Reflections on Academic Life from the Ghetto

Doris R. Badir

AWA Women of the Year -- March 24, 1994

I wonder if you can possibly realise what singular honour I consider this award, in fact this whole evening which is, at one and the same time, a celebration of the contribution of Home Economics to the education of women at the University of Alberta and a vindication of my involvement in Home Economics for some fifty-three years stands out as one of the most important happenings in my life. That you, my colleagues (for I still see you as that) believe that I have made a contribution to women on this campus is a source of immense satisfaction.

Since I fully believe that what I am and what I have done is bound up with my experiences as a home economist and with life in an academic ghetto I hope you will bear with me as I talk a bit about that.

During university - two years completed I made the large announcement that I would like to transfer to Architecture. What an uproar that caused! Didn't I know that my country (we were 1943) needed dieticians, finish and join up - that was the patriotic thing to do. The quiet but perhaps effective comment was "girls don't do architecture."

The School of Home Economics at the University of Manitoba was very fond of using (as a recruitment tactic in the 30s, 40s and 50s) the statistic that 85% of its graduates were married within five years of graduation! That somehow or other was intended to make the achievement of a degree worthwhile. Returning to the School five years after graduation to recruit graduates for the Department of Agriculture I was introduced to the fourth year class as one of the 15% who hadn't! It was to be another 15 years before I made it!

A few years later - the setting a one-room country school somewhere, very remote, in rural Manitoba. It was winter - I was the visiting expert home economist come to look over the sewing projects that the girls in the school had been working on. The boys had been sent outdoors for the duration of my visit and could be seen playing hockey on the pond in the school yard. The girls were (if you can believe it - hemming a tray cloth!) One poor child displayed a very dirty cloth with some of the largest and dirtiest stitches I had ever seen. I suggested that we (she and I) could do better and proceeded to remove her stitches and show her what they should look like! Her attention was far more focused on the game outside and her comment to me as I removed her stitches was "Miss. Baskerville, don't you find sewing awfully boring?" I have never forgotten that - the lesson, while not always heeded, certainly told me that seeking perfection was not necessarily the way to learning - finding enjoyment and meeting a challenge were infinitely more productive and satisfying, and what earthly use was a traycloth to that poor child anyway. I was beginning to challenge the traditional approach of the home economics professional - the person with the recipe.
Several years down the road I was still challenging, even challenging myself. By that time I had done some further study and was teaching Child Development (we're talking 50s). There were lots of invitations to talk to women's groups about raising children. Women seemed to want and the answers were available. There were pamphlets galore on everything from teething to toilet training and I obliged. I cringe every time I think of the poor women who took my advice on how to deal with lying or bed-wetting or whatever! I became very much aware that somehow we were too prescriptive and not sufficiently aware of the differences in situations and people in our recommendations for solving problems of daily living. I left home economics.

A few years later, after a stint in the developing world, having walked and sat and talked with the women in rural Egypt, watched them deal with the household chores and the farmyard chores in exactly the same manner as their foremothers had dealt with them 2,000 – maybe even 5000 years ago - I realised that home economics had a purpose. The importance of context to the solutions of problems of everyday life was obvious - what was not so obvious, but certainly crucial, was the need for empowering women to take charge of their lives in order to change them.

But just to show you that change doesn't take place quickly - another story - another 'home eccy' story from my life as the wife of a graduate student at the U of A. I joined the Graduate Wives club and the first evening was a presentation by a home economist from the Blue Flame Kitchen the topic - Entertaining on a Budget. The poor young woman who made the presentation had obviously gone to some reference book to get her information and her opening remark went something like this – *The first thing you have to decide is whether or not you are going to hire someone to serve the drinks!*

So, I come to the present:

We (Magdy, Patsy, 20 months old, and I) arrived in Edmonton on Labour Day 1967 and took up residence in the spanking new Michener Park. Magdy had been accepted as a Ph.D. student in the Department of Romance Languages. We had just completed two years at Waterloo University where Magdy had worked on his MA and I had taught Introductory Sociology at Rension College, produced Patricia and together we had played host and hostess to the international students at the Rotary International Centre. I had no job to come to. I had written to both the Sociology Department and to the School of Household Economics. Sociology did not respond; Home Economics offered me a job teaching Clothing Construction which I declined. The course offered in my own field (Family) had already been taken up by another would-be academic that upstart Dianne Kieren!

I took off for Gordon Hirabyashi's office the first day of registration and asked if there was something for me and left the office with a section of Sociology 202 to teach. I was a sessional lecturer in the Department of Sociology and in the School of Household Economics for the next four years teaching everything (as sessionals always do) from Intro Soc to Soc of Family to Social Psychology of Family Relationships to Intro Soc for
University Hospital nursing students and Misericordia Hospital nursing students; to Consumer Economics and Intro Family Studies in the Division of Family Studies.

By the summer of 1971 the Family Studies Department was well underway under Dianne's guidance and I had become somewhat of a fixture. We had hired an additional staff member in Family Studies (a male) and Beth Empey offered me a full-time tenure-track position. It had a catch to it. She was able to put some money together from here and from there (which she explained very carefully to me). She acknowledged that what she was offering was not enough but in her mind it was better am nothing. In my mind (I had not yet the experience that I was later to acquire as Equity Advisor) it was also better than nothing. Magdy was completing his doctorate and had been more or less assured of a permanent position with his department so the Badirs decided to settle in. Little were we to know it would be another six years before Magdy had a tenure-track position. Little did I expect that the next six summers would be spent in driving to Banff (Magdy was teaching at the Banff School) every weekend to visit Magdy who wanted so desperately to stay in academe. Together we had contributed 11 years to the U of A as Sessional Instructors. There were experiences that made me take, when the opportunity presented itself, the invitation to sit on three different university committees (at three very distinct periods in the history of the university) to study the plight of sessional lecturers at the U of A. None of the reports arising from those committees (so far as I recall) have ever been acted upon. We still have sessional lectures and from all appearances we are likely to have more.

At some point during this early period the Report on the Royal Commission on the Status of Women appeared. I was very interested in this and offered to prepare a seminar for Family Studies and any others in the School who might be interested in the report and what it meant for us as part of a system which educated (at that time) only women, and which carried a reputation for, in some perceived way, of holding women in traditional roles in patriarchal systems. I was merely doing what home economics had always done - keeping itself abreast of the changing times. How many other units in the university were doing the same thing at that time?

With a child not quite two when we arrived in Edmonton, we were faced with the need for some sort of child care while we were both at work. I had taught Child Development in another life and had had the experience of developing a nursery school in connection with that teaching so I knew what I wanted in surrogate care. Fortunately, we had neighbours in Michener Park who had four children and a stay-home mom. Bev offered to take on a fifth and Patsy was incredibly fortunate to grow up for the next three years in and alongside, a very happy, healthy and exceedingly friendly. After her first year with that family the University Hospital opened its Day Care Centre and offered special rates to graduate students at the University. Patricia was to be an only child and the experiences which a well operated centre could offer were important, I felt, so she was enrolled part-time in the Day Care Centre and spent the remainder of the time when her parents were not available with our neighbours. I knew what the problems were for families needing good child care, I knew and understood the benefits of good child care experiences for young children.
During these early days the Family Studies Division was approached by the Students' Union to assist with the conceptualising of a Day Care Centre. HUB was about to be built and the possibility of designing the facility for a Day Care Centre had been proposed. Dianne and I talked it over and it was decided that this was something that I could help with. The experience of working with students, with non-academic staff, with a few academics and with the administration was interesting and challenging. It was in that environment that I met and worked very closely with Isabel Munroe. We were successful, eventually in opening the doors of the Student Union and Community Day Care Centre in September 1972. The official opening took place in April 1973. I was the first Chair of the Board of the Centre. My most memorable experiences in that capacity were the struggles with the Students' Union over the development of a Constitution for the Board and the annual meeting with the Board of Governors to pry out of them funds to meet the annual deficit with which we seemed to have continual difficulty. I will never forget the attitudes of some members as they informed me in no uncertain that 'their wives had stayed at home and raised their children (which was right and proper) and that it was not the role of the university to subsidise child care for women who wished to neglect their children.'

Life as an academic in the ghetto was good. Ruth Bleire suggests that it was 'within the ghetto that home economics was allowed to practice and research science and furthermore to popularise science. I believe she was right. Certainly the advancement of nutrition and food science in the first half of the century took place within the walls of the ghetto. The training of dieticians and nutritionists was exclusively within home economics. The beginnings of textile science were in home economics. The growth of a whole new textile industry made the necessity of understanding how these textiles could be best used by the consumer became the basis for a very rapid development of textile testing and the requirements for their handling and care.

Very early in the history of home economics the new sciences important and sociology were seen as important and relevant to the lives of women and children in families and the development of centres for the study of Child Development and Family Studies first came about within home economics schools and colleges in both Canada and the United States. All of this happened because the ethos at that time (30s, 40s, 50s and early 60s) saw the activities of the family and household largely as the preserve of women so the development of programs for women took place within the ghetto.

The walls of the ghetto began to crumble (they are not yet all down) when men became interested in nutrition and food science and child development and the family. But the crumbling took a very decided turn as men entered the field. They began to coopt the field. The science pursued by home economics was criticised as 'Mickey Mouse' while that which was 'real science' became removed from the issues of everyday life. It was the issues of everyday life that energised the study but the application of the science to the problems of everyday life became marginalised and, in so doing, often the women involved became marginalised. It is no accident that during the 70s and 80s men became the heads of home economics programs, and it is fairly obvious that with one or two
exceptions, the disappearance of home economics programs and the substitution of names like Family and Consumer Studies and Family and Nutrition Sciences came as a result of male Deans or heads, and because male academics felt it important to be a part of "real" science.

All of the above aside. For many years, particularly so at the University of Alberta, it was possible for women to be somewhat visible within the university proper simply because they were a part of a unit made up solely of women. Women succeeded there. They became heads of committees, deans of faculties, represented on university committees. Women in home economics and later nursing became the visible women on university campuses because there were no men to represent them!! But that was not all bad either. Women learned to lead, to manage, to direct because they were given the opportunity to do so. Certainly I feel that the opportunities that were afforded me within the University of Alberta community came in a very large measure because I had a base in that bastion of femaleness - the Faculty of Home Economics.

What has now become even more apparent to me is that the ghetto was a much more sensitive and democratic place to be than the bigger academic world beyond. While there were some initial concerns about whether- or not married women with children could truly perform all of the work required by them, by and large the school accommodated itself to married women and single-parent women remarkably easily and well. There was some dis-ease.

But more importantly among the Faculty of Home Economics one found and, I believe, still finds a caring and concern for students which is unparalleled. Time to talk with students, an understanding of problems students face in their lives, a willingness to listen and assist students to find ways out of difficult situations was a very important part of the ethos of the School and Faculty. This same care and concern was present and given to faculty members themselves. While administrators had to take the ultimate responsibility for the way in which the unit operated there was a remarkable amount of give and take - a remarkable amount of taking stock of what we were doing and why. How many units within the university were undertaking a review of their mission and their curriculum in 1974? How many had come up with new suggestions for courses and programs in the mid-seventies? That doesn't mean that everyone of the faculty was in agreement with the suggestions or the ultimate changes but it does mean that when I came into the Dean's position in 1976 we had just completed a Task Force review of our courses and programs and the faculty had agreed to a new Mission Statement and to the process of attempting to make our teaching and research come into line with that statement.

I never remember a time when there was not full and open discussion of budgetary matters and even when difficult decisions had to be made everyone was made to feel that they had had a part to play in the process.

When it came to evaluating our peers, I think that more often than is likely in the university-at-large, we were able to take into consideration the circumstances of an individual faculty member's life. Illnesses, pregnancies, child care issues and need for
time for further study were all a part of the fabric of a Faculty Salaries and Promotion Committee discussion.

We had, I believe, a community within which students felt at home, needed, wanted, and listened to. We operated on a basis, which afforded everyone an opportunity to have their say, to participate if they so wished and to complain and make suggestions. I don't want to suggest that we were a perfectly and smoothly run operation. There were differences, there were disagreements, there were upsets. Perhaps (and I have often reflected on this over the past two years as the Faculty has had to endure some very severe changes) we were too tolerant of those differences. Perhaps we should have been less accepting of disagreements, which, at times, amounted to downright stubbornness and obstinacy. It might be that a little less tolerance of difference would have made the attitudes of those who sought to destroy the Faculty somewhat less determined to do so.

Yes, life in the ghetto made opportunities for women not as readily available outside.

Last night when talking to Magdy about what I would be talking with you about he asked, "Why do you think that home economics has virtually disappeared and Women's Studies is riding high when if you are right it has contributed to the education of women?" I thought it a singularly good question not that I think it should be either/or, nor would I wish the demise of either. My rationale, and some of my colleagues might disagree, would be that home economics has never been able to shed its image as housewifery and as we all know 'anyone can do housework!' It has mean been able to throw off the feminine mystique. Many enjoyed the mystique - life in the ghetto was indeed good. It has never quite grasped a body of knowledge, which it can own. The base was there and there are areas which have succeeded but on the whole it has not worked. It has only recently been able to define an area of practice. Men, entering the field, did not want to be associated with the mystique and rather than help throw it off they decided to work to make it in their image. Women's Studies, on the other hand, came into academe with no mystique, with plenty of ginger and now - who would ever dare to do the politically incorrect thing of suggesting that it should go? It has (Women's Studies), in a very short time, laid claim to a body of knowledge and methodologies supported by an immense body of research which it can own. We might want to contemplate what would have happened had there been a closer link between the scholars in women's studies and the scholars in home economics. Is there not still time for some links to be developed?

Back to some of the experiences which were available to me because I was one of those visible women from the ghetto.

The committee to examine and compare the salaries of women academies, which was the result of a recommendation from the Senate Task Force is well understood by this group. I served on that committee along with Jean Lauber, Juanita Chambers and the then Registrar, Alec Cairns. The results of that study you may all recall. My memory is of the frustration of having to discuss our findings with Deans prior to announcing the results and having our recommendations considerably watered down and changed. The
indignation of many deans when we dared suggest that their treatment of women had been biased was funny and sad.

My other memory is of the "problem" we encountered with the women situated in the predominately female departments and faculties because we 'could not find comparable males with whom to pair them'! In other words, the so called 'salary grid' which eliminated discrimination because it refused to take into consideration gender - was not foolproof. There was no only discrimination against women in the university as a whole but because there were no benchmarks in the single-gender units the discrimination took on new meaning. In most cases there was no internal discrimination but on the whole the women in these units were paid less because their administrators played the rules more religiously - to say nothing of the women who, like Doris Badir, accepted what was offered because the administrator had told her there was no alternative! At any rate we had the satisfaction of doing something that assisted the university to understand that discrimination in academe on a gender basis was not going to be tolerated. It made me a much more sensitive administrator when it came to discussing salaries with prospective faculty members.

There followed committees (several if my memory serves me well) to study other possible systems for salary and reward structure and I was asked to sit on these. Some were made up of deans only - some were university-wide - some were between central administration and AASUA. None, so far as I know, ever got beyond the presentation of a report to the office which established the committee.

One of my biggest battles- a battle lost -was over the decision about the need for a Home Economics Building. Even before I was a member of staff, as a sessional, I sat on a committee to plan a new home economics building - an extension to the present building. At one time we even got so far as to employ an architect and design a structure. It was, to all intents and purposes, a 'fait accompli.' But when I became Dean it was still a dream. All of the necessary statistics which triggered a need were there in plain view. We had more than doubled our enrolment, we were offering service courses (an unusual thing for a professional faculty) to several units on campus, we had doubled our staff and increased the numbers with solid academic credentials, we were offering graduate programs to the Master's level and lacked only the facilities and the cooperation of some of the departments who consistently, and sometimes violently, opposed us offering a Ph.D. program. In other words, we were a growing factor in the education of home economists and dieticians in Alberta and Canada - at one time the second largest. We would be on the top of the list for a new building - it was to come just after the extension to the Education Building (and as you know, it was only built because someone was smart enough to get the hole in the ground before the axe came down). We were certainly ahead of Mechanical Engineering, Fine Arts, Agriculture and Business. But the story you now know. Mechanical Engineering and Fine Arts were built. Then we found ourselves in competition with Agriculture, Electrical Engineering and Business. We came out on top and then Agriculture was built. The next year, on a new vote we came out on top of Business but the Dean of Business returned from study leave and the voting started again and we lost. Then the Library got added to the list. That was the last straw! I was forced
to make a decision as to whether or not the need for a Home Economics Building was more important than a Library. Can you imagine my distress when I came down on the side of the Library only to find that the Engineers had not been so selfless and we went to third - one behind Engineering. Well, we do not have a new Engineering Building, or a new Library, nor do we have a Home Economics building, and from what I hear of the current problems with the Faculty of Agriculture, the likelihood of ever seeing space where all of the various components of home economics can be together to work, research and study, to truly demonstrate their adherence to the mission of the profession is only a 'lost dream.' What did I learn? The politics of academe are a very long way from demonstrating any acceptance of diversity and equality among the parts of the whole.

So all of this experience was there when Myer asked me if, on relinquishing the position of Dean of the Faculty of Home Economics, I would take on the job of trying to create a more equal and diverse climate within the university. And that was not without its problems. There were the contenders that there was no need for such a position - we know about them. That period is history now. I think I did succeed in creating a greater awareness on campus. I know I succeeded in bringing the opposition out of hiding! I sincerely believe that if I had not been saddled (and I use that word deliberately) with the job of sorting out the problems related to the attempt to introduce pay equity for the non-academic staff, that we might have had a very different program of equity on campus. It was a very real failure, to me, that we were unable to keep the issues of 'equity and respect' at a senior level within the administration. Unless the person or persons responsible for a program that requires change and the monitoring of change in the academic units of the system, unless those persons have the ear of a very senior member of the administration they will never have the clout to persuade Deans and Department Chairs to comply.

One thing that I am certain of - we simply cannot allow ourselves to become complacent about the gains we have made. WE cannot allow the same sort of compliance with the idea that unemployment and underemployment has been caused by the entry of women into the labour market. We cannot and must not allow persons, who do not understand, to make decisions to rule out important areas of study for women and men which consider the management of resources for improving the quality of life to be important. We cannot allow ourselves to be coerced (as I remember being coerced in 1945) into that moving women back into 'their rightful place - the home' will solve problems of a far more complex nature.