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THE AALS SECTION ON WOMEN IN LEGAL EDUCATION: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Elizabeth M. Schneider*

WLE Chair—1988

The AALS Section on Women in Legal Education has been important to me. I went to law school to do women's rights work and was active on women's issues at NYU Law School, raising issues of gender-bias in legal education and helping to found a Women's Rights Clinic. After graduating in 1973 and clerking, I worked as a staff attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights ("CCR") in New York. In 1974, my colleague at CCR, Rhonda Copelon, and I were thrilled to be recruited to teach a course on Women and the Law at Brooklyn Law School as adjunct professors. We taught the course together until 1980, when my love of teaching led me to move to a full-time position as a staff attorney in the Constitutional Litigation Clinic at Rutgers Law School-Newark. In 1983, I moved to Brooklyn to teach Civil Procedure, Constitutional Law, and Women and the Law. By this time, ten years after I had graduated from law school, I was already part of a network of female law professors who had been active in women's rights, civil rights, and clinical teaching. So it is not surprising that the AALS Section on Women in Legal Education would become one of my homes in the legal academy, and that I would continue to be involved with issues concerning female faculty in legal education.

Beginning in 1980, when I went to Rutgers, I was active in Section activities and programs at the AALS Annual Meeting. I was lucky that when I moved to Brooklyn, there were a number of female law teachers already on the faculty and that several were concerned with gender issues. I was also lucky that there was a loose regional group of female law professors in the New York area, the oldest of the regional groups of female law school faculty, the Metropolitan Women Law Teachers Association ("MWLTA"). I did not have to rely on the once-a-year AALS Annual Meeting to connect with other female law teachers. My colleague at Brooklyn, Maryellen Fullerton, chaired the MWLTA in 1985, and I took over the reins in 1986.

During the year that I was Chair, the MWLTA had two programs. The first program sought to link the work of the New York Task Force on Women in the Courts with the work of MWLTA. This program, "The New York Task Force on Women in the Courts: The Challenge for Legal Education," was held at Columbia University's Faculty House and was hosted by Dean Barbara Black,

* Rose L. Hoffer Professor of Law, Brooklyn Law School. Thanks to Nancy Levit and Linda Jellum for putting this issue together and to Laura Rothstein and Pat Cain for copies of AALS Section on Women in Legal Education Newsletters from this time. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Rhonda Copelon, Professor of Law and founder of the International Human Rights Law Clinic at CUNY Law School, who tragically passed away in 2010. Rhonda was a dear friend over many years. It was the great fun, energy, intellectual stimulation, and sisterhood of teaching together that inspired both of us to become law professors.

the first female dean of Columbia Law School. Panelists included Barbara Black, Nadine Taub, Lucinda Finley, Mary Joe Frug, Nancy Erickson, and Sue Bryant. Each speaker reported on work that she was doing on issues of gender-bias in the classroom, including analysis of first-year courses, casebooks, and classroom and clinical pedagogy. The second program, held at NYU Law School, was a workshop on a paper that Sylvia Law was writing on sexual and reproductive rights.

These regional groups were very important in building friendships and camaraderie that was both personal and professional. Connections that we made through the MWLTA gave us the opportunity to meet people at different schools, provided a sense of support, and encouraged us to feel that the hard work we were doing to integrate the legal academy was important. For those of us who were teaching on issues of gender, they were especially important. Marina Angel, Chair of the Section in 1986, noted the importance of these regional groups and their link to building the AALS Section.¹

I became Chair of the Section in 1988. This was a time of tremendous energy and activity concerning women in the legal academy and the impact of feminism on law generally. The *Journal of Legal Education* had just published a symposium issue, "Women in Legal Education—Pedagogy, Law, Theory and Practice."² In addition to the various programs that the Women's Section co-sponsored with other Sections, Ann Shalleck had begun the Women and the Law Program at American University Law School and sponsored programs at the AALS Annual Meeting on feminism and law teaching.³ For several years before, the Section had done programs about gender in various first-year courses, co-sponsored with other Sections.⁴ In January 1989, the program was "The Influence of Feminist Theory and Gender-Bias in Contracts." Mary Joe Frug, Clare Dalton, Marge Schultz, and Chris Littleton were on the Planning Committee. The wonderful panel included the four of them along with Mary Becker, Elizabeth Mensch, and Robin West. It was a huge success, but the Chair of the Contracts Section refused to co-sponsor it. Mary Joe wrote about this in an essay that was published after her death in 1991.⁵

¹ Marina Angel, SEC. ON WOMEN LEGAL EDUC. NEWSL. (Ass'n of Am. Law Schs. Section on Women in Legal Educ.) (Nov. 1986).

² I later published an article on this theme in the *Journal of Legal Education* symposium issue, Elizabeth M. Schneider, *Task Force Reports on Women in the Courts: The Challenge for Legal Education*, 38 J. LEGAL EDUC. 87 (1988). See generally Symposium, *Women in Legal Education—Pedagogy, Law, Theory and Practice*, 38 J. LEGAL EDUC. 1 (1988). The issue was co-edited by Martha Minow and Carrie Menkel-Meadow.

³ For discussion of the Women and the Law Program, see Ann Shalleck, *The Feminist Academic Challenge to Legal Education: Creating Sites for Change*, 20 J. L. & POL'Y ____ (forthcoming 2012).

⁴ See Marina Angel, *Women in Legal Education III*, 80 UMKC L. REV. 711 (2012); Patricia A. Cain, *A Section Memoir*, 80 UMKC L. REV. 727 (2012).

⁵ Mary Joe Frug, *Rescuing Impossibility Doctrine: A Postmodern Feminist Analysis of Contract Law*, 140 U. PA. L. REV. 1029, 1029-30 (1992); see also Cain, *supra* note 4.

There was so much going on that Section Newsletters were bursting at the seams. There was a palpable sense of excitement about the various projects that the Section and other groups were undertaking, the various regional groups, the Fem-Crit groups, the scholarship and the teaching. Many of us felt that we were breaking new ground and we were. I was honored to be a part of these efforts.

It is important to recognize this history for many reasons. I have previously explored some of these reasons in another context: “the importance for feminists in the law to have a sense of history; the importance of recognizing the ways in which feminists in the law have made history; and the need to acknowledge and sustain institutions that feminists in the law have built.”⁶ But it is also important to bring the past into the future. Today, the Section may play less of a central role for many female law professors, because there are so many more women, and because they have other professional settings in which to meet each other, so they do not feel as isolated. Ironically, there may also be reluctance on the part of some younger female law professors to identify or be active with organizations that are women-specific, just as there was in the past. The Section continues to be important as a place for female legal academics to develop what the future will be.

⁶ Elizabeth M. Schneider, *Feminist Lawmaking and Historical Consciousness: Bringing the Past Into The Future*, 2 VA. J. SOC. POL’Y & L. 1 (1994) (discussing the National Conference on Women and the Law).

