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# Rip-off Professionalism

by Marilyn C. Zilli

In the February 1972 issue of *PRO SE* (National Law Women's Newsletter) an article entitled "Professional Rip-off" criticized the Women's Liberation Movement for producing what the authors call "grasping opportunists," "pleasant, reasonable, charming, and eternally submissive sell-out[s]" (page 4). They are referring to professional women and posit that because, in a capitalist society, professional status is a privilege enjoyed by few, the claim that all women will benefit from an improvement in the status of professional women could not be farther from the truth (page 4): "Instead of making women more 'equal,' the new female professionals make themselves more special and other women more powerless than ever" (page 4). The implicit conclusion of the authors is that the women's movement must adopt socialist goals. Socialist change is necessary because rip-off professionalism originates in the capitalist education structure and because it is perpetuated by liberal consciousness. My purpose is to examine both the origin and perpetuation of rip-off professionalism and to propose admittedly reformist, but non-rip-off, methods of dealing with the problem.

Education in the United States is a closed system; it reinforces the status quo in three ways. First, it systematically admits into higher education those students who already conform to existing social values—white affluent males—and it shunts off the underprivileged—non-whites, low-income whites, some women—to junior colleges, vocational-technical schools, or regional campuses. Secondly, and at institutions, such as Indiana University, which accept a large number of women and some non-whites, it tracks the conformists into professional schools and Ph.D. programs, thus preparing them for middle-management, well-paying jobs. The attrition rate for women and non-whites, as the supposed level of skill rises, is tremendous. This tracking, of course, reinforces economic stratification.

Moreover, the American educational system encourages women and non-whites who want to compete at the higher skill levels and for the good jobs to emulate the white middle-class male and his work ethic. Studies have been done to show that grammar and secondary school teachers do not spend time or effort encouraging students whom they perceive as low-income and who are non-white or female. It is only the clean, polite, male, "white" child who is really worthy of attention. At higher educational levels, women and non-whites must be able to demonstrate rationalism, stability, manners,

self-restraint, and subservience to authority before they can qualify for capitalist goodies. Pluralism yields a homogeneous society, and tokenism is tolerated only when it is not disruptive of this homogeneity.

Law school repeats this pattern. The women and non-whites who are admitted are those who have already demonstrated their acceptance of the status quo and who give evidence of continued deference to it. The mistakes of admissions officers who inadvertently admit non-conformists are rectified from freshman orientation telling students to think of law school as a business, through graduation ceremonies congratulating the successful. Rationalism, stability, self-restraint, and subservience continue to be rewarded. But there is an added imposition on non-whites and women. Because they are in a minority in the law school community and in the profession, non-whites and women must continually prove themselves. They must be more competitive, more hard-nosed, more self-serving, more elitist than their white male colleagues: "Mediocre Blacks and women don't make it in the professions." They must make themselves more special. For women this can mean not only seeking after law school "honors" but also passing off menial tasks to the clerical workers, denigrating the supposedly less liberated law wives, even sacrificing the credibility of a sister for the sake of ingratiation into the law school hierarchy. A second hierarchy must be established: the good women and the extra-special women. Law schools are fertile ground for a culture of "pig women," of rip-off professionals.

Potential professional women thus face the following dilemma: in order to succeed they must imitate the status quo; in order to change the status quo more effectively, given the conditions of our society, they must become professionals. This necessarily involves the risk of co-optation psychically as well as economically. The real question, however, is: must they be rip-off female law students and become rip-off professionals? There are, of course, two alternatives.

On the one hand, as students, women can continue to seek intellectual and emotional integration into the law school system and to "capitalize" (interesting word) on their special status. On the other hand, as super-trained lawyers they can tell themselves that they deserve jobs with prestigious firms, even though these firms exploit female employees, especially the non-professionals, and serve exploitative corporate clients. More subtly, they can impose the sterility of their intellectual prowess and elitism on the problems of less fortunate women and force these women to follow their misguided leadership. This is already being done. For example, too few middle-class women lawyers have taken the trouble to consider blue-collar women's fears of losing all protective legislation with the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. These same middle-class women have suggested the legalization of prostitution, purposefully overlooking expressed fears that such legalization would only facilitate exploitation of low-income women. These women lawyers can charge the same rates for their services and go to the same cocktail parties as their white male colleagues. As either students or lawyers, they can allow their token status to become special status and take their well-earned place in the legal elite.

On the other hand, however, women can make the best of what is reformist. They can recognize that although tokenism does not change conditions for the vast majority of women, it does provide a few with the respect and political clout with which to set precedents and make opportunities for other women. They can use the time, space, and freedom which a professional status insures in order to organize, to move against the system and

training which have allowed professional women to exist only in small numbers. They can use the power base which has been unwillingly granted to them to make other women more powerful. The idea is to avoid becoming a tool of capitalism, to avoid using the power base to make yourself special, while helping no one else. Affirmative action, community organizing/legal aid, organizing in the professions, CAP, Welfare Rights—all of these are ways in which women can work to make other women more powerful. Dirty hands are a necessity, and the delusion that merely because a woman holds a top-ranking job she is automatically helping other women, or society, must be overcome.

The liberal consciousness, because it has been trained to “rational compromise,” will no doubt rush to point out to the writer that the choice proposed above is less easily made than it sounds: gray areas exist. In order to handle big cases—especially, perhaps, feminist cases—women must work for those firms which have the money to subsidize such suits. In order to encourage pro se and pro bono work, they must somehow be self-supporting. In order to change the structure of legal education, they must get more degrees to get a good teaching job at a good law school. The problem, however, is that change from the top down is inadequate. The above paradoxes reinforce the thesis of the *PRO SE* article that socialist change is necessary: the entire structure of society must be changed so that justice and the ability to do justice are not measured with a dollar sign.

Women have to be on their guard against rip-off professionalism. They can and must examine and be critical of both the structure and the attitudes which allow rip-off professionalism to be a way of dealing with injustice. Women law students, indeed lawyers, must look at their own behavior, both as individuals and as a group, and consider their priorities carefully. They can and should take it upon themselves to look for and point out examples of sexism in textbooks and lectures, to bring feminist speakers to the law school, to interview with notoriously sexist firms, to raise consciousness. At the same time, however, they should realize that all of these tactics are basically reformist and that a change of structures is essential to defeat institutional sexism.