

Shifting Boundaries of Gender Co(II)ege-Existence

Josephine Ho
Center for the Study of Sexualities
National Central University, Chungli, Taiwan

The massive entry of women into higher education and their subsequent experience in educational institutions were never a "natural development." As a matter of fact, as such a realignment of gender space was made possible by a convergence of various socio-historical forces (including nationalistic concerns for educational enhancement, demands of an expanding and upgrading capitalistic mode of production, the maintenance of class distinction, the activism of the women's movement, etc.), the operation of such forces also function to create a space, albeit often beleaguered by conflicting demands, for women's advancement in learning and their subsequent employment. In this presentation, I hope to lay out some observations in relation to the forces and issues presently struggling to shape college coeducation in Taiwan. I believe an understanding of these forces would help us explore new and creative approaches to coeducation which would not only promote gender justice but also help realize the true ideals of a democratic education. The presentation of one of these efforts to politicize gender education will be given by my colleague Naifei Ding; for the time being, I will deal with the various actual struggles now raging on Taiwan's college scene.

If coeducation began with the objective of exploring a new arrangement of social roles in which the genders would resume a peaceful and harmonious co-existence which has been in turmoil along with the rapidly changing social structure, it soon discovered that such co-existence is never easily achieved or maintained. For the realignment of gender roles is not only prompted by the movement of women outside the traditional private realm of the home, but often intersected by other volatile relationships in the areas of class, race, age, profession, sexual preference, etc. Consequently, any motility in the other social areas also brought on disturbances in gender alignment.

Such observations unveil more than a few difficulties in framing coeducation. In the case of Taiwan, we are presently struggling with problems in various aspects of coeducation. There is dead in the center of media attention the question of changing existing curriculum arrangements so that certain existing gender-oriented graduation

requirements may be removed. This mainly has to do with the required first-aid or home-care courses for female students. Yet such changes involve much more than making certain courses elective, for there is also the question of immediate cuts in university budgets and payroll in keeping with reduced course offering, which would greatly influence the subsidies the school gets from the state. In other words, we are faced with the challenge of minimizing the impact on both school budgeting and existing personnel arrangements lest we should encounter resistance in promoting gender justice through coeducation.

Then there is the question of instituting new courses that deal with various aspects of the developing field of gender studies. In recent years the university had taken the initiative to establish courses geared toward coeducational purposes, under such titles as "Marriage and Counseling," in order to cope with the rapid deterioration of marriages. In the meantime, successive waves of social movements have greatly enhanced student awareness of social inequities, thus sparking the demands of progressive students for alternative courses in gender envisioning. The establishment of progressive student organizations on campus has also added impetus to the need for more courses in the field of gender politics. With the university's eagerness to satisfy such demands and thus contain such developments, progressive courses in gender politics have won admittance into the curriculum. Whether changing tides in social movements would add or retract from such success is something for all of us to watch and ponder.

The concept and reality of coeducation of course involves much more than mere considerations for curriculum or personnel adjustments. The more profound problems have to do with the co-existence of large numbers of young men and women within the confines of the limited space of the college campus. Extended experience of gender segregation in previous schooling has left the men and women on coeducational college campuses all thumbs in dealing with the sudden change of atmosphere. Most of them have to quickly invent new modes of interaction, scramble for courtship rituals, and learn expressions of mutual respect, etc. The institution's lack of reflection on related issues in gender relations, along with its deliberate blindness to the emotional and physical needs of the students, certainly does not provide much help. In addition, existing gender inequities in the wider social context also find ample manifestation on the college campus, often leading to an atmosphere of mutual distrust or speculation which prove to be far from conducive to a healthy learning environment. Coupled with widespread reports of sexual harassment cases suffered by female students, college coeducation has often fallen prey to conservative criticism that demands that we go back to segregated and thus insulated education where women could be "protected and cultivated properly."

Recent debates over the double-standards of supervision imposed on women's and men's dorms are but one aspect of such backlash.

What I have been trying to show here is that the problems of coeducation are also problems of the society in general. In that sense, coeducation is not some abstract ideal to be carried out simply by acts of faith. On the contrary, the shape and operation of coeducation hinges upon how we articulate with or resist existing/emerging social forces to create a democratic and equitable education.