

WOMEN'S STUDIES, GENDER STUDIES AND FEMINISM

Women's studies as an academic enterprise had its roots in second wave feminism and originated as a challenge to male-defined and male-centred knowledge. Students studying sociology now take it for granted that gender is central to sociological analysis. This was not always so. The sociology I was taught as an undergraduate in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the sociology of men as if they represented the whole of society – and primarily white western men. Women featured only briefly, in lectures on family and kinship. This was not a problem peculiar to sociology; women in other disciplines were facing similar biases in relation to what counted as knowledge. Some of us, inspired by feminist ideas, began to complain and then to act.

By the middle of the 1970s feminists began to organise across disciplines as well as within them. Young feminist academics and graduate students met to discuss the possibility of launching women's studies as a new 'women-centred way of knowing' that would challenge the prevailing androcentric view of society and culture prevalent in the humanities and social sciences (science subjects weren't even having the debate at that stage). We offered adult education courses in our communities as well as agitating in universities, using the skills we were learning through political activism to make a difference within the academy. At this time most feminist academics were also activists in the wider women's liberation movement. We were a privileged group of women; not all of us were by any means middle class in origin but we had gained a university education at a time when only a small minority of young people did so – and this, perhaps, is partly why second wave feminism is seen as overwhelmingly middle class.

Looking back, we were remarkably successful within a very short period of time. The first women's studies courses, at postgraduate level were set up in the early 1980s, initially at Kent and Bradford, then York, followed by many others. Throughout the 1980s both undergraduate and postgraduate women's studies programmes sprang up in universities and polytechnics across the UK and by the end of the decade we had our own professional association, initially called the Women's Studies Network (later to be renamed the Feminist and Women's Studies Association). In many ways the 1980s were an inauspicious time for new academic initiatives. It was the Thatcher era, with its cuts in central government funding of HE, leading to a lack of academic jobs and thus little opportunity for job mobility. Yet among those who had been recruited into academia before the job slump took hold, there was a critical mass of committed young feminists willing to put considerable effort into developing women's studies. When a group of us in a Polytechnic proposed a women's studies degree we met little opposition. As far as

the 'authorities' were concerned we could go ahead in seeking validation provided we could do so without any additional resources. What mattered, we were told, was 'bums on seats', and provided we could achieve this (and bring in the fees paid by said bums), the powers that be had little interest in what we were teaching. Programmes such as this one were initially successful. At undergraduate level they often attracted mature women students without standard academic qualifications who came in via access courses

Women's Studies programmes relied heavily on the energy and feminist commitment of, primarily, junior academic staff often on temporary contracts. While these degrees appeared to flourish, under-resourcing and the lack of institutional support also made them rather precarious. During the 1990s a few more job opportunities opened up. One consequence was that when those involved in women's studies moved on, and their replacements often lacked the same expertise or commitment. At the same time cuts in the funding of students, the decline in student grants and their replacement by loans meant many less advantaged women could no longer contemplate a degree course while others opted for 'safer' subjects. As student numbers declined in the 1990s and early 2000s, many degree programmes shut down. While there were a few new ones at postgraduate level (usually badged as gender studies), free standing undergraduate degrees gradually disappeared, although a few universities still offer women's or gender studies routes through other degree programmes. Postgraduate courses have, however, proved more durable.

This decline has not meant the demise of feminist knowledge production within universities. The rise of women's studies also led to feminism having an impact on a variety of disciplines, with a gradual 'mainstreaming' of feminist research and theory in much of the humanities and social sciences. As feminist knowledge became more academically respectable it was increasingly possible to build a career as an avowedly feminist scholar. This very success, however, has created another problem: a rift between academic feminism and feminist activism, which became apparent in the 1990s. Feminist knowledge, in particular feminist theory, was increasingly more abstract and distant from the everyday challenges facing women in the outside world. There was pressure to keep up with whatever intellectual trend was currently fashionable in order to appear respectably intellectual and 'cutting edge'. Not all feminist academics played this game, but we were facing other problems that worked against maintaining our connections with activism.

As the generation who founded women's studies became more senior we found ourselves over-burdened by work responsibilities, which was exacerbated by the

increasing bureaucratisation of higher education and the audit culture. This left little time or energy for activism. Early career feminist academics were also under pressure. Where my own generation were largely left alone to do whatever research we felt like at the beginning of our careers, as long as we fulfilled our basic teaching commitments, new academics recruits are expected to undertake a teaching qualification, apply successfully for research grants, publish in reputable journals, create impact and be accountable for their intellectual productivity. Yet feminist research and teaching in universities continues to thrive – and not all of it is divorced from activist concerns. Some of it has made, and continues to make, a difference in the ‘real world’, impacting on government and international policies in a number of areas, some of it still making connections with activism.

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