

DOING GENDER STUDIES IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA: THE IMPACT ON UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS LIVES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

The Gender Studies Program was introduced as a discipline within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya in 1994. Gender studies as a discipline has, since its inception, been viewed as a transformative project which imparts not only knowledge and learning but significantly affects all areas of lives of those who participate in it. The aim of this article is to determine whether Gender Studies training impacts on our undergraduate students' lives. The findings from this paper will highlight whether the Gender Studies Program, University Malaya has met its objectives in creating gender awareness and critical thinking in individuals who can shape a just and equal society free from all discriminations particularly discrimination against women. It is important to conduct this analysis as Gender Studies training contributes towards feminists' activism through its teaching and learning process. Besides examining the impact of Gender Studies on our undergraduate students' lives, the other dimension to the paper is also to obtain feminist critiques about the significance of Gender Studies as an academic entity and feminism as a social movement. The article will be divided into seven parts which includes: introduction, a brief history of the Gender Studies Program, University of Malaya, and significance of the study, literature review, methodology, findings and conclusion.

Keywords: gender studies, gender awareness, critical thinking, transformative project, learning and impact on lives, impact on relationships

Introduction

It was not until the completion of our first semester that we questioned and inquired of ourselves the impact of teaching Gender Studies for our undergraduate students within the grounds of a public institution. There is a great sense of need to understand and analyse whether the courses that we have been teaching make a difference in our students' lives. Even though we have been teaching Gender Studies since 2005,

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we have done so not in the capacity of full-time lecturers. Thus, we do not have access, opportunity and resources to analyse and to obtain feedback on our teaching from the undergraduate students. Therefore, after becoming full-time lecturers in the Gender Studies Programme in 2006, we started discussing and posing questions to ourselves as to what roles we play in this process of personal and knowledge transformation in terms of values in our students' lives. With this in mind, we embarked on this journey to conduct a survey amongst our undergraduate students to analyse their responses and reactions towards learning and training in Gender Studies.

Before we delve into the significance of the research we will outline the "herstory" formalization and institutionalization of Gender Studies Programme in the University of Malaya. The next section will depict the objectives and significance of the establishment of the Gender Studies Programme, University of Malaya.

Herstory of Gender Studies in the University of Malaya

Year 2010 marks the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Gender Studies Program (hereinafter be referred to as GSP) in the University of Malaya. The Program was officially launched during the 1994/1995 academic session, under the Dean's Office of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. It is multi-disciplinary in approach and offers a range of courses from theory to methodology dealing with the family, economics, politics, peace and conflict, law and religion.¹ Gender Studies as a teaching discipline is a novel idea in Malaysia because it requires academics and students to deconstruct and reconstruct traditional values.²

The GSP was introduced to fulfill the country's needs as a newly industrialized nation. This programme nurtures the students to be sensitive towards gender issues' to generate new insights and understanding on all aspects of social, economic and political life. It is hoped that with their exposure, students are able to provide positive perspectives on gender-related issues.³ Besides undergraduate courses, the programme also provides a platform for academic discourse on gender by organizing forums, seminars, workshops, and conferences.⁴

The responsibility of preparing the course-outline package was given to a few senior faculty members under the leadership of the then Coordinator of Gender Studies, Prof. Nik Safiah Karim.⁵ Two senior faculty members, Dr. Rokiah Talib and Dr. Susan Oorjitham, went on a fact-finding mission to several Canadian universities which assisted in the development of the curriculum of the GSP. This venture was sponsored and supported by the Canadian Co-operative and Support Office (CIDA).⁶

The GSP's objective is to train gender sensitive students who can apply their training when they enter the job market. Students will be able to benefit from the wide exposure of course offerings in various academic disciplines and are expected to have more critically informed perspectives on gender relations and gender roles in society and culture.⁷ The GSP encourages students to take a minor in Gender Studies. The GSP courses are also offered as electives for students from the Faculty

of Arts and Social Sciences as well as for students from other faculties. This allows for greater flexibility in employment opportunities.⁸

Given their training, they are expected to be more sensitive and have a more progressive perspective on issues related to gender. Graduates could improve existing and future policies and laws or even reformulate policies and laws so that they are gender sensitive. The GSP networks with both local and international organizations that are tapped regularly for support. The local ones are from other local universities, HAWA (The Women's Affairs Department formerly under the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development and later under the Prime Minister's Department, and more recently the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development) and local women's and other NGOs. The international organizations that have supported the GSP are the Canadian Co-operative and Support Office (CIDA), The Asia-Pacific Gender and Development Center (APDC) and the Committee for International Co-operative in Higher Education (CICHE) under the British Council.⁹

The GSP has offered both core and elective courses in which students need to obtain at least 27 credit hours to minor in Gender Studies; each course is 3 credit hours.¹⁰

It is important to emphasize here that GSP at the University of Malaya has addressed many and interrelated issues on gender in development at the national and international levels, especially in courses such as Gender and Development; Gender and Citizenship; Gender, Conflict and Peace; Gender and Law; Gender and Politics, etc. Thus, the GSP of the University of Malaya is the only institution in the country that offers an undergraduate teaching program for a minor in Gender Studies.¹¹ Other universities in Malaysia such as University of Science Malaysia, University Putra Malaysia and the National University of Malaysia have Women's Studies Programs which engages in research with minimal teaching.¹²

The Significance of the Research

In the wake of globalization, identity politics, fundamentalism, and new forms of patriarchy, we felt there is a need to instill feminist values and perspectives in recognizing that there are inequalities and power relations which need to be addressed, discussed and improved for a just and equal society.

This research project is important in measuring the achievement and impact of Gender Studies as a discipline which is viewed as a transformative project which imparts not only knowledge and learning but also, significantly affects all areas of those who participate within it. It will give the opportunity for students to know and be concerned about issues relating to politics, the economy, social and cultural issues both at the national and international levels. It can debunk myths suggesting that GSP can breed anti-men attitudes and spread an extremist, western feminist influence among students.

The objectives of this article will be to explore the following; the perception of undergraduate students towards gender studies training; the reasons which influence undergraduate students to choose gender studies courses; the impact of gender studies training on undergraduate students' relationships with their family, friends and partners.

Literature Review

This research is influenced by a research project on "Employment and Women's Studies: The Impact of Women's Studies Training on Women's Employment in Europe."¹³ The research was conducted from 2001 to 2003 and funded by the Directorate General XII (Research) of the European Union.¹⁴ Even though there have been many research projects conducted in Malaysia to examine and analyse the women's movement, and development, to date there is no specific research conducted to examine the impact of Gender Studies training on students' lives, their relationships and employment. We know that Gender Studies training exists in many institutions and take different forms ranging from the government sector to NGO's in creating gender awareness in the society. Institutions of higher education could also assist the process through appropriate curricula and through developing research agendas.

This article will also explore the role of academicians in their contribution to politics as well as to social movements. There are some who question the effort to institute Gender Studies as politically ineffective for reaching the stated goals shared by all feminists as these are stated by some activists.¹⁵ This opinion is opposed by feminist activists from academia who believe that they too contribute by disseminating knowledge and creating awareness amongst university students. It is critical to conduct this analysis as we strongly believe that Gender Studies training contributes towards feminists' activism through the teaching and learning process.

Wiegman (2002)¹⁶ raises the fear among feminist political activists that Women Studies produced many contemporary feminist scholars who are more academic than feminist and who are more bureaucratic, hierarchical, and careerist than ever before.¹⁷ Nonetheless she defends the significance of Women Studies as an important part of the humanities and not merely the domain of a certain kind of anti-patriarchal theoretical obsession.¹⁸ She further adds that Women Studies' methodological emphasis lies within the 'live subject' as the proper object of study and the agent for reviving social justice goals. Meanwhile Newman (2002)¹⁹, in her article emphasizes Women Studies' programs' anxiety over institutionalization when the transformation of the university is negotiated in its relation to the nation-state. Therefore, the function of a university will no longer be for deployment of knowledge production and social change but will serve as one of the agents of the nation-state. Newman further emphasized that the Women Studies presentism²⁰ produces a curriculum that registers the value of all knowledge according to its usability for the present as defined by our understanding of the needs of present politics.²¹

Ellen Messer-Davidow (2002)²² in her book *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse*, centers her argument around a key question about the

development of the field of Women's Studies in institutions: "How did it happen that a bold venture launched thirty years ago to transform academic and social institutions was itself transformed by them?".²³ Her position is that Women Studies has become a part of the institutional system largely engaged in intellectual scholarship too removed from its activist components.²⁴ A reorientation is needed to reach the goals originally set in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and to achieve those goals now requires new thinking about strategies, tactics and organization.²⁵

Shanthi Thambiah (2004)²⁶ in the report about *Gender Studies in the Asia-Pacific* discusses the development of Gender Studies in Malaysia. Despite the difficulties and obstacles, Malaysian women and men have made their contributions in starting research projects, dialogues, initiatives and teaching by mobilizing their internal resource capabilities and by taking advantage of the opportunities provided by both international and national agencies.²⁷ Therefore, academics both women and men, need to continue to struggle to incorporate feminism and the gender perspective into their mainstream courses.²⁸

Oanda I. Ogachi (2000)²⁹ in her article *Women and Gender Studies in East African Universities and the Need for a Transformative Pedagogy: Issues and Challenges*, explains the increasing significance of gender analysis as a critical Social Science methodology, as part of disciplines and as a strategy to academic discourse and the culture of the institutions. These developments represent a great leap in the quest for women's empowerment and the struggle of feminist scholarship for visibility in academic knowledge.

Joan Acker et al (1991)³⁰ examine principles of feminist research and discuss the authors' attempts to use these principles in systematic ways in their own research. Three principles of feminist research have been identified; (a) that the research should contribute to women's liberation through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves, (b) the research should use methods of gaining knowledge that are not oppressive and should continually develop a feminist critical perspective that questions dominant intellectual traditions and (c) can reflect on its development.³¹ According to the authors, they consciously apply these principles in researching the relations between changes in consciousness and the changes in the structural situations of individuals. They raised several methodological issues and encountered various dilemmas.³² These includes the impossibility of creating a research process that completely erases the contradictions in the relationships between the researcher and the researched, the difficulties in analyzing change in process, the tension between the necessity of organizing the data and producing an analysis which reveals the totality of women's lives, and problems of validity, particularly those raised when the research process becomes part of the process of change.³³

Thus through our experiences in teaching Gender Studies we would like to share the voices of our students who were engaged in learning and knowledge production through the courses offered by the Gender Studies Program in the University of Malaya. All feedback and the survey conducted with our students on the subject matter serve as testimonies that Gender Studies indeed ignite personal

and knowledge transformation and give an impact to the way the students think, analyze critically and handle their daily journey of life with their friends, families and partners.

Besides examining the impact of Gender Studies on our undergraduate students' lives, the other dimension to the paper is also to obtain feminist critiques about the significance of Gender Studies as an academic entity and feminism as a social movement about the role of academicians from the vantage point of feminist activists who often view feminism's incorporation into the university as a betrayal of community and academic professionalization as a depletion of political energy from arenas of greater social concern.³⁴ It is our hope and belief that this initial research will reveal that academics who are aware of the importance of gender-centered studies will not merely be concerned with theory but will facilitate students' agency so as to shape a just and equal society free from any discrimination particularly discrimination against women. Therefore, Gender Studies training also contributes towards feminist activism through the teaching and learning process. We also believe that universities must become directly engaged with civil society and government in finding and applying solutions to pressing social needs.³⁵ This is in line with one of the objectives of Gender Studies training which states that this training and learning cannot be detached from social needs. According to Boothroyd et al (2004),³⁶ the misconception that students should simply absorb knowledge generated and imparted by professors, then wait until they graduate before applying it, reflects an incomplete conception of personal and social learning processes.³⁷

It has been highlighted in the same literature that pedagogy, discovery, and access to higher education are all enhanced when universities and their members become directly involved with social problem solving, especially when the involvement is made an integral component of teaching and research rather than being relegated to the academic side-lines.³⁸

Methodology of the Research

By using the qualitative approach we can capture real experiences and feelings felt by students and we opted to move away from the conventional and rigid methodology of quantitative research so as to provide a more holistic analysis. The open-ended questionnaire became an important method in this research for exploring the students' experiences and obtaining their feedback on the courses and Gender Studies training as a whole.

We conducted a study in the form of an open-ended questionnaire and distributed 110 questionnaires to students that we taught in the second semester of the academic year 2006/07 in the following courses.

- a) Gender Research Methodology
- b) Gender and Development
- c) Gender, Peace and Conflict
- d) Gender and Citizenship

Overall the students' responses were very encouraging in which we received 100% responses consisting of 88 females and 22 males. There were 5 areas posed in Bahasa Malaysia to our undergraduate students which are as follows:

1. opinions/ views of our undergraduate students towards Gender Studies training.
2. reasons which influence our undergraduate students to choose Gender Studies courses.
3. the impact of Gender Studies training on undergraduate students relationships with their family, friends and partner.
4. the impact of Gender Studies training on undergraduates students' personal lives.
5. suggestions for improvement.

In order for us to analyze all the responses from the undergraduate students, we have clustered similar answers to make up the percentage and we have adopted a simple percentage in our analysis.

Undeniably, most of the feminist research projects which encapsulate "Doing Gender Studies" favour and embrace qualitative methods for convincing reasons in exploring people's lives because they permit women to express their experience fully and within their own capacity and on their own. Several feminist researchers including DuBois (1983)³⁹ criticize the simplistic and superficial nature of the quantitative method. She also claims that quantitative research techniques distort women's experiences and result in the silencing of women's voice.⁴⁰ Smith (1987)⁴¹ emphasizes that the social scientist's method must permit respondents to describe the world as they experience it:

*"There are and must be different experiences of the world and different bases of experience. We must not do away with them by taking advantage of our privileged speaking to construct a sociological version which we then impose upon them as their reality. We may not rewrite the other world or impose upon it a conceptual framework which extracts from it what fits with ours. Our conceptual procedures should be capable of explicating and analyzing the properties of their experience rather than administering it. Their reality, their varieties of experience must be an unconditional datum"*⁴²

According to Reinharz (1986)⁴³ the qualitative approach became the primary method and is accepted as the way to expose the multi-faceted reality of women's lives. Her statement also supported by Bowles and Duelli Klein (1983), Roberts (1981) and Stanley and Wise (1983) which agrees that the research origins of Women's Studies lie in qualitative methods.

However, Ann Oakley (2000)⁴⁴ discusses the function of the qualitative and quantitative dichotomy as a gendered ideological representation. According to her within this gendering of methodology, experimental methods are seen as the "quantitative" and therefore the most masculine.⁴⁵ These processes of methodological development and gendering cannot be separated from the ways in which both science and social science developed and the social relations in which they are embedded.⁴⁶

In this dichotomy qualitative methods are the most feminine and the survey with its presentations of findings in numbers whether descriptive or explanatory represents the masculine.⁴⁷

Firstly, we would like to qualify that this is an initial stage and a 'raw' piece of research which we hope to refine in the areas of methodology and analysis in the near future. This research uses both the quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse students' responses. We believe that by using the qualitative approach we can capture real experiences and feelings. The survey which is in the form of an open-ended questionnaire became an important method in this research for exploring the students' experiences and obtaining their feedback about the GSP courses and training. Nevertheless, we are aware that there are many gaps and weaknesses in this initial research because the survey was administered to only half of the undergraduates who enrolled into this program. Due to the limitations, the results and analysis may not be an absolute measurement of the impact of GSP to all of the students who are Gender Minor students. Hence, there is a dire need to do further research in the future which includes undergraduates, graduates and postgraduates who underwent Gender Studies training and examining the impact of GSP in a broader perspective.

Findings of the Study

The analysis is categorized into four parts according to questions posed in the questionnaire. Every part of the analysis will consist of the students' testimonies with regard to the questions posed. The analysis does not include the responses we gathered from the fifth question with regard to the suggestions made for improvement of Gender Studies training.

A. Opinions/Views in Gender Studies Training

Of the total number of 100 respondents, 74 female and 9 male responded positively in finding the Gender Studies training as a platform for them to be *"able to discuss openly within a safe environment, construction of new knowledge and intellectualism on issues of women's rights, social issues, oppressions and discriminations, violence against women"*. The students further responded that GSP should be *"a course which needs to be incorporated in all public tertiary education and needs to be expanded and explored"*. The students reiterate that GSP *"created interest towards learning further GS and GSP is able to compete with other courses and should be continued as it's very unique and different"*. There were also responses which regard GSP with the wrong perception as *"myth and wrong perception regarding GS i.e. GS centers around women studies only, however after following through the course, GS expands on other issues such as power relations between men and women"*.

Student Testimonies...

According to a male respondent *"...Pengajian Gender perlu diperluaskan pemahamannya kepada semua pelajar. Pengajian Gender perlu membuat publisiti kerana 40 orang pelajar masih tidak mencukupi untuk mengubah pandangan masyarakat."*

Pengajian ini telah membuka mata dan saya berasa beruntung kerana saya berkemampuan untuk mengubah perspektif masyarakat walaupun bukan dalam unit yang besar..."
 ("...GSP should be expanded to all students. GSP should broaden its publicity because 40 students are not enough to create awareness and change societal perceptions. GSP has been an eye opener for me and I feel privileged, because I'm able to contribute in creating awareness and changing societal perspectives even though in a small way...")

According to the male respondent "...perkataan "Gender" pada saya menimbulkan minat untuk mendalami keistimewaan kursus ini.."
 ("...the word "Gender" in my opinion has created interest to further understand the uniqueness of the GSP...")

According to a female respondent: "...pada mulanya sebagai syarat jabatan, namun bila mengikuti kursus rasa sangat serasi dengan personaliti saya yang ingin memperjuangkan hak wanita...".
 ("...initially it was as a department's pre-requisite subject, however, after following through the program, I feel that the program is suitable for my personality and I would like to defend women's rights...").

Eleven female students responded that it is "...difficult to understand and learn GSP...; six female students noted the "...lack of exposure to GSP.."; two female students responded that "...it is their first time hearing about GSP..".

B. Reasons for Choosing Gender Studies Programme

44 of the female students and 16 of the male students responded that "...they have taken GS by choice because of their interest, drawn by the word "Gender"; helps in their research, construction of knowledge, various issues on conflict and war, citizenship, helps in understanding feminist movements, understanding social issues and gender relations, they noted the clear objectives spelled out in the course outlines and learning outcomes..". There was one male student who responded that by taking GSP, he is able to "...delve into the concept of patriarchy...".

Nine female students and one male student responded that they took GSP courses because "... firstly because there is no choice because of suitability of timetable but eventually find GSP very interesting..." One male student responded that he "...does not know why he followed GSP courses..."

C. Impact of Gender Studies Training on Their Relationships with Their Families, Friends and Partners

Sixty female students and 16 male students responded that "...they learnt to be more respectful, more sharing, able to subscribe to the division of labour at home, voice out, better relationship, try to practice what has been learnt at home, better understanding of the partner, self respect, a more stable relationship, more independent, more open to discuss sensitive issues, disseminate information on women's rights and oppression..."

Student Testimonies

"...Selepas saya memilih untuk mempelajari pengajian ini, perhubungan saya dengan keluarga lebih baik kerana saya boleh bersuara walaupun saya anak perempuan. Perhubungan saya dengan rakan-rakan adalah lebih baik memandangkan saya lebih yakin dengan diri sendiri. Perhubungan saya dengan pasangan saya lebih seimbang kerana saya mempunyai hak untuk bersuara..." (perempuan).

("...After taking this programme, the relationship between my family and me has improved because I'm able to express and voice out even though I'm a female in the family. In addition, the relationship with my friends has also improved as I'm more confident of myself. Furthermore the relationship with my partner is more balanced because I'm able to express and voice my rights...")(female)

"...dijadikan salah satu subjek atau kursus wajib universiti supaya semua pelajar atau individu dapat mengubah tanggapan serta persepsi yang tidak baik terhadap pengajian Gender kerana ada yang mengatakan RPG (Rancangan Pengajian Gender) adalah bias terhadap lelaki..." lelaki)

("...to make it a compulsory subject at the university in order for all students and individuals to change the negative perception towards GSP as GSP has been labeled as a program which is biased towards men...")(male)

"...perlu menarik lebih minat pelajar terutama lelaki supaya mereka dapat memahami wanita dan masalah wanita. Dengan ini timbul kesedaran dalam diri mereka agar tidak membuli atau memperkecilkan wanita. Saya rasa perlu juga dimasukkan pengajian maskulin supaya lebih ramai yang berminat. Masih ramai yang tidak tahu bahawa terdapat pengajian Gender di UM, so perlu kempen secara menyeluruh...." (perempuan)

("...there is a need to attract more students' especially male students in order for them to understand more about females and their problems. This will create self-awareness within them not to oppress or bully females. I'm also of the opinion that the program should also include masculinity studies to attract more students, male and female. At present, there is still a lack of awareness on the existence of GSP in UM, therefore there is a necessity to organize a comprehensive campaign to create the awareness...")(female)

D. Impact of Gender Studies Training on Their Personal Lives

Eighty female and 15 male respondents responded that they are *"more gender sensitive, that there is empowerment of the female students, empathy towards communities, construction of new knowledge, awareness of social construction of gender, personal transformations in terms of values..."*.

Student Testimonies

"...beberapa kesan positif terhadap kehidupan saya. Pertama, pengajian ini membantu dengan jelas peranan saya sebagai wanita dalam masyarakat. Saya mula berdikari dan mampu melakukan tugas-tugas yang dikatakan bersifat 'lelaki'..."(perempuan)

("...there are positive signs which shape my life. Firstly, this program has helped me to understand my role as a woman in this society. I'm more independent and able to handle jobs which have always been labeled as "men's jobs"...)(female)

"...kesannya sangat baik .Saya mula menghormati hak wanita..."(pelajar lelaki)
("...there is a positive impact. I'm beginning to respect women's rights..")(male)

Seven female students and two male students responded that "...Gender Studies did not influence and did not impact them in their daily lives..."

Conclusion

The analysis suggests that Gender Studies training facilitates personal, social, intellectual development and transformation. It enables the students to renew relationships and to articulate the inequalities they experience. The research findings foster knowledge, skills and attitudes which then translate into the desire to effect changes in relationships and everyday practices of our students. The analysis shows that Gender Studies increases gender awareness, self-confidence and critical thinking. Many students enroll in Gender Studies because its content reflects their personal experiences and concerns. They then find Gender Studies as enabling them to develop meta-discourses about their experiences which help them to confront experiences and in time to transcend and move beyond them. The research reveals that the teaching and learning process within the Gender Studies raises the intellectual tone of the society, conscientising the public about gender discrimination and most importantly providing, a platform to voice out experiences and thoughts in different ways, in us embracing diversities to create a just, equal and democratic society.

We believe through our explication that academia and feminists activisms are worlds which are not separated but are interweaved and interrelated. This learning and knowledge transformation is a force that will challenge patriarchy, fundamentalism, racism and globalisation. However, there are hurdles which the Gender Studies must face which include the lack of support in terms of resource allocation and human resources. Negative perceptions and myths regarding Gender Studies still influence some students in their choosing of courses. In addition Gender Studies lacks publicity and promotion within the institution. Cultural factors, religious values and norms are always seen as conflicting with Gender Studies instead of working with the program to encourage and foster a just society. The foundation of formal and informal education from the very beginning does not expose and encourage discussions on gender issues and gender relations. This lack of recognition of the importance and significance of Gender Studies as an impetus for social and knowledge transformation serves as an impediment to the expansion of Gender Studies. Finally,

one cannot avoid the whole notion of 'culture of fear' embedded within us which discourages open engagement with and discourses on gender which will touch upon 'sensitive' issues. It is our hope that the training and learning process provided by the Gender Studies Program facilitate social engagement in higher education in spite of many odds.

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