Feminism in Education: Historical and Contemporary Issues of Gender Inequality in Higher Education

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Received 30 July 2011; received in revised form 1 October 2011; accepted 18 November 2011

ABSTRACT This research interrogates definitions and key concepts of ‘gender’ and issues relating to gender in education. It discusses different feminist approaches such as radical, liberal, Marxist and Islamic feminism. Not many studies have theorised gender issues in higher education, therefore, an attempt is made in this study to explore the underpinning theories of higher education and feminism. On the whole this study has two aims—to examine differences and similarities between feminist approaches to education and the ways in which these approaches can inform our understanding of inequality in higher education. The important premise of this research is that people’s actions are socially constrained, although not socially determined; people make decisions which are based on an awareness of potentialities and limitations of certain courses of action.

Keywords: Gender, Feminism, Inequality, Higher education, Islamic feminism
Introduction

The key concepts of this research are gender, feminism and higher education. In the first place, the study explores definitions and concepts of gender as well as attempts to establish what the word ‘gender’ actually means. More consideration is given in the study to feminist writers who gave us an understanding of gender issues in higher education under certain feminists approaches (e.g. radical, liberal, Marxist and Islamic). Furthermore, the study develops arguments regarding the divisions of masculinity and femininity and how this understanding relates to the role of education in society.

Definitions and concepts of gender

The word gender comes from the English gendre, a loanword from old French. This, in turn, came from Latin: ‘genus’. Both words mean ‘kind’, ‘type’, or ‘sort’. It appears in modern French in the word ‘genre’ (type, kind, also ‘genre sexuel’) and is related to the Greek root ‘gen-’ (to produce), appearing in ‘gene’, ‘genesis’, and ‘oxygen’. As a verb, it means ‘to breed’. Most uses of the root ‘gen’ in Indo-European languages refer either directly to what pertains to birth or, by extension, to natural, innate qualities and their consequent social distinctions (such as gentry, generation, gentile, genocide and eugenics) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2008).

The general consensus is that word ‘sex’ relates to biological difference. It has also been used in the context of social roles of men and women—for example, the British Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 which ended exclusion of women from various official positions. This usage was more common in the 1960s and earlier. During the 1970s, the radical feminist movement had begun to take the word gender into their own usage to describe their theory of human nature. However, by the end of the decade consensus was achieved among radical feminists regarding a theory that human nature is essentially epicene and social distinctions based on sex are arbitrarily constructed (Thomas, 1999). Matters pertaining to this theoretical process of social construction were labelled matters of gender, while gender is a social construction; it concerns the differing qualities culturally attributed to women and men.

Gender issues

The data regarding how women and men are situated differently within a global
work context reveals the extent of gender inequality. Women are made of one-half of the world’s population and perform two thirds of hours work, yet they are poorer in resources and representation in positions of authority or decision-making (Peterson and Runyan, 2000).

Gender refers to socially learned behaviour expectations that distinguish between masculinity and femininity. Sex—the biological difference between males and females—on the other hand, is determined by reference to genetic and anatomical characteristics, socially learned gender is an acquired identity. We learn, through culturally specific socialization, how to be masculine and feminine and to assume the identities of men and women. In fact, the socialisation dimension is so powerful that apparently unequivocal gender identities are formed even when biological sex is unclear (Francis, 2000a).

Men are not exclusively educators and leaders and women are not exclusively in charge of maintaining the house or rearing children either. What appears constant throughout historical record, however, is the relationship between masculinity and femininity. Francis and Skelton (2001, p. 71) noted two important points regarding this relationship; first, masculinity and femininity are not independent categories but are defined in oppositional relation to each other: more of one is less of the other—as in ripe versus unripe fruit, active children versus passive children. Specifically, the dominant masculinity in Western culture is associated with qualities of rationality, hard-headedness, ambition and strength. To the extent that a man displays emotionally, soft-headedness, passivity and weakness, he is likely to be identified as non-masculine, which is to say, feminine. Similarly, women who appear hard-headed and ambitious are often described as masculine. Moreover, the relationship between masculinity and femininity shows constancy in assigning greater value to that which is associated with masculinity and lesser value to that which is associated with femininity.

Thus, in most situations, rationality, hard-headedness, ambitious and strength are perceived as positive and admired traits that are in contrast to less desirable feminine qualities. When we study gender we learn about both men and women. When we look at activities associated with masculinity (team sports, military), it appears simply that men are present and women are absent. Moreover, gender analysis helps us to understand how this presence-absence dynamic occurs and offers a more comprehensive explanation; it enables us to see how women are an important part of the picture even though they are obscured when we focus on the men.

In a sense, the presence of men depends on the absence of women. Because of this independence, gender analysis of women’s lives and experiences does not simply ‘add something’ about women but transforms what we know about men and
the activities they undertake (Francis and Skelton, 2001). Gender shapes not only how we identify ourselves but also how other identify and relates to us and how we are positioned within social structures. The position of femininity in the society is promoting gender issues that people have set paradigms regarding femininity and women role in the society (Weiner, 2000). Education, particularly higher education, [arguably] undermines women traditional role (i.e. childbearing, emotional-caretaking and physical maintenance of household) because education [for women] is considered a ladder to independence.

A number of institutions play a part in the production and reproduction of gender inequality—be it at a material or an ideological level. According to ADB (2000) and Archer (2003), both the family and the media work at an ideological level [thereby] perpetuating inequality of the sexes, while employers who pay lower wages to female workers perpetuate inequality at a material level. But an institution which many sociologists have regarded as central in perpetuating inequality and, [yet] central in potentially eliminating inequality is education (Thomas, 1999). From the nineteenth-century reformers who pressed for universal schooling are today advocating an increase in the number of girls in all levels of education (as well as fighting for improvement in their choice of available subjects and careers). Education therefore continues to be a battleground in the struggle for equality of opportunity.

Conceptualization of gender issues: historical perspectives on women and the opportunities offered to them by higher education

Gender is considered an appropriate predictor of life events (Baron, 2004). Pre-industrial societies were characterised by high infant mortality rates combined with low life expectancy and a social belief in the value of large families. In such a context, many women were pre-occupied with rearing children for a greater part of their lives. Such gender role allocation typically has the support of religious and moral codes and is enforced by institutionalised authority structures (Baron, 2004).

An examination of evolution of women’s higher education opportunities reveals that ‘women have struggled for centuries to gain access to higher education as both students and scholars’ (Lie and O’Leary, 2000, p. 17). The rationale of their exclusion from learning has centred on their supposed inferior intellectual ability. Women’s lack of participation in the educational process can be traced back to ancient times. Aristotle claimed that ‘in comparison to men, women were biologically defective, which rendered them morally and intellectually inferior. To
this end, women were not creative and thus their souls were incapable of reaching
the last stage of reason, therefore as they had underdeveloped brains women could
not be educated’ (cited in Lie and O’Leary, 2000, p. 17). This view reflected a
general belief, even though there were important arguments rejecting this idea,
c.g., Plato’s Republic (See Allen, 2006 and Bloon, 1968).

History, in Lie and O’Leary’s (2000) opinion, is replete with more recent ver-
sions of this Aristotelian argument. The French philosopher, Rousseau, in the late
1700 expressed an opinion on the education of women, which typifies this view—
the attitude that many educated men have even today. According to Martian
(1984, p.340), ‘The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To
please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and channelled by
them, to educate them when young, to care for them while growing, to counsel
them, to console them and to make life sweet and agreeable to them from their
infancy’. Although there is historical evidence of educated and creative women,
they are the exception rather than the rule. For a period of nearly nine hundred
years, female scholars were to be found in India during the Vedic period (1500 to
600 BC), where sons and daughters had equal opportunity for education (Lie and
O’Leary, 2000, p. 179). It was, therefore, not unusual to find in Vedic society to
find women teachers, philosophers and poets (Thapar, 1966). However, this
equality ended during the post-Vedic period from 500 BC to 500 AD, when the
caste system in India became firmly entrenched. This development marked a dete-
rioration in the status of women—they were treated inferiorly compared to men,
as Thapar (1966, p.179) noted:

‘In general, there were relatively few educated women before
the last century although some women in certain cultures were
included in mainstream education and learning under certain
conditions; their inclusion in it was the exception rather than the
rule.’

Feminism in education

Until recently, it has been possible to characterise three distinct types of feminist
17) has given a useful account of how these different approaches have informed
work on gender inequality in education. In recent years, however, the distinctions
between these three approaches have become blurred, particularly in the area of
empirical research. While there are major differences at the level of grand theory,
liberal, radical and socialist feminists appear increasingly agreed about what is happening in higher education. What these approaches have in common is that they challenge a view of education which is only concerned with the male experience and which treats that experience as the ‘norm’. When researchers look at schooling from the point of view of girls, therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that writers such as Kelly (1995) and Walkerdine (1997) came up with very similar findings.

A fourth approach is the Islamic feminist paradigm. Islamic feminist claims equality with men who live in Muslim societies and other male dominant societies. Islamic feminism derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an, which seeks justice and equity for both women and men. Muslim women’s feminist activism aims to improve women’s legal, social, political, economic and educational situation in Muslim world and elsewhere.

As far as the liberal, radical and Marxist feminists are concerned, what is surprising is that very few feminist researchers in the sociology of education have chosen to explore higher education, especially when so much work has been done at secondary and primary education levels. It can be argued that this failure to adequately examine feminism at higher education level may be the result of a deficiency [arguably] in the feminist theory of education that feminists have difficulty in theorising the role of higher education in the reproduction of inequality (Francis, 2000b). This problem is not only with western educational theorists—although in Britain and the United States of America there is a substantial amount of literature available on gender in higher education. In developing countries such as Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, there are little or no studies done on gender in higher education.

**Liberal feminism**

Liberal feminism is characterised by an individualistic emphasis on equality. According to this philosophy, society itself does not need a major overhaul, but rather, laws need to be changed and opportunities have to be opened up to allow women to become equals in society. To a liberal feminist, evidence of progress is seen largely by the numbers of women in positions previously occupied by men. The view of education which dominated feminist thought in the 1970s was heavily influenced by liberal explanations of working-class failure in education. Just as these explanations had concentrated on the inadequacy of working-class culture and had put forward the notion of compensatory education, so the tendency of feminists was to explain girls’ academic failure in terms of deficiencies of their socialisation. Schemes such as Girls into Science and Technology (GIST) and
Women into Science and Engineering (WISE) were devised as 'remedies' to girls' early socialisation.

In the liberal model, education tends to be seen, to some extent, in isolation from the social structure. Education may create and perpetuate inequality, it also has the power to redress it. For example, Friedan (1983, p. 67) believed that it was 'The Feminine Mystique' which prevented women from leading successful public lives. The education system was partly to blame for the ideology of the feminine mystique, but equally the solution for women who were trapped in their roles as wives and mothers was to return to college to obtain an education. In a sense, then, women's main problem was their own attitude (even though it might be an attitude fostered both by the education system and the media). According to Thomas (1999), if only women would stop wanting to become housewives and start wanting to become lawyers or doctors instead, the problem would end. Most liberal feminists believe that schools are partly responsible for instilling sexist attitudes in children (Delamont, 1990, p.3). Delamont further argued that:

'Schools develop and reinforce sex segregation, stereotype and even discriminations which segregate the negative aspects of sex roles in the outside world, when they could be trying to alleviate them.'

These statements demonstrate a central argument of the liberal feminists’ analysis—i.e. the ability of school to promote good or bad attitudes, with the implication that changing schools will change attitudes and, [ultimately] society.

Radical feminism

There are two main strands to the work conducted within the radical feminist paradigm. The first is a belief that education consists of the transmission of ‘male’ knowledge—that what is taught in schools is simply an account of male experience presented as if it was everyone experience! Spender (1982, p. 16) is a powerful exponent of this point of view, arguing that:

'Men have provided us with a false picture of the world not just, because their view is so limited, but because they have insisted that their limited view is the total view.'

Much feminist attention has been focused on the sexist bias of many textbooks used in schools. According to the OECD (2006, p. 14):
‘The impression gained is one of the women’s inferiority, her domesticity, her lack of intelligence, ability, sense of adventure of creativity.’

The OECD explains that women are either invisible in most textbooks or, when they appear at all, they are seen performing low-status tasks. Spender (1982) gives numerous examples of this bias; one is that history textbooks about the nineteenth century contain few or no references to the women’s movement, despite the fact that women were fighting to be accepted into high education and to be enfranchised. In other words, women’s experience, as Francis and Skelton (2001, 2005) put it, became a non issue, perhaps irrelevant. The role of education in a patriarchal society is, therefore, to transmit a dominant ideology—i.e. masculine superiority. The second strand of the radical feminist argument is that schooling is part of a process by which the ideas and experiences of girls and women are trivialised by male pupils and male members of staff (Acker, 1984). While this is a common finding amongst researchers (for example, Francis and Skelton, 2005), it is the interpretation that radical feminists put on this finding that is significant. Radical feminists see such put-downs and discrimination experienced by girls as a means by which men control women and through which boys control girls. From this point of view, women are oppressed and victimised—they are not simply the unlucky recipients of prejudice!

For radical feminists, therefore, schooling represents one of the ways in which girls and women are excluded from power. For this reason, radical feminists reject any ‘superficial solutions’ such as those that seek to encourage more women into higher education. Spender (1982, p. 110) puts it as follows:

‘Such superficial analyses and solutions are not only insulting to women, they also ignore the distribution of power in society and the academic world, and the way in which males have appropriate and defended that power.’

Many radical feminists paid little attention to any effort that is aimed to change current education system because women are trapped in a vicious circle in which men keep changing the rules as soon as women show any sign of becoming as successful as them. For feminists such as Spender, the only solution is a separatist one where men and women maintain separate institutions and relationships. In other words, women must make their own education, their own rules in society.
Marxist feminism

Marxist feminism represents a two-pronged attack on inequality in society (Thomas, 1999, p. 14); the first on orthodox Marxism, the second on orthodox feminism (liberal and radical). At the same time, Marxist feminism draws from each of these approaches and, at the same time, attempts to integrate the two. Hartmann’s (1981) essay on the subject is appropriately entitled ‘The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism’. Marxist feminism, like radical feminism, regards the relationship between the sexes as political—that is, about power. However, Marxist feminists do not regard the relationship between the sexes as the only power relationship in society. While radical feminist (Millett, 1983; Thomas, 1999) on one hand argue that male and female are two cultures with different life experiences, Marxist feminists on the other hand argue that the life experiences of middle-class women are much closer to those of middle-class men than they do to working class women.

Marxist feminists are quick to point to the important role of radical feminism, and argue that while women’s oppression is almost universal, it has taken different forms in different societies. There is no question of oppression of women in general, but [in some countries] it takes the form of exploitation in the labour market—which has become essential to maintaining capitalism—low wages, poor working conditions, job security as well as exploitation in the home and family. Consequently, contradictory demands are placed on schools and colleges: for example, although girls are allowed to study science subjects in schools, but are also encouraged to take subjects such as home economics [in order] to instil in them their future roles as wives and mothers.

Barrett’s (1998) analysis is more deterministic, arguing that education is explicitly the object of state policy and serves to reproduce both class and the class system; it is not reducible to it. She further elaborates her thesis by describing four levels at which gender relations are reproduced in schools. The first is that of ideology—for example, when girls and boys are socialised into appropriate feminine and masculine behaviours. The second is that of structure and organisation—for example, a majority of headteachers and heads of department [in many countries] are men while women are employed at the lower grades of the teaching profession. The third consists of those mechanisms which channel pupils into a sexual division of labour—e.g. boys are persuaded to study science and technology subjects and girls are ‘encouraged’ to study the arts. The fourth is that of the definition of legitimate knowledge—what is often taught as neutral and objective is in
fact andocentric and sexist. (However, Barrett (1988) rejects this arguing that an objective and a neutral teaching of knowledge is possible.)

Arnot and Grubb (2001) argued that a theoretical division exists between ‘cultural’ (what have been characterised as ‘liberal’ and ‘radical’) approach and ‘political economy’ (Marxist-feminist) approach. Both tend to present an ‘overly determined view of women’ in that the former portrays women as ‘oversocialised’ and the latter regards them as ‘doubly-determined’ by the needs of capitalism.

**Islamic feminism**

Islamic feminism leads us to the feminisms of Muslim women and how they balance their ‘femininity’, ‘modesty’, ‘modernity’, ‘piety’ and ‘agency’ and how all of these are perceived in Muslim communities and wider pluralist settings. This feminism is usually grounded in the Islamic beliefs of these women and at the same time underpinned by the Western socio-cultural milieu of Muslim women (Contractor, 2010). Islamic feminism seeks to challenge patriarchy and patriarchal understandings of faith, yet they constantly achieve their goals and rights through partnerships with men. Islamic feminism also seek to challenge stereotypical imagery of Muslim women by replacing this with images of Muslim women as contributing citizens in a pluralist society. Islamic feminism, therefore, struggles against vestiges of patriarchy in Muslim communities.

This understanding of Islamic feminism often remains unarticulated but is nevertheless observable in Muslim women’s arguments, struggles and indeed successes in their quest for rights, equity and education. Islamic feminism draws its strength from Muslim women’s knowledge, higher education and understanding of Islamic theology which enables them to challenge patriarchal interpretations of faith with women-friendly interpretations (Contractor, 2010). These women work with male and female scholars to reclaim their faith through knowledge of Islam, higher education experience, and through everyday practice of Islam.

Islamic feminism encourages women in education, particularly higher education because many Muslim women in higher education consider it essential that women should examine alternative ways to study and to work with Islamic jurisprudence. Islamic feminists (for example, Yamani, 2006; Wadud, 2000; Afshar, 2006; Mernissi, 2001) advocate that Islam condemns all forms of inequality against women. They believe that gender inequalities in Muslim societies are all cultural practices which must be eliminated through education and through the empowerment of women.
Gender and higher education

Little attention has been paid by feminist sociologists to the position of women in higher education. The attitude of most feminists appears to be that if women have reached higher education, they are successful. The question then arises as to why fewer women than men [in the past in the Western world] reach higher education in the first place? According to Byrne (2001, p. 15),

There is an intellectual minority of girls whose elite wings have helped them to fly from the gutter to the university.

Wolpe (1993, p. 20) sees the issue from a different end of the political spectrum and has this to say about higher education:

Those children who comprise the elite section of the education system are destined via higher education to fill the managerial, professional and higher executive posts of this country.

Thomas (1999, p. 67) argues that an alternative way of looking at higher education is to see it as a continuation of the reproduction of gender relations. This is broadly the radical feminists viewpoint. Women who reach higher education throughout the world are not deemed to be successful by virtue of having done so; on the contrary, higher education continues to exclude and marginalise its female students, pushing them further into 'female' jobs or marriage and family (Weiner, 2000). This is the position taken by Rich (2000, p. 127) who argues that university is ‘a system that prepares men to take up roles of power in a man-centred society’. In the opinion of radical feminists such as Francis and Skelton (2005), higher education curricula are as biased towards male experience as did secondary education curricula.

Conclusion

The most important point we can make about gender is that it is not concerned only with the biological or social differences between men and women. As a concept, it has wider implications in all sphere of society, including education. Higher education does not actively discriminate against women, but undermines women’s ability to succeed. According to Thomas (1999, p. 181), ‘higher education does not reproduce gender inequality by actively discriminating against women. What
it does is to make use of culturally available ideas of masculinity and femininity in such a way that women are marginalised and, to some extent, alienated.’ In other words, higher education, in many countries, might not actively discriminate against women, but through an acceptance of particular values and beliefs it impedes women’s ability to succeed.

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