

An educational approach to gender justice

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The Government in Scotland has adopted a gendered understanding of its approaches to tackling violence against women (VAW) VAW is defined by the Scottish Government as follows:

Gender based violence is a function of gender inequality, and an abuse of male power and privilege. It takes the form of actions that result in physical, sexual and psychological harm or suffering to women and children, or affront to their human dignity, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. It is men who predominantly carry out such violence, and women who are predominantly the victims of such violence. By referring to violence as 'gender based' this definition highlights the need to understand violence within the context of women's and girls' subordinate status in society. Such violence cannot be understood, therefore, in isolation from the norms, social structure and gender roles within the community, which greatly influence women's vulnerability to violence
(Scottish Government 2010)

This definition is significant and has won considerable support from women's organisations across the world. The gendered approach is the result of campaigning and lobbying by women's organisations, and the deployment of evidence gathered from a wide range of grassroots organisations, including Women's Aid groups across Scotland. The Scottish approach contrasts with that in England and Wales, which offers a more 'gender neutral' definition, reflecting an institutional politics divorced from the political realities of survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, women's groups tackling violence in the community and professionals working in communities with women and girls. Policy in England and Wales has been influenced by the gender-blind arguments of gender symmetry in issues such as domestic abuse and sexual violence, which in turn has been fuelled by anti-feminist and, in some cases male-supremacist, groups such as the UK Men's Movement. These reactionary movements are present in Scotland but the feminist movement have successfully protected the gendered analysis from their attacks.

The Scottish Strategy to tackle Violence against Women has had a strong educational component. The Scottish Government's National Training Strategy to Address Violence Against Women identified training and education needs across the multiple sectors in Scotland where professionals and the public encounter violence against women. Lesley Orr was responsible for developing the national training strategy, based at Scottish Women's Aid, and identified the need for accredited education at a higher level to provide a strong theoretical grounding for the many workers engaged with addressing gendered violence in different parts of Scottish society.

At the same time, Eurig Scandrett at Queen Margaret University (QMU) had been developing the university's educational curriculum in social justice, building on work in collaboration with community-based and non governmental organisations. The origin of Queen Margaret University is in the women's movement of the 19th century and the campaign for access to education for working class women. Two activists, Christian Guthrie Wright and Louisa Stevenson, established the Edinburgh School of Cookery and Domestic Science in 1875 to provide education for young women seeking work in domestic service, the dominant form of employment in the Scottish Capital, as well as providing nutritional improvement. Education for nurses quickly followed and through a series of iterations, the school became Queen Margaret University in 2007.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, the University developed a strong reputation for providing relevant education in partnership with community-based and campaigning organisations. An opportunity was therefore identified for providing a course on violence against women in the context of gender justice, aimed at two distinct groups of people: activists and professionals involved in community support projects and campaigns around violence against women; and social science students developing an interest in gender. Through a partnership between Scottish Women's Aid and QMU, a course – Gender Justice, Masculinities and Violence - was developed by Lesley, Eurig and Nel Whiting, Scottish Women's Aid's training officer.

The course embedded dialogical education throughout. It is taught by educators from academia and social movement organisations (indeed all three tutors are both social movement activists and academic scholars). The students are drawn from full-time education and the field of practice in tackling violence against women. The curriculum draws on these experiences as well as the theoretical developments in understanding gendered violence. Feminist theory has emphasised the social location of the theorist, the claim that all theory occurs from a 'standpoint': a socially-located position from which the world is viewed. Understanding gender justice, masculinities and violence must recognise that all theory is gendered and emerges from praxis. This is not to say that men cannot develop theory about women and vice versa, but rather that theoretical understanding must be grounded in a social reality in which theorists are either engaged in challenging, or else are complicit in, patriarchal structures of power. There is no gender-neutral position from which intellectuals can theorise, practitioners can act or educators can teach.

Theoretical frameworks that the course draws on include Gramsci's conception of hegemony and Foucault's idea of discourse. Neither Gramsci nor Foucault were feminists, and indeed aspects of their writings exhibit the particular forms of misogyny of their social locations of gender, history, class, sexuality. Their theoretical insights however have been useful to feminists working to transform society towards gender justice, including the constant renegotiation of masculinity away from its hegemonic manifestations towards forms which can embrace equality; and constructing alternative discourses of gender that have the potential to deconstruct gendered power relations.

Indeed, the provision and practice of a course in gender justice, masculinities and violence within a mainstream university, which is both a validated elective module within a degree in psychology and sociology, and an opportunity for theoretical

nourishing of practitioners and activists working in the field of challenging gender-based violence, is itself a counter-hegemonic contribution to gender justice. It is delivered by, and open to both men and women, and its curriculum draws on the struggles of the women's movement, and pro-feminist men. Its presence demands that the practice of activists is taken seriously within the institution of Higher Education, and the rigours of academic theory becomes a resource for those working in the field.

The political value of education of this kind is illustrated by the importance which feminists have always recognised, of the integration of theory and struggle. In 1966, in her ground breaking paper *The Longest Revolution*, Juliet Mitchell wrote:

Feminist consciousness is the material with which our politics must work, if it is to develop. The Women's Liberation Movement is at the stage of organizing our 'instinct' of our oppression as women, into a consciousness of its meaning. This will become a rational consciousness as we come to understand the objective conditions which determine this oppression. At the moment, the essential 'instinct' coexists with the possibilities for transforming it into rational consciousness. The 'instinct' expresses itself as all our protests against every manifestation of our oppression – it is here that the jokey, spontaneous bra-burning, the smoke-bombing of Miss World competitions, descriptions of the misery of housework and of the degradation of women's jobs have their place, as machine-breaking and descriptions of the 'real life' of the workers in the nineteenth century had a place in the formation of working-class consciousness. It is as though we suddenly, out of the blue-mists of mystification, see what is being done to us.

The oppression continues although the objective conditions change and so the need for development of rational consciousness remains an important task for activists in women's organisations, communities and feminism movements. Many of the younger students start with a perception that gender equality has been achieved, and that the struggles of their parents' generation are no longer needed. Others recognise the need for continuing struggle yet reject the analysis – or at times just the label – of their feminist antecedents. Several battles have been won since 1966, at least on paper. In the UK, the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1970, although current average female pay remains around 83% of male, a result of the sticky floor as much as the glass ceiling, poor access to affordable childcare and the unequal division of domestic labour. The Abortion Act of 1967 provided for women limited access to abortion which is under constant threat from an anti-abortion backlash. Domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment are all now recognised and increasingly taken seriously by law-enforcement agents and employers. On the other hand, commercial sexual exploitation of women is multiplying, from the plethora of commodities aimed at the sexualisation of young girls; the mainstreaming of lap-dancing, pole-dancing and strip clubs; increased trafficking of women; the exponential growth of pornography through increasing variety of online and offline media (The value of the pornography industry increased from \$7 million in 1972 to \$12 billion in 2000 (Whisnant & Stark 2004)).

More recently, Motta et al (2011) have pointed out that

Neoliberal policies have driven ever larger proportions of the population into flexibilised and informalised working conditions, and caused a crisis in masculinised organised labour, the collapse of welfare provision for poor families, and the privatisation of public and/or collective goods such as land, housing and education. As a consequence, poverty has been feminised and violence, both structural and individual, has intensified. In the main, women carry the burden of ensuring the survival of their families, combining escalating domestic responsibilities with integration into a labour market that is increasingly precarious and unregulated. Furthermore, their integration is accompanied by accelerated sexualisation of public space, and the concurrent objectification and commodification of women's minds and bodies. Such conditions serve only to deepen women's experiences of poverty, inequality, exclusion, alienation and violence.

At the same time, feminism seems to be in crisis... In this light, we suggest that there is an urgent need to revisit and reinvent feminist theorising and practice in ways that combine critical understanding of the past with our current struggles, and that create theories both inside and outside the academy to support movement praxis.

Education, which engenders dialogue between practice and theory, academic rigour and political struggle, critical analysis and strategies for change, has its place in such generation of theory and facilitation of praxis.

References

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