
Jottings from a travelling feminist geographer¹

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Am sitting in Schiphol airport (Amsterdam) on my way to Malawi for a brief research visit, admiring the pillars decorated with maps from exotic parts of the world - bits of Nigeria, Israel, Italy and somewhere that could be China (not sure). My mind is mulling over the idea of writing something for the Women and Geography Study Group (WGSG) 2004 publication to mark the two decades of feminist geography since WGSG's publication in 1984 of the influential text *Geography and Gender: An Introduction to Feminist Geography*. I'm wondering where I/we have got to since then.

The question 'How far have we come?' is a central theme of this latest joint effort of the WGSG. I am delighted to be part of this collaborative publication. When the first WGSG book was published in 1984 I was at school studying for my A-levels and there was no mention of gender in the Geography A-level syllabus then - I hope that's changed by now. In fact in 1984 I found glacial hanging valleys and flood hydrographs more exciting than bid rent and location theory which seemed to figure highly in the human geography sections of my A-level course.

In 1997 the WGSG second publication *Feminist Geographies* was launched. During its preparation I was wrestling with finishing a PhD and learning to be a lecturer. So although I joined WGSG in 1990 as a graduate student and was at the WGSG reading weekend in Hexham where early discussions for that book took place, to my disappointment I never made it as a contributor.

Now it's 2003 and given that the personal is political (as feminists, geographers among them, have been maintaining for a long time) answering the question 'How far have we come?' is also about how far I've come. The beginning of my engagement with feminist geography began in the late 1980s. I can clearly remember sitting in Durham University library as an undergraduate ignoring the impressive view of the cathedral out of the window and being totally absorbed reading *Geography and Gender* for a whole afternoon. It was powerful stuff! Very exciting fighting talk. According to what's written in my own copy of the text (now with much faded cover and numerous underlinings inside) I bought it in 1988 with money given to me by my grandmother,² probably as a Christmas present. It certainly was a significant book to me as I didn't buy many textbooks in those days.

That first encounter with gender in geography as an academic issue was before I chose to take Janet Townsend's 'Geography of Gender' course in my final year. Little did I know then how much that particular course was set to have a significant influence on my future career direction. I was lucky to take part in two short intensive ERASMUS courses on geography and gender - the first in Amsterdam when I was in the final year of my Geography BSc; and the second in Durham the following year when I'd embarked on a doctorate at Oxford. They were wonderful European mixes of students, academics and others with heady discussions of things like gender and planning with a field tour by bike of a planned suburb. The key inspiration and encouragement I received to embark on an academic career and pursue interests in gender came from these courses and the WGSG members involved in them at the end of the 1980s. I guess this was the same for some other UK feminist geographers of my generation

Though, on reflection, I was well-immersed in feminist geography at the end of my degree at Durham, certainly not all the battles were won. There was a memorable staff - student liaison committee meeting where my request as a student representative to change the title of a course 'Man, Land and Time' to something a little more gender sensitive was politely dismissed by the lecturers (all male) on the committee. They rehearsed the well-worn argument about the term Man being generic.... funnily enough though just a couple

of years ago I was bemused to see on the publishers' conference stand a student textbook arising from that same course, called guess what? 'People, Land and Time'! So it seems some battles have been won eventually. However, I still seem to waste scores of ink on student essays peppered with 'manmade', 'manpower' and so on. While in departmental meetings it's also still tedious hearing about how many staff we need to 'man' (sic.) open days and fieldcourses.

But that is jumping ahead in my story. While still an undergraduate when I was considering embarking on a PhD, a well meaning older male professor advised me in a friendly manner not to waste my time on this gender stuff as it was just a fad that would soon go out of fashion. Well, I am happy to say that firstly, I didn't follow his advice and secondly, he has been firmly proved wrong in his assertions about the (lack of) enduring quality of gender and feminist analysis within geography. I did the doctorate on gender space and empowerment in Northern Nigeria (with an all-female supervisory and examination team) and gender remains a central aspect of my teaching and research. Certainly I remain comfortable calling myself a feminist geographer.

Now I've been a lecturer for over eight years, but sadly for the past few years I've found myself working in a department as the only woman among the academic staff. The lack of female colleagues and role models is a disappointment for me and certainly not helpful for students. This was identified by the WGSG back in 1984 (p.128) in a diagram suggesting the possible chain of events explaining the low percentage of female academic geographers. It is interesting that this diagram and the accompanying discussion does not include the term 'glass ceiling' – perhaps it is a term that wasn't around then, but I believe the glass ceiling certainly exists for women in academic geography. More obviously the fact that women's academic careers are often disrupted by career breaks for child rearing is conspicuous by its absence (WGSG 1984, p.128, figure 9). The reality is that almost a cohort of WGSG committee and other members in the last few years have taken maternity leave. Perhaps in 1984 the WGSG were trying too hard to make out that women academics were just as professionally competent as male academics and were afraid to mention that they might have children and subsequently choose, or have, to take time out of their academic careers. To my mind what WGSG and her members should be campaigning for strongly today is more family-friendly career structures for both men and women in the academy. We all need more realistic work expectations with flexibility for child rearing, elder care and so on instead of the work-all-hours culture based on the model of a single male workaholic that demands we meet crazy deadlines, and achieve impossible levels of productivity.

While being a lone female geographer in my UK institution, it is certainly helpful to feel that WGSG is part of my wider 'academic family' beyond immediate colleagues in my home department. A kind of sisterhood if you are happy with that term. As pointed out in 1984 this sisterhood was one of the aims of the WGSG. One that I would say it has been successful at achieving and is still needed. The old girl network has still a long way to go before it can rival the old boy network.

I recently got married - something that when *Geography and Gender* was impressing itself on my consciousness I didn't expect to be doing. My attitude then was that marriage was an irredeemably patriarchal institution. But more recently I have come to decide that given the inequalities and patriarchy dominant in our society today there are more disadvantages being in an informal heterosexual partnership, rather than being married, especially if having children. Among the WGSG and feminist geographers today there seems to be a healthy mix of women (and even the odd few men) of many diverse sexualities and single/married/other partnered status. The 1984 WGSG book is resoundingly silent on sexuality. The notions of gay, lesbian, bi, transgendered geographies simply hadn't appeared by then. That happened in the 1990s and WGSG has been facilitative and supportive of these flourishing explorations which have been closely linked to and supported by the rapid evolution and firm establishment of feminist geography as a serious academic concern.

I am happy to report that a couple of WGSG members were at our marriage celebrations and during my wedding speech I reflected on what a feminist geographer was doing having a 'white wedding'. Briefly, analysis from Judith Butler and notions of hyperfemininity figured. But then the best man got the last word by quoting entirely out of context my own words about marriage and sexuality in Northern Nigeria from a *Gender, Place and Culture*

article (Robson 2000). Humour aside, that reminds me of the uncomfortable feeling I sometimes get that many bright young men are dominating the spheres of social and cultural geographies that feminists helped to shape and with a nod to gender are clambering up the academic career ladder space.

Later on congratulating me publicly on having got married, I was horrified to be asked by a senior (male) colleague whether I was going to be changing my name! What did he think I was going to do with over a dozen years of publications to my name? Some male colleagues clearly remain unreconstructed where gender issues are concerned. Like the ones who occasionally put their arms around the (female) support staff standing at the photocopier in an extremely inappropriate manner. Yurghhh...makes my skin creep.

Schiphol airport here in the Netherlands is a global hub, but it's surprising as I look around at the passengers passing through this placeless place just how few single women there are. Lone travelling businessmen in shirt, tie and jacket seem to dominate. In 1984 the pages of *Geography and Gender* described a gender division of labour where "...men dominate in managerial and professional occupations" (WGSG 1984: 70). Not much has changed there then.

Keele, 4th December 2003

Today I had an interesting conversation with Maria³ – a visiting PhD student researching weighty matters in historical geology. She asked me if I was the only woman academic in the department, then expressed surprise that this is the case. As she explained, it is not like that in her home country of Portugal. Interestingly, this is something our own home students rarely comment on. I wonder if it also no coincidence that my conversation with Maria took place in the shared female space of the sports centre changing room after we'd both been to an aerobics class. I sometimes wonder what male spaces I don't share with my male colleagues (the pub, the gents, lunchtime five-a-side ...) and whether this has any impact on my being in/out the loop where university politics are concerned.

RGS-IBG, London 15th December 2003

A meeting with colleagues on the editorial board of *Journal of Geography in Higher Education (JGHE)* today prompts various reflections on how far we've come. Firstly, being at the RGS-IBG's architecturally impressive old buildings in South Kensington stimulates thoughts on institutional progress in our own professional body. I think back to a couple of months previously listening to Linda McDowell at the RGS-IBG conference 2003 voicing feminist critique in her usual incisive manner. What was remarkable was to hear this being expressed inside the august lecture theatre of the RGS-IBG in London with the names of dead white male explorers, the early RGS fellows (Mungo Park, Clapperton, Livingstone, Grant) engraved in gold above the wooden panelling. Things have changed since 1984 – such critiques have become mainstream. *Gender, Place and Culture* has become firmly established as a respected journal for feminist geography and is now into its eleventh year. But in the RGS-IBG's own building the names of early women explorers are still not prominently displayed. Over the last couple of decades feminist geographers have been responsible for uncovering the herstories of women geographers, explorers and travellers including Mary Kingsley and her ilk. Shortly after the amalgamation of the RGS and the IBG, the WGSG held a meeting at what is now the RGS-IBG's own building in Kensington. For many WGSG members it was new territory and they called for identification and prominent display of 'the lady in the loo' (a prominent large full-length portrait of a white woman in nineteenth (?) century dress) (see figure 1). Even she has now disappeared (temporarily) with the Society's recent rebuilding project. But I am happy to report that she is shortly to be displayed on the main staircase along with other distinguished female explorer-geographers of the past. To my mind WGSG members need to carry on their efforts to recognise and promote women geographers past and present within our institutions.



Figure 1 The "lady in the loo", Kate Marsden (photo courtesy of RGS)

Thinking about that RGS-IBG conference and how far have we come since the arguments in *Geography and Gender* reminds me that there was no childcare available at the annual conference in 2003 as it was decreed too expensive to provide for little or no demand. Similarly at the Association of American Geographers conference in the same year women on the AAG council were having to argue fiercely to retain provision of childcare for conference participants – an argument we thought we'd won long ago in order to enable participation by all, including women who still bear the greatest share of child care responsibilities.

It is an odd dilemma that many, many academic geographers have children and yet somehow it remains a stigma to bring them to a conference. Frankly, at a conference many (men too, but especially women) want, or certainly feel it is most appropriate, to enact their professional, not family, personae. But can't kids do geography too? What if a parallel programme of geography as fun and discovery was organised for youngsters? Then parents might be keen for their kids of all ages to come along and join in an educational experience. Maybe academic parents would perhaps even gain status thereby and be proud of being seen to raise and stimulate the next potential generation of geographers?

After our meeting at the RGS-IBG, over lunch with *JGHE* colleagues there is chat about matters in our home departments. It emerges that our experiences vary from being a sole woman academic, to there being 3 or 4 women in a large department or even belonging to a department with a 50:50 male:female ratio of staff with a woman head of department to boot! Albeit not a scientific survey this reflects the welcome progress in some institutions since the WGSG reported in their 1980 survey of UK geography departments that "...in no case did the proportion of women exceed one-third of all full-time staff" (WGSG 1984: 125).

Keele, 16th December 2003

Today I gave 'the gender lecture' in our first year human geography course. As usual I was happy to see a fair gender balance in the crowd of over one hundred students filling the lecture theatre – a slight improvement on the survey in *Geography and Gender* which reported 45% UK geography undergraduates as female (WGSG 1984: 124). But, I was not happy to point out to our students that, as then, nationally there are still fewer female than male postgraduates in geography and a greater paucity of female academic staff. This is also obvious from the team of geographers teaching their degree.

I remember how it was nice when a male colleague used to do this lecture on gender in human geography. That was a deliberate strategy we adopted so that students didn't get the impression that concern with gender was just a female thing. Now sadly he's left and none of my older male colleagues were willing to take on this topic so I am certain I get identified in a few student minds as a mad eccentric feminist. However, not a few (mostly female) students look intrigued and attentive to what I have to say. Meanwhile a few lads sitting together at the back of the lecture theatre shift nervously and joke among themselves, no doubt at my expense, but of course they do it well out of earshot. It's gratifying though when the odd student (always female so far in my experience) later picks up the gender/feminist ideas for a dissertation.

Postscript - At home, 14 January 2004

Overall, we've come a long way it seems in some ways in two decades since *Geography and Gender*. The impact on scholarly research of feminist geography has been immense. The impacts in the academy too have not been insignificant. I personally feel I owe a lot to those early WGSG members – I wouldn't be writing this as a feminist geographer and university lecturer if it wasn't for their influence both individually and collectively. We owe it to them and ourselves (and male colleagues) to encourage more women into the profession (not easy though when we are acutely aware of what an uncomfortable place academia is to work in today), but also for future generations to continue to fight for greater gender equality and better work-life balance in the academy. There are plenty of struggles still to engage in. The need for female networking is as great as ever, not least to make sure precious gains are not lost. Here I remain in agreement with Doreen Massey in her foreword to *Geography and Gender* "There is a long way to go" (WGSG 1984: 13).

References

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- Women & Geography Study Group of the IBG (1984) *Geography and Gender: An Introduction to Feminist Geography* Hutchinson: London.
- Women and Geography Study Group (1997) *Feminist Geographies: Explorations in Diversity and Difference* Longman: Harlow.

¹ With regard to the style of this piece its deliberate resemblance to 'Don's Diary' which appears each week in the [Times Higher Education Supplement](#) is acknowledged.

² An extremely well-read 92 year old with an impressive knowledge of English literature, history and classical music. Born before second wave feminism my grandmother never became the teacher she would have liked to be, but in common with other respectable middle class women in the 1940s she had to give up paid work on marriage and became a fulltime housewife and mother.

³ Not her real name.