

# The Education of Women: Protection or Liberation?



Rita Bornstein

---

*Nine things should be done to improve educational opportunities for girls and women.*

---

A number of years ago Margaret Mead studied a tribe in New Guinea called the Arapesh. According to Mead, the Arapesh believe that only a child born with an umbilical cord around its neck will become an accomplished artist. And, as predicted, that is what happens. Others who try to become artists are unsuccessful. In this way, social expectations among the Arapesh influence individual achievement.

Our culture is sophisticated enough to recognize that artistic achievement is not contingent upon the umbilical cord. However, we do continue to predict an individual's future achievement on the basis of other accidents of birth, such as anatomy and color. Specifically, our expectations for women and minorities limit these groups to a narrow range of behaviors and opportunities, despite our professed ideal of equality. I will focus here on the ways in which the socialization and

education of women in our culture inhibit the full development of their potential.

## **Deprivation, Oppression, Paternalism**

The history of women in American society is a sorry record of deprivation and oppression, guised in protection. In the seventeenth century, it was said that girls need "only sufficient geography to find their way around the house and enough chemistry to keep the pot boiling." How far have we come from the paternalism inherent in that statement? How far do we have to go to provide an education that will liberate women from those limiting expectations?

Let us begin to answer those questions by looking backward. In 1872, the Supreme Court

\* This article was originally presented as a speech to the 1978 Teacher Corps National Developmental Training Conference.



studies, female students washed the men's clothes, cleaned their rooms, served them meals, and listened to their speeches. Those women were not being prepared for careers, but to be more intelligent wives and mothers.

### Protection and Privilege

The specious notions of protection and privilege have prevented educators from training girls in the same way they have trained boys. Women have not been educated for responsibility, or work, or power; instead, they are taught intellectual and physical restraint. "Women work very hard to live down to what is expected of them," said Elsie Clews Parsons, an anthropologist in the early 1900s. In women we cultivate dependency, passivity, deference, sweetness, softness, helplessness, agreeableness, and weakness. But these "feminine" characteristics are not valued by the society that nurtures them, and are useless for coping with the realities of a woman's life. We have perpetrated a fraud on women, a fantasy that there will always be someone to shelter and protect them; that meaningful work and personal growth are not avenues of fulfillment; that, unless a woman is completed by a man, she is nothing.

When asked to describe the characteristics of admirable people, we list courage, self-reliance, independence, self-assertion, self-confidence, physical strength. These qualities are associated with successful, healthy adults—and are nurtured in men. A recent study by a Yale University psychologist found that the four personal characteristics most important for managerial jobs are emotional stability, aggressiveness, leadership ability, and self-reliance. Those characteristics, too, are nurtured in men. But, women who display those qualities are generally described as pushy, brash, aggressive, abrasive, and masculine—all pejorative terms.

### Achievement and "Deviant Upbringing"

A longitudinal study on IQ and independence training found that, when children are competitive, self-assertive, independent, and dominant in interaction with other children, their IQ tends to go up. When children are passive, shy, and

issued the following prescription for women: "The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life." In the early nineteenth century, it was almost impossible for women to get any education. Schools accepted girls only in the summer, when classrooms were vacated by boys needed on family farms. A girl's curriculum consisted of handwriting, drawing, embroidery, music, dancing, a little French, and some religious reading. For decades, educators, doctors, and the general public debated whether women were strong enough to withstand the rigors of a college education. It was said that the strain of learning would make a woman sterile.

Law schools refused to admit women in the late 1800s because "women had not the mentality to study law," and because coeducational classes would be an "injurious diversion of the attention of the students." When women were finally admitted to law and medical schools, quotas were imposed. Until 1945, the quota for women at most medical schools was about five percent. Late in the nineteenth century, Oberlin was the first college to admit women. In addition to their

dependent, their IQ tends to decline. The characteristics associated with a rising IQ, it should be noted, are not very feminine characteristics, in the sense of traditional values.

One researcher, when asked what kind of developmental history was necessary to make a girl into an intellectual person, replied, "She must be a tomboy at some point in her childhood." The physical vigor, aggressive curiosity, and risk-taking involved in tomboyish behavior is the antithesis of the ladylike docility nurtured in girls by our childrearing and educational practices.

Amelia Earhart's husband, in his biography of the pilot, emphasized that her childhood had been different from that of most girls her age. Along with her brothers, she was encouraged to experiment, to build, to explore the outdoors. He traced her masculine spirit of adventure to this "deviant" upbringing.

### Look Good Enough, Smell Good Enough . . .

Consider the story of Emma Green. Everything that happens to Emma is true, but Emma is not a real person, she is a composite of many women. The story is based on research conducted on the rearing and education of women. The story of Emma is told from a middle-class perspective because, unfortunately, most of the research on sex bias has been conducted with middle-class subjects, most of whom were Anglo. It should be noted, however, that most girls (those in the minority as well as those in the majority, lower-class as well as middle-class) are to some degree captives of the same fairy tale. They believe that if they look good enough, smell good enough, and act sweet enough, they can catch a man who will protect and shelter them happily ever after. Although most girls today expect to work, work is peripheral to their lives. They believe their real rewards will come through their husbands and their children.

### A Moth-Eaten Fairy Tale

Emma's moth-eaten, middle-class fairy tale began when she was born. Her parents had hoped for a boy to carry on her father's family name, but quickly adjusted to her arrival because she was a cute little girl. Her mother was rather



pleased with a daughter, she felt that girls are neater, sweeter, and cleaner than boys—and more obedient. Girls, her mother knew, are helpful around the house because they can do chores and take care of younger siblings. As Emma grew up, she had dolls to play with, and tea sets, and doll houses.

Once, when she was about to shinny up a tree, her dad said: "No, Emma, don't do that. You might fall down and hurt yourself." The little boys on her block were playing ball almost as soon as they could walk, and Emma used to watch them. Once or twice, she asked to play, but the boys said, "Ah, girls can't play ball. Go play with your dolls." Emma's mom, watching, only smiled.

Within a few years, Emma had a younger brother, Tom. Emma's dad was proud to have a boy, and tossed him up in the air, and called him "Tiger." Tom was allowed to run and jump and play ball and climb trees. Emma watched him.

Emma and Tommy went to the movies together. They saw the adventures of Superman, Buck Rogers, and Tarzan. They watched boys and

men save lives, help people, and swing between buildings. The men were very brave, adventure-some, courageous, and independent. Tommy realized that he would be like that when he grew up. Emma realized that she would *not* be like that because she was a girl.

When she entered first grade, Emma felt very important. She could already read a little, and knew her numbers. The first thing the teacher said to her was, "Emma Green, how pretty your dress is! Come and let me look at it. What pretty hair you have." When Emma turned her papers in, the teacher didn't say much about her work, but she always commented on what a nice handwriting she had and how neat her papers were.

Emma loved to read. Besides her textbooks, Emma read books from the library. The books had few pictures of girls or women; they were mostly about boys and men doing important things. Her math and science books had no pictures of girls at all. Emma decided that was because math and science were icky subjects, and only boys liked them. She thought that if she were smart she could probably be a teacher when she grew up.

In high school, a boy asked Emma to go out with him. Her mother gave her some advice: "Smile and listen to your date. Ask him questions about how he does all the things he does. Don't talk too much. Boys don't like girls who talk too much. And remember, be polite, sit with your legs together. Act like a lady."

Emma went to college because of her parents' encouragement. They said she could meet some nice boys there. In college she met Joe and fell in love with him. When they got married, Emma dropped out and went to work so that Joe could finish school. Emma took a job as a clerk in an office. She didn't have any typing or stenography skills, but she was bright and taught herself to type. She worked up to a secretarial job.

When Joe graduated he took a job with a large company. Emma soon gave birth to a boy and later two girls. The only thing that bothered Emma about her marriage was that sometimes Joe seemed more interested in his work than he was in her. Joe was everything to Emma, but she knew that work was really the most important thing in Joe's life.

Then one day, when Emma was 39 and Joe

was 40, Joe told Emma he wanted a divorce. Emma had thought they had a pretty good marriage. She wondered how she had failed Joe, what she had done wrong. Maybe she wasn't bright enough, or didn't clean her house as well as she should have. Joe paid alimony and child support for awhile but then he remarried and started a new family. Soon after, the money stopped.

Emma realized she would have to get a regular job. She had worked on and off throughout the years as a part-time clerk, but had no skills with which to build a career. She had never even learned stenography. She went to an employment agency and they sent her to work as a file clerk, the job she had had 20 years before when she dropped out of college.

### Why Are Women in School?

Emma's story makes it imperative that educators ask: why are women in school? To catch a husband? To learn enough reading and mathematics to teach their children and do the shopping? To learn to drive? Schools continue to patronize, protect, and segregate girls. We foster beliefs that competition isn't good for girls; that physical activity is dangerous for girls; that co-educational physical activity is immoral; that hard or dirty work is unladylike; that rigorous academic preparation is unnecessary for girls; and that job or career training for girls is peripheral to their needs.

We educate women as if there will always be someone around to take care of them. On the contrary, we should pretend that girls are orphans, will never marry, and will have to be responsible for themselves for the rest of their lives. In short, we must help our female students to prepare for lives of work, since work they will. Nine out of ten girls presently in high school will work during their lives. If they marry, they will work an average of 25 years; if they do not, they will work an average of 45 years.

Most women work because of economic need. They are widowed, divorced, single, or have husbands earning under \$7,000 a year. But women are clustered in low-paying, dead-end jobs, earning significantly less than men. They tend to be overqualified and over educated for the jobs they hold.

## The Responsibilities of Educators

What are the responsibilities of educators for changing the education of women and more adequately providing them with the characteristics, skills, and experiences that will allow them to survive with dignity? One of the most potent tools in the hands of educators today is Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. That legislation offers the potential for liberating female students from the paternalism, stereotyping, and discrimination characteristic of American education. Title IX prohibits discrimination on the

---

*"[There is] a special responsibility on all those involved in teacher training—a responsibility to become aware of the nature and impact of sex bias in education and to develop the skills with which to train teachers to overcome biased practices."*

---

basis of sex in educational institutions receiving federal money; virtually all schools in the country are covered by the law.

Three years ago, the general reaction of school administrators, coaches, and other school personnel to Title IX ranged from tolerant amusement to undiluted anger. Very few people accepted the fact that sex discrimination existed in their schools. Despite the hostility and recalcitrance, however, significant changes have occurred in schools around the country as a result of Title IX. One state reports a 630 percent increase in the number of girls participating in interscholastic sports. Physical education teachers are finding that properly handled coeducational classes have positive outcomes for both themselves and their students. The number of women advancing into administrative positions is definitely on the increase, although the overall numbers are still small.

While there has been progress in providing equal opportunities in education for women over the past years, little change has occurred in the classroom itself. Few teachers are informed about the Title IX mandate and the damaging effects of sex bias in curriculum and instruction. Teacher attitudes, behaviors, and expectations are crucial

factors in the development of female students. This places a special responsibility on all those involved in teacher training—a responsibility to become aware of the nature and impact of sex bias in education and to develop the skills with which to train teachers to overcome biased practices.

## What Can Education Do?

There are nine areas that require immediate attention if the education of women is to change. These points translate equally well to the education of the minority student. First, the level of awareness regarding stereotyped attitudes and behavior must be raised. Teachers should be helped to examine their attitudes about appropriate sex-role behaviors, and then to sensitize their students and colleagues to the issues of bias and stereotyping. Second, teachers should become knowledgeable about Title IX so that they can help monitor compliance in their departments, schools, school districts, and universities. They should know who their Title IX coordinator is, how to file a grievance, whether the institutional self-evaluation required by the government was conducted, and what areas were found to be out of compliance. They should inform students about their rights and responsibilities under Title IX.

Third, female students, teachers, and administrators should be encouraged, supported, and trained for nontraditional career options and upward mobility. Schools of education should be providing encouragement, financial support, and job placement opportunities for women in educational administration.

Fourth, community groups should be educated about Title IX and involved both in monitoring compliance and in assisting teachers to overcome bias. Indeed, sometimes there are more resources for the teacher in the community than in the school. Fifth, resources on sex bias and methods to eliminate such bias should be available to teachers in every school. There are increasing numbers of such useful materials, including newsletters, bibliographies of non-sexist materials, women's studies curricula, classroom activities, books and films, workshop and training guides, research data, and employment data. Sixth, research is needed in all areas of sexism in education. Much work is needed on the inter-

action of sex and race factors in the educational process.

Seventh, teachers should be trained to identify sex bias in curricular materials. Textbooks, films, course curricula, tests, and teacher training texts and guides should be reviewed for bias and stereotyping. Textbooks reflect a disproportionately small number of girls and women. Further, as the grade level increases, the representation of females decreases. Minorities are inadequately represented, and minority women suffer particular exclusion. They are pictured only half as many times as minority men. In general, girls and women are portrayed as emotional, lacking in initiative, skills, bravery, competence, and independence. Few women are portrayed at work; most are shown in family roles. The contributions of women to our culture and history are ignored in most textbooks currently in use.

Eighth, teachers should develop ways to incorporate information about the history and contributions of women and the problems of sexism in all courses and programs.

Finally, teachers must gain information and skills to analyze and eliminate sexist practices in their interactions with students, since interactions between girls and their teachers are often instrumental in shaping their feelings about themselves and their environment. Research with elementary school teachers indicates that they interact far more with boys than with girls. Boys are not only reprimanded more, but also receive more praise and instruction. They are listened to and rewarded for creative behavior. Girls are either ignored, or rewarded for being neat, clean, polite, and quiet. Studies of secondary school teachers indicate that teachers of both sexes expect and prefer adolescent males to be dominant, independent, and assertive. Adolescent females are expected to be submissive, dependent, unassertive, emotional, and concerned about their appearance.

Further, the tasks and groupings assigned by teachers are often based on stereotyped notions about appropriate male and female behavior. For example, why do we ask only boys to carry books, to move furniture, and to operate audiovisual equipment? Why are girls asked to carry messages and to erase the board? Why do we have different methods for rewarding and punishing students,

based on their sex? We would be appalled if a teacher said, "Good morning, blacks and Anglos" or "We are going to have a spelling bee, Chicanos against Anglos." We know that racially identifiable groupings are frequently the result of racist practices, as is the disparity in corporal punishment and suspension rates for minority and non-minority students. For most people, it is harder to see that, in the same way, treating students on the basis of sex—rather than individual differences—is discriminatory.

Girls, like all children, need a great deal of encouragement from their teachers. The 1975 report on male-female achievement by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicated that, at age nine, males and females perform at about the same level in all subjects. By age 13, girls have begun a decline in achievement which continues downward through age 17 and into adulthood. By adulthood, males as a group out-perform females as a group in *everything* except creative writing and music.

### The Lesson of the Arapesh

I remind you of the lesson of the Arapesh: what we expect from people is generally what we get. Unless we educate teachers to liberate their female students from protective, limiting stereotypes, we shall not be providing a truly equal education.

Virginia Woolf wrote: "Life for both sexes is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything . . . it calls for confidence in oneself." Preparing women for this struggle is one of the tasks of our educational system. Let us send women out into the world with all the courage, daring, intelligence, physical strength, pride, and confidence of which they are born capable.



Rita Bornstein is Consultant on Sex Discrimination in Education, University of Miami, Florida.

Copyright © 1979 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.