

## TEACHING MEN FEMINISM BY DISTANCE EDUCATION: Perspectives, Challenges and the Way Forward

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issues surrounding teaching men feminism particularly via the medium of online, distance learning. Increasingly, tertiary institutions in the Caribbean are adopting online learning as the way forward to ensure that its citizens are well equipped to enter the global workforce. There is also a move towards increasing the number of tertiary educated males, who are in the minority in many universities and tertiary level intuitions. By focusing on a lesser known area in the research on gender pedagogy and distance learning, this paper highlights the importance of studying the particular challenges and benefits of teaching men feminist theory. This is mainly achieved through data garnered from a sample of learners themselves, and as such is largely a qualitative paper which taps into the narratives of these men as its major source. The personal experience of the author in the area of coordinating an online distance programme also proves to be an interesting perspective for the work. This is buttressed by literature from the leading researchers and academics in the area of distance learning and feminist theorizing and pedagogy.

The paper argues that there are unique challenges and benefits in teaching men feminist theory and highlights the benefits and drawbacks of doing so online. It also suggests ways in which the challenges may be surmounted in order to facilitate an increased number of men who are interested in investing in online education and particularly those with an interest in gender studies. “Despite the long history of men’s involvement in feminism, I’ve learned over the years that telling someone, anyone that I am a feminist is bound to have a startling effect. The responses vary, but they usually involve questions, such as “what do you mean?” often accompanied by some stuttered expressions of doubt about whether it is possible for a man to be a feminist, perhaps whether it is even logically possible...women’s embarrassment seems to centre on how my being a feminist diminishes my manliness, while men seem to think I’m crazy.” (Digby, 1998, p. 1.)

**Keywords:** Gender, women education, distance education, feminism.

### INTRODUCTION

It is open secret that gender studies courses are mainly taught and learned by women. Feminism is “the awareness of the oppression, exploitation and/or subordination of women within society and the conscious action to change and transform that society” (Reddock, 1998) and was initially seen as for and by women only. The second wave of feminism in the 1960s, envisioned women theorizing about their domination outside the presence of the ‘oppressor’. As Judith Gardiner argues “the women’s liberation movement... assumed an antagonism between feminism and masculinity.” [Gardiner, 2002, p. 2] This antagonism was two-way as ‘masculinist’ movements “argued that women’s increased power was symptomatic of cultural changes that had reduced the importance and visibility and masculinity.” (Kimmel, 1987, p. 269). This segregation lost traction with the third wave of feminism in the 1990s and profeminist men’s movements. As Hooks opines, “feminist struggle takes place anytime anywhere any female or male resists sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.” (Hooks, 2000).

**Increasingly, men have shown interest in studying the ideological and biological binaries of masculinity and femininity.**

The response to men studying feminism varies. Some instructors will welcome them, hoping that they will try to stem discrimination against women in their purview. Still, others view them with suspicion since they are beneficiaries of a structure which privileges masculinity. The average person on the street (particularly in the Caribbean) will invariably question their sexuality since men who are closely related to femininity are surely homosexuals. These are the range of issues facing men who opt to study feminism and those who teach them. It is my view that if we hope to create a society which does not privilege one gender over another, and if we are truly committed to a future for education that includes equal participation for our males, then men cannot be left out of the dialogue. I also believe that the online space affords some advantages over face to face interaction where this is concerned as it affords some 'anonymity' and an encouraging environment in which they are exposed to a conscious-raising pedagogy that empowers them to make a difference.

### **CONTEXT AND SCOPE OF THE IGDS DIPLOMA PROGRAMME**

The Caribbean has had a history of impressive tertiary education, starting with the University College of the West Indies, an adjunct to the University of London in 1948 (University of the West Indies [UWI] since 1962). It has 3 campuses in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados. The region is now populated by other highly rated tertiary institutions and distance learning programmes. UWI, for instance launched its Open Campus in 2008, as a virtual campus which offers multi-mode teaching services through 42 site locations serving 16 countries in the English-speaking Caribbean. It is within this campus that the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IDGS) offers its undergraduate Diploma in Gender and Development Studies which I have coordinated since October 2008. Since its origin in 2003, this 18 month programme has met the demand for knowledge in gender studies among persons in the Caribbean region who were unable to take up face to face courses. The programme is designed to provide participants with an understanding of gender and its influence on all spheres of life and its impact on development. There are no exams in this programme, in keeping with our commitment to authentic assessment. (Fook, 2008, p. 2). The philosophy of the programme is learner centred in focus. Guided by Barr and Tagg's "learning paradigm," (Barr and Tagg, 1995). learning is viewed as going beyond acquiring information and skills but to developing the type of understanding that empowers the learner to challenge existing social inequalities.

Not surprisingly, the enrollment of men in this programme is very low. We have not had more than 2 men in each cohort (which usually includes 8-15 persons), and in some groups there were no men at all. Indeed, one of the main challenges facing tertiary institutions in the Caribbean is the ratio of men to women. At UWI Mona, 70% of graduates are women. (Figueroa, 2004). While administrators are pleased that women are taking up opportunities for tertiary education, they are concerned that men seem less interested. This under-representation of men in education is perhaps rooted in our socialization as boys focus on accessing money rather than spending years in educational pursuits.

As Barry Chevannes notes: "school is girl stuff!" This declaration by an eight-year old inner city boy...reveals the association of meaning built up in the minds of many boys...Training in survival through deprivation and harsh treatment and constructing male identity through provider roles are ...factors that give girls a school advantage." (Chevannes, 1999).

## MEN AND FEMINISM: The Issues of Teaching and Learning

The men involved in the Diploma Programme expressed various reasons for enrolling. For some it was the realization that job opportunities in gender were growing, the need to learn something new, and the desire to balance the treatment of women in their societies. Some noted that their friends were curious but supportive of the move. In another case, both male and female colleagues were cynical and suggested other educational alternatives. Interestingly one respondent noted that he was the one with the problem: "during the early stages, I felt somewhat odd telling people about the course, mainly because of my biased perception gained during my stages of development."

In the Caribbean, where homophobia is often violently manifested, getting men interested in gender studies is particularly challenging. The students did acknowledge that their sexuality was often questioned, and a student noted he had to "constantly reassert my masculinity in defense of heterosexuality since there is a discrete suspicion that men who do gender courses embrace homosexual inclinations. The popular belief is that "real men don't study gender" (Brod, 2002, p. 161). and stems from the idea that men typically do not see themselves as gendered but 'normal'. (Holmgren, and Hearn, 2009, p. 403).

The students reported an excellent working relationship with their female instructors and classmates. Each person was given an opportunity to post an opinion and the discussions in asynchronous and synchronous chat rooms were said to be "stimulating." This is often times not the case in a face to face environment, where smirks, side-bar comments and other "real time" negative responses militate against openness mixed gender classrooms. As Magda Lewis reports, sexual dynamics in the face to face feminist classroom often leads to tensions and threatening situations. (Lewis, 1992). In our experience however, the online environment allows for a frank yet 'filtered' response which makes for less tense situation. When asked if they noticed any negative treatment when compared to female classmates, most said no. They noted that the women did not seem to think their space was being invaded. This is not to say that there were no differences of opinion. Indeed, one respondent noted that "there were occasions when some seemingly covert remarks were made when I pushed on a point too strongly." However this was the exception, as most thought that their perspective was actually more encouraged because of their gender. As a student noted "what made gender courses exciting for me is that because the issues were predominately female, the lectures and students encouraged a male perspective." Another shared: "interestingly, I thought female lecturers would be quick to embarrass or disregard males but they have all proven me wrong."

For some respondents, their view of feminist theory remained fairly consistent before and after the programme. One in particular noted that feminism represented for him, a vehicle of social awareness and ultimately change. However, most noted that their views about feminists were challenged in the course. Before doing this programme, many saw feminists as "bitter people who wanted to be like men, who hated men with a passion." This fits the stereotypical view of bra burning, man hating feminist perpetrated by western ideologies. This is not to say that there was not a space for angry revolution, but this monolithic and misguided view, has militated against many seeing the worth of feminist insights.

The respondent noted that after the course "my perspective changed significantly. I have now become much more liberal and respecting of the rights of females who have been subordinated by a system of patriarchy." They all lauded the programme as an "eye opener", and therefore, our goal of consciousness-raising via an online medium has seemingly been achieved.

Respondents also revealed that studying feminist theory resulted in feelings of shame for the atrocities of patriarchy. As one noted "I never knew the extent to which men had put the entire world to work in their favour...I was ashamed." This is not uncommon for men who gain feminist awareness and while useful to an extent, it must be managed carefully in the online environment. It is not useful to invite men to learn feminist theory and rob them of their sense of self. As Connors has argued, "we have been told by many sources that the problems of this world arise from machismo... and the natural consequence of hearing this line so consistently is that we shrink from considerations of ourselves as... representative of manhood." (Connors, 1996, p. 144). Instead of challenging the core of their identity, men doing feminism may be better instructed to use this for good rather than cower in fear of its power and potentially dangerous effects.

As feminist educators, we "all attempt...to create pedagogical situations which 'empower' students, demystify canonical knowledge, and clarify how relations of domination subordinate subjects." (Luke, and Gore, 1992, p. 1). Overall I believe this has been achieved with this programme, where we transform skeptics into profeminist men. Respondents were impressed with the commitment of their instructors to keep the online learning environment alive. They became conscious of their subtle negative behavior towards women, and refocused their attention to ways in which they can bring about change. At the same time however, they expressed that not enough focus was placed on the issues of masculinity. They noted that they Caribbean male should be a subject for study to ascertain how they "treat with notions of power, influence and respect among themselves" and suggested that if there was a greater focus on masculinities, more men would be interested in the programme.

## CONCLUSION

Having a male perspective in a feminist classroom can be a powerful tool for teaching and learning. As a respondent noted, "men need to be encouraged to determine a space within feminism that is not limited to oppositional positions". If we adhere to the poststructuralist ideal that rejects unitary truths, then we should welcome the opinions of men as it relates to feminism to foster commonalities and eliminate essentialist differences. As Patrick Hopkins argues, "feminism should be about gender and the structures of sexism that arise from hierarchical evaluations of gender, not about the problematic ahistorical category of woman per se." (Hopkins, 1998, p. 51). However, if we focus heavily on masculinities in the feminist space, we risk "leveling structures of power by granting to men's studies an equal and complementary place to women's studies." (Robinson, 2002, p.143). In seeking men's views we must still maintain the space for woman studies and not overlook the fact that women's oppression still exists.

While our programme is not without its challenges, I have found the student centeredness of online education as advantageous in the study of feminist theory. Persons are guided by tutors, but are given freer rein to interpret the information in their own way, and contribute to lively discussion without fear of comments and body language that hint of intolerance, which are so often evident in traditional classrooms.

It also allows for equal opportunities to air unpopular views instead of risk being overshadowed by a more dominant voice. For those who struggle with teaching feminism in a face to face setting, they may consider blending the delivery using online aspects to enhance open-mindedness towards divergent views and meaningful discussion towards a common goal of gender equality and empowerment.

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