

Highlights of the Preliminary Report on the Status of Women as Graduate Students in History in Canada

by the Working Group on the Status of Women Graduate Students in History:
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As a group of women students, we were presented with an opportunity last fall to begin investigating the status of women as graduate students when we were asked to participate in a panel session on women in the historical profession for the Learned Societies Conference in Victoria, B.C. Facing time as well as financial constraints, we decided to concentrate our energies on a preliminary survey, and generated questions regarding the academic, financial, and personal experiences of women as graduate students in history. The response to the survey was impressive. Out of 210 questionnaires distributed, 140 were returned. The following is a brief summary of our most significant findings.

Financial Difficulties

While the effects of academic underfunding and grant cutbacks have obviously affected the financial situation of both women and men students, a significant proportion of the women surveyed felt additionally disadvantaged due to gender

and identified a variety of ways in which their financial situation differed from male colleagues. Many perceived their male colleagues not only as being awarded scholarships more often than women but also that they received larger grants at a disproportional rate. Perceptions of lack of legitimacy around female students and their studies, some respondents felt, directly affected women's ability to secure strong letters of support for scholarships as well as good rankings within departments. Some women felt that they were just not taken as seriously as their male colleagues and were often seen as merely pursuing graduate work for frivolous or selfish reasons (versus a career orientation for men) and hence not deserving of adequate funding. Other respondents noted that being "partnered" generally worked against women as they were usually perceived as less in need of funding since they were "supported" while partnered male colleagues were viewed as "supporting". Finally, men's greater access to higher paying jobs both in the community and within the university was also cited as a major factor for gender differentials in student incomes.

Children and Childrearing

Responses to our questions regarding children made it particularly clear that the male model of the single unencumbered student who devotes all waking hours and resources to academic work remains alive and well in departments across Canada. Almost half of the women who did not have children stated that their involvement in graduate studies had affected their decisions regarding childbearing. Most cited both the lack of money and time during graduate school as reasons for

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International Congress of Historical Sciences, Madrid, August 1990: A Resume

by Claire Dolan

(Excerpt taken from a report submitted by Claire Dolan who was the CHA representative to the General Assembly of the ICHS and spokesperson for Montreal's candidacy as host city for the 10th International Congress of Historical Sciences in 1995.)

Organization of Sessions

Based on the numbers supplied by the Executive Secretary of the Conference, there were 2,380 registrants in Madrid with 300 accompanying persons. The Moscow Congress in 1970 had attracted 4,000 participants.

The congress got under way on Sunday, August 26. Sessions were held from Monday the 27th to Saturday, September 1st. The Scientific Programme included "Major Themes" and "Methodology". Depending upon the interest generated by these themes, the audience varied from 50

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postponing if not abandoning plans to have children. Numerous respondents also commented that they did not feel able to have children because if they did so they would not be viewed as committed academics either within their departments or by potential employers. When we turn to those respondents who did have children we see that the concerns of women without children are not groundless. While some women with children did note that certain members of their departments were supportive, 12 women stated that they felt they were taken less seriously than graduate students without children. One woman was told that women with young children did not belong in graduate school, while others reported being told that it was not "professional" to try to combine children and study. Most of the women with children also faced other problems in trying to combine childrearing with academic work. Many, especially single mothers (27% of the respondents with children), noted the stress and exhaustion they faced trying to combine the two responsibilities. A number of women reported that even when universities have provisions for maternity leave for graduate students, taking such leave often resulted in a loss of funding and various university privileges.

Sexism/Sexual Harassment

It is apparent that even when women try to live up to the male model by postponing or abandoning plans to have children, this is not enough to ensure that they will be treated as equal colleagues within the academic community. Many women reported meeting with condescension as women, while others reported cases of outright sexism where they were just not taken seriously as students. In addition to gender discrimination, almost 25% of the respondents had experienced sexual harassment. For many women such harassment involved sexual jokes or comments intended to make them uncomfortable. Repeated comments about their appearance, made women feel that their physical attributes were taken more seriously than their intellectual ideas. Others faced repeated sexual advances which left them feeling not only degraded and angry but also extremely powerless. Graduate students are completely dependent on two or three people to write them letters for funding and eventually jobs. This makes it

particularly difficult for women facing sexual harassment from a faculty member. These women are aware that if they confront the situation openly their careers and reputations are more at risk than those of their harassers. It is therefore not surprising that although most respondents reported that their universities had sexual harassment policies only two women filed official complaints.

Gossip

The responses to questions about gossip only underscore what most of us already know - that academics love to talk, especially about each other, and even more about women. While one respondent noted, "gossip and casual malice are pandemic in academic life," there is a clear gender imbalance in both the target and the effect of sexual gossip. One respondent expressed this very well:

Men's personal lives are rarely discussed and usually assumed to be under control. Women's personal lives are a constant subject of curiosity and rumour. As a result, women's personal lives blur into their professional lives, and it is damaging to their careers.

Close to 50% of the respondents had heard sexual gossip about women in their departments. The nature of the gossip varied. Two common themes were stories which circulated about alleged faculty/student sexual liaisons and stories about the dress, attractiveness, or general appearance of women students. Gossip about sexual orientation was also reported. As one woman put it: "I'm a lesbian - everyone talks." Sexual gossip clearly undermines the authority of female faculty and the confidence of students.

Course Work

While women's history courses are now more commonly offered in graduate programmes across Canada, departments offering such courses nevertheless remain in a minority and among faculty, as a whole, women's history appears to be a low priority. Less than 50% of the students noted the existence of women's history courses in their departments and slightly less than 25% of the respondents believed that women's history was taken seriously by professors. A majority of the respondents did claim that women's history was

integrated into other courses but noted that integration was often perfunctory or grudgingly done only at the students' request or insistence. A week on "women" or students being allowed to do essay topics on women, if they chose, was viewed as minimal integration at best. Integration did seem to work better when done within the context of social or labour history courses. The age and gender of professors was also often important: young, enthusiastic professors (mostly female but a few male) were credited with the most successful attempts at integration. Students appeared more interested in women's history than their professors. Almost 40% of the respondents said that women's history was taken seriously by their peers, but gender played an important factor here with most interest being expressed by women students. Male students were often described as opposed to women's history, as well as hostile, derisive, and condescending. A few were described as simply indifferent to women's history giving the impression that it was acceptable for women to do but they did not have to know about it. Few men were described as genuinely interested and supportive.

Conclusion

The responses to our survey were thought-provoking and confirmed that concerns about gender inequality in history programmes in Canada are not misplaced. Serious attitudinal and structural problems are still faced by women graduate students. It is our hope that this preliminary study will lead to a comprehensive survey of both women and men graduate students in history to allow for a broader and more thorough examination of how gender influences one's experiences and success in academia.

In Memoria

Dr. Dorothy E. Long, member of the CHA since 1946, passed away in late 1990. She was a resident of Toronto.

John R.N. Palmer, member of the Association since 1977, passed away September 29, 1990. Mr. Palmer was mayor of the city of Orillia, Ontario.

Dr. S. Alex Saunders of Toronto, member of the CHA since 1950, passed away November 23, 1990.