

Women's Right to Education

From Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz to Beijing

by Carolyn Lehmann

Il y a 300 ans, une soeur mexicaine s'est vaillamment battue pour que les femmes puissent avoir accès au savoir et à l'éducation. Dans cet article, l'auteure nous encourage à continuer de déployer des efforts afin de dénoncer l'effacement de centaines d'années de luttes des femmes. Pour ce faire, l'auteure propose une éducation créatrice et des actions sur le plan international.

The year 1695 marked the death of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, an accomplished writer and poet, as well as an astronomer, theologian, musician, playwright, and painter, whose work has only been translated and made available to the English speaking world during the past decade (Arenal and Powell). Sor Juana, the "First Feminist of the New World" (Schons), believed that a central women's right is education, learning and the creation and pursuit of knowledge. Three hundred years later, the 1995 Fourth World Women's Congress in Beijing, China will once again speak of these women's rights as human rights. Many of us are unaware it has already been said centuries ago.

Juana de Asbaje Ramirez was born in 1648 or 1651 near Mexico City. She entered the convent of Santa Paula (Order of San Jeronimo) in 1669 and became Sor (Sister) Juana Ines de la Cruz (Joan of the Cross). Convents were attractive places for women, particularly upper class women, because they offered intellectual, spiritual, and political independence not possible for women in the outside world. In the convent, Sor Juana could dedicate her life to her passion for books, music, drama, and astronomy. But even there, she was not entirely immune from the meddling of misogynist clerics who used their power and authority as confessors and bishops to limit women's intellectual freedom.

Sor Juana lived during the 200 year period (from 1560-1760) when extensive witch hunts plagued Europe. Pope Innocent VIII had issued a Papal Bull in 1484 which initiated the church-sponsored violence known as the Inquisition intended to drive out any "heretical depravity" from the catholic faith (Summers). All books, plays, and writings, were censored by Inquisitional priests for anything "unorthodox." In the Americas, this persecution of "witches" was carried out by the Inquisition of the Holy Office.¹ Men as well as women were persecuted, and throughout the continent the Spanish conquerors also targeted the indigenous peoples, "converting" them to Christianity.

Sor Juana faced the threat of becoming a victim of the Inquisition. Her famous work, *La Respuesta* (The Reply) is an autobiographical letter to Sor Filotea de la Cruz, a

pseudonym used by the Bishop of Puebla. Disguised as Filotea, the Bishop had written a public letter to Sor Juana, making it clear that he did not "condemn the practice of letters in women" as long as any learning did not keep women from "a position of obedience" (Trueblood 200).

Sor Juana's "reply" to Sor Filotea, is a self-defense against the Bishop's public act of persecution. It is also a magnificent treatise of a woman who refused to deny her vocation and right to pursue learning. She made it clear that the pursuit of her art and her right to expression of opinion did not make her a heretic. She refused to remain silent and gave examples of heresies caused by male arrogance, ignorance, and half knowledge (Gage).

Sor Juana felt that the quest for knowledge was sacred, flowing from a greater power, and enhancing her ability to strive to reach her God, and to understand the Scriptures.

Without Logic, how should I know the general and specific methods by which Holy Scripture is written? Without Physics or Natural Science, understand all the questions that naturally arise concerning the varied natures of those animals offered in sacrifice...?

How without Arithmetic might one understand all those mysterious reckonings of years and days and months and hours and weeks that are found in Daniel, which can be comprehended only by knowing the natures, concordances and properties of numbers?

Without Geometry, how could we take the measure of the Holy City of Jerusalem, each of whose mysterious measurements forms a perfect cube uniting their dimension...?

How without a knowledge of the order and dimensions by which History is composed, is one to understand the Historical books? How without command of the two branches of Law, should one understand the Books of Law? Well, then, and without being expert in Music, how might one understand those musical intervals and their perfections that occur in a great many passages...? (Arenal and Powell, paras. 300-375)

Sor Juana argued that there should be education for and by women. She wanted education to be in the hands of older women who could pass their knowledge on to young girls. She condemned lack of learning as a cause of women's weakness and of the inability to prevent the abuses in the land from continuing (Arenal and Powell, paras. 990-1019). Furthermore, she considered male teachers to be a danger to women, citing the possibility of sexual abuse and harassment of these women by their teachers.

I do not see how the custom of men as teachers of women can be without its dangers,... because of the repeated handling [Sor Juana uses the Spanish *manosear*, which today would be translated as "fondling"] that occurs in such immediate and tarnishing contact. And everyone knows this to be true. (Arenal and Powell, paras. 1024-25)

Sor Juana was a woman of profound spirituality; she had great knowledge and a brilliant intellect. As a nun, her sexuality belonged to no man. This, in the eyes of the men of the Inquisition, was a dangerous combination. Knowledge is power, and the church feared its use in women's hands. The church thus forbid all external routes and methods of knowledge to women, and reserved its deadliest persecutions for wise and knowledgeable women. This compelled many, many women to abandon practices of science, chemistry, homeopathy, medicine, and surgery.

In spite of the courage of Sor Juana's writings, two years after *La Respuesta*, in 1693, Sor Juana signed a declaration of faith, repenting and giving up her secular studies. In blood, she writes: "I, (SJI) the worst of all."² We cannot be certain of her reasons or of the agony this decision caused her. We do know, however, that the methods of persecution of independent-minded women used by women-hating men during the Inquisition were innumerable, cruel, and extremely successful.

How many women like Sor Juana were crushed both in spirit and in body? How much of women's knowledge, mystical wisdom, and visions of a different world were tortured into oblivion? The persecution of women as witches during this period was so successful that not only are the accomplishments, the work, and the contributions of women throughout history absent from our history books and educational curriculum but male violence against women: bride-burning, sex-tourism, child prostitution, and "domestic" violence has become a world-wide epidemic.

Three hundred years after Sor Juana's death how far have we really progressed? As women globally prepare for the Fourth World Women's Conference to be held in Beijing, China this coming September, preparation mate-

rial from the International Women's Tribune Centre in New York states that only about 20 per cent of women visiting their centre are even aware the conference is taking place.

In 1975, International Women's Year, the un declared a Decade for Women under the themes of equality, development, and peace. In 1985, the un adopted a document, "Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women," covering a wide range of issues. In 1995, a draft Platform for Action has been drawn up for the UN Conference on Women in Beijing which purports to be a guarantee of real progress towards women's equality.

However, if we review national government reports from 1975 to 1985, and from 1985 to 1995, we see very little documented or real progress for women globally.

The UN Draft Platform for Action identifies ten critical areas of concern and discusses strategic objectives derived from those areas. Two of the ten critical areas relate directly to education, knowledge, and learning.

The first critical area indicates education as a key to development, and notes the inequality in access to education for women. Gender-sensitive education and information is linked with ending violence against women, which is now recognized by the UN as a human rights violation.

The second critical area of concern, according to the UN Platform for Action, is the "lack of awareness of, and commitment to, internationally and nationally recognized women's human rights."

Reflecting on Sor Juana's work written over 300 years ago, and the work of many women since that time, we wonder how and why there is still such a lack of awareness. Christine de Pizan, wrote a Universal History of Women in 1429, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which talks of women's lack of access to education. Olympe de Gouges of France, wrote a declaration of women's rights in 1791. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft in England wrote the *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In 1848, the First Women's Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, to consider the rights of women. In 1848, Sojourner Truth said: "if coloured men get their rights, and not coloured women theirs, you see, coloured men will be the masters over the women" (Gage). In 1870, a Women's Rights Catechism was developed by Matilda



Joslyn Gage in the United States.

The 1995 World Conference on Women in China calls for action in these areas through campaigns of legal literacy to inform women of their rights under international conventions as well as under national laws. Women's human rights education must be included in all educational curricula.

Women write to keep our memories alive, to re-visit and re-write what has been erased over and over again. Women write to conquer misogyny and inquisitorial institutions. We write in hope that women's words will never again be covered over. So be it.

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¹Today the Holy Office is called "The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith." It currently makes such

decisions as to allow a woman to have a hysterectomy only if her uterus poses an immediate danger to her life, not a threat contingent on a future pregnancy. (*Conscience*, Washington, D.C. Autumn 1994)

²This is movingly portrayed in a film of Sor Juana's life, *Yo, La Peor de Todas*, by Argentinean film-maker Maria Luisa Bemberg.

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RENEE NORMAN

Prodigal Mother

Sometimes when I drive away
A daughter waving smiling sadly
from the window
The others invisible until
an extra arm or head
appear behind beside her
Glass gargoyle gazing

I remember Suzanne
talk to me over our restaurant meal
Speak
about her husband and children
in England
still wondering about the day Suzanne
Left
just a toothbrush in her purse
She never went back

I see Suzanne's sensitive stricken features
Soft behind her eyes in her words
They know where I am now
If they ever need me
If they want to call

I was childless then
I didn't understand
all Suzanne could be
She gave birth at 19
too quickly in a toilet
then again a year later
She didn't like her husband

When I first drove away
for just an hour
I didn't like it
Worried
the umbilical cord that tied me to my children
Unsevered and secure

Soon I learned to leave
longer times
Worried less
needed to go
Understanding I was not my children
We were joined but
Separate too

These days I drive away
feeling freedom in my flight
Fear
Knowing all I've left behind
Return

Everyone rushes
to prodigal mother
Returned to the fold
And I am grateful
Relieved
I did not bring my toothbrush
like Suzanne

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