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## Strategies for Progress

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# STRATEGIES FOR PROGRESS

**adapted by the editor from a talk given at the institution of the  
GVSU Women's Commission, October, 1996**

*Bernice Sandler*

Sometimes, when I'm depressed and think that nothing much has changed for women in academia since 1969, I go through a little litany of progress to cheer myself up. Maybe you can use something similar when you are feeling pessimistic about your work on the women's commission. Sometimes it's more exhilarating to look back at what progress has been made than to look ahead at what has yet to be done. Here are six major changes.

One: In 1969, there were no laws prohibiting discrimination against women in higher education. Today, we have, in the United States, what is probably the most comprehensive set of laws in the world. It's not always as well enforced as we would like, but it is there and it has made an enormous difference in the academic world.

Two: Legislation has changed policies: we have gotten rid of most of the overt policies and practices that used to limit women students and faculty access to higher education and its programs. We used to have quota systems, not only in professional schools, such as medicine, engineering, and veterinary science, but also at the undergraduate level. At the University of Michigan, for example, women students made up 45% of the student body (even though the administration repeatedly denied that there was a quota), which meant that women had to have higher grades than men to be admitted. Cornell used to admit two women a year, no matter how smart the applicants, no matter how many wanted to enroll. The last time I looked, Cornell had about 65% women, because it no longer uses reproductive organs as a criterion for admission. On some campuses, there were rules requiring women to live on campus; men could live wherever they wanted. That requirement was used as a way to restrict the number of women students on campus: e.g., "We'd love to have more women but we just don't have enough dormitories."

At Johns Hopkins University, in the early '70s, women faculty couldn't join the faculty club; they were encouraged to join the faculty wives club. Today no department or school would openly allow such exclusion on its campus. I have a letter, from the '70s, sent to a woman candidate for a position at one of our finest New England institutions, which says, "Your qualifications are excellent, but we already have a woman in this department." Anti-nepotism rules have also disappeared. I knew many women who could not be hired because their husbands were on the faculty. They could be hired as secretaries but not as teachers. One woman taught full-time without receiving a salary, because her husband was teaching in the same department.

We have made enormous progress in women's sports and physical education, although we have gone only from horrendous to very bad—but that is progress! Let me give you a few reminders of how awful it used to be. The University of Michigan has had a very strong intercollegiate athletic program, as you well know. In the '70s their budget for the men's programs was well over a million dollars. The budget for women was zero. What the women did to raise money for travel to their intercollegiate games was sell apples at the men's football games. At the University of Minnesota, women had no budget for athletic tape to wrap their wrists or ankles to prevent injuries. But the men were very generous: they would give their grungy, used, sweaty tape to the women, who were very glad to get it, because it was all they could get.

The third change is that there now is at least an awareness that sex discrimination is a problem. Back when we were trying to get Title IX passed, I used to get a lot of letters from both women and men, asking, "Is there really discrimination on campus?" I believe that one of the reasons that Title IX did get through is that the higher education establishment officials did not recognize what we were trying to do and generally ignored us. When some of them were asked to testify, they said, and I am quoting almost verbatim, "There is no sex discrimination on campus, and, besides, it's not a problem." Had they known what was actually in Title IX and what its effects on athletics and other areas would be, it never would have passed. They were not really watching as closely as they normally did. So, certainly, awareness is a big change. In 1970 no college or university would have invited me or anyone else to come to campus to discuss issues about sex discrimination, because they were not seen as real issues. I was particularly proud of the honorary doctorate I got from Grand Valley in 1974, because most institutions at the time were not seeing women's work as worthy of recognition.

The fourth major change is that women are now energized and have organized to work on these issues. A commission on women on this campus didn't come about simply because someone said, "Hey, why don't we have one?" It happened because people worked for it and pressed for it. Back in 1970, I knew roughly 90% of the women on campus who were involved in pressing for change, because there weren't very many of us then. Today, it would be impossible on many a campus to know everyone there who cares about and works on women's issues. Moreover, there are hundreds of women's caucuses in the disciplines. I can remember having a conversation in the '70s with a group of women, in which we were saying, "Wouldn't it be great if someday there could be a conference just about women's issues?" Well, today you can't even keep up with all the women's conferences taking place.

The fifth change is that women's issues have become institutionalized. We have policies that prohibit discrimination; we have sexual harassment policies; we have affirmative action policies; we have women's commissions, programs for returning women, women's centers, research centers, and networks—all of these are ways of institutionalizing women's issues, and they all help women by sharing information and ideas.

Sixth and last, the study of women is now being included in the curriculum and in research. Nobody knows for sure how many courses there are, but the last estimate I heard is 30,000. Of the roughly 3,300 institutions of higher learning, two-thirds have women's studies courses of some sort; and several hundreds have women's studies programs, in which students can major or minor. Research on women is not yet a high status area, but it is much better than it was when I was in graduate school. I had wanted to study how women make vocational decisions, but my dissertation advisor said to me, "Research on women? That's not real research." So I wrote on something else. About a month after I had finished my work, I had completely lost interest in the subject.

These six changes—the legislation, the elimination of most of the overt policies and practices; the institutionalization of women's issues; awareness about discrimination; women as a new advocacy group and constituency; and the development of women's studies—are major accomplishments. Despite occasional backlash, there is no way to turn the clock back. Even so, the future is going to be difficult: backlash is increasing, partly because we have made a lot of progress, but also because of the growing realization that women are not merely wanting better jobs for women. Women want to change the institutions. They want to change the world.

Although progress has been made in these six areas, there is still much to do. For instance, despite a marked increase in the number of women in the professional and graduate schools, most women still major in traditional women's fields and prepare for traditionally female jobs. Despite an increase of women in the administrative ranks in higher education, in about 90% of all institutions, the three top academic posts—the president, the chief academic officer and the dean—are held by men. Women seem to belong the "Quadruple A Club": they are assistant to the dean, assistant dean, associate dean, or acting dean; but they don't get to be the dean very often. Although there has been a tremendous increase in women as assistant professors, there has been little change in the percentage of women as full professors: it hovers at about ten per cent. Women promoted to full professor have barely replaced those who have retired or died. Several studies indicate that it takes women longer to be promoted than similarly qualified men, and far fewer women receive tenure than do their brothers. After twenty-five years of so-called affirmative action, the general pattern of women employed in higher education is still what it was in the '70s, the '60s, and even the '50s. The more prestigious the job is, the fewer the women there are in it. And the salaries of women in academia are still lower than those of men with comparable training and experience at every age, every degree level, every discipline, at virtually every type of institution. Academic women earn about 85% of what their male counterparts earn. Women are a relatively new advocacy group, and I hope that this new women's commission will see itself as such, as pressing for change.

You should know that when you take on such a task you are not necessarily going to be liked or even respected for your efforts. Whenever a group tries to change the status quo, people who want to cling to the present or the past are going

to feel antagonized. You may not even personally benefit from your work. In all likelihood, someone else may be the beneficiaries, probably women who won't even know about or appreciate what you've done. We have all met women who believe that they became tenured or were admitted to graduate school or got a good job only because they were very good and not because of anything that the women's movement did. They have forgotten that somebody had to open the door so that their merit could be recognized. So if you want to be recognized for your good works and be thanked and loved and admired, being on the women's commission is probably not the road to that end.

In dealing with problems of discrimination, the commission should consider three tasks. The first is to develop strategies that will help women cope more effectively with discrimination. You can give them special training. You can teach them how to handle a budget so they can become administrators. You can have mentoring and support groups. The second is to come up with mechanisms for resolving problems with discrimination after they occur. But the most important task is to bring about structural change in the institution. Other women's commissions have found it useful to follow these five steps for bringing about such a change.

1. To start, figure out what it is you want to change. Perhaps it is the family leave policy or inequity in athletics. Perhaps the sexual harassment policy isn't working. The issue should be something that you care about and are willing to spend time and energy on, as well as something that's amenable to solution. It should be something specific, a particular policy or program or procedure. To want to change or eliminate all discrimination is a noble aim, but it's a lot easier to change a particular problem—like a policy on how we deal with sexual harassment—than to end all discrimination. It should also be an issue that will draw support from other groups, like organizations of students, unions, faculty, and people of color. You ought to take on short term issues as well as long term ones—the former because you need to feel successful, to feel good about a change early on; the latter because there are so many of them: e.g., adequate child care, sexual harassment (including student-to-student harassment), hiring and promotion, tenure, upward mobility for women, sexual assault, and the curriculum.

2. Develop an awareness on campus about the problem, because if people don't know that something is indeed a problem, they won't be interested in changing it. You need to sharpen the discontent of both women and men on campus, make them feel uncomfortable, so they will want to work for change. You need to document the problem—e.g., student-to-student harassment or sexist remarks in the classroom—and get the word out about it. You can do a survey or a report or get a sympathetic student journalist to do a story on the issue. One of the problems in developing awareness is that sometimes there are differences in the ways in which women and men or white people and people of color view discrimination. White men are more likely to feel that if there is a new policy, the work against discrimination has been done; but women and men of color are more likely to be aware of subtle as well as overt discriminatory behaviors. White men are more likely to say, "Look how far we've come," whereas others may say, "Look at how far we still have to go."

Therefore, developing awareness about some of the subtle issues in discrimination is critical in getting broad-based support for change.

3. Develop a series of specific recommendations for alleviating the problem. One could be a committee to study the issue in detail and come up with solutions. Others could be a revised grievance procedure or a fact sheet on harassment for student orientations. One way a commission can develop awareness as well as make recommendations is to issue a yearly report, such as the one done by the University of Delaware's Commission. If your report is specific, with examples and recommendations, and if you have worked out strategies for implementation (see 4), the change is more likely to come about. In collecting your data, you should be sure that the numbers also take race into account, so that you can see if there is something specific that needs to be done for women of color. When you ask for change, you should always ask for more than you think you can get. There will always be some who say, "You're going too far"; so you need to have something left over after your negotiations and compromises.

4. Develop a strategy and plan for implementation. You need to figure out who has the power to make the change. Is it a department chair, the dean, the president, the board of control, or the state legislature? And you need to determine what kind of pressure to use to make that change happen. Try to get support from other groups, like students, unions, faculty, and people of color. In Washington, D.C., groups of women and people of color have been working together for a long time and have been very successful.

You can't win the battle every time. The first time you raise an issue, you will probably lose, but every time an issue is raised, it is an opportunity to sensitize someone's thinking, and the chances for change get better and better. Don't worry about why someone supports you: whether that person really cares about the issue or has a selfish interest is not important. The motivation doesn't count; doing the right thing does.

5. Once you have achieved your recommendations, you need to develop a monitoring process to see that they are indeed implemented and that they are working.

Some other advice:

- Avoid paranoia at all costs, even when it may be justified. If you begin to suspect that someone has evil intentions, check immediately to see if there's an alternate explanation. Often things happen because of incompetence or insensitivity and not because someone is sitting down and plotting some counter-action.
- Remember that the burden of second class citizenship also presents an opportunity for growth, a unique challenge, not just a time of bitterness and devastation.
- Keep a sense of humor; it may be the only thing to keep you from weeping.
- Watch what other groups on campus are doing. Seek them out and examine their successes, so that you don't have to start from scratch.

One other strategy: To deal with overt acts of discrimination, you may be able to do "public shaming." If nasty graffiti appear on the walls or the sidewalks, the women's commission can ask the president to make a statement. If male coaches encourage their athletes to be disparaging of women—as does actually happen in some institutions—you should shame them publicly and press for change. Public shaming reassures the community that the community cares, and it reminds those who do ugly things that their behavior is not acceptable.

There is a story about a woman archeologist and her students who found a tablet buried in the Middle East. On it are inscribed these words, which are symbolic of what's happening to women everywhere: "And they shall beat their pots and pans into printing presses and weave their cloths into protest banners. Nations of women shall lift up their voices with nations of other women. Neither shall they face discrimination anymore." Now, that may sound apochryphal, but I believe that it may come from the "Book of Prophets," for what women are learning is the politics of power and the politics of change; and the campus, the nation, and the world will never again be the same.

### **Responses to questions from the audience**

- On women's self-confidence:

Some very interesting research has been done on women's confidence and self-esteem in a number of areas—both in and outside academia—which shows that women are less likely than men to feel confidence in themselves and to recognize their own abilities. A study on self-esteem was done recently in Illinois on a group of high school valedictorians. They were asked, "Do you think you are brighter than your peers?" In response, 23% of the men and 21% of the women said yes. After two years of college, 22% of the men and only 4% of the women said yes. At graduation from college, 25% of the men, but not one woman answered yes. What's happening in our college classrooms? Something that is not helping women develop confidence. You can see this phenomenon elsewhere. If you ask men how they got their jobs, they will probably tell you why they deserved them—how clever they are and what they have accomplished. Women are more likely to say that they were very lucky or that they got the job because they knew someone. They are not very likely to say things like, "I wrote a really good letter and worked on my resumé and practiced for my interview and had wonderful recommendations." Incidentally, about 75% of jobs are gotten because of a contact; nobody gets a job because of luck. You get a job because you were in the right place at the right time and had the right qualifications and so forth.

We're not sure exactly where lack of self-confidence comes from, but there's a lot of devaluation of women in the society as a whole. I'm the senior author of a recent

book about how men and women are treated differently in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> We point out about fifty kinds of behaviors in which women are treated in ways that do not encourage them to speak, that denigrate their work, and that make a difference in the way they feel about themselves. Women students are praised for their attractiveness, and in some classes that's the only praise they get, if they get any at all. At a reception after a lecture I had given on the "chilly climate" in the classroom, in which I mentioned that men get much more praise and much more feedback in the classroom, a young woman said to me that, although her grade point average was 3.8, only one professor in her entire graduate career had ever praised her intellectual ability; and that was a black woman, who said that she thought like a graduate student. That was so important to her that it stood out, because nobody else had ever told her that she was smart or had valued her work.

Often, professors are not even aware of such subtle devaluation. A woman told me this story. She planned to be gone from campus and asked a male colleague to teach her class and give an objective test, which she had designed. He agreed and was kind enough to score the tests. As she looked at the papers before returning them, she noticed this pattern: on all the A tests taken by men he had written, "excellent"; on women's A tests, he had written "very good." On the B papers of men, he had written "very good"; on women's B papers "good." I don't think that the male professor did that deliberately, and perhaps a female professor would have done the same thing; but that is the kind of subtle devaluation that gnaws at a woman's confidence. Women simply don't get the kinds of reinforcement that men do. It is a very difficult problem to deal with, but one that we need to help women deal with.

We need to ask ourselves what we are doing in our classrooms that discourages women from taking part in discussions. Of course, their participation also depends on the subject matter and on the ratio of men to women in the classroom. But, for instance, it is often assumed that women do not do well in science. We can ask the science professors what we can do to encourage women to participate and to continue to study science. When we hire faculty members, we can ask them, "Do women participate in your classes as much as men do? If not, what do you do about it?" These are reasonable questions to ask a candidate. Any man or woman who responds by suggesting some techniques is likely to be better than one who says, "Oh, I never thought about that." We also know that women's studies classes have a marked impact on women's self-esteem, so the curriculum we choose is also important.

- On single-sex education:

Elementary and high schools which receive federal funds cannot exclude either sex, and, as we have learned recently from the Supreme Court decision on the

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<sup>1</sup>Bernice R. Sandler, Lisa A. Silverberg, and Roberta M. Hall. *The Chilly Classroom Climate: A Guide to Improve the Education of Women*. Washington, D.C., National Association for Women in Education, 1966.

Virginia Military Institute, no state-supported school can be limited to one sex . Only private schools can continue to exclude one or the other sex. But there is more than a legal issue involved here. We know from the research that single-sex education is very good for girls and women in promoting their ability to participate in classrooms and so on. On the other hand, there's been very little research on the effect of single-sex education for boys and men, and what there is shows that it is either neutral or harmful. So we have a conundrum: how do we have single-education for girls and coeducation for boys? It's not likely that coeducational institutions are going to go back to single-sex education. So what we really have to ask is, what is happening in single-sex education for girls that is not happening in coeducational schools and what can we do to help? If we look at coeducational schools, we see a lower percentage of women faculty; girls' and women's schools, however, have been able to find the "qualified women" that coeducational schools have had trouble finding—a very different message than comes across in our coed institutions. In all-female institutions, females are not discouraged from speaking up, as they are—to be sure, often subtly—in coeducational schools, by female as well as male faculty. We need to change such behaviors, so that our coeducational education has a more beneficial effect on women.