

# "Doing Gender in South African Universities": Reflections on a research forum celebrating ten years of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape



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Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) celebrated its tenth anniversary as an academic programme this year (2005). WGS is currently an interdisciplinary academic programme within the Arts Faculty that operates as a fully-fledged department. It offers undergraduate modules towards a major in WGS, as well as a postgraduate programme for Honours, Masters and doctoral degrees in WGS. It is also active in a wide range of research activities and international and local collaborative endeavours, including curriculum development projects and staff-student exchanges. WGS, emerging out of UWC's political history as a "struggle university" and the broader context of women's struggles in South Africa, works hard to maintain a strong local and community orientation. Offering a part-time after-hours programme ensures that WGS continues to service mature students, many of whom work in local women's or gender organisations.

A two-day research colloquium (28–29 July 2005) marking the anniversary brought together feminist academics, students, researchers, writers and activists who study, teach or research issues concerning women, men and gender, either in their own disciplines, or in the dedicated area of gender studies. The colloquium honoured the achievements of the decade of WGS at UWC, acknowledging its base in the broader struggles for gender equality in the country, as well as at UWC itself. At the same time, it paid tribute to gender studies in universities across South Africa. The forum gave voice to the history of gender studies in South Africa, especially in the Western Cape, while also providing space for sharing and interrogating the continuing challenges, controversies and debates within women's and gender studies programmes and the broader

academy. The event showcased contemporary accomplishments in research and teaching in local gender studies, in addition to engaging with the philosophical and practical challenges of achieving these milestones.

The first panel of the colloquium included the current leaders of women's and gender studies programmes in the Western Cape: Amina Mama of the African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town, Amanda Gouws from the University of Stellenbosch, and Tammy Shefer, current director of WGS at UWC. Also on the panel was the first director of WGS at UWC, Rhoda Kadalie, who invoked nostalgia from the audience with her recollections of the early years of the programme and the activism of that period. She provided a moving account of the ways in which gains – such as the battle for maternity leave – were made through the lived experiences of women staff.

The colloquium was notably well-attended by students of WGS at UWC, and a highlight was a panel of students (Fouten; Hoek; Mitchell; Mohamed and Abrahams; Roman and Krause), who presented their research and reflected on the challenges they experienced. Students on the panels and in the audience talked about building international and local networks to conduct research, and their commitment to sharing what they learn at WGS with other programmes and other students in the university. They also spoke about the essential intellectual and emotional support they received from WGS, which enabled them to grow and flourish in their scholarly and personal lives.

Within the broad topic of knowledge production and teaching gender at universities in South Africa, a number of themes emerged. The link between feminist academic work and community-based practice and activism came under scrutiny in the light of the shifting political terrain of South Africa over the last decade. While this link has persisted, the shift from mass mobilisation and the democratic struggle towards a period of reconstruction has meant wide-ranging changes in the way we do gender work in universities, both as students and staff. Students (and their teachers) are no longer visibly active in marches and demonstrations, and the integration of the academic/research project with women's struggles and the broader democratic struggle is not as clear. Gender studies programmes could be criticised for no longer achieving the ideal model of political and activist integration in their work as they did in the 1980s and 1990s.

But do these changes necessarily mean we are no longer relevant or strongly connected to the reconstruction of South Africa? Must we question our definitions of activism and reconstruct new forms of engagement? And are



we already doing that? Some argued for the importance of acknowledging the gains we have already made as feminists in the academy, and for appreciating the multiple ways in which we carry out political and activist work, including the challenging of students' thinking in the classroom. In this respect, there was a particular concern to explore new ways of integrating practice with theory, as well as acknowledging the multiple ways of being a feminist activist in contemporary contexts.

A second thread, related to shifts in the broad nature of education and the academy, has both local and global manifestations. Desiree Lewis presented critical arguments about the ways in which neoliberalism has impacted on women's and gender studies, and there is no doubt that the pressures of contemporary marketing and consumerist discourses in education are being felt in all disciplines. All over the world, marginal programmes (including gender studies) are fighting for survival (Gouws). Even well-established and secure programmes may find themselves forced to make changes and compromises. For example, the word "feminist" was removed from undergraduate course names at UWC because the term created confusion and alienated some students; and this change did contribute to increased enrolment by both women and men students (Shefer). Feminist theory meanwhile remains very much in evidence within the undergraduate module; and, as demonstrated by students' narratives in the colloquium, the programmes are indeed stimulating feminist and critical thinking and identification (see also Clowes). Nevertheless, a political trade-off is entailed, and feminist programmes continue to face the challenge of balancing a political and activist identity that will allow women's and gender studies programmes to participate in building a new South Africa, against growing pressure to market modules and produce graduates. The creative work being done by feminist teachers in spite of the challenges of neoliberalism and other problematic global and local forces was more than evident in the presentations of Elaine Salo, Shirley Walters and Viv Bozalek.

Another key area of debate concerns the place of men's studies in gender studies. Kopano Ratele and Elron Fouten stimulated debate and raised concerns regarding the historical domination of men in all disciplines (as both subjects and objects of knowledge production), and the danger of this re-emerging to usurp and destabilise women's studies.

Another important theme was that of women's relationship to knowledge production and authorship. The overriding picture is still one in which women, and especially black women, are marginalised within the arena of academic



research, writing and publishing (Maurtin-Cairncross; Shabalala). While this issue has drawn attention and been addressed within debates about the political power of representation and authorship (see, for example, Bennett, 2000; Boswell, 2003; Fester, 2000; Mama, 2000; Maurtin-Cairncross, 2003; Motsemme, 2003), it was also encouraging to hear of efforts to support and develop women's authorship at UWC (Hames; Maurtin-Cairncross).

Although the 2005 colloquium did not specifically focus on issues of sexuality, the complex ways in which sexualities are woven into the work of feminist researchers, teachers and academics were clearly evident. A prominent theme was the ever-broadening view of sexualities and the many areas in which issues concerning sexualities appear. The "problem" of sexualities – sexual relationships, sexual experiences, sexual images, sexual languages – threaded through the sessions throughout the programme, testifying to the "natural" link between gender, women and sexualities, and our study of these topics. Sexualities formed part of the discussion of processes of teaching, learning, and research. In separate sessions, Janine Hoek, a WGS Masters student, and Jane Bennett, of the African Gender Institute at UCT, both spoke of the connections between desire, love, teaching and learning. Christell Stander and Sabine Neidhardt explored the political character of our academic positions and how they shape our ability to challenge heteronormativity. Estian Smit, Zanele Muholi and Sharrone Mitchell all addressed the issues of sexual experiences and the ways in which we challenge mainstream ideas of gender, sex and sexualities.

Culture shared the stage with intellectual discourse during the two-day event. Poetry, music, and visual and performing arts were crammed into every spare moment between papers. At the opening party, Brown Paper Studio, a UWC student drama group, performed a presentation on the multiplicity of gendered identity and gender inequity. Diana Ferrus, a Masters student in WGS, was accompanied by her pianist in readings of her famous poem on Sara Baartman, as well as a number of others written by herself and other members of her poetry group who joined her. Participants also enjoyed a multimedia presentation on gender and HIV/AIDS by Sebastiao Matsinhe, an accomplished painter and WGS undergraduate student, and Freshly Ground guitarist, Julio Sigaque. Zanele Muholi, an internationally acclaimed South African photographer, showed her recent video "Only half the picture", a compilation of still and video images of women in South Africa. The colloquium ended with a celebratory dinner and yet more music from the Cape Town women's band, Madame Afrique.



The colloquium was a rare opportunity for those who work in women's and gender studies programmes, a notoriously over-committed group, to share experiences, to think critically and reflectively about our work, and to celebrate achievements, while also acknowledging the complex challenges and thorny terrain that lies ahead. At such forums, we are reminded again of the power of collective reflection, long-known and appreciated by feminists in multiple contexts, but also the difficulties in sustaining creative and empowering spaces for such collaborative work in contemporary contexts of feminist and academic work.

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