POW Hosts Forum on Discrimination Against Women

Internationally Renowned Graciela Chichilnisky Discusses Lawsuits Against CU, Future of Women in Higher Education

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"Outstanding Women, the Glass Ceiling, and Columbia University," a panel discussion last night in Jerome Greene Hall, highlighted personal and professional efforts to address gender equity within Columbia's community.

The discussion, sponsored and moderated by Productive Outreach for Women, a Columbia undergraduate feminist organization, is the first of a two-part series on "Gender Discrimination Here and Now," and focused on two faculty cases—those of Graciela Chichilnisky and Shelley Weinstock—as well as the experiences of female academics in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Chichilnisky, UNESCO Chair of Mathematics and Economics, and Weinstock, a former assistant professor of Chemistry at Barnard College, were joined on the panel by fellow academic Elisabeth Frederiksen, an Economics Ph.D. student, and from the corporate world by Pamela Peeters, host of Time Warner Cable's "Our Planet," and the President of the New York Business and Profession Women's Club, and Randall Dodd, the president of Washington D.C.'s Financial Policy Forum and a former Ph.D. student under Chichilnisky.

Vanessa Carr, President of POW, introduced Chichilnisky, a Nobel Prize nominee who has been involved in two legal cases against the University—a 1991 class-action lawsuit alleging violations of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Pay Act of 1963 through the University's unequal compensation and promotion of female faculty, and a subsequent suit alleging the University breached its 1995 settlement with Chichilnisky.

According to a press release from the American Association of University Women, although the University settled the first suit, it subsequently undertook what the AAUW and Chichilnisky perceived as retaliatory measures.

Chichilnisky amended her second suit to include the discovery of a more than 50 percent discrepancy between her salary and those of many male professors in the Economics department. The University has since countersued Chichilnisky.

Chichilnisky discussed these points, but stressed the larger problems facing women in academia, and particularly women at Columbia.

"This is not about me. If this were about me, I would feel terrible. This is a much larger problem," she said, "This event is about you. This is about the students, whose futures we represent ... this is about millions of men and women who suffer from the conspiracy of silence about gender discrimination in higher education."

She spoke of the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding gender inequity, and said "people are intimidated. It's a little like the situation of rape ... Academic rape is no different, because it shames the victims into silence. The intimidation of those who seek justice is retaliation."

For women, she said, ascending into the upper echelons of higher education generates something she called a "reverse Pavlovian response": "the more you perform the worse it gets. This is the glass ceiling."

The best possible solution, she said, was to convert the negative energy into positive energy.

"Columbia has made me a better person ... it's not worth it to fight two lawsuits for a person like me. It's worth it for you," she said. "I'm your future. I'm telling you you can be successful, you can have wonderful children, that ... the right struggle, even if you don't succeed, is victory."

Weinstock, who has a Ph.D. in nutritional biochemistry from MIT, followed Chichilnisky, and spoke of her own legal struggle with the University, which began after then-Provost Jonathan Cole denied her tenure in 1992, despite unanimous recommendations from the Barnard and Columbia Chemistry departments as well as from Barnard's president.

Her legal battle began, she said, after "several people came to me and told me they felt very strongly that this was sex discrimination, and said they would be willing to testify." She appealed her case all the way to the Supreme Court, she said, before it was dismissed for lack of evidence.

The legal battle was particularly difficult, she said, because of her own expectations. "I went to college in the 1970s, which was an optimistic time for feminists. I believed that academia was filled with liberal, progressive people... when I heard of these issues when I was younger, I didn't believe them ... [but] discrimination is subtle and pervasive and hard to prove."

Following remarks from Dodd, Peeters, and Frederiksen, a visiting student from the University of Copenhagen whose research delves into gender-based wage differentials, POW's Liza Dwoskin opened the floor to questions.

Chichilnisky and Weinstock addressed Columbia's particular issues within this context. Both discussed studies conducted at other universities, and brought up an MIT-led push amongst nine other elite institutions—including Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and the University of Michigan led by then-President Lee Bollinger—two years ago to recognize gender discrimination.

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Graciela Chichilnisky, UNESCO Chair of Mathematics and Economics and professor, is suing the University for discrimination.

"Columbia is behind the times ... Other Ivy League institutions recognize the problem; Columbia doesn't. For Columbia to say that there is no gender discrimination ... is denial," Chichilnisky said. All those nine university presidents said there is gender discrimination, and Columbia said there isn't."

"I am sorry that President Bollinger, having come to Columbia so recently with such a reputation for affirmative action, has chosen not to address my case," she said.

Weinstock also spoke of an unwillingness to admit that there is a problem at this University.

"Columbia says they've never lost a lawsuit," Weinstock said. "They may not have ever lost a case, but that does not mean that discrimination has not occurred." She noted that many of these cases had been settled out of court, perpetuating what she perceived as a culture of silence.

POW's next event in Fall 2004 will seek to address this perceived conspiracy of silence. POW will spend the next few months conducting anonymous interviews with female professors and graduate students, and will read excerpts from these interviews alongside a commission on gender equity appointed by Provost Alan Brinkley.