

**SCHOLARS AND CONTROVERSY:
A NOTE ON ELIZABETH COLSON'S WORK
AGAINST SEX DISCRIMINATION IN ACADEMIA**

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INTRODUCTION

There is widespread consensus that the standards set by Elizabeth Colson's books on two different groups, the Makah Indians of North America (1953) and the Plateau Tonga of the Gwembe Valley (1958, 1960, 1962, 1971), place her among the most distinguished anthropologists. Her research and writing span three continents (North America, Africa, and Australia). She has written persuasively on such topics as marriage, divorce, kinship, quantitative methods, the long-term study of a single community, politics, law, development, disruption, and change. Some of her writing bridges the often separate fields of theoretical and applied anthropology.

Unheralded in anthropological circles is another aspect of Elizabeth Colson's work—her championship of the rights of academic women. In 1969, she co-chaired an Academic Senate subcommittee which a year later produced a report on the status of women on the Berkeley campus of the University of California. Thus, a tribute to Elizabeth Colson as researcher, scholar, and teacher might well include mention of her work on behalf of academic women. In 1970, sex discrimination on university campuses was a hidden and almost taboo topic. However, the scholarly and courageous report by Colson, Scott, Blumer, Ervin-Tripp, and Newman did much to publicize it. In an era when few distinguished academics were willing to sacrifice time and energy for the public good, Elizabeth Colson gave a year of her time to clarify the record concerning women academics at Berkeley. The report that she and her colleagues compiled set standards for similar data collection and reporting on university campuses across North America in the 1970s. Today, as an anti-feminist mood gains ground in government agencies and nonchalance is apparent among younger women (Bolotin 1982), it is useful to again recognize that a reticent scholar felt the need to document for all time the problems, dilemmas, and discrimination faced by women seeking an academic career. This essay describes the Subcommittee on the Status of Academic Women at Berkeley, which was co-chaired by Elizabeth Colson, and includes the subcommittee's main findings. It also presents a brief summary of subsequent events on the Berkeley campus.

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF ACADEMIC WOMEN AT BERKELEY

In 1969, the Senate Policy Committee of the Academic Senate of the University of California at Berkeley appointed a subcommittee of the members of the Berkeley Division to prepare a factual investigation of the status of women on the Berkeley campus. This investigation was seen as a prelude to considering remedial changes. The Subcommittee on the Status of Academic Women on the Berkeley Campus (hereafter called the subcommittee) consisted of Professors Elizabeth Colson (Anthropology) and Elizabeth Scott (Statistics) as co-chairs and of Professors Herbert Blumer (Sociology), Susan Ervin-Tripp (Rhetoric), and Frank Newman (Law).

By May 1970, one year later, this group had produced what was called “the most detailed and thoughtful study of the status of women on the Berkeley campus that has ever been prepared” (Kadish 1970). As its mandate, the subcommittee had attempted to understand the difference in opportunities faced by men and women in pursuing academic careers. It had examined the situation of women academics, women scholars in research units (such as those at the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory), and women graduate students. The nine-page text of the subcommittee’s report was followed by fifteen appendices, the report totaling 76 pages in all. The appendices examined such topics as nepotism policies which discriminated against married women who held doctorates; the percentages of women at different academic ranks; comparative rates of promotion and attrition; women on Academic Senate committees; discriminatory insurance policies; and other aspects of inequity. Seven of the fifteen appendices were devoted to women graduate students and covered such topics as financial support, degrees awarded by field and gender, relative success of women in obtaining degrees in distinguished departments, and a survey of the problems encountered by women graduate students.

THE SUBCOMMITTEE’S FINDINGS

Among the subcommittee’s findings were that few women on the Berkeley campus—only fifteen at the time—had achieved the rank of full professor. Although women comprised 4% of the full professors at Berkeley in the early 1950s, the percentage had declined to 2% by 1970. During the same period the percentage of women associate professors (the next rank) had declined from 6.8% to 5.3% (Colson et al. 1970:25 and 27). The most striking decrease during these years was in the percentage of women assistant professors (the third rank). In 1970 only 5% of that rank were women. That figure represented half the percentage of women assistant professors in the late 1940s and less than a third of the percentages for the late 1920s to the early 1940s. In 1970, the *number* of women assistant professors was sixteen, about the same as in the early 1920s. However, by 1970, the number of male assistant professors had risen to 305, or nearly three times the number of male assistant professors in the early 1920s (*ibid.*). In fact, the subcommittee found that the percentages of women academics on the Berkeley campus had generally risen during the 1920s and 1930s but had declined between 1950 and 1970 (*ibid.*).

The subcommittee also discovered that women rarely held important positions in the Berkeley Academic Senate. No women had ever been elected or appointed to four of the most important Academic Senate committees—the Committee on Committees, the Educational Policy Committee, the Budget Committee, or the Committee on Academic Planning (*ibid.*:38 and 39). In 1970, twenty of the twenty-eight Academic Senate committees had no woman members, and two committees had only one woman member each (*ibid.*:6).

The subcommittee report also noted that the decrease in the percentage of women faculty at Senate rank was very general. “In some of the largest departments the decrease [was] very striking, namely to zero” (*ibid.*:27). The report pointed out that

few departments on the campus have the number of faculty women that could be expected if they appointed [faculty] in proportion to the representation of women in the pool of Ph.Ds. Even those departments which have an appropriate representation have this only at the lower levels, which raises questions about their promotion policies. Departments which in earlier years had one or more distinguished women faculty have made no female appointments in tenured positions for many years. [*ibid.*:6]

The report noted that some departments at Berkeley trained large numbers of women undergraduates and graduates but appointed no women to regular faculty positions (*ibid.*:7, 15, 16, 17). It also pointed out that some departments had appointed no women faculty since 1920! In fifteen out of thirty-four departments, no women were appointed to a regular position between 1950 and 1970. In seven other departments at Berkeley, only two women had been appointed

during these years. The report quietly commented, "The employment of women is a rare thing indeed" (*ibid.*:27). The subcommittee members concluded, "We are not recommending that the University should lower its standards, but rather that it should broaden its vision" (*ibid.*:10).

Figures such as these on low employment rates for academic women were not unique to Berkeley. In 1970, for example, only 2% of all full professors at the University of Chicago were women, in contrast to 8% at the turn of the century (Graham 1970:1284).

In 1970, it was commonly assumed that the reason women did not hold better academic positions was that the demands of family life kept them from publishing at a rate similar to men. However, statistical research by Simon, Merritt, and Galway (1967:234) had already demonstrated that married women Ph.D.s who were employed full time published slightly more than either men Ph.D.s or unmarried women Ph.D.s.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE BERKELEY REPORT

The original printing of the subcommittee's report was quickly exhausted as campus groups across the country rushed to obtain a copy. Colson and Scott arranged for the Academic Senate to have more copies printed, but discovered that they would have to pay for these copies themselves (Scott, personal communication, March 4, 1982).

Despite the subcommittee's discovery of blatant discrimination against female academics at Berkeley, there has never been any campus-wide action against sex discrimination by women academics at that institution. However, several smaller groups of Berkeley women have sued the university, with inconclusive results. In 1972, the Academic Senate at Berkeley managed to pass a resolution to conduct a special investigation of salary equities on the campus. Nine years later, in 1981, the committee that carried out this investigation finally reported after many delays, only to have the Academic Senate refer its findings to a second committee (Scott, personal communication, May 1982). Most Berkeley feminists expected a "whitewash" from the third report.

Because of Elizabeth Colson's role as co-chair of the subcommittee which reported that in fifty years only three women had ever chaired an important Academic Senate committee (*ibid.*:39), she was appointed head of the prestigious Committee on Budget and Interdepartmental Relations in 1971. She had been a member of that committee during the previous academic year. The new appointment proved to be a double-edged honor, for the task cut severely into her writing schedule.

By sacrificing time from scholarly research, Elizabeth Colson was in the vanguard of women who used their research skills to reveal systematic sex discrimination on university campuses across North America. In this regard, Colson is part of a North American tradition in which eminent anthropological scholars have taken a public position on the major social problems of their time. Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber both opposed racist attitudes in the 1930s, and Margaret Mead stressed more enlightened views about adolescent sexuality during a time of parental and societal rigidity in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In the 1950s and 1960s, Diamond Jenness and Harry Hawthorne devoted much of their time to the improvement of official government policy toward Native Canadians. More recently, in the 1970s, David Maybury-Lewis has been outspoken against the slaughter of Brazilian Indians by both ranchers and the Brazilian government.

In addition to celebrating Elizabeth Colson as a distinguished scholar and teacher, it is important that we also recognize her as a courageous person, willing to take an early stand on a major controversy of our time. This legacy will serve future generations of North American anthropologists, both female and male, as an example of ways that the anthropological comparative method, acumen, and research skills can be used toward creating a more just society.

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