

# Surviving the Educational and Judicial Systems

by Monica Nowos

As a child, my first- and second-grade teacher isolated me. I recall asking her how to spell “carrot,” and she refused. In third grade, my teacher discovered I had no basic skills. I finally learned to read and write (barely). My fourth grade teacher was not just neglectful, but she humiliated me and degraded my progress. Fifth grade gave me inspiration from a dynamic teacher, but sixth grade was a year of doldrums once again.

I was grateful for my junior high learning experience, which was a dramatic change from the warehousing of elementary school. But there was always a gap in my basic skills that it seemed I could never close. When I could not keep up, I was plucked out of my English class and placed in a small room to *do nothing* with maybe five other students. This separation increased the gap in my learning. I had to demand to be placed in a real classroom. I had counselors, administrative staff, vice principals, and others with “Dr.” titles always trying to dissuade me from trying to receive an education.

I was able to complete high school and then college by purposely picking classes that did not require much writing. I did well on multiple choice or true/false tests and on labs because I had good comprehension.

In college, I sometimes experienced gender discrimination. One time, I was in an all-male (except for me) class on manufacturing. The students were supposed to work as a team and receive a communal grade. But I received a B- while my male counterparts all received As.

Another road block was in a women’s studies class taught by a woman. Though she brought to light gender inequality in our society,

she also practiced this bias herself. During her lecturing, she would only address male students’ questions and she purposely graded women students harshly.

She scrutinized our work, looking for things like typos, and then she graded us harshly. But she was lenient with the men and even gave extra points for discussion—which she only allowed males to participate in. It was a very bizarre experience. It almost seemed like she was conducting an experiment in how prejudiced behavior might affect a classroom.

After college, I got a job and was able to buy an SUV and a home, but my livelihood was soon dashed by a broken system—one that I had not even been aware of. This was the judicial system and my first experience with it was a baptism by fire. Though I had gone to school and worked in very male-oriented environments, I hadn’t seen *nothing* yet. I didn’t see a true witch hunt until I was introduced to the judicial system after defending myself and my family from an attacker.

During my trial, I had hoped to bring an expert witness, Dr. Saunders, to testify about abusive men and their propensity for violence. But the judge did not allow him to testify because Dr. Saunders had stated that he was a feminist. His definition of feminism was that he believed that women and men should be treated equally. In the courtroom, feminism was a dirty word. At



the end of the trial, the judge agreed with the reasoning of a juror that believed, "If a man hits a woman once, it is his fault. If a man hits a woman a second time, it is her fault."

I nearly fell over. To hear this from a judge was alarming and disgusting. I could not believe the ferocity of such a statement. I was sentenced to 7-17 years.

In prison, I found a sea of illiterate women. Not just a fissure of illiteracy, like the one I fell into as a child, but a Grand Canyon that thousands had fallen into. Literacy for women prisoners is so low that I find it hard to believe that most of them can understand the plea agreement they signed. The general feel of the women here is that there is nothing they can do about how they are treated. It is just the way it is and always will be. The continuous violence, abuse,

neglect, and unfair treatment that they have been subjected to has eroded their ability to stand up for themselves.

I do not believe there is nothing we can do. We should start by addressing the judicial system—the whole network from the police to the courts. The law books may have page upon page about equality and they may stress women's parity with men, but police officers and the courts do not enforce the rules.

Women's literacy would be best described as the ability to not only read, but to put what you read into *action*. Without action, equality can't exist. It is just a fairy tale.

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*Monica Nowos was raised in Rochester Hills, Michigan, the fifth of six daughters. She is currently in prison.*

## Education Helps Women by Idalina Barbosa

It is very difficult to believe that for many years, and even still in some countries today, the education of women is not perceived as important. Women are responsible for taking care of their families by cooking, washing, raising children, and caring for their husbands.

In the mid-twentieth century, women in the U.S. organized for access to education. Women realized education would help them to make significant contributions to their society as well to their families. Women entered colleges and pursued careers that were once exclusively held by men. Some of these professions are medicine, law, science, and even operation of high power equipment. Today it is very difficult to find a job that is still exclusively for men.

Education does three major things for women. It opens up opportunities in the work place, gives more freedoms, and instills a new sense of confidence to enable women to take risks.

Women no longer only see themselves as homemakers. Women who were unhappily married have found the confidence to be single parents. They are still able to take care of their children because they have become financially independent.

Women now have the freedom to express themselves. Women make choices about their bodies, their finances, and every other aspect of their lives. Education gives women the confidence to take risks because they know that if they fail they have the tools or could acquire the tools to help them succeed. Although women have accomplished a lot in the past century, there is still a lot more to do.

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*Idalina Barbosa is a student at Mujeres Unidas en Acción in Boston.*

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