



Gender justice starts in schools

Judy Rebick is president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), an umbrella organization representing almost 500 women's groups across Canada. Though not an academic, Rebick has long been a student of how women's issues are and should be part of the "mainstream". In this interview, Ms. Rebick talks about education, women and society two years after the Montreal Massacre.

David Black: Ivan Illich argues in his book, *Deschooling Society*, that leaving education to the school system means that learning becomes hopelessly confused with maintaining class differences and social hierarchies. How does this contradiction affect attempts to improve equal treatment and access for women in the school system?

Judy Rebick: In general, women are challenging the nature of all institutions in society, and especially their role in maintaining the status quo. You have the ideology that women should be equal now, which is pretty well accepted by society. But in institutions created for women in the school system, it's impossible in every institution and for men, it's impossible in our society.

What we're finding in every institution — and we're most advanced in our understanding of this in the universities — is that the glass ceiling is a symptom of the problem rather than the problem itself. By the "glass ceiling," I mean the fact that you see fewer and fewer women in positions of authority, the higher you go up in an institutional hierarchy.

Though the legal barriers to rising up are not there, the obstacles to rising up are — like a glass ceiling — no less real for being more difficult to see. In the university system, for example, 55 per cent of the student body are women, 53 per cent of students getting their bachelor degrees are women, but only 45 per cent of masters students are female.

As female representation in institutions improves, women start to challenge the very basis of these institutions by their presence. In the case of education, that basis is the curriculum, which

women to challenge traditional notions of excellence and scholarship is absolutely critical. Frankly, universities are in many ways the last bastion of pro-chauvinism. I find that even with progressive male academics.

I once went to a York University Political Science seminar on coalition building, and I was astonished by the attitudes of men supposedly on the Left. They were as sexist as any I've run across in a long time. It took me back to the early 1970s, when feminists used to have to fight for space so that people would listen to us. That sexism may be difficult to dislodge because of this notion of academic excellence.

Women teachers at the elementary and secondary school level have long represented what's been called a "two-thirds minority," reflecting their greater numbers but lesser power in the system. Nonetheless, this numerical majority has meant that there has been a kind of women's perspective at work in education for as long as the female. What school teachers have been female. What possibilities for change lie in this ratio, especially now as teachers are asked to take on quasi-social work and parenting roles in a troubled society?

One of the problems we face — and this is certainly true of education — is the argument that feminism is a "bias" and a point of view among equally other valid views.

The organized women's movement has a point of view. We have a program that we're fighting for. But feminism as a philosophy is not a point of view. It's a basic definition of men. In those women are equal with men. In those terms, and with exception of an extreme and often religious fundamentalist point of view, the vast majority of people agree with feminism. Therefore, feminism should be integrated into the overall curriculum in school.

Most grade school teachers have been hesitant to do that. What we have to do is fight for that integration into the curriculum. Despite the presence of many women teachers, most are neither organized or feminist, and therefore don't see it as their role to challenge the curriculum.

Conscious feminism in the school system is fairly recent. Women organizing as women is new in education. But the Federation of Women Teachers is becoming more and more feminist, as is the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation. It's a process that's fairly advanced, at least in the big cities, and certainly in the current Toronto education board. As with anti-racist education, it takes time.

The struggle begins around affirmative action. Then you start asking questions such as, why are so few school principals female? There is something more to systemic discrimination than denial of opportunity to women. It has to do with how the system is constructed to promote men. It not only promotes men into principalships and their ideas into education, but it promotes the way of looking at the world historically, you make it as a woman historically have had to fit into that ideological framework and be a guy.

What does a feminist pedagogy or philosophy of teaching look like?

A feminist pedagogy is more participatory and cooperative and doesn't assume that the professor is the source of all wisdom. It appreciates that wisdom resides in the student as well.

In adult education, these things are understood. Children are a feminist pedagogy are, first, that education is less hierarchical, with the teacher serving as a

facilitator and not a dictator. Second, the

has historically been based on white male European culture.

Although the outcome of these changes to the education system may be undecided, it might help to suggest concrete ways change is taking shape. Of course you see happening in the area of curriculum reform and post-secondary women's studies programs, for example?

At the elementary and secondary school levels, we need material in the curriculum concerned with violence against women. We need to challenge the myth that it's up to the family to teach social roles. We've got to challenge that because you have elementary school girls afraid to play with boys because the boys are so violent. Teachers have to intervene in the school yard, as well as teaching non-violence in the curriculum.

This is true at the university level too. What seems to be happening with Women's Studies is that now you have such programs at many universities, and across the disciplines. What we have to do is start taking a feminist perspective in everything we do. Every program and every course should have a women's point of view. That's where women in Studies is headed. With more women in a department, of course, that feminist perspective comes more easily.

Most women and men, no matter how pro-feminist they are, often don't notice aspects of sexism that women trained in feminism and Women's Studies can. It's the same is true with Whites and racism; you don't notice. It's not that you're purposely oppressing another person, it's that you don't notice because it's the way things are and always have been. The presence of women throughout the university and the willingness of