman who enters into such social circumstances reacts to them in her own unique way.

B. The Reasons for the Tension

The discomfort and distrust many women in non-traditional fields feel towards the women’s movement surface in both obvious and subtle forms. There are frequent outcries of “I’m no women’s liber” which appear in interviews with women who enter into male fields, such as mining and construction work. More polite displays of discomfort or open hostility when the subject of the women’s movement and/or feminism comes up among professional women also suggest an undercurrent of concern, at the very least. Pre-

ferences for classification as a "generic" jockey, orchestral conductor, or scientist, and not as a woman, are often expressed in interviews. Furthermore, while gender-free judgments of performance are a critical, long-range goal for society, they are rarely a reality in the workplace of the late 1980's. In spite of this fact, there is evidence of a general denial on the part of many women that they have experienced personal discrimination. One has to wonder whether these reactions are also a factor among women in non-traditional fields.16

Why do these counterproductive attitudes exist between some feminists and some women who have chosen to be pioneers in non-traditional fields? First, both groups have limited familiarity with each other. There is a dazzling variety of non-traditional fields available to women now and a diverse population of women, representing many socio-economic groups, who choose to enter them. There is also great variety in the population of women who are comfortable with the label "feminist." However, this rich diversity is not generally recognized or appreciated by either group.

Unfortunate stereotypes regarding both groups are also partially responsible for the alienation which occurs between the two groups. Especially for women who choose the trades, the stereotypes assume that they have very little education and have experienced economic deprivation, which leads to a choice of job based solely on the prospect of financial gain and on the acceptance of traditional sex roles.17 It is not well known that a small but significant number of college graduates have become integrated into some of the trades. This "downward mobility" is not at all understood or accepted at present. Likewise, the well known stereotype of the feminist as a woman who hates men, has had great opportunities in the workforce and the educational world, and is well-to-do financially is equally detrimental to the advancement of mutual understanding.

The gap also exists in part because of class consciousness on both sides. To some researchers, women in non-traditional fields

who have chosen trades may not seem to be fruitful subjects for study and attention. Such women may appear inaccessible, have different lifestyles and values from those of the scholar, and often refuse to acknowledge a debt to the women's movement. On the other hand, to some women in non-traditional fields, feminists exhibit a drop-out mentality which seems irresponsible in today's society. In addition, it appears to these women that feminists do not understand the full dimensions of economic oppression for men as well as women and work primarily on issues limited in impact to middle class women.

Another serious cause of the alienation between feminists and women in non-traditional fields is the superficiality of print and television media coverage. Media images and media discussion regarding both feminist ideals and the experiences of women who pioneer in new fields of employment are frequently tiresome and one dimensional. Article after article, for example, has been written in the popular press about women miners with great romanticism. The most offensive articles follow a pattern in which there is a statement of biographical details and a discussion of what it is like to be the first woman in a male-dominated environment. The substance of a female miner's story occurs after the initial phase of integration is over, and little is related about this later state of development. A review of popular press images and discussions of feminist activity would likewise yield material which reveals a less than enlightening presentation of feminist thought.

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of the values clash arises because, as is no secret, women do not all agree about the role of gender consciousness in the workplace. This constitutes a profound barrier to communication which is seldom acknowledged. Some feminists declare their ideology and value system through a pre-eminence of gender issues and become involved in activist initiatives. Those who put gender issues first in the workplace may alienate those who

cannot or those who will not. However, assumptions regarding the reasons for this openness or lack of it can be misleading. Some women believe in feminist principles but experience discomfort when confronted with the demands of activism. Women in many non-traditional fields, including the trades, the professions and those involving public life, especially in the early years of their careers, are under particularly heavy pressure to prove themselves and their competency in the world. For women operating in a male-dominated environment, earning respect is a fundamental first goal that is basic to success in their careers. Often, to be openly feminist at this critical time can be counterproductive to the basic goal of recognition and job security.

Whatever the causes may be, there is significant and convincing evidence which suggests that women who work in non-traditional fields are encountering situations in their workplaces that require all of their energy to survive. However, there is compelling evidence which suggests that survival in the non-traditional workplace is not enough. There are calls for "challenging conditional acceptance" on the part of pioneering women. A number of researchers conclude that if women in non-traditional fields wish to avoid the powerful and defeating dynamics of tokenism, they must involve themselves not only in the encouraging of other women but also in seeking out women who have preceded them in order to know their role models. In fact, psychological researchers have discovered that positive attitudes toward other women in the same workplace may increase women's own sense of self-value.

Beyond these important insights, the literature contains evidence which explains how the structure of organizations is often responsible for why women act as they do in their workplaces. Researchers

reject the suggestions that sex role socialization explains the behavior of women and men. Instead, they analyze the workplace structures to find institutional sexism and the real reasons for difficulties. Intervention strategies, which employers can consider if they are serious about equalizing the working relationships between women and men, are proposed and include organizationally imposed encouragement of legitimacy for women.

C. Modifying the Tension

It is important to close the gap between women who choose non-traditional fields and those involved in the feminist movement. For one thing, individuals in each group represent potential for the provision of mutually beneficial support, and the community of women in general will be strengthened through understanding. In addition, softening the counterproductive attitudes of the two groups may result in more recruits for the women’s movement and may yield interesting and useful research inquiries. It may be fruitful for researchers to develop an empirical study which examines the similarities which exist among all pioneers in a variety of non-traditional occupations and social classes. Furthermore, women who change careers may consider a non-traditional field more readily when these barriers to communication are removed.

Intervention by feminist scholars and educators at institutions where training is given in non-traditional fields is another exciting possibility for the future. This is already happening in advocacy groups across the nation. For example, at Cornell University’s New York City campus, women’s studies programs for trade-union women have been conducted for over ten years. No doubt there are other programs. These efforts to teach women’s studies help to ameliorate and modify many unquestioned attitudes toward feminism before they become rigid.

Rejecting the stereotypes and tolerating a range of responses to gender consciousness will also help close the gap. Clarification of

the shared issues of concern is also an important part of the agenda for reconciliation. Finally, naïveté regarding the dynamics of sexual integration and the strategies for removing these barriers, which governs both employee and employer in workplaces that are dominated by men, must be overcome. Until the subtle barriers at all stages of a woman’s career development are recognized, challenged and removed, true social progress is impossible.

IV. A PARALLEL GAP

There are interesting parallels between the gap outlined in this essay and the one which exists between many of today’s young women and feminism. Gloria Steinem explores this in her essay “Why Young Women are More Conservative.” She points out that comfort with activism comes at a later age for women than it does for men. She also notes that the “traditional college period is an unrealistic and cautious time,” and that “more equality is in evidence” at this time in the campus environment. Young women have experienced fewer radicalizing experiences, such as occupational segregation, the inequality of child rearing, or the impact of aging, than older women have. Steinem feels college is perceived to be a time to prove oneself and achieve excellence and mastery.

Entering a non-traditional field also requires caution and conservatism, at first. It is also a time for proving oneself. In some work settings, more equality is in evidence, initially, as a result of the employer’s heightened consciousness. However, taking a developmental perspective, women already launched in non-traditional careers and past the initial stages of adjustment to the new territory may have a readiness for feminism which they did not have earlier because of the pressures of integrating themselves into the field. According to Steinem, joining forces to gain power collectively is the true radical goal, and perhaps this is more possible with seasoned veterans in non-traditional fields than it is with fresh new pioneers.

27. Id. at 213.
28. Id. at 212-18.
The author/compiler of *Alone in a Crowd*, Jean K. Schroedel, touches on the issues raised here in her introduction. She points out that some women in non-traditional fields have mixed feelings about feminism. "For these women there is a tenuous relationship between their struggle for lives of dignity and any organized women’s movement. Feminism for them is associated with media caricatures and pampered, upper class women, not with the lives of women like them." Schroedel observes that some women in non-traditional fields "represent the women’s movement’s greatest challenge and hope—challenge in how to win them over to feminism, and hope because they are women of boundless strength and courage." 

V. Conclusion

This essay has analyzed the relationship that exists between some women in non-traditional fields and those in the women’s movement. There are strong indications that an uneasy relationship exists between many women who are occupational pioneers and those involved in the women’s movement. The solution to the communication gap between many occupational pioneers and this critical movement, which aims to eliminate social barriers to women’s development, is not, however, clear. Perhaps as women integrate more fields and their numbers in the workplace increase, they will take their own satisfactions more seriously and will begin to view the important work of the women’s movement with new respect. Perhaps more women in non-traditional fields will begin to work with each other during the next ten years, accepting some basic feminist principles as their own as they work toward full "personhood" in the workplace. Perhaps employers will begin to shed their naiveté about the social dynamics of sexual integration, and in some workplaces institutional alterations will be made in order to champion real equality. Certainly, if occupational segregation and sex discrimination are to ever end in the United States, it is imperative that more women and men resolve the complex problems outlined here. Otherwise, the dynamics of tokenism will prevail, and mean-

30. *Id.* at 6.
ingful social progress for women at work will remain elusive.