

## **WOMEN AND EDUCATION: A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Jane Gaskell and Arlene McLaren, eds. 1987. Calgary: Detselig.

This book contains sixteen papers presented at the Women and Education conference held at the University of British Columbia in June 1986. That the book is a result of the conference is indicative of the commitment of the contributors to disseminate their beliefs, values and research findings about the female education experience to the widest possible audience. This commitment in turn suggests there is something new and exciting that must be shared.

We are not disappointed. The book claims to be the first comprehensive overview of Canadian scholarship on women and education. This claim is not unreasonable if we consider the previous publications of Veronica Strong-Boag, Beth Light, Ruth Pierson, Alison Prentice, Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, Sylvia VanKirk or Jill Vickers as singular efforts to redress specific absences of Canadian scholarship on Canadian women's history and status in general. In this book, Light, Pierson and Prentice are among several others who analyze and criticize women's education in Canada, past and present. Rival publications to the claim for first overview might be Trofimenkoff's *Neglected majority* (1977) or *Canadian issues: Reaching out: Canadian studies, women's studies and adult education* by the Association for Canadian Studies (1984). However, *Women and education* is unique for the point of view it presents. The contributors are united in insisting on the importance of female experience and the obligation to generate changes in education that will lead women to equality with men. These changes include changing the ways of thinking about education, as well as its purpose and content.

The book challenges the received notions that education is equally accessible to men and women and that it provides both sexes with equal opportunities. With historical evidence and contemporary studies the contributors map the explicitly gendered experience of education. Through primary school to higher education they trace the sexual division of education that disfavors women. Even adult education which purports to exist to serve individuals' needs defines those needs in terms of male experience, regardless of the fact that the higher percentage of adult students are women.

The book does not stop at exposing gender inequality in education. It suggests what action is needed to rectify it and defines the role of academics, feminist researchers and feminist activists in improving women's education in Canada.

Like most overviews, the book risks providing mere glances at a perplexing subject. Those glances are provocative however, strategically pinpointed at

the four cruxes of the matter: women as mothers and teachers, women's access to knowledge, the curricula and adult education. Gaskell and McLaren have collected a mixed bag of writing on these four themes. Marta Danylewyz, Beth Light and Alison Prentice collaborated on a highly statistical and somewhat confusing account of the sexual division of labor in teaching. Roberta Mura, Meredith Kimball and Renee Cloutier as well as Jane Gaskell contributed clear pragmatic studies of high school girls' course choices. Unfortunately, Dorothy Smith's discussion of ideological structures is too abstract and dated (1975) to be meaningful but it is tempered by Nancy Sheehan's historical analysis of women and educational reform and Thelma McCormick's timely look at feminism and Women's Studies programs. Both of these are excellent examples of articulate writing and analysis. It is always a pleasure to read pertinent and poignant Kathleen Rockhill whose contribution to the book brings us face-to-face with the anomaly of women's experience—education as threat and desire.

Each of these topics merits a book in itself and the editors have not disguised their desire that more Canadian academics join a national feminist research effort to provide Canadians with a national perspective and national statement on women's education. One might argue that this is unrealistic due to the provincial jurisdiction of Canadian education. But federal government funds subsidize much of higher education and control many vocational training programs in Canada. What the book lacks in substance becomes a substantive argument for more large-scale funding of educational research, particularly with a feminist focus. As a precedent, the book sets a commendable example of scholarly collaboration toward women's educational equality. However, its numerous printing flaws, typographical errors and unimaginative cover design bear witness to the publishing difficulties Canadian scholars face and serve to undermine the credibility of the scholarship. The editors can be applauded for sensing the urgency to publish this "first" but should be chastised for their haste that has produced sloppy editorial work.

Feminists and feminism may have their critics but the value of feminist educational research is made clear by this book. What is women's educational experience? Is Women's Studies a viable academic program? What is a sociology for women? How does the ideological structure of society affect women in education? What are the restraints on women's education? Is there gender discrimination in our educational institutions? Finally, who should read this book? Anyone who doesn't know the answers to these questions.

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