Inequalities of Women: Understanding Marginalization of Female Educators and the Quest for Change

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ABSTRACT

A historical and critical analysis of the evolution of female educators within the United States is presented. Beginning with colonial America through current time, inequities of female educators are noted including a devaluation of pedagogical approaches, disproportionate pay scales and career opportunities, and a discounting of feminist scholarship. Research that challenges patriarchal structures and power arrangements which implicitly and explicitly marginalize female educators from K-12 to higher education is encouraged. Reconceptualizing ways to uncover and analyze discriminatory gender relationships embedded within social and educational institutions are needed to combat exclusionary practices and promote change.

Societal Constructions that Perpetuate Inequality

“...the recursive reworking – the process of becoming aware of and working with the internal and external contradictions and splits in an ongoing basis – leads us into new spaces and ways of thinking, beyond polarities and binaries” (Asher, 2002. p. 83).
Throughout history, women have been burdened with certain disadvantages that have positioned them unfavorably in both their personal and professional lives. Women’s stories portray their intimate struggle to discover personal meaning and identity in the midst of predominant patriarchal structures that seek to maintain disproportionate power arrangements. The image of a woman has for too long portrayed her as feminine, which in turn, negatively implies that she must be acceptable, docile, passive, submissive, and ‘less than’ in many ways. Sadly, throughout history, women have been thought of as lesser human beings; their status in our society has traditionally been that of second-class citizens. Although put on pedestals in early patriarchal American society for their virtue and compassion, they were nevertheless ‘put in their places’ when it came to more important issues such as education, wealth, and suffrage. Consequently, females to this day struggle to hold administrative positions or assume authoritative roles. It is only when equality, under the civil and women’s rights movements became a goal of American society that women were treated as equals, at least in the eyes of the law (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003).

Audre Lorde (as cited in Trinh, 1989) stated that “women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs” (p. 85). Within the educational setting, female educators continue to suffer from discriminatory practices that hamper growth, creativity, and bringing the self into practice. Of particular concern for female faculty in higher education is the practice of discounting feminist scholarship. Of overpowering consequence is the marginalization of the feminine voice. When female scholars are positioned within male boundaries of academia that restrict and devalue feminine writing styles and ways of knowing, it is imperative that we interrogate such aspects of privileging that perpetuate such limiting principles (Asher, 2002, 2005).

Instances of exclusionary activities were revealed in a qualitative study of female faculty by Ropers-Huilman (2003). For example, participants from all faculty ranks seemed to be intuitively aware that using a feminist writing style or voice might negatively impact their likelihood of tenure. Many of the female faculty in Ropers-Huilman’s study reported that their publications in feminist journals would not be considered worthy by their departments and, consequently, not count toward tenure. In addition, other female faculty have feared that their feminist perspective which stemmed from a “different frame of reference” (Grimes, 2005, p.1) would not be accepted unless they followed masculine institutionalized practices and rules of scholarship. In order to be true to ourselves and address the need for substantive changes, female faculty typically are pushed to make sense of resistance, stereotyping, and fears in a manner that goes beyond repositioning ourselves into an either/or Eurocentric understanding of our personal and professional lives.

As been previously illustrated, academia has not been exempt from essentializing practices and is often experienced by women as a chilling and
alienating environment (Aquirre, 2000). Ironically, an ethic of caring has also contributed to the exploitation of women educators. As Stienberg (1996) points out, “when women operating on the basis of the ethic of caring subordinate their own concerns and needs, they reinforce patriarchal power relations between their husbands, male principals, bureaucratic supervisors, and themselves” (p. 474). In some instances, there is a feeling that a mothering role, rather than a professional mentoring role, is expected of faculty women (Ropers-Huilman, 2003). This, in turn, is just one more example of how women are forced to sort through multiple conflicting identities and battle against othering (Asher, 2002). Mattingly (1994) also views the practice of comparing selfhood in relation to others as othering.

Scholars have demonstrated how education continues to be troubled with premeditated and inflexible structures that promote gender discrimination in terms of hiring practices, pay, power, tenure, and prestige (National Organization for Women, 2009; Perry & Gundersen, 2011; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

**Sexual-Social Arrangements**

Sexual-social arrangements that have contributed to gender bias and the resulting inequalities for women holding educational positions are examined in this expose (article). For all of time, women have been challenged to develop a consciousness of self separate from a male understanding that sought to silence them through discourses of biological and sexual difference. Both overt and covert hegemonic practices of domination have permeated society resulting in the very question of whether or not a woman has the innate ability or right to be educated and/or to educate others (Miller, 1980). From an historical framework, the backlash of oppression and marginalization has impacted identity formation of women: as individuals, as teachers, and as higher education professionals. As did Stienberg (1996), the authors wonder how the teaching profession became negatively gendered by time-honored qualities of womanhood. It is our belief that society must continue to interrogate socialization practices that have time and again unconsciously indoctrinated both women and men and have served to shape the “psychological assumptions underlying our patriarchal social systems” (Deats, 1994, p. 274).

Teachers in all grade levels can and should provide opportunities for critical interrogation of oppressive behaviors. A ‘feminine’ pedagogy that encourages self-reflection will, hopefully, halt the damage of negatively categorizing individuals by race, gender, and/or other characteristics that are intended to be demeaning in some way. Students can be gently supported while attempting to understand and untangle uncomfortable historical untruths and confront their own prejudices and learned behaviors in current day terms. In an effort to understand the relationship between women’s identity and the teaching profession, an examination of the link between
gender inequalities and power/social constructions that continue to inundate educational arenas and create differences in positioning, salaries, and opportunities for advancement is critical.

**Historical Women Issues**

“Girls are conditioned into passivity: the story often goes...this is why they do so badly at school: implicitly femininity is seen as a series of roles, often imposed by agents of socialization, for whom the worst offenders are taken to be women mothers and female teachers.” (Walkerdine as cited in Munro, 1966, p.133)

Social constructions have traditionally dictated that women yield to someone else’s control. Females often receive messages that they are more feminine, acceptable, and lovable when they have little or no institutional power. Historically, “women have been led to feel that they can integrate and use all their attributes if they use them for others. They have developed the sense that their lives should be guided by the constant need to attune themselves to the wishes, desires and need of others. The others are the important ones and the guides to action” (Miller, 1980, p. 34). Some women are so attached to social, political, and economic patterns and roles that they solidly identify with those roles. These notions of submissiveness are of special concern since, first of all, they are clearly counterproductive and, secondly, females are deserving of the benefits of their hard work. As such, society must continue to explore how oppression and repression shape one’s understanding of the world in which we live.

**The Phenomenon of Othering**

As one begins to explore oppression and identity formation, most likely they will be dismayed at the ruthlessness, brutality, and utter cruelty of the colonizer to the colonized. In addition to the obvious physical violence, Fanon (1967) characterized this viciousness as the ultimate crime of depersonalization and dislocation resulting from shattered self-images and seizure of freedoms. The phenomenon of “Othering” is created when the more powerful force beats another into submission and begins to define him or herself as superior. At the same time, the oppressor takes on the crusade of arrogantly molding another into an image that is at least tolerable in his or her eyes. Ironically, both become psychologically transformed and “duped” (Fanon, 1967, p. 29) into accepting the perversions necessary to disclaim their true self-image.
Muting of Women Voice

A similar experience of muting has occurred in the span of time as society effectively convinced women that others have ultimate power over. Over time, this positioning of silencing has obliged women to respond or even fight back in order to maintain their own internal existence and not succumb to psychological defeat. Munro (1996) listened to women speak of their lives and “found embedded in their stories the struggle to name their own realities and to acknowledge the meaning they give to their experiences in spite of predominant assumptions regarding the nature and roles of women” (p. 447).

The truth remains that, as women attempt to rise to authority positions, they encounter many difficulties overcoming a tradition of servitude rather than leadership. The questions that emerge then are, how do women formulate empowering decisions for themselves and still maintain relationships? How can women take care of themselves and still care for others? In the spirit of finding balance and mending their potentially fragmented selves, women need to consciously name their multiple responsibilities and cultivate those positive feminine attributes. The perennial struggle is to define “who has the power to define whom and when and how” (McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993, p. xvi). Women can only claim equality by persistently striving for fairness and inclusion in the workplace, the home, and in society in general.

Historical Gendered Educational Issues

“So I gain truth when I expand my constricted eye, an eye that has only let in what I have been taught to see” (Pratt, 1984, p. 17).

Around 1850, coeducation became popular and an increase in women teachers paralleled the rise in females attending schools. Educational debates in early America centered on core beliefs of inferior intellectual abilities, choices for a ‘fitting” female curriculum, and basic social consequences of educating women (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003). For instance, according to the predominant male class, the fears were that if women were educated, equality of the sexes might extend to politics, employment, and other undesirable social changes. Extending this scenario to the educational arena, the dollar once again played an important part here. Hiring females in any profession, including teachers, was of course much more economically efficient than hiring their male counterparts (Perry & Gundersen, 2011, Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). The dominant portrait of the female teacher during the 1800’s was, a single woman receiving a fractions of the salary paid to men (Strober & Lanford, 1986).

Female educators have historically struggled with inequalities that resulted in the exploitation of women as professionals. As colonial America developed their
educational system, the prevailing thought was that the classroom was seen as the medium for socializing children. Even today, parents expect teachers to assume inordinate responsibilities of molding their children into productive members of society. Additionally, debates continue within the higher education circles as to whether a university’s mission or a liberal education should include moral, ethical, and personal development (Goodchild & Wechsler, 1997; Oram, 1996).

During the colonial time frame, the value of women as educators became linked to an ideal that feminine qualities of nurturing and caring would best serve the needs of a growing country. Women became the transmitters of morality, decency, and respect (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003). Furthermore, at the turn of the nineteenth century and for many years to follow, the prevailing belief was that the presence of maternal and moral components inherent in women teachers would benefit both boys and girls by providing role models for the girls and discipline for the boys (Goodchild & Weschler, 1997). Miller (1980) asks, “…and who better than women to project such ideals? Certainly, women could provide the gentility and docility needed to maintain such an atmosphere” (p. 33).

Somehow society did not embrace these wonderful female qualities that were brought into the classroom. Instead, education became a duty best carried out by females with the teaching profession concurrently becoming one of minimal recognition. Unfortunately, these supportive attributes are often taken for granted and still, to this day, receive little value in our culture. Consequently, “although women continue to be lessened as educators, and continue to be chastised for their choices and efforts, they contribute the most necessary building blocks of all education, namely nurturing, guidance and caring” (Miller, 1980, p. 34).

“Beginning with their decision to enter their chosen profession, teaching was a space in which these women continually had to define themselves by reconciling conflicting images of self with societal expectations and the gendered nature of teaching” (Munro, 1996, p. 441). Despite a history of little political and social clout, women, individually and as primary educators, have wielded tremendous personal and psychological power by supporting the growth and talent of others.

Miller (1980), while recounting the history of formalized education in the U.S., makes the statement that “women have found a welcome refuge within the teaching profession” (p. 31). On the surface, it appears that choosing education as a career path has certain perceived benefits. Entering the field of teaching seemed to offer reliability, security, and chance to work with students. However, while there is an overriding belief that teaching as a profession is a rewarding and noble endeavor, a very different portrait is portrayed when “female images reflect the notion that early childhood education is for the old main…teaching preschool is the bottom of the barrel, nursery school is a step up, and kindergarten is only a notch above” (Steinberg, 1996). These authors also assert that “resting at the basis of a patriarchal system is the
marginalization women’s work – and early childhood education, of course, is women’s work” (p. 478).

In summary, women throughout educational history have been enslaved in the role of babysitter, nursemaid, and librarian, a position that all too many women accept and embrace. Several critical theorists have begun to examine the significance of speaking out against gender preoccupations and breaking the silence that effectively imprison female educators (Hooks, 1994; Pratt, 1984; Trinh, 1989; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). Women are constantly challenged to negotiate stereotypes and other social constructions inside and outside the workplace. Rethinking fundamental pedagogy that celebrates an intuitive female approach that embraces self-reflection and community is imperative for transformation. The need for change is evident and acknowledgment of a powerful but neglected women’s elegance is of utmost importance. The ultimate issue is that women have not been given equal access to positions of authority and respect.

**Higher Education Faculty Implications**

Several aspects in higher education retell themes of injustice. Women today earn approximately 50% of all undergraduate degrees and 40% of doctoral recipients are women (Hart, 2003, p. 22). In spite of this phenomenon, there has been a growing trend in the overall employment of non-tenure-track positions. These faculty positions typically represent the lowest faculty ranks and pay, and, not surprisingly, faculty women hold a disproportionate share of these positions. Teaching to research expectations, research funding inequalities, discrepancies in space and equipment resources, are further examples of real world truths in academia (Harper, Baldwin, Gansneder & Chronister, 2001; Hill, 2004; Perna, 2001). All of these factors either stand-alone or collectively, negatively influence opportunities for advancement in higher education faculty ranks.

More recently, Hill (2004) linking low pay to a ‘feminization’ of the profession, reports that status may be going out of the higher education faculty profession as well. How ironic and prevailing is the notion that as men choose to leave a profession because of “declining social and economic status of academics” (p.8), more opportunities for women are created. Another recurring research finding relates to under-representation of full professorship ranks. Perna (2001) suggested gross inequities in faculty employment particularly at research and comprehensive universities. Hague (2003) reported less than 10 years ago that, overall, women currently hold only 13% of full professorships and 24% of senior lecturer positions. More currently, the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics (2010b), shows that salaries for women in education earn approximately 75% less than men.
Equalization efforts, however, seem to be on the rise. For example, a study by the Higher Education Funding Council for England has set in motion research in response to disappointments in career opportunities and concern for female academics’ upward mobility (Hauge, 2003, p.10). This author found that sex differences in faculty salaries are beginning to stabilize somewhat in newly appointed professors’ positions. However, this research also suggested that early advantages in pay for men vs. females remain problematic. Perna (2001) demonstrated this snowballing disadvantage that women faculty have endured as a result of annual percentage increases over time that exponentially separate the salary gap between men and women faculty (p. 287). So, yet once again, the unfortunate fact remains that research findings indicate patterns of inequity and gender discrimination still prevail (Hopkins, 1999; Hague, 2003; Hart, 2003).

Case in point, why do female educators need to speak as a man? Instead, we take this opportunity to show how the female experience of one of the authors would be written in the female voice. One of the authors vividly recalls a moment of realization and feeling of being duped by the very institutions that promote structured, rational, and limiting investigations of the truth. The author felt violated and robbed of self by the educational ivory tower that she held dear to her heart and life’s mission as an upcoming scholar. The thought of, how dare they ‘train’ me to write as a man enraged and upset her. She felt ashamed and guilty that she had unknowingly become part of a system that had accepted, still again, the notion that white males in academia have set the parameters by which acceptable scholarly writing is based.

Conclusion

Gender differences on the educational scene continue to include differences in wage scales, predominance of male administrators, and a primarily male centered curriculum (Hague, 2003; Harper, 2001; Perna, 2001). Research should be expanded on ways to uncover and analyze discriminatory gender relationships embedded within social and educational institutions and the link between cultural misconceptions of knowledge and education. Fortunately, a number of scholars have begun to publish research findings in opposition of power arrangements and patriarchal taboos within educational institutions. Further, feminist authors and researchers are increasingly addressing the marginalization of women in society as a whole.

The implications for theory and practice are many. Through increased awareness, society can allow women to celebrate their intuitive female approaches both in everyday relationships and in the classroom. A critical re-conceptualization of the role of women as caregivers, teachers, and/or professionals can help faculty women make empowering decisions for themselves, their scholarship, and their teaching while still maintaining professional relationships. Continual change and
progress with respect to hegemonic pedagogy that diminish female ways of knowing, learning, and speaking, from elementary education to academia, remains evident. It is quite interesting how various critical theorists have described the corruption of true life stories into historical facts (Bhabha, 1994; Pinar, 1995; Trinh, 1989). One can only wonder why the overarching “historiography” (Crocco & Waite, 2007) went from honoring stories as a way of teaching morality, values, and respect, to diminishing the purity of this method of ‘teaching’ life. Discounting the classical feminine tradition of learning life’s lessons through story telling is an atrocity and the ultimate massacre of wholesomeness, innocence, and decency. Hopefully, deconstructing issues of difference will bring to light the vital need for transforming negative beliefs about female professionalism (McCarthy, C. 1993; McCarthy, C., Crichlow, W., Dimitriadis, G., & Dolby, N., 2005).

As equal access to positions of power, prestige, and creativity has not yet become a reality, we must wade deeper to develop more satisfying answers. We must persevere as Allison (1995), so beautifully proclaims, “…two or things I know for sure, and one of them is that to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world” (p.72).

Thoughts of inequities period challenged the authors to once again reexamine their beliefs and values on how society and human experiences can indeed drastically impact an individual’s core being. As we reflected on cultural meanings and historical events, we were able to form a deeper appreciation of the power of demoralizing messages and how sexual-social arrangements have their basis in certain, identifiable conditions. However, it remains inconceivable as to how, at every chance possible, those who can overpower seemingly do so without a second thought. We often wonder how one can morally and psychologically justify discriminatory and repressive practices.

References


