

EL PAPEL DE LA CLASE TRABAJADORA (OTRAS MUJERES) EN LA EDUCACIÓN CRÍTICA*

Resumen: Este artículo aborda el papel de (otras) mujeres de clase trabajadora que retornan a la educación a través de la universidad y de la participación y educación comunitarias. El análisis de las experiencias educativas se hace a través de las voces de mujeres trabajadoras, empleando enfoques biográficos de orientación feminista. Las historias ponen de manifiesto la importancia de las desigualdades de clase y de género. Las biografías resaltan la capacidad que tiene la educación como experiencia transformadora, mientras éstas reflexionan críticamente sobre sus experiencias vitales. Teóricamente se parte del feminismo y la llamada 'educación radical de las mujeres', y se resalta la crítica del feminismo académico defendiendo una perspectiva más dialógica. Aunque es cierto que las universidades ofrecen a las mujeres un espacio de transformación, resulta evidente que el currículo universitario debería apoyarse de una manera más explícita y profunda en las experiencias y los conocimientos de las mujeres.

Palabras clave: Clase, género, educación radical de las mujeres, enfoques biográficos feministas, 'las otras mujeres'.

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THE ROLE OF WORKING CLASS (OTHER WOMEN) IN CRITICAL EDUCATION

Abstract: This article looks at the role and experiences of working class (other) women who return to education in universities and community education. The educational experiences are explored through the voices of working class women by using feminist biographical approaches. The stories reveal the centrality of class and gender inequalities in the women's lives. The biographies highlight the potential of education as a transforming experience for working class women as they critically reflect upon their life experiences shaped by class and gender. The theoretical framework draws on feminism and radical women's education while critiquing academic feminism and arguing for a more dialogical approach. Although universities do offer a space for transformation for women the curriculum needs to draw more overtly on the experiences and knowledge of 'women adult students from below'.

Key Words: *Class, gender, radical women's education, feminist biographical approaches, 'las otras mujeres'.*

THE ROLE OF WORKING CLASS (OTHER WOMEN) IN CRITICAL EDUCATION

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1. - INTRODUCTION

Education in capitalist societies largely reproduces dominant power relations, values and culture (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). For working class women this means preparation for low paid jobs and domesticity. The system, through from initial education to higher education, favours the middle classes. Yet education also has the potential to transform people and society as the work of Freire and Gramsci (1971) illustrates. Adult education in the UK, for example, has been rooted in the radical tradition and working class movements since the nineteenth century through organisations such as Ruskin College and the Plebs League. These, however, were male dominated. The emergence of second wave feminism in the 1960s gave rise to the development and establishment of feminist radical adult education and women's education for working class women developed by feminist adult educators. Feminism was central to raising consciousness about women's inequalities and oppression in society. As Jane Thompson argues:

The re-emergence of feminism in the 1960s is important for women because, whatever other political struggles we might be engaged in, our subordination to men individually and collectively is a condition we share with all women irrespective of class, "race", and sexual preference (Thompson, 1997, 71).

Through critical radical education women's education focused on women's oppression and a critical understanding of this as a means to liberate working class women. Women's adult education centred on education for social purpose and drew on "really useful knowledge" (Johnston, 1979). It created a space for women to learn with other women with a curriculum which included discussions on personal and political transformation through collective learning (Thompson, 2000). Since the 1970s educational opportunities for women to return to education in the UK have increased but the spaces for criti-

cal radical women's education, although still there, have decreased. The rise in the trend towards postmodernism in the 1980s and since in both feminism and adult education may account for this situation as well as the influence of the Thatcher era in the 1980s.

At the same time lifelong learning has become a policy favourite at both national government and EU levels. Lifelong learning has now become a dominant concept and policy in adult education both in the UK and Europe more widely. The language of lifelong learning has largely replaced the use of the word education. More importantly the acceptance of lifelong learning has resulted in a shift from education to learning and with it a move from a collective approach to adult education to an individualised and marketised one. Policy makers have latched on to lifelong learning for economic reasons. Lifelong learning rhetoric argues that lifelong learning is the key to economic prosperity and social inclusion for both nation states and Europe as a whole in the wake of economic and social changes and globalisation. Emphasis is placed on vocational education to the detriment of liberal and adult education.

This article argues through the voices of working class women students for the reclaiming of spaces and opportunities for critical radical women's education in community, further and higher education (further education are post compulsory institutions in the UK). As the stories of working class women in this article illustrate, education has the potential to change women in terms of the self, community and society as they develop a critical learning identity. Yet accessing education, particularly higher education, is not always easy and once they are in education it is sometimes a struggle for some women. Gender inequalities in society mean that women have to carry on juggling roles in their private lives while coping with studying and in higher education middle class and largely male cultures and institutions (Merrill, 1999). In exploring these issues I look at the inter-relationship between gender and class as the women in my studies are both gendered and classed, and in some cases raced as well. I draw on the life histories of women taken from research on women adult students in further and higher education. The next sections will examine the role of feminism, gender, class and biographical approaches in relation to working class women and critical education. Although this paper focuses on the role of working class women and adult education in the UK the issues which arise will hopefully be relevant to other cultural contexts.

2. - WHAT HAPPENED TO ACADEMIC FEMINISM?

Second wave feminism in the 1970s stimulated the development of feminist theory and methodology in academia. Academic feminists fought hard to introduce women's feminist studies as an academic discipline against opposition from male colleagues. For feminist sociologists it was a reaction against male sociology or 'malestream' sociological research which failed to acknowledge the role and existence of women in society. Black feminists such as bell hooks (1984) also acknowledged that academic knowledge was dominated by a 'white male canon'. Dorothy Smith asserted that: "The women's movement has given us a sense of our right to have women's interests represented in sociology, rather than just receiving as authoritative the interests traditionally

represented in a sociology put together by men” (1987, 85). As a result of this type of research feminists:

Through a range of disciplines feminist academics brought “women’s” knowledge and voices in from obscurity and opened up a new way of looking at social reality. Second wave feminism grew out of the voices and actions of both working class and middle class women, often with both groups working together... (Merrill, 2005, 42).

Feminist sociological research in the UK focused on working class women such as Ana Pollert’s (1981) study of the working lives of women at a cigarette factory while Ann Oakley (1981) researched issues relating to women such as pregnant women who were expecting their first child. Adult education feminists such as Jane Thompson and Marjorie Mayo worked more directly with women in communities rather than for them. Feminist academic work was important because it brought the political and critical into research:

Feminist researchers highlighted the importance of researching the personal lives of ordinary women in the home as well as their public lives in the workplace and elsewhere. In researching the private, everyday lives of women, they emphasised how “the personal is political”, as in the gendered distribution of emotional labour (Merrill and West, 2009 forthcoming).

Feminist research challenged male power in society and aimed to raise the consciousness of women in collective ways in order to transform their lives from oppression to liberation. Although there are different feminisms (for example, liberal, Radical Feminist, Socialist-Feminist [Marxist], poststructuralist, postmodernist) reflecting a range of ideological and epistemological positions, all share a common aim of challenging gender and structural inequalities in society in order to transform the lives of women. As Maggie Humm argues:

Feminism is a social force... [and] depends on the understanding that, all societies which divide the sexes in differing cultural, economic or political spheres, women are less valued than men. Feminism also depends on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social place... a belief in sexual equality combined with a commitment to eradicate sexist domination and to transform society (Humm, 1992, 1).

Times, unfortunately have changed and there is a new story to tell. Many UK university Gender Studies Women’s Studies departments no longer exist or have been mainstreamed and marginalised into Sociology Departments. The nature of feminist academic study transformed during the 1990s. Marxist and radical feminism has given way to a postmodernist discourse which is remote from the everyday lives and material reality of working class women (Ramazanoglu, 1999). Academic feminism is now largely elitist and abstract excluding “other women” through its language, theory and content (Merrill and Puigvert, 2001, 308):

...the emergence and stronghold of postmodernism and the decline of Marxist feminism in the academy has established a discourse which is far removed from the material reality of working class women. Academic feminism is becoming elitist, excluding “other women” through its language and content (Merrill and Puigvert, 2001, 308).

Words such as individualism, fragmentation, deconstruction and discourse became dominant and trendy in academic feminism. Collectivism, solidarity, class, social movements and community became forgotten and deemed irrelevant in the postmodern world. Thompson argues that:

The concentration on individualism precludes the more radical conviction that education will only empower people if it enables them to act collectively on their own reality in order to change it; and women's education will only be relevant and useful in this process if it derives its legitimacy, has its roots and exists in relation to groups and movements of women in ways that make a difference to their lives (Thompson, 2000, 103).

During the 1990s Nussbaum observed that feminists in academia mostly comprised of; "young feminists who reject large-scale movements in favour of verbal interventions that do not connect to real women" (1999, 36). As Beverley Skeggs (1997) points out heavily theoretical writings by postmodern feminists in universities is remote from the lives of working class women:

Often, the more theoretically sophisticated feminist analysis becomes in the academy, the less likely it is able to speak to women outside of it. The debates that rage between postmodern and materialist feminism occupy a completely different space to that occupied by the women of this research. Feminist knowledge has been produced but it has only been distributed selectively (Skeggs, 1997, 141).

While much sociological feminism may have lost its way there is still hope for a critical feminist education in adult education and also through dialogical feminism although the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

3.- A NOTE ON DIALOGICAL FEMINISM

Dialogical feminism is a dimension of feminism which has been developed by Lidia Puigvert and Rosa Valls (2002). For them dialogical feminism provides an "alternative to the feminist movement of equality and to the feminism of difference" (Puigvert and Valls, 2002, 2). Importantly it allows the voices of 'las otras mujeres' working class women to be heard and listened to within academia (Puigvert, 2001). Their voices are valued. Puigvert developed the term 'las otras mujeres' to refer to women "who are excluded from society because they have low levels of education or because they belong to minority cultures" (2001, 94). She goes on to argue that 'other women' are those who are questioning and challenging their role and position in society through participation in adult education in order to transform gender relations in society.

A fundamental concept of dialogical feminism is the notion of equality of difference. This enables women to:

Fight for their own rights as equals to men but also as equals to all other women while avoiding a homogenising equality. What is sought is an equality that respects the differences and the diverse identities between, for instance, "other women" and academic women...as far as this respect for the difference does not imply the discrimination of any other person (Puigvert and Valls, 2002, 3).

Dialogical feminism promotes a situation in which everyone has the capacity to discuss, think and act on equal terms enabling 'las otras mujeres' to understand their experiences and oppressive gendered position in society. Emancipation and transformation therefore becomes a possibility. It is a dialogical learning process. Adult education can provide a space for dialogical feminism as its dialogical learning approach draws on the work of Freire. Dialogical feminism also draws on the ideas of Habermas and his concept of egalitarian dialogue whereby dialogue is enacted in terms of validity claims (Habermas, 1984). In a dialogue the value of the argument put forward is valued rather than the social and power position of a person. In a similar way feminist biographical research in adult education values the voices of female students as they make meaning and understanding of their lives and experiences through the stories they tell.

Dialogical feminism is rooted in practice, action and research with "other women". Lidia Puigvert, and others at CREA, have been working from this perspective with groups of women and social movements since 1992 on different projects:

These include, for example, the women's group of the Federation of Adult Education and Cultural Association (FACEPA). The women are working class adult learners of different ages who meet to discuss gender issues in relation to their learning, such as identifying their curriculum and the ways in which they want to learn. Drom Kotar Mestipen is a women's gypsy association formed in 1999 to strive for equality and non-discrimination of gypsy women both within their own community and society. MEI Al-hanen (Women for Intercultural Education) consists of women from different cultural groups in Barcelona and Catalonia striving to promote intercultural dialogue and understanding (Merrill, 2005, 49).

Dialogical feminism has, therefore, remained rooted in the everyday lives of working class women and maintains an equal relationship between academic and non-academic women. As Puigvert (2001) asserts academic women have a lot to learn from the experiences of 'las otras mujeres'.

While, as stated earlier, much academic feminism has become elitist, abstract and theoretical there are still pockets of hope. Some academic feminists are still listening to voices from below and work towards transforming women's lives through education. This is particularly visible amongst feminist adult educators in universities.

4.- THE ROLE OF FEMINIST ADULT EDUCATION

As stated above working class women's education in the 1970s grew out of the influence of feminism. Much of the learning took place in community settings and was based on a critical pedagogical approach to women's studies. The curriculum examined the position of women in society and the causes of women's oppression. Jane Thompson reflects on the women's studies programmes she set up with working class women living on a council estate (social housing) in Southampton, southern England:

It also meant helping to create educational spaces for women in women-only courses and the setting up of a Women's Education Centre in Southampton, in which issues of personal and political transformation were given priority alongside emancipatory learning, "really useful" feminist

knowledge, and the commitment to social and collective ways of getting women out from under (Thompson, 2000, 47).

In this type of learning situation the process of how women learned together in a democratic and active way became as important as the content.

Women's adult education also challenged the notion of the neutrality of knowledge by asserting that knowledge is socially and politically situated. Jean Barr asserts that; "It was, in short, a thoroughly political process which self-consciously acknowledged the need for gender politics in adult education and feminist politics in knowledge production" (1999, 40). In her book *Liberating Knowledge, Research, Feminism and Adult Education*, Barr engages with the notion of gendered knowledge and argues for a feminist radical education which has at its core the idea of "liberating knowledge":

Women's education as it developed in adult education thus challenged, in concrete, practical ways, the notion of disembodied knowledge, recognising that knowledge is not neutral, but always socially situated: there is no "god's eye view", no knowledge from nowhere (Barr, 1999, 40).

In the 1990s radical women's adult education, as Mal Leicester (2001) points out, was about using "women's ways of knowing" to influence the curriculum content. For Leicester 'ways of knowing' should be understood to refer both to process (ways of thinking understanding) and to product (that which at any time is accepted as true) (2001, 55). In Ireland Anne Ryan argues in her book *Feminist Ways of Knowing* (2001) for a feminist critical adult education pedagogy which takes into account self, identity and subjectivity as well as structural issues. Ryan delivers a personal development education programme to achieve this: "Personal development education can provide a context within which the process of becoming politicised and agentic can begin and develop" (2001, 117). For her such a focus on self development will result in transformative learning and offers an alternative approach to teaching about the ways in which knowledge and femininity are constructed. She asserts that:

Adult education has a responsibility to provide new forms of knowledge, such as feminist poststructuralist discourses, and to facilitate students' engagement with them in productive ways. Otherwise, dominant assumptions about women and men will be reproduced unchanged... A self-consciously feminist poststructuralist adult education praxis could provide one model for such a practice (Ryan, 2001, 136).

Widening participation policies in the UK have led to more women entering higher education. Engaging in learning in higher education provides time, space and an environment which enables women to reflect upon their lives and their gendered self. Many of the women I have interviewed stated that studying for a degree allowed them to be more than a wife, mother, carer, etc., as for the first time in their lives they felt that they were doing something for themselves (Merrill, 1999; Merrill, 1999, 2003). This is reflected in other research on working class adult students (Burke, 2002; Pascal and Cox, 1993; Reay, 2002). Some went beyond this and reacted to their experiences of gender inequality in the home and left their partners. Similarly, Jocelyn Quinn asserts that universities

offer a space whereby women can leave their gendered self behind which gives them the power to think about the self. If this happens “then women are truly powerful: they are exercising their power to think” (2003, 143).

5. - EXAMINING GENDER AND CLASS

Gender cannot be discussed in isolation as the gendered experiences of women are always located within a classed position in society, and for some, also a raced position. Gender and class are inextricably linked. For, as Beverley Skeggs points out: “...the category ‘woman’ is always produced through processes which include class and classifying produces very real effects which are lived on a daily basis” (2001, 2). The adult women students in my research recognised that they were gendered but also saw their working class identity as being important so that their lives were shaped by being working class women. The intersectionality of inequalities in society means, as Anthias elaborates that “classes are always gendered and racialised and gender is always classed and racialised and so on” (2005, 33).

The study of social class was once central in UK sociology as sociologists recognised that class permeated all aspects of society and daily life. This changed when many sociologists became obsessed with postmodernism:

“Class and collectivity are currently viewed as unfashionable concepts in both the academy and society generally as the individual and individualisation are deemed to be all-important. ...Sociological discourse has increasingly focused on issues of individualism and individual identities influenced by the hegemony of postmodernism and the subsequent demise of meta-narratives and the project of modernity. Class is now viewed as largely irrelevant in sociology” (Merrill, 2007, 72).

However, there are some signs that not all sociologists have neglected class. Sayer, Crompton, Savage and Skeggs, for example, are re-asserting the importance of class in society and sociology. As Skeggs asserts:

Class struggle is alive and well...In fact class is so ubiquitous, one wonders why all the energy, anxiety and aggressive denial is put into proving that the working class either does or does not exist or, if it does, is worthless. Why is so much time and effort put into discrediting those whose access to power is highly restricted?...Class struggle is also about the positioning, judgements and relations that are entered into on a daily and personal basis. Living class...is very much part of how class is made (Skeggs, 2004, 173).

The working class white women in my research shared common life experiences as a consequence of being a woman and being working class. For them class is an everyday lived reality at a material and cultural level. Their life histories revealed this in many ways. Cultural expectations of class and gender, for example, meant that they had left school at the earliest possible age as working class girls were expected to work for a few years before getting married and having a family and, therefore, continuing in education was seen as pointless as these women participants point out:

I thought I was just an ordinary working class woman who would go and get a job. The thought of doing anything else at that time just it didn't enter my head. And I wanted to be earning too. I wanted the money, but I never thought about college or anything like that.

I started school in 1969. Girls went to school, just did it and then got married. You know, had a little job then got married so there's no encouragement whatsoever... it was just the norm. Women just got married and children and that was it.

The neglect, even denial, of class by many sociologists in recent years is another example, like many feminist sociologists, of academics becoming too remote, abstract and theoretical from the social world. For the black working class women (a small sample) gender was strongly linked to ethnicity and cultural expectations and like the white women were expected to leave school at the earliest possible moment. For one Asian woman, for example, studying for a degree was a means of re-building and changing her life after her escape from an arranged marriage and a violent husband.

However, being a white working class woman is different to being a black working class woman. Power and inequality differences can be identified as the former are less oppressed than the latter in UK society. For many black women race is the dominating form of inequality which shapes their identity. As Reynolds asserts "many black women in Britain identify 'race' as the starting point of any self-definition" (1997, 10).

6. - USING FEMINIST BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES

Feminist methodology challenges traditional approaches to doing research in a number of ways. The use of biographical/life history approaches by feminists enables the voices of marginalised and oppressed women to be heard and use research to challenge gender inequalities and transform society. As Reinharz asserts: "Biographical work has always been an important part of the women's movement because it draws women out of obscurity, repairs the historical record, and provides an opportunity for the woman reader and writer to identify with the subject" (1992, 126). Feminist research has also rendered the private lives of women as being an important area of study as well as illustrating that the 'personal is political' and that individual women are not alone in their experiences of being a mother, a housewife etc. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise argue that "...a feminist social science should begin with the recognition that 'the personal', direct experience, underlies all behaviours and action" (1983, 164). In doing so it highlights the interaction and inter-relationship between public and private lives and the macro and micro levels of society and the individual. This approach echoes the work of C. Wright Mills who reminds us that 'the personal troubles of milieu' are entwined with "the public issues of social structure" (1973, 14). Biographical research also locates women's individual and collective lives in a historical context. This type of research:

...offers many examples of the wealth of biographical and life history research, and its unique potential to illuminate people's lives and their interaction with the social world, and the interplay of history and micro worlds, in struggles for agency and meaning in lives. And to illuminate the interplay of different experiences and forms of learning from the most intimate to the most formal (West, Alheit, Andersen and Merrill, 2007, 279).

Biographies/life histories may appear to be individual but feminists use individual stories to illustrate the collectivities of women's lives and oppression and experiences of gender, class and race inequalities (Skeggs, 1997). Stories give us a powerful insight into social life by exposing the role of and interaction between structure and agency in shaping lives.

For many of the women I interviewed the experience of a critical incident or an epiphany (Denzin, 1989) led them to use their agency to change their life and take the step to enter education. As one woman explains:

...at that time I was in a violent relationship so it made me realise that this is not the situation you're suppose to have in life so you've got to overcome things and you've got to do things... I wouldn't have done the things that I'm doing now (studying for a degree) because it's taken from then to this to do what I'm doing yes it was a turning point.

At other times in the women's lives structure became more dominant than agency in shaping their participation or not in education. For example, one woman who was attending a course at a further education college (a post-compulsory educational institution for young people and adults) had to leave for financial reasons even though child-care at this particular outreach centre was provided free:

But in the college I had a nursery place and they kept Emma for me to go to college. You got your expenses as in your bus fares every month but even with that it was too much because you've still a lot of money to put out for dinners and whatever. I couldn't afford that off my benefit and try to buy Emma clothes and run the house as well. I just felt that it was too much.

As the humanistic writings of Marx on historical materialism exemplify women and men: "make their own history, but not... under conditions that they have chosen for themselves; rather on terms immediately existing, given and handed down to them" (1852 / 1983, 287).

Feminist research also stresses the need for subjectivity in research and new forms of relationship between the researcher and researched, thus breaking down power differentials. As Natalee Popadiuk argues:

...the feminist biographical method is a powerful tool. It engages in research from a unique perspective that provides depth, meaning and context to the participants' lived experiences in light of the larger cultural matrix in which they live (Popadiuk, 2004, 395).

Feminist research is critical in challenging the assumptions of 'traditional' research such as the hierarchical power relationship between researcher and researched in which the researched is treated as a subordinate. In contrast feminists strive for a democratic relationship in interviewing in which, as Ann Oakley (1981) argues, the process is two-way and more like a conversation. This is the approach which I use when interviewing. CREA, at the University of Barcelona, also strive to employ democratic and dialogical approaches to their research. Their critical communicative approach is outlined in a pa-

per by Valls and Tellado (2008) which describes research projects for and with Roma women.

Feminist biographical approaches provide a humanistic method to research. The process is empowering for both interviewer and the interviewee as well as a self-learning experience for both, particularly for the interviewer. As Reinharz stresses: "Once the project begins, a circular process ensues: the woman doing the study learns about herself as well as about the woman she is studying" (1992, 127). It is not surprising, therefore, that biographical approaches are popular with feminist adult educators as a way of researching.

7.- EDUCATION AS A CRITICAL AND EMPOWERING PROCESS

For working class women returning to education can be a critical, empowering and transformative experience not only for the individual but also, in some cases, for the family and community. Taking the first step back into education is not easy for many women and the learning journey itself can be one of struggle as well as enjoyment and achievement. Mary reflects on why she feels that education is important for self development and for working class communities. (Mary lives in a high rise flat on a deprived housing estate in Edinburgh, starting her learning as an adult student on a return to learn course and following through to a degree):

I think people have to realise how hard the first two steps of coming in the door can be. But as you keep coming your confidence just builds right up. You are meeting people. Now I do lots of things. I am on the management committee for here. I am making phone calls, applying for grants. Things I had never thought I would or could do. See it matters for our community. We are classed as a deprived area. I think when you say you come from here everyone thinks you are a waster. But this gives people the chance to show, yes there might be problems here but we are not all like that. We have got brains and don't write us off cos of where we come from.

Julia's Story

Women can be powerful voices in working class communities. Community activism can also be a means for enabling women to engage in learning. Julia participated on a Community Research course at the University of Warwick and then went on to complete a 2+2 Health and Social Policy degree (2+2 degrees are aimed at local adults and those who do not possess the traditional qualifications required for entry to university). Julia's story shares the experiences and struggles of many of the working class female research participants interviewed about their educational journeys I interviewed. The Community Research course was aimed at women living in Priority Neighbourhoods in Coventry, UK. (Priority Neighbourhoods are areas designated by the Government as being extremely deprived and areas with severe social and economic problems). Julia, a single parent, attended a meeting about the programme in her local community:

The community course we were almost hand picked from priority neighbourhoods. I was living on an estate in Coventry. Lecturers had taken the time to come out and visit different groups of people... We were invited to a meeting. There were lots of us who came along. We were already

active within our own communities. We were working in a voluntary capacity to make things better for our neighbourhoods and to make our voices heard in community matters working alongside service providers to help make things better for our children, for ourselves and for our environment.

The part-time Community Research course equipped the women with research skills for using in their local communities. After they finished the course the local Council funded them to undertake community research projects in deprived areas of the city. The course was Julia's first experience of learning since leaving school. She explains:

It was a very, very new experience for me and it was the first time I'd experienced reading really. That was my first introduction which was a big shock to me because it was all very different to secondary school. At the same time it was a really nice taster and it gave me a taste of what university might be like. I think I liked what I saw and what I was learning and I liked the feeling that I got, that I wanted to learn more and realising that there was so much that I didn't know. I had a lot of support from my lecturers. The work that we handed in came back with a lot of feedback and that was a nice feeling to see that we could actually achieve or accomplish things and work together as a team.

The women formed a strong bond supporting each other with their learning and meeting socially. She described it as "a wonderful experience" because although it was a steep learning curve the content of the course and the pedagogy focused on their life experiences and the environments they were living in. For her it was 'very easy to see what we were learning and why we were learning it' as well as learning collectively. Moving on to the 2+2 Health and Social Policy degree was initially confusing for her as she was not clear what and why she was learning. At the same time the funding for the community research jobs came to an end.

On the degree course she found some of the modules hard and felt that that was due to "not having a good education from junior and secondary school". Studying at an elite university raised issues of class as she found that some lecturers were "very different from myself, from different backgrounds". Most lecturers, however, she found supportive and could emphasise and understand what being a single parent, living in poverty on a deprived and rough council estate (social housing) meant:

One of my tutors had already done lots of books and studies about poverty and things like that and, you know, poverty was a really big issue for me at the time. I was really, really struggling and it was nice to know that she understood, whether she'd experienced it herself or not in her own life that didn't really matter because she really understood it at a very deep level what single parents go through. I got a lot of support and I found they were quite significant to me personally which then gave me the confidence to carry on working and to concentrate on my academic stuff.

Like many working class women she lacked confidence in her academic ability:

I never actually thought I'd make it to the end, so, each year that went by was quite a shock because I'd got through another year but I was determined to make things different for myself and for my son, so again this goes back to a personal side, that, I'd realised through all the reflective work that we'd done I'd realised that I couldn't really make any changes in my personal life un-

less I really, really changed. What I was learning and how I was learning and what academic qualifications I was getting. It is determination that I wanted to change things and make a difference and be able to support us financially and move out of the neighbourhood that I was in too. I just thought I can't afford to drop out now because I'll have nothing to show for it but I will have lots of student debts.

Paula, studying at another university also expressed her gendered and classed feelings:

You never lose that. I don't think you ever lose that. You learn to live with it but you don't ever lose that. You always think that you shouldn't be here and you are a con. You know how did I get here and I slipped through the net and I shouldn't be here.

For some women issues arise in seminars with middle class younger students:

They come from a different background and that's when I found I couldn't speak (in seminars). In the module Politics and Food we (mature women students) were talking about school dinners and were saying that they had to be good because this is the only hot meal they get and they couldn't understand that at all. Daddy had bought them ponies and daddy had got them this car. (Kathy).

Being a mother and an adult student also means that studying has to revolve around childcare, limiting time on campus. Despite the constraints Julia enjoyed university life; "...it was still a nice feeling. I don't know how to explain that in words. I suppose it's a feeling of being included. I felt like I was a part of something". At the same time many women experience difficulties, often multiple ones, which affect their studying. The lack of finances was a big problem for Julia:

If you're worrying about silly things like whether you've got enough petrol to drive into University that really hinders your learning so much and it did get to the stage where I was struggling to even pay utility bills and buy food and it just seemed ridiculous that I was having a university education but I just couldn't afford it.

During her studies Julia moved to another council estate because she was fearful of where she lived after some incidents occurred:

It was a really difficult neighbourhood to live in and I was right at the heart of it. I would say three nights a week there would be some large event happening in the street involving police and ambulances and lots and lots of fights, men fight, women fight and cars being set alight and joy-riding around the streets. It's very hard to explain how much that actually affects your learning or how much it acts as a barrier to what you're learning. People climbing into your garden and banging on your windows.

She was also fearful because her son's father is an African Caribbean and:

There was lots of racial tension too, lots and lots. With my son being from dual heritage background I felt that hatred personally. I found all that very difficult. It's really hard when you can hear people shouting at other people in the street. You can't just turn off and ignore it and think they'll be ok. You worry about them and wonder if they got home safely... The last big thing was the fire next door to my house. I felt really frightened to a position that I couldn't really function properly. That was worrying because I had a black child in my house. I knew I needed to move house.

Moving house to a better estate improved her quality of life and enabled her to focus back on her studies. Cultural differences of gender and class meant that she did not get support from her family while she was studying. She explains:

It's not because people didn't want to support me. It's because my family nobody in my family has been to university. My mum has supported me through my whole life but she couldn't even remember the name of my course, let alone what university I went to. She had no clue because my life was so different from anything she'd experienced so it was really hard for her to support me.

Studying at university also made it harder for her to relate to other women on the estate:

I couldn't talk about University to any other mum's as I walked to school because I felt that they had snubbed me a bit, you know like, "look at you with your big briefcase". It was really tricky to explain to people why I wanted to progress myself. I withdrew from my friends on the estate a little bit because I found it hard to explain to them why I wanted something different but I understood why they didn't or why they were happy in the situations they were in.

Participating in education, at whatever level, does change women in different ways. For Julia:

Yes definitely although I still question myself a lot, I still worry about lots of things and I sometimes don't feel as confident as I should, it's nowhere near how I was five years ago. I've gained tremendously in confidence, being able to talk to people and not worrying so much if I get something wrong and take part in meetings. I don't feel threatened or nervous to open my mouth.

Women, like Julia, who participate in education are affected by the experience, often in critical ways in terms of how they see themselves and society. Many reflect back on their lives and the gender inequalities they have experienced in the home and outside. They recognise that this is related to gender and class issues and as a result want more out of life and do "something for themselves".

"Studying for a degree represented an active decision to take greater control, to break free from gender and class constraints and to transform individual lives. All felt that they did achieve this in varying ways. It would be too simplistic to argue that the women were liberated from a false gender consciousness, but their gender identity was reconstructed as a result of learning" (Merrill, 1999, 204).

In some instances becoming "educated" affects marriage and partnerships ending in divorce or separation and sometimes domestic violence. Women studying sociology and gender studies degrees, in my research, are generally more conscious of the gender and class issues than those studying other disciplines. Although Julia's story is an individual one many of her experiences as a working class adult student in higher education are collectively shared by other working class women such as struggles with poverty, juggling roles and coping with studying in an elite institution.

8. - CONCLUSION

The women studying social science degrees did find that, on the whole, their voices and life experiences were listened to by lecturers in seminars, if not always by the younger students. However, the experiences and knowledge of 'women from below' could be used more overtly and incorporated into the curriculum thus developing a more critical education approach. As illustrated above Julia recognised the importance of learning through experience when she moved from the certificate course in community research to a degree programme. As Barr reflects:

... I indicated that my concern as a teacher and researcher in adult education had come to be defined in terms of "healing the breach" between ways of knowing and forms of knowledge developed "from above", in "the academy"; and knowledge developed "from below", rooted in everyday life (Barr 1999, 141).

Similarly Skeggs argues for relating experience to theory as at the moment in academia "many of the concepts we have to work with are produced from those who just do not know about the experiences and interpretations of others and can only speak to those who occupy similar positions to themselves" (2001, 167). She goes on to state that:

The working class are constantly aware of the dialogic other who have the power to make judgements about them. Privileged academics might produce more rigorous theory if they imagined a dialogic working class other, one that does and will make judgements about the adequacy and applicability of their arguments. Similarly the working class women need to put into effect the(ir) realization that the dialogic and real other who makes judgements is not justified in doing so (Skeggs, 2001, 167).

Higher education does offer a space for a small number of working class women to experience reflection, become aware of their gendered position and transform, albeit in a small way. However, with some exceptions, the process of transformation could be taken further through a more critical curriculum and education based on 'really useful knowledge' and 'women's ways of knowing'. The academic elitism of many feminist academics and their discounting of 'other women' need to be challenged, particularly by radical feminist adult educators. The spaces for women's education and its potential for change also need to be reclaimed in the area of community education. As Thompson asserts:

But certainly education is an influential and important context in which women's lived experience and existing knowledge could once again become the starting point for generating new knowledge, in more democratic ways, about inequalities of power and resources in society; to encourage critical understanding about the causes and consequences of such inequalities; and to inform individual and collective action to challenge and remove them (2007, 96).

It also means challenging the neo-liberal take-over of adult education (Thompson, 2007) and the obsession with individual learning, vocational education and employability. As adult educators we need to look back at the past for inspiration and good practice for reclaiming critical women's education for the future.

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