

THE FEMINIST UNIVERSITY

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Synopsis—This talk was originally given at Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax, Canada), a women's university going co-educational, and with predictable results. It was 'regiven' in Gröningen—by 'popular request' and it contains the main reasons that women need a feminist University.

I have a vision of a feminist University organized quite differently from universities we know from all over the world today.

Perhaps you will be amazed as I have been to learn that wherever you go, New York, Ann Arbor, Columbia, Missouri, Stockholm, Moscow, Mexico City, Tel-Aviv, Peking, Pyongyang . . . they are all alike . . . organized in faculties and departments with clear cut border lines.

Like small countries, each of them defends their territories, while they try all the time to take a few resources from their neighbors. Kings and emperors arise, searching for disciples and successors to build the empire more solidly. And Young Men are coming up, firmly trained for years within one discipline.

It occurs in such a way, that when years of training are over, medical doctors can barely see anything else but illnesses, laboratories, big pharmaceutical firms and income opportunities. Lawyers, physicists, engineers and biologists, from one direction and often from one direction only, approach and attack the problems of this new world of ours; problems which are multi-factorial, and dangerously complicated.

We might read about teamwork, but rarely do the teams work and survive, because the deep-rooted ideology of the outer world has long ago penetrated university life: compete, compete, compete. This undercurrent works directly against all intended programs.

I have had other experiences since my first years as a research leader. In doing research for transport authorities on accidents, I had to work together with architects, lawyers, road engineers and child educators.

It was necessary to solve a series of problems. In catastrophe research I worked with statisticians, sociologists, nuclear physicians, (who were experts on the poisonous character of plutonium), and

disaster committees of sociologists and medical people.

In my role in the governmental committee for changing smoking habits in the Norwegian population, I had to work with criminologists, marketing men, the World Health Organization in Geneva . . . and as a writer about consumer economy, traditional economy was never enough: psychology and sociology were potent theoretical instruments to understand consumer behavior.

You may be sure that for years and years I have crumbled when listening to experts talking above each other's heads, using similar words with different meanings, and from such different contexts that the only thing that could save them, was if the problem at hand was solved. That approach has been used in a few interdisciplinary congresses which I have attended, one on women where problems of the greatest importance to us were approached this way—pornography—from the point of view of the investors, from the media, from the legal authorities, social anthropologists and statisticians and Gallup experts. An interdisciplinary approach is necessary in a Feminist University.

Another main purpose is to cure the blind eye in patriarchal institutions. For example: whenever did economists care to provide models for the unpaid work which women do? There are several developed today in Women's Studies, which, for years I have had to struggle to include in general courses of social science.

A few sincere men, like Galbraith (1983) have written about this. A Swedish male statistician has calculated the number of hours spent in unpaid work compared to paid work in Sweden and found that the ratio was 7:6.¹

¹ Ingelstam, Lars. 1981. In the journal for the Swedish Statistical Bureau, *Velferd* (Welfare). The article is written in Swedish.

But where have sincere sociologists of the past tried to understand how this tremendous workload was a barrier to the ideal of participation in competition?

The need for a feminist university comes from studies conducted all over the world, most often by women. This work shows:

That since universities were constructed by men, for men, women will not easily find their place within the structure however competent they are, nor will problems of the greatest importance to women be considered. This means that most of the world's scholars who are competing individuals, trained in well separated fields, will overlook the structure and inadequacies in 'the female world'^{2,3} They will insist that they can understand the complicated issues of the world while staying blind in one eye.

This means that a Women's university like Mount Saint Vincent University will change differently from a man's university which is required to go co-educational. When I visited the Mount in the fall of 1979, I was not the least surprised to find that from a male student population of five per cent, came three candidates for the position of president in the student organization.

Returning this year, I am not the least surprised that the Mount has already acquired a strong male image through its student newspaper *The Picaro*, which carries a figurehead (a *brand image* I would say from the eight years I was in advertising), which gives association of male ideology which in strength will outdo every nice little pamphlet about the Mount being a women's university. The editorial board is constructed in such a way that the 90 per cent Women Students are very strongly under-represented, and adult women, from continuing education, are practically invisible as journalists, or when it comes to the problems which might be of the greatest importance to them.

Students learn their proper role behavior from role models. I have looked at the composition of the faculty leadership and the head of faculty, and have found that this is, as in most other universities, a proper place for women students to learn that they might, under certain favourable conditions such as a women's university, not only achieve the post as chair in child education and home economics, but in biology and sociology too . . . and . . . as president.

² Bernard, Jessie. 1981. *The Female World*, a brilliant exploration of a previously uncharted region—the special world of women. The Free Press, New York.

³ Ås, Berit. 1975. 'On female culture' an attempt to formulate a theory of women's solidarity and action, *Acta Sociologica* 18 (2-3), Special section on women's sociology; *Journal of Scandinavia Sociologist Association*, Munksgaard, Copenhagen.

First we have to tackle the problem of myths. Here and now I would not be the least surprised to be told that educational opportunities are similar for boys and girls in many countries. But they are not, and for the following reasons:

If we offer equal opportunities to two groups, one which is strong and has lots of resources, and another which is weak and meets barriers in many ill-defined areas, the strong group will use the opportunities to a greater extent and the gap between the sexes will increase.

Since conditions for women are not visualized and spelled out, and therefore not solved, the male society may blame the victim and comment on her low motivation or lack of fighting spirit.

Secondly: since girls and boys learn their roles and opportunities in contexts, in the institutions of society such as education, the economy, politics, etc., a feminist university must cope with this by taking away the hierarchical structures and hiring women scholars. Fortunately there are wonderful women scholars in mathematics, philosophy, physics; many of these women will tell how brilliantly girls perform if there are not boys in the class. The third and fourth solutions for a feminist university are therefore to do away with the hierarchal structures of scholars and hire, for example, the 23 women in my country who have more faith in their own competence than in the university committees which overlook them.

A fifth task for a feminist university would be to get away from discrimination practices which drain the energy out of women. We may use a concept developed by George Gerbner in an article by Gay Tuchmann⁴ 'Women's depiction by the mass media'. Gerbner says that the media bespeaks women's 'symbolic annihilation'. According to Gerbner, just as representation in the media signifies social existence, so too, does under representation, trivialization and condemnation indicate 'symbolic annihilation.' Rather than keeping pace with women, by picturing, for instance, their increased participation in the labour force, the media discredits, isolates and undercuts. They discuss 'women libbers', present issues of liberation on shows which are distasteful to a general audience, and muddy the distinction between women's liberation and sexual liberation and get away with it.

Let me take two examples from the Mount which have to do with the effect of such harassment.

Remember, we talked about myths and symbolic annihilation and the impact these two important areas have on the construction of a feminist university. There is a myth in the world that all people are getting a better education. This is wrong.

⁴ Tuchman, Gaye. 1982. Women's depictions by the mass media. *Signs* 4 (2): 528-543.

United Nations publications from 1980⁵ and 1981⁶ report consistently that the gap between boys and girls in educational opportunities in primary schools as well as in secondary schools is widening in all countries. And no instruments which are forceful are built to counteract these developments. (Another good reason for having a feminist university.)

Another myth tells us that conditions for women are improving in all the nations of the world. The truth is that the conditions for most women in most countries, independent of the country's economic system is worsening. Yet women do between 66 and 75 per cent of all the work in the world.⁷

A myth says that competence determines the position of a person in a hierarchy. Research findings on all levels of exams show that a paper with girl's name on it will get a lower grade than the same paper or thesis, delivered with a boy's name on it.

A study by Phillip Goldberg (1974) many years ago now, shows this, and has been replicated in several class levels by Dale Spender (1980) by Norwegian social scientists⁸ and by Swedes, evaluating similar official documents from the authorities, signed by women and men.⁹

Adult men and women, teachers and journalists (Tuchman, 1982) are prejudiced in the same ways, which means that not only do we learn our sex-roles, but also their legitimacy (Payne, 1980). We learn it so well that confronted with the fact that boys in co-ed classes take about two thirds of the teacher's attention, the teacher, as well as the students, perceive it as if girls and boys are treated similarly.

⁵ Deble, Isabelle. 1980. *The School Education of Girls*. Published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7 place de Fontenroy, 75700, Paris, France.

⁶ Dupont, Beatrice. 1981. *Unequal Education: A Study of Sex Differences in Secondary-School Curricula*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, France.

⁷ The former Foreign Minister of Sweden, Karin Soder, quoted the figure of 75 per cent at the Center Party's convention in 1976. The Finnish professor Elina Haavia-Manilla of the University of Helsinki reported at the Moscow Conference of Political Scientists in August 1979, that the U.N. had recently issued the figures 66 per cent (the amount of women's work in the world), 10 per cent (the size of the total salary volume given to women for their work) and 1 per cent (women's part of all private property).

⁸ Utne, Birgit Brock and Runa Haukaa. 1980. *Kunskap uten makt* (Knowledge without Power); *Kvinner som lærere og elever* (Women as teachers and students). The University Press, Oslo (written in Norwegian).

⁹ Einarsson, January 1981. *Språk och kön i skolan*. (Language and Sex in School) report. Lärarhögskolan i Malmö, Sweden (written in Swedish).

If girls get as much as 40 per cent of the attention, boys usually complain (Spender, 1982). Jon Elliot had the feeling that girls did not ask questions to the same extent as boys, neither did they give information or elaborate extensively on the topics, the way boys did. When he went over the discussions he found that when a girl tries to take the floor, the boys stop her immediately, try to silence her and ridicule what she said.

'It is,' Jon Elliot says, 'the boys who determine the rules by which all have to behave.' (quoted in Spender, 1982). Boys are willing to make degrading remarks about women's sexuality; girls and female teachers. This very important research material is seldom taught in universities, neither are the findings from other areas of women's experience. These findings should be taught to the women they concern, so that they can have some tools for recovering their dignity and self-respect. This would be part of the curricula of a women's university.

Boys are seldom punished for this behavior. Teachers say that boys will outgrow it—they are going through a phase in their development (Spender, 1982).

Girls learn early the hidden messages in all general education—that they have to wait (Spender, 1978) and that boys do not like them, and that this is legitimate.

Men need women as a negative reference group and are not willing to perceive women in roles different from the sex object and/or as wife and mother.

There is a strong tendency in all male institutions (I am not claiming that every man does this!) to show this degrading behavior against women. But it is adjusted subtly to the women involved.

Navy personnel may tell—as male members of fraternities sometimes do—that in foreign ports they gather all the ugliest women to participate in a 'beauty contest' on board, the crippled, blind, or sick, to elect the Pig of the Port. Indian or white men may rape young Indian women, as we have been reading, without facing severe penalties. This extreme violence toward women must be treated as a severe dysfunction of society.

At this university (the Mount) it may take the form which I saw a few weeks ago. A nice poster in one of the elevators at Seton Academic Centre, announced the coming of a women singer. It had been decorated with a moustache. Symbolic disabling has not yet been seen on men represented on posters. If women are very competent they must be very masculine. Or they must be ugly. So, on a poster of Heather Bishop her teeth have been blackened. The Norwegian female leader of the Labour Party had this done to her picture during the last election. And then finally, the announcement of this lecture. Again in the elevator at Seton. The university emblem had two breasts drawn over it,

over my name.

Sexual annihilation means draining women of competence, of self reliance and dignity and telling them: 'you are just a sex symbol.'

I do not accept it. Not for myself, for my women students, for my daughters or for all small girls in this world. So the feminist university will have some very particular features.

It will be for all women of all ages and with educational backgrounds from primary schools to doctoral degrees. To increase the confidence of women who have their self respect totally destroyed, the university will provide education and research facilities and production opportunities for those women who need to work their earlier experiences out of their systems. Female Danish scholars have suggested that we build on Paolo Freire's educational traditions, developed among illiterate people in Latin America (Freire, 1971).

Men may attend the feminist university for certain periods if they accept as a working hypothesis that: possibly the whole world would change if women, one day, in this world and in the future of men's minds, become persons.

The feminist university is now searching for sites,* preferably in areas where women have a strong historical heritage. It will build upon an ideology of giving suppressed people their dignity once again. It will organize faculty and administration in a new way learned from experiments in the Quaker communities, on board ships, from women refugees and smaller schools, in a way characterized by multiple leadership and frequent rotation of jobs.

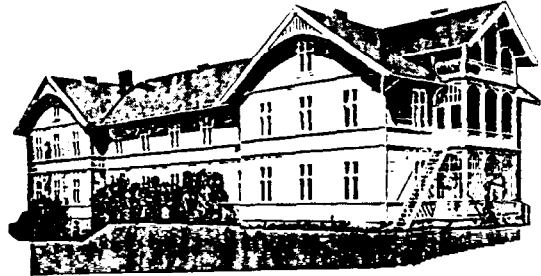
A beautiful site and a building has now been found for a Women's University in Norway. Interested persons may write to the author of this article at Jörnstadveien 30, 1360 Nesbru, Norway.

The teaching goals are to provide education and research facilities and production opportunities for women of all ages and of different educational backgrounds.

The curricula, issuing from the need to liberate women of different nations, classes and races, should build, in addition to conventional knowledge, on results available from Women's Studies, cross-cultural and in an interdisciplinary context.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Summary of paper to be presented at a Canadian Conference: *The Need for an International Feminist University*, June 1984.