

When The Old World Meets The New —

Ethnic female students caught in between a teacher's view

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Il y a souvent un conflit lorsque des étudiantes élevées assez traditionnellement se trouvent déchirées entre les exigences de leurs parents ethniques et les exigences modernes de la culture de leur école. Il se peut que les parents ne permettent que les sorties surveillées, empêchent leurs filles de participer à des activités extra-curriculaires et tiennent à ce qu'elles se conforment à un rôle stéréotypé. Mais l'influence de leurs camarades et des mass média suggèrent d'autres attitudes aux jeunes femmes. Jusqu'à ce que les problèmes deviennent moins graves, peut-être avec le temps, les enseignants qui sympathisent avec des deux côtés ne peuvent qu'écouter et offrir leur amitié.

I have lost count of the number of times I have heard comments such as these during my years as a high-school teacher. "Miss, I love my parents, but they don't understand me." "My father thinks we still live in the old country and he refuses to acknowledge that 'Canadian' girls are allowed to go out unchaperoned." "Whenever I have a fight with my father, he punishes me by refusing to let me go anywhere for a month — except to school and to work." "My mother bursts into

tears when I tell her that I want to move out of the house and live on my own before I get married. Then she threatens to disown me forever." "I can never go out on weekends because I have to do all the cooking and housework and take care of my little brothers and sisters. My oldest brother won't help me at all. My parents both work shifts and are rarely home together." "No, my homework isn't done because I had to work till midnight last night and I was just too tired when I got home." "My parents just want me to work in a bank or be a typist like my sister. Once I told them that I wanted to take the auto-mechanics course at George Brown and they practically threw me out of the house."

Although these are not direct quotes, they do represent snippets from the conversations I have had with my female students over the last fifteen years as a teacher in a downtown Toronto high school. Because it is a business and commerce school, it attracts a majority of female students. Given the school's inner-city nature, the students are overwhelmingly ethnic in background — Portuguese, Italian, Chinese, West Indian, Vietnamese, Greek, and so on. One of the pluses of teaching these young people is that they see many of their teachers

as their friends, their confidants, their social workers, their buddies. Even though their stories are often repeated by other students year after year, they never cease to capture my interest and sympathy. I rarely have any answers for them. All they really want is someone to listen and give them support.

Young ethnic women have unique problems living in "Canadian" society that middle-class women do not have to face. For instance, if a middle-class teenager comes home and tells her parents that she wants to try something unusual (like taking a trades course or working in the bush for the summer), her parents might say, "well, we don't really approve, but try it and if you don't like it, you can always come back and do something else." The tendency in ethnic families is to say, "no, that's not for young girls," and leave it at that. In other words, risk-taking is not encouraged or supported. It is very difficult, therefore, for these young women to break out of traditional moulds and venture forth into something new.

The social restrictions of ethnic cultures are constantly clashing with the culture that the school reflects. Attending school social functions is often a problem; getting involved in after-school sports and other activi-

ties can cause considerable problems between the women and their parents. Schools encourage activities; parents want their children at home or at work.

Because television plays such a key role in our mass-media society, and since these teenagers tend to watch a fair amount of TV, they often live in a fantasy world created by television. The distorted view of the world created by the programs they watch leads to another kind of conflict with their parents when they begin to compare their parents with television parents. Sometimes they become ashamed of their parents rather than seeing the good in them. In the course of trying to change their parents' attitudes (and many of these changes are justified), they begin to look down on their culture and its values. They think that change comes without struggle and pain. The reasoning goes that if you yell at your parents long enough, they will come around to your way of thinking.

In terms of their justifiable dilemmas, I have much sympathy. There is trouble created when they go out

at night (or even during the day) unchaperoned. Their parents think that the young women will be tempted beyond their ability to say no. They overprotect their daughters and generate in them an unnatural fear of Canadian life. The students know that this is not true; they meet peers at school, both male and female, and they grow to trust them. Who, then, is right? Can you trust your own feelings?

Many female students find they have little time for socializing. They work long hours at part-time jobs in addition to helping out at home and doing their homework. This leaves them tired and somewhat uninterested. Seen from another viewpoint, this economic input that they have often means that the family is able to hang onto them longer. "The family needs my paycheque, so how can I possibly leave?" At the same time this economic input is not translated into economic independence. It's never a matter of "it's my money, I earned it, and I'll do what I want with it." The young women don't have that kind of choice, and they know it.

Finally, there is the "look but don't touch" appearance shared by

many of the female students at my school. On the one hand, their parents obviously allow them to go to school with a great deal of make-up, tight clothes, hiked-up skirts — the whole "sexy" image. On the other hand, these same parents want their girls chaperoned when they go out. It's as if they emphasize their daughters' looks so they can attract a man, but then the young women are marketed in a very different way. "Now that you like my daughter, keep your hands off her unless you are going to marry her." It's another confusing message that these students have to cope with in their adolescent lives.

One could go on and on about the problems, confusions, and frustrations created when the old world meets the new, especially for ethnic teenage girls. It certainly creates dilemmas for their teachers, who feel that they cannot take sides in the matter and who feel much sympathy for the positions of both parents and children. Perhaps the next generation will see a reduction in these problems when attitudes and values have had a lifetime to change. In the meantime, all we can do is listen and offer our friendship.

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