Commentary: Speaking up for women in the neo-liberal university

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When I went to university in the second half of the 1970s we still had to argue about whether men were smarter than women, fight to write our essays on women’s experience, contest sexist language, get talked over in class, deal with men disrupting women’s meetings, campaign for safety on campus and against blaming the victim. There were very few academic women in ongoing positions or senior positions. Most women general staff were ‘secretaries’. Some of my friends’ parents only let them go to university in the hope they would find a rich husband, or at least one with good prospects.

But this was also the heyday of second wave feminism, and we were loud and proud on campus as young women, pushing our way in and backing the academic women organising, and ganging up with the mature-age women students (who were there thanks to the Whitlam Labor Government’s abolition of fees, introduction of TEAS and the return to study schemes). There was one Women’s Studies subject in third year sociology. There was a national ‘Women and Law’ conference in my second year organised by students and staff. We had student general meetings in my first year on abortion rights and for gay rights and the Australian Union of Students women’s department was getting underway. The AUS women’s department went from strength to strength, and was importantly a resourced women controlled entity as we campaigned for government funding of women’s health and legal organisations off campus.

When I started working at Victoria University in the early 1990s, we had a major in Women’s Studies and had just started a postgraduate coursework
program in Women’s Studies. We had postgraduate research students working on topics from overtly feminist positions. Our discourse was increasingly nuanced, interdisciplinary and cross cultural. Intersectional perspectives were in hot development and the diversity of the VU student and staff cohort invited, or insisted upon, this inclusivity. But we still found ourselves having to fight to keep the major over and over again, and for ‘gender inclusive’ curriculum across the university. This latter project has not been successful anywhere.

The efforts of women (and some men) in Australian higher education to mainstream, normalise – or make ordinary – gender diversity and equity in our curricula and practices has been going on for a long time, right back to the Bluestocking era of the nineteenth century. Back then women had to fight for access and then to challenge the curriculum. Consider that medical students were still taught that women should not be admitted to higher education as it would cause their womb to ‘atrophy’ as the finite energies fled to their head.

Much has changed, but running alongside are still the crass realities that show that nowhere near as much has changed as we anticipated. The neoliberal university makes much of its gender equity policies and high participation rates of women, yet antagonism to feminism and feminists, in all our diversities, is constant and virulent.

Despite women now being the majority of staff and students, and despite the rhetoric of equality and inclusion scattered over university mission and value statements, when it comes to determining our narrative as women we still have limited voice and agency. The neo-liberal university with its focus on the market, on the commodification of education and research, on reconstituting students as customers and research partners as clients, has no trouble speaking to the demands of liberal feminism for gender equality and even equity.

There is no shortage of excellent affirmative action policies introduced since the 1980s, which were designed to reach gender balance. They have worked to the extent that the proportion of women promoted through to senior lecturer doubled, but still less than a third get through to the next level. Career advancement amongst general and professional staff women has had more lasting success, thanks largely to the determination of the women rather than management enthusiasm for the implementing policies, but now that too has stagnated.
Today 57% of university staff are women (by FTE) and the trend continues. General staff are 55% of all staff, of whom two thirds are women. The Gender Pay Gap amongst higher education staff is ten percent (when across the Australian workforce it stubbornly sits around 17%). However, gender segregation in disciplines and occupations has only marginally shifted, and the increasing precarity of university employment is a major impediment to women getting decent jobs and advancing their careers. 57% of teaching-only staff are women, of whom four out of five are casual. Four out of five research only staff are on short fixed term contracts. Only three out of ten staff are employed on FTE basis now, and two thirds of university staff are insecurely employed. The key statistic for academic women (and men) looking towards a career is that less than 1% of new university jobs since 2005 are ongoing teaching and research jobs, despite massive increases in students (Rea 2017, 12).

The flow through implications of such precarious employment are of equal concern, particularly if a gendered reading of the employment trends within fields of study and disciplines is applied. In Australia we still have the most gender segregated workforce in the OECD, and this is reflected in student and staff participation across university disciplines. Only 16% of engineering graduates from Australian universities are women, and fewer of these are domestic students. The barriers to women in Australia participating in non-traditional occupations remain strong. In academic employment, where women are employed in traditional female areas, there is greater precarity, and even in the traditionally male areas, which tend to be more stable, the women within these are also more likely to be in vulnerable positions.

Sharon Bell and Lyn Yates in their project *Women in Science Research Workforce* investigated why women are still not equal in science careers despite all our efforts. They sought to:

[understand the] ‘wicked problem’ that appears to repeat itself in successive generations of women in science – the well-documented, entrenched patterns of disadvantage associated with women’s participation in the science research workforce (Bell and Yates 2015, 5).

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1 Whilst I recognise that STEM disciplines and careers are tremendously important, I am wary here of privileging these areas. STEM has to be viewed through a gender lens, but we are constantly at risk of encouraging girls and women into STEM subjects by suggesting that other things girls do well are not as important.
Bell and Yates discuss women’s outstanding achievements, but argue their participation is still ‘characterised by low levels of retention and success beyond the postdoctoral career stage’ (5).

What Bell and Yates found is consistent with other major studies on gender in the university workforce, in particular a 2016 report by Glenda Strachan et al., drawing upon data from their extensive survey of university staff. Homogeneity, funnelling and the employment mode are the key issues, and this has also consistently been demonstrated in the annual data collected by the Workplace Gender Equity Agency.

Funnelling (or marginalising) is particularly pernicious in university jobs. Who is not familiar with the realities of women and men classified in the same job and yet with expectations and opportunities that are quite different? While the Level B man gets on with his publications, the women finds herself stuck with a heavy teaching and coordination load. She is told that she is really good at it, but she will not get promoted. Amongst professional staff, women tend to be concentrated on busy tasks requiring detail and organisational prowess, while men get ahead by being seen and heard. A man gets to present at the committee meeting with more senior staff, using the documents generated by a woman!

Homogeneity also remains really hard to shift. It is well recognised that men like to have similar men around them. Remember the hilarity a couple of years ago when a male scientist took this to another level when opposing the presence of women in the lab? He claimed they were ‘distractingly sexy’. Women, on the other hand, are generally more inviting and inclusive of men coming into predominantly female workplaces.

And, the big problem remains that women have babies, and even if individual women do not have responsibility for birthing or caring for children, the expectation that this is women’s work still mitigates against all women. Not so deep down, the attitude that women are a secondary workforce persists.

Interestingly, Bell and Yates concluded that additionally to all of the above, research grants processes tend to prefer men, particularly with unbroken service records, so the increase in short term contracts and casualisation makes it even harder for women with caring responsibilities to carve out a career path.

Importantly, students see all this amongst university staff and so lower their expectations, at the same time as they wonder why, if there are more
women on campus than men, gendered violence on some campuses is as high as or higher than levels of violence within other sectors of the community. They also know that women graduates now start earning roughly similar salaries in many fields, but that this quickly changes; the Gender Pay Gap amongst graduates is about 3.4%, but just three years later has blown out to 9.3%, according to a 2016 Careers Australia report.

So, the gains have stagnated and women learn quickly that we are to blame. ‘We wanted too much’, ‘we just are not that good’, ‘feminisation of higher education is adversely impacting upon the value of degrees’, are all tropes bandied around. Totally ignored is the narrative and critique from women who do not want to sanction and reinforce the negatives of the neoliberal university by seeking promotion into management. Women who argue that the university (and society) need to change, not them, are rarely ‘heard’ these days.

Therefore in this final section, I want to focus upon what we can do about this from a feminist perspective. I say ‘feminist’ on purpose, as part of the doldrums is not just the attacks on women’s rights and gender equality, but also the steady undermining of these as a political and ideological cause.

Mainstreaming gender equity and equality ended up with many good and sincere policies and processes, and even some attitudinal and behavioural change focussed education. However, the resilience of sexism and patriarchy is clear – and patriarchal interests are still actively pursued. Indeed, feminism these days seems to be defined by those opposing feminism. Apart from the highly irritating ‘I’m not a feminist but...’ trope, far more blood-boiling are anti-feminists defining us as ‘out of date old women’s libbers’, ‘man haters’, and a whole lot of other descriptions that speak to the prejudice and paranoia of the author. These are the out-and-out misogynists, but there are also men who self-identify as feminists. Indeed, while we currently have a male prime minister who calls himself a feminist, when we had a female prime minister she was vilified for identifying as feminist. Relatedly, in our universities, we hear reports of women advising other women to take care as they have been identified as feminist and their career prospects could be damaged. I have even heard of honours and postgraduate students advised not to undertake overtly feminist topics if they are seeking an academic career. This is despite widespread recognition of the contribution of feminist theory, epistemology and ontology to research over the past decades, and the cross pollination of feminism with many traditional and newer disciplines.
Thus, it seems to be harder now than a generation ago to raise the gender equity issues and insist upon a gender lens without being labelled and dismissed (sometimes literally in this environment of reviews, restructures and redundancies, even if one has an ongoing position). The neo-liberal university is a frustrating site for feminist engagement, as neo-liberalism so happily accommodates some reformist feminism. Yet, when women still cannot reach positions of power and influence, we are still blamed and diminished. There is not just a glass ceiling; the door is also only half open.

We do make change, but what is increasingly clear is that good policies and intentions are insufficient. Promises mean nothing unless they are backed up by legislative redress, such as being included in the legally enforceable industrial instruments, specifically the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement and the Workplace Relations Act. Feminists in the NTEU have consistently pursued a feminist agenda over the decades, to insist that issues of concern to women are included in the EBAs. Most famous amongst these is the high level Paid Parental Leave provisions, but just as important have been gender inclusive fairness measures, across employment conditions.

Funding attached to implementation of gender equity also makes a difference, but is very hard to get in this environment where antagonism is raging. We just have to look to the United States for more blatant opposition to women, gender diversity, and feminism. I recently read of Professor Watchlist (n.d.), a website whose professed mission is to “expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom”. Such antagonism is also documented in We only talk feminist here, a new book by Briony Lipton and Liz Mackinlay (2017), researching women’s experiences in Australian universities. The participants reported that they are reluctant to own up to feminist positions, and that they feel isolated and even frightened when they do speak up. As Mackinlay writes in the NTEU women’s magazine Agenda,

the Australian higher education sector has undergone significant structural, operational, and cultural changes, and academics today are experiencing first-hand the effects of a highly corporatised system in which institutions and individuals are increasingly pushed into producing marketable research, competing for – ever-diminishing – government funding, and globally ranked prestige… Notions of the ideal academic have a significant impact on what types of academic endeavours are considered most meritorious and indicative of excellence, and female academics, and particularly
feminist scholars, continue to be dismissed as knowledge producers in their own right. (Mackinlay 2016)

When I started teaching at TAFE in the 1980s we looked to Dale Spender’s work on classroom dynamics, which found that naughty boys got more teacher time because they played up and demanded attention. Well-performing boys also got attention because they were doing well. Good girls were largely ignored, but ‘bad’ girls also did not get attention. I think of this as young women ask me how they can get into a university career. What makes a woman acceptable in the neoliberal university? Who is the acceptable feminist academic or professional staff member or manager? Who wants to be? It often seems even harder to answer these questions because there are plenty of women around and even some wielding power, so women feel even more to blame themselves, when they do not succeed.

Trying to change what is valued, and how, is as hard as ever, especially when we have a nagging conservative trope saying ‘well, maybe we have overdone it – this equality thing. Women and men do choose to do different things. So what if the ones men do are valued and rewarded? Women have a place and if they want to they can lead – just look at the women leaders of the contemporary right.’ So, what can we do?

- We can ensure women are supported, whether in promotion, on boards, in meetings, in the cafeteria or the college.
- We must question those who claim to speak for women.
- We must speak out when feminists are attacked for speaking up feminist.
- We must stop being so hard on ourselves and other women.
- We must be open and critical of one another, but on our turf. We should not give ammunition to those who want to drag us down.
- We do need to gender analyse everything, and propose the remedies.
- We do not need to make heroes out of men who stick up for women, but should expect it and appreciate it.
- We do need to carve out spaces for women and to have feminist discussions - like Bluestocking Week.
- We have to call out sexism.
- We must insist on implementing neglected policies.
- We must insist on making campuses (IRL and online) safe.

We must not underestimate our opponents, but we also must not let them set the agenda.
References


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