



Should Gender Studies be a core subject in Further Education?



By Jean Harrington, Media Analysis teacher in Dunboyne College of Further Education

Laura Bates, founder of Everyday Sexism: 'If you think men and women should be treated equally, regardless of sex or gender, then you're a feminist.'

When I was growing up, I believed I was equal to my male peers and I expected to be treated as such. I didn't need to shout about it; the shouting had already taken place. Therefore, I didn't define myself as a feminist; the rights I had were enshrined in legislation. I could stand on the shoulders of the giants who went before me, without realising I was doing it. The concept of

feminism was part of my world.

There have always been people, however, who want to denigrate feminism, to turn it into the 'F-word', to make it something to be ashamed of. This became very obvious when news broke that more than 200 schoolgirls had been kidnapped by terrorists in Nigeria several years ago. Some of my friends posted comments on Facebook such as: 'I'm not a feminist, **but** I believe women are entitled to an education as much as men.' Comments from other women followed: 'I'm not a feminist either **but** I agree.'

So, women in Ireland were debating and abhorring the fact that girls were kidnapped because they were receiving an education, but denied being feminists. The irony was not lost on me. But where are people to learn about gender issues, if not at school? Clearly my Facebook friends didn't understand what feminism was.

Which brings me to the core question: if there is so much misunderstanding about what should be a simple concept – equal rights for men and women – should gender studies be a core subject in Further Education? If

students are not introduced to these issues in an educational context, it leaves a vacuum for the media to fill with celebrity opinion.

Geri Halliwell, formally of the Spice Girls, is one such celebrity. 'Feminism is bra-burning lesbianism. It's very unglamorous.'¹

Lady Gaga denied she was a feminist, but in her denial showed she didn't understand what it was. 'I'm not a feminist. I hail men, I love men.'²

Some people think that the F-word has become so sullied that it needs to be rebranded, so Elle UK started a campaign last year to 'rebrand' feminism.³ They hired three ad agencies – Brave, Mother and Wieden + Kennedy – who came up with different posters and campaigns on what feminism is. What was particularly interesting was that they didn't try to change the name; they simply embarked on an educational campaign.

Therein lies the crux of the matter. If the majority of the population do not understand a relatively simple concept like feminism, that surely demonstrates how our education system is failing them. They have to rely on Facebook or Twitter – or worse still, young celebrities – to try to understand gender issues and discrimination. And if female celebrities see the word as contaminated, maybe it is no surprise that women who are posting about women's rights are refusing to call themselves feminists. Demi Moore⁴, Susan Sarandon⁵ and Sarah Jessica Parker⁶ are among some of the celebrities who have rejected the term 'feminist' preferring to call themselves

'humanist' to get away from the negative connotations associated with feminism.

Because young people in the West are born into a society where they don't need to fight for their rights, they don't see feminism as being relevant. But yet, women in Ireland still earn on average 17% less than their male counterparts who do the same job. Sexism is rife – even in the hallowed halls of universities. Professor Pat O'Connor⁷ of University of Limerick has written extensively on how universities operate a male-dominated environment where less than one in five of those in senior management are women, despite the fact that women make up almost 40 per cent of staff.

Many women in Ireland don't think they need the concept of feminism anymore, just as I didn't think I needed to shout about it when I was younger. Equal rights for men and women are already in existence for us, as they are for the majority of our students. Despite this, sexism is rife in our culture.

This was the genesis of *Everyday Sexism*, a project founded by Laura Bates to document and catalogue the hundreds of instances of sexism which are experienced by women daily. She realised how invisible sexism had become in our culture. Despite what six out of seven women believe, feminism is still relevant and has a place in our world.

Therefore, our educational institutions seem the obvious choice to teach young people about gender issues; about feminism, sexism, discrimination (against men and women). The student demographic in Ireland is changing. It is only by providing a safe and healthy environment for people to discuss these

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issues in a mature and reflective way that we, as a society, can hope to deal with them in a calm and progressive manner.

Gender issues are a core part of society today, just as much as they were before women won the right to vote in Ireland. As society becomes more multicultural, we will be faced with diverse problems and questions in relation to gender equality. To handle them we need to educate ourselves on all the aspects of gender inequality. The first step towards solving a problem is to be aware of it.

I don't have the answers; I only have questions. But maybe that's not a bad thing. Because as soon as a society thinks that they have all the answers, that they know everything – that's when complacency sets in. We need to continuously question ourselves, and encourage our students to question everything. We need a nation of critical thinkers who will question the establishment, who will question knowledge that is presented through the traditional media, through social media and through official sources.

This is in line with the 'Socratic teaching method'. The teacher must know his or her subject, but should also know the limits of their knowledge. In the words of Plato, 'Knowledge will not come from teaching, but from questioning.'

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/24/gender.pop>

2 <https://bitchmedia.org/post/lady-gaga-im-not-a-feminist-i-hail-men-i-love-men>

3 http://www.elleuk.com/fashion/celebrity-style/articles/a2322/elle-rebrands-feminism/?utm_content=bufferab2b3&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

4 <http://metro.co.uk/2008/11/27/demi-moore-im-not-a-feminist-2-192155/>

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2013/jun/30/susan-sarandon-q-and-a>

6 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/starsandstories/8749418/Sarah-Jessica-Parker-from-Manolos-to-motherhood.html>

7 <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/university-management-a-mans-world-survey-reveals-265254.html>