

Editorial introduction

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EDITORIAL



Editorial introduction

Gender is how women are oppressed; sex is the excuse patriarchy uses for the oppression of women. Reality – the reality shared by women, actual women, in the world – really does matter for feminism. Metaphysical definitions of the category ‘woman’ really, really don’t. (Lavery 2023)

So writes literary scholar and trans activist, Grace Lavery, in her critique of the transphobic discourses of ‘gender critical feminism’ that have recently taken hold in anglophone contexts. Central to Lavery’s critique is an understanding of feminism that takes seriously the lived experiences of women, in particular experiences of patriarchy that ‘police’ women’s bodies based on essentialist characterisations of what it is to ‘be’ a woman. In these terms, Lavery suggests that the ‘gender critical’ movement in recent feminist discourses fails to account for the lived realities of women’s lives precisely because of its inordinate focus on gatekeeping the definitional boundaries of womanhood itself.

We agree. In a special issue that explores the relationship between adult education and gender, Lavery’s critique is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, Lavery’s critique of the transphobia of most ‘gender critical’ discourses emphasises the importance of feminist adult educators not losing sight of the root cause of women’s oppressions, in particular the interdependence between patriarchy and capitalism. Amidst capitalist societies that are structured around gender inequalities where men typically hold more power and privilege than others, the system’s dependence on social reproductive labour, or the unpaid labour involved in birthing, caring, and in managing the domestic sphere is astonishing. Mostly this falls to women and girls. In 2021, the charity Oxfam assessed the global value of this unpaid care work, if it was costed at minimum wage, at US\$10.8 trillion per year (Oxfam International 2021). When women and girls do enter the wage economy, they are more likely to be employed precariously and in low-wage, low-status jobs in which they are more likely to be harassed. The devaluing of women also includes widespread violence against women and girls, which frequently goes unchecked. According to the sociologist Raewyn Collins the masculine dominance patriarchy upholds is so strong, many men who are violent don’t necessarily think of themselves in that way and might even feel that their actions are entirely justified and authorised by the ideology of male supremacy (Collins 2005, p. 83). These are the issues that are of far greater concern in today’s world than the insistence on policing gendered spaces, which so consumes ‘gender-critical’ feminists.

In recent times, feminist discussions around issues of male privilege and gendered dimensions of power include a focus on how men and boys are socialised into patriarchal concepts of masculinity in ways that create inequalities for women and girls. Competing feminisms analyse the impacts of this binary in different ways. Liberal feminists argue women should *lean in* (Sandberg 2013) to capitalist structures so that they might share power in an unequal world and grasp for themselves whatever gender-based equality they can. More radical voices critique this logic believing only privileged women can break the so-called glass ceiling of unwritten rules and biases by *leaning on* the labour of others who are less privileged (Arruzza *et al.* 2019). These critics draw from such sources as the

World Economic Forum (2020), who claim that if we follow the current trajectory of reforms, it will take a hundred years for the gender-pay gap to close.

Gender and feminist theories do not simply focus on inequalities experienced by women and girls solely on the basis of gender identity. Theories of intersectionality help problematise any single-axis analysis of oppression, recognising instead the accumulative effects of multiple oppressions experienced on the basis of gender alongside ethnicity, citizenship, social class, financial poverty, and disability (Crenshaw 1989, Ross and Solinger 2017). In this vein, gender theorists have offered perspectives that interrupt the location of feminist discourses along a narrowly defined, male-female binary. In particular, Judith Butler (1990) challenges the singular and unified conception of womanhood that 'constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued' (1990, p. 2). Moreover, queer and trans theorists continue to successfully problematise heteronormative and cisnormative cultures and essentialist views of gender, sexuality, and their intersections more broadly.

This is the framing through which we introduce this special edition of *Studies in The Education of Adults*, which explores the potential for adult and community education to play a role in working towards a more just and equal society. We extend our gratitude to the contributing authors each of whom bring unique, sometimes overlapping perspectives that shines an important light on our understanding of gender. For example, Jocey Quinn's focus on how the learning that happens in everyday life that is beyond the formal has a powerful impact on formations of gender, class, race, sexuality, and disability and is thus a key field of enquiry with important consequences for gender equality. Elsewhere Saskia Eschenbacher and Nils Weber bridge ideas about transformative learning often attributed to Jack Mezirow with the insights of Judith Butler in deconstructing the gender binary so that we might awaken in people how we need not be trapped into beliefs about particular ways of being in the world. The significance of incorporating a gender analysis into our lived experiences is also taken up by Niall Dempsey who uses autoethnography to powerfully lay bare the fragility and instability of the gender binary. In so doing, he offers some liberatory possibilities for men, and disabled men in particular, whose lives and potential for transformative learning are limited in the barren and, often toxic, terrain of hegemonic notions of masculinity. Abarna Selvarajah's use of personal interviews is another example of the power of deep inquiry, this time to provoke a considered understanding of the gendered experiences of Tamil women living in Ontario, Canada. Another deep, qualitative research methodology is adopted by Balwant Kaur who uses walking interviews to showcase the transformative nature of adult education through the educational narratives of urban-based South Asian Muslim women. Together they identify places of educational encounter as they uncover some unsettling truths about the intersections of race, gender, and migratory settlement. The methodology Kaur adopts provides a foundation for the women she walked with to find agency, creativity, and a commitment to forming future community. Research methodologies such as these are common-place in adult education and regularly feature within other volumes of *Studies in the Education of Adult*, not just this special edition.

Grace Lavery's critique that opened this introduction is also important for feminist adult educators of all genders in exposing the heterogeneity of women's lives, and with it, the need to approach such lives with a nuanced sensitivity to complexity and context. Saskia Eschenbacher's powerful account of the effect period poverty has on billions of people, both financially and because of negative social norms surrounding menstruating, illuminates the extent to which people's lives can differ in a world where gender-based inequalities play a significant part. Saskia demonstrates how adult education can play a crucial role in raising

awareness, destigmatising menstruation and empowering communities to take action. Building community is also a central focus of the thought-provoking contribution by Zoe Meletis, Annie Booth, Laura Pyke and Ashley Riceman who bring us into the heart of a series of talks, workshops and other educational exchanges as part of a Canada-based initiative focused on the impacts of male violence against women. By engaging with issues across the gender spectrum and in support of feminist, queer and Indigenous ways of being, they seek bridges between university, community, scholarship, and action beyond formal learning scenarios. In a separate contribution, Shereen H. Shaw, Ghada Nakhla and Sonia Soans examine the role of adult education in the lives of Syrian women who arrived to the UK as refugees and explore education's ability to bridge the gap between cultures by serving as a tool of self-expression and integration.

Lavery's emphasis on the realities of 'actual women' in the world also brings into focus the importance of feminist adult educators responding to women's complex experiences in ways that bring about concrete social and political change for women and all others in adult education settings. Sometimes this is against the grain of government discourse as Ayca Kaymakcioglu demonstrates in their account of how adult education methodologies can interrupt narrow versions of 'the family'. As M.E. O'Brien argues elsewhere, when we understand the traditional family as little more than an economic unit that maintains male domination, we begin to see its limits to human emancipation and the coercive nature of its logic (O'Brien 2023, p. 3–4).


As a whole, the contributions we present in this special edition evidence ways in which adult education can be a worthwhile space for intersectional work given how the traditional education system has acted, and, indeed, continues to act, as a significant site for the inculcation of heteronormative, cisnormative, and patriarchal gender norms (Heyder and Kessels 2013) and the stigmatisation and exclusion of trans and non-binary people (Sayre Smith *et al.* 2018). Where changes have been initiated in formal educational settings, there are growing concerns that these are often superficial; a vernacular of intersectionality and inclusivity is adopted without the corresponding commitment to ending the institutional structures that perpetuate inequality in the first place (Ahmed 2017, Salem 2018). Working against this superficial vein, adult education is primed to offer an alternative given how adults educators often seek to interrupt unequal distributions of power and privilege. Sometimes this can be through praxis-oriented, counter-hegemonic feminist pedagogies within social movements and community spaces (Fitzsimons 2022), while at other times this can be through critically-charged and participative initiatives within schools, colleges and universities. Such initiatives include programmes that focus on: *equality of access* within subject areas like STEM; *equality of participation* through gender-responsive curricula and supports; and *equality of outcome* through efforts to address work-based and wider social issues including sexism and misogyny, transphobia and homophobia. Across all these different efforts, a shared concern and commitment for effecting social and political change persists. It is this commitment that orients the purpose of this special issue on adult education and gender as together, we analyse, respond to and subvert social constructions of masculinity and femininity and how these play out in a wide variety of pedagogic spaces.

Disclosure statement

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