

American Women Who Created their Own Educational Space: A Case Study of "Women & Children First" in Chicago

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◀ Abstract ▶

How do American women educate themselves after graduation—especially about issues that are often considered "controversial" or even "disturbing" by many? In the US, multi-purpose women's community centers, similar to those now enjoyed by women in almost all prefectures and large cities in Japan, were prosperous at one time; however, many of them were forced to close their doors during the 1980s. Thus it might appear that American academic institutions or at most women's groups offer the last educational space for women who have exited the U.S. school system. Upon close examination, however, it is clear that women's bookstores in the US, which began to grow in the 1970s, also offer a valuable educational space for women in local communities. This paper examines the history and the role of women's bookstores, which have put feminism into practice and survived despite ongoing changes in the economic and political climate. In particular, by focusing on "Women & Children First," a women's bookstore in Chicago, it demonstrates that women's bookstores have served as an educational space for women in their community and a base for continuing feminist activism in the US.

Women & Children First has constituted a crucial community center, a meeting place as well as a learning and information center for over two decades, and continues to make alternative information and arts available to women. It also attempts to promote feminism that can be shared by all women and to offer a bridge beyond the dualism and hierarchy experienced by many women. It has thus made diverse women's cultural works and the voices behind them visible and available to all and offered a safe educational space for women to learn and enjoy their mutual cultural expressions. Numerous women who have been involved in women's bookstores since the 1970s turned bookstores into places for women's continuous learning, creation and enlightenment. Women & Children First, as a prime example of such a women's bookstore, indeed makes women's accomplishments visible and alive.

I. Introduction

American women have taken women's studies courses offered nationwide for over three decades, and virtually

every college campus offers one or more courses on the subject. In English composition classes, literature written by women was added to a "canon" which was once full of

works by white males. Issues such as discrimination based on sex, rape, sexual harassment, divorce, domestic-violence, abortion, and sexuality are no longer taboos for discussion. This development changed and continues to affect the lives of many women as well as men. However, how do women educate themselves after graduation — especially about issues that are often considered "controversial" or even "disturbing" by many in the general populace? This paper highlights women's bookstores in the United States as a prominent alternative educational site for women. In particular, for purposes of space, I will focus on one women's bookstore in Chicago: Women & Children First. I have selected Women & Children First because it is one of the pioneering women's bookstores and constitutes one of the most prosperous ones at present. As a methodology, I conducted interviews with the owners, distributed questionnaires to the customers, and collected their 20 responses in April 1999.¹ In the meanwhile I examine newsletters and flyers as well as articles concerning the bookstore published in newspapers, magazines and journals including *Feminist Bookstore News*. By tracing the persistent efforts of the owners of Women & Children First in operating the bookstore, I will demonstrate their contribution to women's educational opportunities — particularly, through their dissemination of information from women's perspectives, provision of an educational space for women in their community as well as a base for continuing feminist activism.

II. Women's Bookstores: Creating Women's Safe Spaces in Local Communities

In the case of Japan, women's centers (Josei Sentā) are valuable as women's spaces that are safe for learning about gender issues. They are usually funded by the government, number over 300 and are located in almost all prefectures and large cities.² They provide women space to educate themselves as well as exchange information and materials that are hardly obtained elsewhere. For example, many of them offer not only courses to learn domestic skills, skills and knowledge necessary for personal independence but also issues such as discrimination based on sex, rape, sexual harassment, divorce, domestic-violence, abortion, sexuality and so on. In particular,

these issues have previously been overlooked by other centers such as so-called culture centers (Karuchā Sentā) or lifelong learning centers (Shōgai Gakushū Sentā) including community centers in regions (Kōminkan) and higher educational institutions. Furthermore, the women's centers feature library, conference, audio-visual, childcare, and consultation facilities.

On the other hand, it might be said that financial dependence on the government can potentially negatively affect operations.³ As will be discussed below, women's centers funded by the US government used to be prosperous in local areas; however, many of them were forced to close the doors during the Reagan and Bush administrations. Moreover, even though women's centers in Japan will presumably continue to exist, an important question is whether "women's centers" can offer a place for women that cannot be realized in community centers, culture centers or lifelong learning centers. In short, it is crucial that they can provide women with a safe haven to discuss openly about gender or other "controversial" issues without fear of government censorship or oversight. We might say, in fact, that it is critical for contemporary women's centers in Japan to justify their existence and to acquire the support and understanding of the local populace.

In the US, many feminist groups from local ones to national ones such as NOW (the National Organization of Women) now try to offer an educational space respectively for studying such issues. In fact, academic institutions also offer similar services. Women's studies departments and libraries in universities and colleges tend to welcome adult learners, a feature usually absent in Japanese educational institutions. However, even if it is easier for adults to gain admission to colleges and universities than is the case in Japan, the time required to commute regularly after work and the cost of tuition are hurdles difficult for many women to clear — especially working mothers and women in poverty. Moreover, under the more conservative atmosphere at present, public learning places including community centers, churches in general are reluctant to offer "feminist" or "controversial" issues. Recently, the Bush administration called for the elimination of all the Regional Offices of the Women's Bureau, which has



provided critical services since 1920, including educating women about their legal protections against workplace sexual harassment, providing specialized information about training programs and workplace support to help low-income and low-skilled women.⁴ This action follows on the heels of the elimination of the White House office for Women's Initiatives and Outreach, and the elimination of the Equal Pay Matters Initiative. Thus, as first glance, it might appear that only American academic institutions or at most women's groups offer an educational space for study of gender issues on behalf of women who have exited the educational system. In fact, however, upon close examination, one finds that women's bookstores in the US have offered a valuable alternative educational space for women in local communities since the late 1970s.⁵

It is said that the inauguration of feminism constituted one of the great intellectual revolutions of the twentieth century. Feminism is intimately tied to the women's movement. The first wave of the women's movement in the United States dates from 1920, when the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote. In this connection, the reemergence of an active feminist movement in the 1960s and early 1970s is often referred variously as the "second wave" of the women's movement, the second women's rights movement, or the second women's movement. Many political achievements were made such as the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which decriminalized abortion, and Title IX of the Education Act. However, ERA (the Equal Rights Amendment) was not, ultimately, ratified.

Feminists of the 1970s started to write what they thought, did, and discovered, and simultaneously they wanted to know what other women were thinking, doing and discovering. Women's newsletters, newspapers, magazines, and journals were published in hundreds of cities. Sometimes they were one-article pamphlets which were, however, often circulated by the thousands. Feminist publishing started with such pamphlets and periodicals. Feminist publishers such as Women's Press Collective, Diana Press, Seal Press, Feminist Press, and Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press "challenged the book world by inventing and popularizing anthologies of

previously unpublished and largely political works" [Seajay 1998: 225]. However, many bookstores were reluctant to deal with these "unattractive" and often "political" materials from unknown small publishers. Therefore, at first these materials were often handed from women to women or sold in their gatherings, and sometimes they were sold in their local women's centers. Actually, many women started selling materials to support local institutions for women after 1980 when government funds began to vanish. Therefore, initially women's bookstores were operated through volunteer labor, donations, and fundraising.

The women's bookstores thus also functioned effectively as women's centers, complete with bulletin boards, housing referrals, and support for battered women. Indeed, women started selling hard-to find books and pamphlets written by and for women from the feminist publishers and some mainstream publishers. Simultaneously, women's bookstores in the US constituted a welcome response locally to their perceived needs and educational desires. Eventually they existed in virtually all states and large cities until the 1990s. In fact, the number of women's bookstores in the US reached 145 in 1996.⁶ However, the aggressive expansion of e-commerce bookstores such as Amazon.com and of super-chain bookstores like Waldens, Borders and Barnes & Nobles have driven some 2000 independent bookstores out of business since the middle 1990s. The super-chain stores are owned by media conglomerates, five of which at present sell 80% of the books in the US [Norman 2001: 30]. These companies have typically demanded big discounts in exchange for big purchases, and sold books at cost in order to corner the market.⁷ At the same time, journalists have pointed out the "mainstreamization" of feminist materials [Rosen 1997: 23] insofar as super-chain bookstores now carry a good selection of well-established feminist authors such as Gloria Steinem, Dorothy Allison, or Betty Friedan, and even a women's studies shelf. However, the original audiences of such works were the patrons of women's bookstores. Furthermore, Amazon's sales grew 838% from 1996 to 1997, from \$15.7 millions to \$147.4 million [Angel 1995:21]. By the end of 1999, almost 100 women's bookstores had closed their doors, in

great part due to the media conglomerates and e-commerce bookstores. As of 2002, there are less than forty women's bookstores remaining in the US.

On the other hand, most of them which survived are doing well, and they include many of the pioneering women's bookstores, including Women and Children First in Chicago (1979) which will be discussed below.⁸ Furthermore, new women's bookstores operated by young feminists are emerging; for example, one of the newest, Bluestocking in Manhattan, New York was founded by a twenty-six year old woman in 1999. Since the women's bookstores came into operation, many female faculty of colleges and universities near the women's bookstores have been cooperative toward them. Some order textbooks and encourage students to buy them there. Others take classes on field trips to visit the store, learn about its history, and its activist role in the early days of women's studies. In fact, textbook sales are generally 15 to 30% of many feminist bookstore revenues [Norman 2001: 32].

Today, as before, they are operated by women on behalf of women, and vary in size and in mode of operation from a small business run by a couple of women to a co-op run by dozens of women. Women's bookstores try to offer a safe space for women who once finished or left higher education to enter into the "real world," which is rife with discrimination based on gender, race, class, age and so on. They have for over two decades served local women as crucial community centers, meeting places, learning and information centers, and provided them with a variety of alternative information.⁹ Next, I would like to examine how two women started their bookstore and turned it into an alternative women's center. Their bookstore, Women & Children First, shows that women's bookstores in the US have played an important role through helping to sustain the larger feminist movement.

III. Women & Children First in Chicago

Two women, Ann Christophersen and Linda Bubon, launched a women's bookstore in Chicago (1979), and named it "Women & Children First," although others around them warned them not to give it that name nor to refer to it as a feminist bookstore [Barrett 1987: 26]. The owners had first met as graduate students in literature at a

time when it was hard for them to find anything but the most famous of books by women authors in most bookstores. Indeed, the Third edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (1974), a standard text in college English classes, included only eight women writers in its list of more than 170 works. Christophersen said,

The whole range of the kinds of things and the kinds of subjects always are addressed, but usually addressed - at least in the form that's been available to us - by men...[B]esides giving new life to all those traditional fields and finally seeing them in a way that they should have been seen all along, there are burgeoning new fields to explore. Because women are not only writing about things in ways that men didn't see them before: they are also writing about things that men never address [Christophersen 1985: 6].

By 1971, there were over 100 feminist journals and newspapers as well as influential books.¹⁰ Nevertheless, even in the late 1970s it was hard to find books by women and for women except in fields based on traditional gender roles such as cooking and nursing. The two owners noted, "it was harder to look for books about women's body, women of color, or lesbians, and violence against women."¹¹ Bubon recalled an unsuccessful attempt in 1978 to locate a lesbian life-story. She visited six different bookstores, but not only did they not carry the book she was looking for—she could count the number of books by women authors that they stocked on one hand [Clarke 1999: 14]. One of the reasons was the distribution system. There were very few bookstores willing to stock materials published by small publishers. Christophersen and Bubon decided "to meld a love for literature with a passion for politics" [Neff 1999: 1], launching Women & Children First on November 10, 1979 in a small storefront in the De Paul neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois.

As they said, "We strive to do this in an atmosphere in which all are respected, valued, and well-served" [ibid.]. The owners thus envisioned a store that would define "feminist" inclusively, as encompassing the interests and lifestyles of women whether they were heterosexual or



lesbian, partnered or single, family-centered, career-centered, or both — regardless, moreover, of their ethnic, racial or religious background. They wanted a place where women's art could be celebrated and where women could come together to talk about issues of their concern. The store emphasized the strengths that made it unique: its outstanding selection of fiction, poetry, and art books authored by women; non-fiction sections on pregnancy and parenting, psychology, spirituality, health, violence against women, international politics, biography, and women's studies. It also had a large children's section which features books from babies' board books to young adult reading, with special emphases on multicultural selection, strong girl characters, and health issues. Moreover, poetry readings, panel discussions on a variety of topics, and forums on women's health issues began the day the store opened. The store's program series offered performative and communicative space for a diversity of writers whose strong, independent voices brought new dimensions to the chorus of voices asserting and redefining the reality of women's lives through literature.¹² They ranged from a local poets to nationally renowned authors, straight Caucasian writers, authors who were women of color, as well as lesbian artists and writers.

Christophersen and Bubon were willing to stock books from small presses like "Kitchen Table," which featured books by women of color, and provided multiracial and multicultural women's voices. They said, "Noticing the truly original, or non-mainstream voices, putting them on the shelf, and pointing them out to customers is our mission" [Neff, op cit]. Thus they started the business to make available to readers the broadest possible range of female voices asserting and redefining the reality of women's lives through literature. In doing so, they were willing to take a risk on the new and sometimes quirky voices emanating from small publishers. They offered the selective reader variety and choice, and often promoted them by offering a discount. At present, Women & Children First continues to offer new and alternative ideas and encourages women toward continuous learning and intellectual growth.

By introducing expressive arts created by women of color as well as lesbians, Christophersen and Bubon tried

to bridge between women in general and the feminists of the women's movement, who were easily divided by their race, class, and sexuality. They thus attempted to attract various kinds of women, and promoted the survival of the women's movement as well as the larger women's culture.

"What we are trying to do, whenever possible, is put people in touch with the voices behind the book," they said. They find it exceedingly important to bring women of all races together, and their efforts resulted in Women & Children First being "one of the few places in Chicago today where women of color and white women regularly find themselves in community"[Clarke 1999: 14].¹³

Answers given to my questionnaires proved customers showed strong attachment to Women & Children First, and recognized its importance as a community center and as an information center.¹⁴ One woman noted that she was attached to the bookstore "Because of everything it does for women and the women's community." The women's answers to the questionnaire reveal that the bookstore's bulletin board is an invaluable resource for women seeking housing, support groups, conferences, hotlines, organizational meetings, involvement in political activism, and entertainment. The store has received calls from people who want information concerning a whole range of issues— from where they can stay when they visit Chicago to far more difficult issues, such as how to get help for a friend who is living in an abusive relationship. The owners said, "We are in the network of women's services — we refer them to someone who can help." Thus, Women & Children First fosters a sense of community, a place many women turn to as an initial site for information and encouragement.

Furthermore, as one reporter noted, it has remained "a kind of control center for consciousness-raising, and its customers cut across organizational lines" [Barrett 1987: 26]. For example, all female staff are not "just book people," they are "active feminists trained to refer customers to battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers and health centers if need be" [ibid. 1987: 26]. Although it is a place where books by and for women are of principal concern, it is also a community center for women. They tried to make it a space open to all in its community. They host weekly Wednesday-morning story hours at which

Bubon reads new and classic works for an enthusiastic audience of local toddlers and their accompanying adults. The owners noted, "When you bring all this material together, you also bring people together, a diverse group of women come together here, they talk to each other, they challenge each other." It was vitally important to them to build a place of inclusion — a common ground where women could both enjoy the things that connected them and discover more about their differences. Furthermore, they have created an exciting cultural center for women. The bookstore offered every woman, even though she is not interested in literature, opportunities to enjoying feminist expressive art works such as women's music on CD and cassette, videos and audio-tapes for sale or rental, jewelry, cards, posters and calendars, as well as tickets for cultural events and benefits. They stressed, "All this is what Feminism is."

More importantly, they and most of their staff members are intensely involved in outside political, artistic, and literary activities, which enriches the quality and depth of the service they provide their customers. In May 1986, Christophersen and Bubon received the second annual Glynn Sudbery Award which is presented to persons who showed their involvement in independent political activism, especially in human rights.¹⁵ They also organized a press conference of State Representative Carol Rosen (Democratic, Chicago) as well as speeches by Hillary Clinton and many other feminist politicians. In March 1998, the two moved to a larger size, about 3,500 square feet, with more than 30,000 titles in stock. Women & Children First celebrated its 20th anniversary last year 1999. *The Chicago Free Press* made note of the anniversary, saying, "It's a victory for connections built through a strong feminist identity, community involvement, political activism and support for women authors" [Neff 1999: 10].

IV. Conclusion: Promoting Survival and Visibility of Feminism

The second women's rights movement was the movement to hear many women's voices that had never been heard before, especially women of color and lesbians. Women of color and lesbians rejected the idea of a

"universal" female experience, and called for acknowledging the different historical and cultural realities among women. "Mainstream" feminists began to realize that they could not claim exclusion from and mistreatment by men while they turned around and subjected other women to similar abuse. Without the voices of women of all colors and sexuality, women's cultural expression would be shallow and shaky, incapable of harnessing the power necessary to examine the structures that reproduce racial, class, gender, and sexual oppressions.

In the 1980s, radical political expression by feminists was extremely difficult due to the economic recession and the related emergence of a conservative political climate. However, women's cultural expression — especially by women of color and lesbians — flourished through acquiring sites for their performance. In particular, such multiracial and multicultural voices were distributed through the women's bookstore network, which spanned the nation. Their voices became poems and prose, and even manifestos and theories. Eventually, women's works proved women were not a mere addendum to men's accomplishments, and encouraged women to express their own voices. Thus, women's bookstores, at least some of them, have still served as havens rejuvenating feminism in their respective communities. Like other women's bookstores, Women & Children First has constituted a crucial community center, a meeting place as well as a learning and information center over two decades, and continued to make alternative information and arts available to women. It also attempts to promote feminism that can be shared by all women and to offer a bridge beyond the dualism and hierarchy experienced by many women. It has thus made diverse women's cultural works and voices behind them visible and available to all — and offered a "safe" educational space for women to learn and enjoy their mutual cultural expressions.

At the same time, at present, it would seem at first glance that materials and information for women are abundant. However, women are even busier than previously in supporting themselves and their families, and some of them feel suffocated under the flood of information about nurturing, health care, and careers. Women's bookstores not only disseminate information but



also offer filters for discerning which information is most suitable to the woman as well as to the community, and offer a space where women can breathe intellectually and culturally. Once stepping into Women & Children First, one witnesses women's ongoing passion for intellectual growth and their quest for an equal society. Surrounded by classic and new materials that demonstrate women's cultural and intellectual accomplishments, one can see numerous women's steps toward a free society, feel a thriving feminist spirit, and hear diverse women's voices that had fallen on deaf ears until a couple of decades ago. Numerous women who have been involved in women's bookstores since the 1970s turned bookstores into places for women's continuous learning and enlightenment. Women & Children First in Chicago, as a prime example of a women's bookstore, is indeed more than a bookstore for the women who stock its shelves and frequent its spaces: it makes women's accomplishments visible and alive.

<Note>

- 1 Along with these researches, in June 1998 I interviewed Mary Ellen Kavenaugh, an owner of My Sisters' Words in Syracuse, NY and collected 30 written questionnaires from the customers, which consist of six questions for user surveys. In 1999 I attended the Feminist Bookstores Meeting and met owners around the nation. Also I interviewed one of the operators of Crazy Ladies Bookstore in Cincinnati, OH in September 2000, as well as of Antigone Books, AZ in October 2000.
- 2 According to Zenkoku soshiki josei dantai meibo 2000-nen ban, as of 2000 there are 312 general women's centers except for centers for working women in cities as well as those in rural areas. They are open to the general public, and most are funded fully or partially by the government.
- 3 For example, the recent incident with the women's center in Tokyo Chiyoda Ward, which cancelled a planned lecture by Yayori Matsui due to her "controversial" topic, implies the fragility of government women's centers insofar as they commonly bend to groups opposed to feminist activism.
- 4 Kathleen Nutter KNUITTER@email.smith.edu "Bush to close all regional offices of the Women's Bureau" H-WOMEN@H-NET.MSU.EDU 12/18/2001
- 5 In this paper I use "women's bookstores" to refer to bookstores run by women and sold materials for women and by women, which is also a synonym for so-called "feminist bookstores."
- 6 Carol Seajay. 1996-1997 Feminist Bookstores' Catalog. San Francisco, CA: The Feminist Bookstore News, 1996.
- 7 Lately the lawsuit against these super-chain stores was settled and it was pointed out that such secret deals with publishers were unfair and illegal.
- 8 They are, for example, Amazon bookstore in Minneapolis (founded in 1970), Antigone Books in Tucson, AZ (1973), New Words Bookstore in Cambridge, MA (1974), A Room of One's Own in Madison, WI (1975).
- 9 See also Taylor (1993) for an example of a strong bond maintained between a women's bookstore and a women's community, in this case, in Columbus, Ohio in the 1970s (38-40).
- 10 For example, aside from Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch*, Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, and Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* were published in 1970, and Edith Altbach's *From Feminism to Liberation* and Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran's *Women in Sexist Society*, were published in 1971.
- 11 Interview with Christophersen, April 25, 1999.
- 12 Sara Paretsky gave her first reading at their store, and Sandra Cisneros gave one of her earliest. They also hosted figures such as Gerda Lerner, Margaret Atwood, Gloria Steinem, Alice Walker, Bharati Mukherjee, Gwendolyn Brooks, Julia Alvarez, Susan Mnot, Barbara Kingsolver, Edwidge Danticat, and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Kyoko Mori, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Louis Edrich, April Sinclair, Jonetta Cole, Moly Ivins, Barbara Smith, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, and Anna Quindlen. It was the only bookstore in the city of Chicago that asked Susan Faludi to speak when she published *Backlash*. See Martina Clarke, "20 years and going strong," CLOUT! October 1999: 14.
- 13 One-third who answered my questionnaires, which was conducted in April and May in 1999, used words such as diversity and multicultural when I asked the importance of Women & Children First..
- 14 Half of the answers given to my questionnaires used a word, community, when I asked the importance of Women & Children First. I conducted this questionnaires from the end of April to the end of May in 1999.
- 15 This award is given by Independent Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the Independent Voters of Illinois-Independent Precinct Organization in Chicago, Illinois

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