

## ***Where We Start From: Introduction to the Proceedings of the Susan Gotsch Symposium on Women and Work***

The *Susan Gotsch Symposium on Women and Work* was organized in honor of a VP of Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty who was leaving her position at Hartwick College after a distinguished tenure of nine years. During those nine years, advances for women were numerous. Gender equity in salaries for faculty became a reality and women moved into department leadership roles. In academic affairs, all faculty and staff, male or female, were assured of a hearing that was sensitive to the issues of family responsibility (an accepted aspect of the world of work). Gender was no impediment to advancement. Searches were carried out with integrity and insistence was unyielding that candidate pools be diverse in gender and race. These combined strategies that gave women an open road to advancement in the workplace were, unfortunately, not implemented without struggle and some enmity.

The inception of the conference honoring Susan Gotsch was in an exchange of e-mails that asked who would keep alive the work of creating an environment that allowed women to prosper once our point-person had left. While reading this e-mail I wondered which women the author had in mind. The work of VP Gotsch had created a world in which women were a real presence, but Hartwick women tended to fall out or align themselves in groups that were several and distinct.

There were the tenured women faculty frequently rendered speechless by the aggressive and hostile voices of some male colleagues who tended to dominate the discussion in faculty governance. And, there were the untenured women whose alliances with young male colleagues facing similar pressures in the tenuring process were stronger than those with their female predecessors. They appeared dismissive of the landmines cleared by women who prepared the way for their advance.

Did the e-mail author also embrace women in the ranks of classified staff who were profoundly underpaid and disrespected, or the women of the unionized, maintenance staff who, at the time, were enduring the indignity of being privatized and "outsourced"? And what of the few men who truly earned the honor of being called "feminists" who were actively engaged in the work of advancing women's talents, careers, and work life? Lastly, and most importantly, were we addressing the needs of students who in large numbers recoiled from being labeled "feminists"? In this wider context the question - "who will lead?" - more urgently called for response.

The answer appeared to be that no longer would one strong woman have to bear the burden but that groups of women finding common ground could advance themselves, their values, and the quality of life for all of us. But would there be a ground wide enough and high enough for women to reach across the divisions and advance a cause common to all? If not, the usual divisions would persist as the highest paid, most articulate, and most secure inched forward.

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So on a fine October day, women from across campus and community gathered to discuss a variety of ideas and issues, some carrying the hope of reaching across the divisions of status in the community. It was optimistic in its inception – papers would be given by both men and women, would represent a mix of ages, would include faculty, staff, students, and distinguished visiting scholars and activists from across the state and country.

Not surprisingly, many of the conference papers focus on women in a variety of learning environments and on the specialized forms of knowledge they attain. Included here are papers that discuss informal systems of transmitting knowledge about fertility and birth control (Koblitz) and the professionalization of medicine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century academy, a process that eliminated female - dominated midwifery practices (Lacey). The rise of professional medicine resulted in the downgrading of women's experientially gained knowledge and insights. The issue of women and access to scientific knowledge is also at the heart of the panel of teaching scientists who share the social context and obstacles they encountered in joining the ranks of professional scientists.

Several articles point to the importance of mentoring. Gotsch and Schramm tell of creating change in the academy, of the tools, methods, and support necessary to making it happen. Schramm provides an overview of the scholarship of mentoring and suggests there is a curious irony in doubting the efficacy of mentoring once women have attained the status necessary to become mentors. And in a delightfully witty satire, Susan Kress relates the assault on the Ivory Tower by waves of feminists. Her essay outlines the dialectic of change: the insight, innovation, resistance, rupture, and new insight found in both the academy and within the greater women's movement. She leaves us with a series of questions and an agenda for creating and accepting dissent within the ranks of women innovators.

A number of papers bring an international scope to the conference— Lacey on medical training in France and Koblitz examining vestigial evidence of women's knowledge in Ireland, in Russia, and American Indian culture. Iris Berger examines women's movements in the supremely repressive world of South Africa in the 60s when black women organized themselves in the fight for political power, work and education.

Esty, a labor activist, takes up the issues of organizing in groups with common agendas and how becoming organized in collectives supports common agendas and advances the cause of working women. Data on working women in the workforce and current salary inequities demonstrate that economic injustice is still encountered by working women every day. Further, she speaks to the difficulty of one woman finding the powerful voice needed to confront the structures that perpetuate these injustices and the powerful noise that can be made by several or many women speaking in concert against those structures. In a case history of the "Women's Network" that at one time promised to compromise the hierarchical structure in the academy, historian Peter Wallace exposes the hyper-anxiety and repressive responses of some academic administrators. He goes on to uncover the tensions and divisions that can arise as women organize themselves and create an

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agenda for advancement without legal protections.

Amanda Rosner, a Hartwick College student, and Vivian Gornick, essayist and keynote speaker, look to the lives of individual women struggling in the patriarchal worlds of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rosner examines the life and motivations of a late Victorian woman who casts off the usual expectations for the young in rural New York State to pursue her own heart's desire in the world of music and the city. Gornick writes of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a feminist who defiantly and simply asserts her right to be, to vote, to write, to organize. In claiming that Stanton, an existentialist and uniquely American kind of feminist, "eroticizes feminism", Gornick suggests that Stanton, wife and mother, innately knew herself to be the agent of her own being. In a series of anecdotes, Gornick suggests that Stanton perceived men as her object, and consciousness and conscience as her agents.

Questions followed each of the presentations and gave rise to discussions that ranged widely, touching on living wage resolutions, race and racism, the need for support structures and organizing activities so that no woman stands alone in her quest for self-realization. Perhaps the most poignant and piercing conversations took place across generations of women. Younger women faculty and students were uncomfortable with the word "feminism" because it asserted in their minds a self-proclaimed superiority and a rejection of shared community with men who are equally engaged in parenting and work. Veteran activists embraced the term "feminist" wholeheartedly. For them it was a word that expressed a history of struggle and pride in achievements; it represented the battles fought and won and an awareness of potential loss, not dogmatic denigration of men.

Vivian Gornick's essay was controversial. Her reading of Stanton returns to a kind of feminism that is disinterested in the pervasive conversation about woman's biological role, economic role, nurturing role, what might be called family-centered-feminism. Stanton is not worried about alienating men by being strident or unaccommodating, about balancing the prerogatives to marry, mother, and work at the same time. Gornick's Stanton is not concerned with how she fits into social roles and economic productivity, and Gornick is not concerned with fitting into today's feminism and layered, nuanced, discussions of woman and world. Stanton, and perhaps Gornick, boldly declare I am, I think, I act. Theirs is a feminism that carries within it the recognition that for two millennium women were quite simply known to be inferior beings with inferior rights and inferior arenas in which to act and think.

At the end of two days of presentations, did participants find common ground, an agenda that would take us forward together? Shelley Burtner Wallace examines this question in an epilogue to the proceedings and places the debate and differences among feminists in historical perspective. By tracing the major disagreements of the women's movement and how each caused the feminist agenda to advance, she gives us perspective, heart, and questions to guide our movement forward.

I can assert that there was commonality in identifying issues and foundations and that this is the platform from which we step out:

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- ♦ Concerted, organized groups have efficacy in creating change and appear welcome to most women while threatening to most power structures.
- ♦ Women's unique knowledge and traditions of knowing must be protected, preserved, and actively remembered.
- ♦ Mentoring and support are essential in creating hospitable workplaces for women.
- ♦ Women must know and remember their stories.
- ♦ Women command and deserve respect /equality simply by virtue of being.
- ♦ Some women are, in fact, superior in some ways to some men and this superiority does not reside only in gendered roles.

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