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# Feminist Teaching in a Military Setting: Co-optation or Subversion?

*Tobe Levin and Janet Miller-Goeder*

As instructors in English and sociology for the European Division of the University of Maryland, we teach courses on United States Army and Air Force bases to active-duty and civilian personnel and their spouses and children. About 40 percent of the students are female and about the same percentage are members of ethnic minority groups.

Contrary to our expectations, U.S. military personnel are offered a typical U.S. university curriculum. There is even an extensive Women's Studies Program leading to a "Certificate" upon completion of twenty-one credit hours in designated subject areas. The women's studies brochure does, however, address the problematic relationship between a feminist vision and the martial milieu, noting that "a male norm has been established to which women are treated as the exception," and that women's studies aims to introduce an authentic female point of view into the curriculum. The brochure claims women's right to "be different but equal" and declares that "women will no longer settle for being regarded as 'exceptions' or 'appendages'"; and it suggests that feminized modes of thinking and perceiving are teachable (as indeed patriarchal modes have been taught to us!), and that feminist values, which are antimilitarist, can have a profound effect on the social milieu. Referring to current research on sex differences, the brochure stresses that acknowledgment of gender distinctions as formerly legitimate sources of authority "will fundamentally and constructively alter the concepts underlying our institutions." In sum, "male supremacy" should no longer be taken for granted. But the brochure also sympathetically addresses men:

It would be wrong to assume that the Women's Movement, and thus women's studies, is anti-male or for-women-only. By no means. The Women's Movement seeks to free men as well as women from certain roles and behaviors our culture assigns to them, roles which a study of history shows are, in nearly all cases, arbitrarily assigned.

## **Veneer of Support**

Many of our students enlisted in the military to profit from the available educational opportunities, which they see, ironically, as a way back out of the army. Furthermore, public relations promote an image of the U.S. Army as an "equal opportunity" institution, antiracist and antisexist. At least superficially, therefore, our presence as feminists in the classroom is sanctioned by government policy. However, this veneer of support can impede real change by giving the appearance that the battle is already won. Our task, therefore, lies in sensitizing our students to the issues. Men must be made aware of sexist patterns in behavior and women must be given the tools for increasing self-confidence.

To meet these needs, the assistant director of women's studies, Adelynn Whitaker, designed the Military Women and Supervisor Instruction Project. The program offers one-day workshops to counter sexist assumptions about women (and thousands have attended this workshop) and it offers a two-day session for female recruits on how to deal with the misogynist and chauvinist behavior they encounter from the proverbial Sergeants "Daddy Warbucks" and "Sexual Shakedown."<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly, there are female soldiers who try to "get



**Women in the United States Army station at the U.S. base in Heidelberg, Germany. Left to right: Shirley Hall, Jacqueline Pugh, Marilyn Bowman, Nilso Cruz, Valerie Tallie. (Margit Bach)**

over" on their femininity, acting as accomplices to those patronizing gentlemen who, for example, relieve women from mowing the lawns in 112-degree heat, only to replace them five minutes later with men. (Obviously, no one should have to mow the lawn in 112-degree heat!) But the more serious problem facing female G.I.'s is sexual harassment, suggested by the gender difference in reenlistment rates: 46 percent of the women recruits fail to reenlist for a second tour of duty, compared to only 23 percent of the male recruits. Recent headlines in the U.S. Army newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, reflect this, too: "Pfc. is guilty of harassment" (21 March 1980); "Sexual harassment can lead to jail" (27 March 1980); "Verbal abuse 'offends human dignity'" (23 July 1982); and "Sexual extortion victims 'scared'" (21 July 1982). Harassment—officially defined as making sexually suggestive, obscene, insulting, or threatening remarks to women—is punishable under Department of Defense regulations. How harassment appears to its victims may be seen in the following comments elicited from women G.I.'s working in the Signal Corps:

Women are regarded as novelties or freaks when they first come to a unit.

Supervisors ignore us and hope we'll go away.

We want acceptance as individuals rather than someone's wife, mother, or lover. They never see us as adults and capable soldiers.

We are treated as sexual objects rather than as competent supervisees.

We are overly protected so we are never given the chance to prove ourselves.

We are mistrusted by the military community, especially by the married men's wives.

The initial attitude of males is that we were sent here for their pleasure and abuse. We must always be content with that image, before we can get to work.

We have to prove we're not enlisted whores or lesbians. Some men pry upon us when we are new to a company for dates. If we go out with them, then we are whores to the other men. If we refuse, we are labeled lesbians.<sup>2</sup>

### Challenging Sex-Role Expectations

The pervasiveness of such stereotypes results in an atmosphere of mutual misunderstanding against which the Military Women and Supervisor Instruction Project is directed, for its purpose is to promote women's career development, as well as to help male supervisors become more sensitive and effective in dealing with women. While the women are engaged in assertiveness training, the men learn about sexist language and participate in role-plays that challenge sex-role expectations. For instance, scenes are staged in which the male sergeant "welcomes" new female recruits with such remarks as, "What are nice girls like you doing in a place like this?"—an all too typical reaction. Male students' attention is also focused on everyday sexism through role reversal and the introduction of humorous materials such as Anne Roiphe's "Confessions of a Female Chauvinist Sow,"<sup>3</sup> of "Comebacks to Put-Downs," which provides such enlightening examples for the military classroom as the following:

*Isn't it difficult being a woman in a tough job like yours?*  
Given my biological characteristics, I have no choice.

*Here, let me help you. You need a man's help.*

No thanks. Last time I had a man's input I had an unexpected output.

*Does your husband mind if you travel?*

We have an agreement. I don't mind him; he doesn't mind me, whether we're traveling or not.

*Women are so damned emotional!*

Calm yourself!<sup>4</sup>

The practical, long-range effects of women's studies remain, however, difficult to assess. Exasperation results when we overhear a male officer, a recent graduate of the Military Women and Supervisor Instructor Project, remark: "I really learned a lot about how to deal with the girls on my staff, but then, I never asked them to make coffee anyhow."

The program also offers one-credit weekend seminars (designed especially for women, though often attended by men) on topics related to career planning, the development of management skills, and how to deal with discrimination in the workplace. In addition, there are academic courses such as "Images of Men in Novels by Women," "Black Women Novelists," and "Women in Advertising." Among full-semester, three-credit offerings are "Sex Roles" and "Autobiography and Social Awareness."

### The Ideological Double-Bind

Most of the women's studies courses and workshops attempt to combine both practical and theoretical approaches. While extending concrete assistance to the individual participant in planning her career and developing essential survival skills, women's studies also provides a framework for thinking about the nature of women's place in male-dominated hierarchies such as the military and business worlds. Although strategy is admittedly aimed at helping individuals to "make it" within the given patriarchal structures, an underlying (perhaps utopian) assumption is that the increased participation of females at all levels of business or the military will contribute to the transformation of the ideologies underlying competition and the suppression of emotion. At present, however, military women are still officially excluded from combat units and are limited by quota to no more than 10 percent of the enlisted personnel. As Virginia Adams indicates in, "Jane Crow in the Army: Obstacles to Sexual Integration," showing token women are not only driven to conform to the masculinist values of the hierarchy in which they find themselves, but also forced to outdo their male colleagues by over-conforming in order to succeed at all. To illustrate, Adams cites the research of Rosabeth Moss Kanter who found that "When sex ratios were skewed, those whose numbers were small (usually women) become highly visible, generating intense pressures to perform exceptionally well. The tokens and the 'dominants' (usually men) become polarized, which makes the dominants emphasize their male culture and close ranks to shut the women out of it."<sup>5</sup> From this, we conclude that women entering male strongholds may indeed effect a change in discriminatory practices, but only if tokenism is transcended. As one of our students, Sergeant Tina Noel, put it, "I was the only woman in a company of 146 men during my first year in the motor pool. The more women there are, the less pressure and flak we all feel. There is definitely strength in numbers." And perhaps she is right; maybe an increasing proportion of females will elimi-

nate the worst abuses of the "fishbowl syndrome." But perhaps she is mistaken. Other women students indicated that far from being eliminated, sexism has gone underground, has become more subtle.

The University of Maryland Women's Studies Program is based on the hypothesis that the military establishment can be transformed through increasing participation of females—that it can be opened to a female perspective. We are skeptical. Recent headlines in *Stars and Stripes* (February 1983) announced the exclusion of women from twenty-three professional areas in which they had been working, on the grounds that these jobs placed them too close to the front. Since the very concept of a "front" has been challenged by sophisticated new weapons systems, this pretext is untenable; the real reason for women's exclusion is to make room for the increased number of males joining the military because of the recession. And when there is a man to do the job, who needs a woman?

Although the U.S. Army, replete with equal opportunity officers and statutes against sexual harassment and extortion, poses as an equal opportunity employer, it clearly does not have women's best interests at heart, even though, as one official said, "A high quality female can be recruited at the same price as a low quality male."<sup>6</sup> Given their socialization, women are better behaved, more polite, and more submissive to authority. Female recruits are also typically more intelligent and better trained than male recruits and therefore learn more quickly, solve problems more efficiently, and therefore curtail defense spending.

### No Room for Androgyny

Why, then, does the army want to get rid of them? The reason is obviously based on attitude: Women soldiers remain an anomaly. As Sergeant Tina Noel says, "The concept of a soldier is necessarily masculine. There's no room for androgyny. A soldier should be a neutral noun, a sexless entity. But it's not. It's a man. And the military strives primarily to reinforce masculinity as equated with martial prowess."

So what is the role of women in such a situation? "At this point I think women's strength is in our minds, in our intelligence," Sergeant Noll answers. She is involved in efforts to improve women's chances of promotion and to modify working conditions and eliminate such abuses as harassment and sexual extortion. However, in her dealings with the hierarchy, she has found that "They fear us as a group, fear our organized demands. As a result, they attempt to take the lead themselves, co-opting the more radical impulses coming from the grass roots. The military leadership, still well over 90 percent male, really has had a hard time dealing with women, probably because they feel (a) she's a soldier and therefore should be able to do everything a man can do, or (b) she's a woman like their sisters, mothers, wives, and lovers. So from eight to five, she'd better be a soldier. And from five to eight, she'd better be a lady. Women are getting mixed messages."

### Mixed Messages

The messages are mixed, perhaps, because the army is moving in two different directions at once. While official channels proclaim support for the struggle against sexism, discrimination against women continues. We have not yet

seen the death of the "John Wayne myth," as predicted in 1979 by Lorraine Underwood in a Women's Equity Action League position paper.<sup>7</sup> But at least we do find women networking and pushing for change. The men, however, pose a real challenge, if their divided reactions to feminist classroom strategies are indicative. On the one hand, they have learned to write sympathetic, insightful essays, revealing an academic grasp of nurturant, nonaggressive values; on the other hand, they seem to be unwilling to relinquish the simplistic friend-or-foe mentality. Too many of the men still enlist to play soldier, while women learn to play the game. As one female first lieutenant told us, "Women (unlike men) tend to develop a double consciousness with regard to the hierarchy. They grow more cynical than men do, probably because they are acutely aware of being outsiders. What is true but often hidden in civilian life—women's exclusion from most bastions of power as well as the portrayal of us as deviants from the human/male norm—becomes so obvious in a martial setting that it serves to radicalize women."

The current political situation in Europe helps to underscore the contradictions in the military and academic setting described above. The urgency of modifying the military institution and its ideology remains in the foreground of our teaching activities. Since cruise and Pershing II missiles are being deployed on West German soil, an atmosphere of fear and repression has become more pervasive. In response to mounting civil disobedience, demonstrations outside U.S. Army bases, and massive protest against nuclear weapons, the West German government has undermined civil rights by passing new laws restricting demonstrations and assembly, and by defaming the peace movement as a sell-out to the threat of totalitarian regimes. Feminism is intrinsically allied to pacifism, in our view, and this paper reflects the dilemma of individuals struggling to project a utopian vision within a hostile setting. We are aware that small steps have been taken, but we are haunted by doubts about our ability to achieve profound change in a military institution. □

### NOTES

1. Virginia Adams, "Jane Crow in the Army: Obstacles to Sexual Integration," *Psychology Today* (October 1980), 50-55.
2. Michael Rustad, *Women in Khaki: The American Enlisted Woman* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), 146.
3. Anne Rophe, "Confessions of a Female Chauvinist Sow," in *Patterns of Exposition 8*, ed. Randall E. Decker (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1982), 101-06.
4. Anne McKay Thompson and Marcia Donnan Wood, "Comeback to Put-Downs," *Ms.*, February 1981, 20.
5. Adams, 64.
6. Rustad, 56.
7. Lorraine Underwood, "Women in Combat," position paper published by Women's Equity Action League and Legal Defense Fund (1979), 11.

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