
Reflections on Geography and Gender, then and now

A discussion between Clare Roche (University of Limerick, Ireland), Lisa Doyle (Learning and Skills Development Agency, London) and Sophie Bowlby (University of Reading, England)ⁱ

This text grew out of a lively discussion between WGSG members concerning a fitting way to mark the 20th anniversary of the first feminist geography book *Geography and Gender*. Clare Roche suggested that we should produce a text in which we recalled the context out of which that initial book was born but in which we also reflected on current times. We are three women with different but interlinked relationships to feminist geography and the WGSG. Clare Roche, (University of Limerick, Ireland) who is currently finishing her PhD about young women and social change, acts as an interviewing participant prompting reflections from Sophie Bowlby (University of Reading, England) and Lisa Doyle (Learning and Skills Development Agency, London, England). Sophie is a senior academic, one of the original members of the WGSG and a contributor to *Geography and Gender*. Lisa did her PhD on women's homelessness with Sophie in the late 1990s and now works as a researcher in the public sector. Clare did her BSocSc and MSocSc in Cultural Studies and subsequently worked as a researcher with Sophie. We discussed Sophie's memories of the emergence of feminist geography, the WGSG, and the impact of the first book, and Lisa's encounters with each of these from her student days.

Contributing to a contemporary project on feminist geography raised a number of interesting issues. The numbers and seniority of women academics in geography have visibly increased since *Geography and Gender* and yet the working environment many academics find themselves in today in can still be hostile to feminist ideas. The current vogue for long hours, short-term contracts, individualistic working practices, and pressures to disseminate work in a narrowly conceptualised way are at odds with many feminist aims. Wanting to do work that is collective, experimental, and engages respectfully with communities outside of academia whilst maintaining a healthy work-life balance is almost impossible in the current climate of scrambling for tenure or RAEⁱⁱ suitable publications, particularly for young women at the start of their careers. Those who try to do things differently can face consequences in terms of professional progress and/or respect and recognition. Thus the interview also includes reflections on our current work lives and the directions of feminist geography. The interview contains both personal reflections and general critical comments about the wider discipline. Any criticisms are made with the intention of developing feminist knowledges and of being respectful of the institutional and personal contexts within which women in Geography have attempted to make their way, intervene and sometimes just get heard. The interview has been edited for ease of reading and length.

In order to understand the impact of the formation of WGSG and the significance of the writing and publication of 'Geography and Gender' Sophie felt it was important to understand the atmosphere of the late 60s and early 70s and we devoted part of the discussion to her reminiscences.

S. You asked me about what it was like being a women academic 'back then' and I'll try to give a feeling of the atmosphere, what it was like. When I went to America as a postgraduate there was one lecturer who was known to think that you shouldn't have female postgraduates because all they would do is get married and have babies and that was a waste of your time. My other strong memory is of going to see somebody because I was confused about some of the maths that we were being taught. So I went to see this guy and said I didn't understand it. I was quite upset about it; I was really finding it difficult to understand. And he said to me, 'Well I don't know why you're bothered about it, you're only here to get married anyway'. And I just remember I didn't know what to say, I

had absolutely no idea of what to say, I had no analysis, no feminist politics. I had a personal politics that was emerging at that time - that I wanted to have a career - which had been encouraged by my family and all sorts of things, but I had no analysis to go with it. And then later, going for a job, when I had a temporary job at Reading and I went for a permanent job somewhere else I was asked 'Well, how can you promise us that you won't be married and have babies by the time you're 35?' You can't ask that now because it would be illegal but, again, I think I was probably feeble in my answer, I probably said something like 'Well, I'm very committed to the job', but I can't even remember what I said.

C. Rather than 'How dare you ask me that?' (laughs)

S. Which is what I should have said,

C. But we didn't have a voice to say that

S. I didn't have a voice to say that. It was around actually, but I knew of no analysis that allowed me to say it. I was shocked, I was very angry about it, but it was a useless anger. Also there was a strong implication in one of the questions that the reason I'd had something published was because I'd gone to bed with the editor. I can remember him saying 'Oh and do you 'know' Dr X?' - and the way it was asked there was a strong innuendo that the only reason I could possibly have had anything published must have been because I'd gone to bed with him. That was the kind of atmosphere. Later, at Reading, I didn't feel that strongly that people were rubbishing me, they were patronising in a nice way, you know, trying to look after me. One person said he was really *pleased* to have a woman in the Department (I was replacing a woman), he felt it was very good to have a woman as part of the teaching staff although he also said something to the effect of 'not too many!' But he genuinely thought that it was helpful to have this other view of the world represented.

C. But not in the context of a right?

S. Not in the context of it just being ordinary. Being a woman academic didn't feel ordinary, you did feel in a minority but I don't think I understood what I felt because again, I had no analysis within which to place it. As far as my own Department was concerned there were soon two women lecturers in the Department as well as me, so the Department was relatively welcoming to women but I remember when one was appointed that there was a man who has since retired who was very opposed to her appointment on the grounds that she was a woman - because employing women was 'a bad idea'! Certainly the word 'feminism' was seen as a rather shocking word to use, slightly alarming in an academic context. I think it was viewed as a somewhat weird thing to be interested in. John Silk was very involved in feminist ideas and he objected to some girlie pictures that were put up somewhere and took them down and that was seen as quite a radical act. I'm trying to give you an atmosphere, that it wasn't that you just said 'Oh yeah, I'm a feminist geographer' and that would be OK, people saw it as being slightly frightening, slightly odd, not the norm.

C. And your work, was it always feminist, or was that part of your development?

S. Oh that was definitely part of my development! My thesis was about people's knowledge of opportunities in the city and when I came to Reading I did a similar project in Oxford with money from the SSRC [Social Science Research Council]. It started out being concerned with problems of access to food shopping for people without cars and it was a class analysis. Obviously I recognised that this food shopping was largely done by women and it was in analysing the results of that that I became much more interested in why it was that women were doing the food shopping. So I began to think about feminist issues which were then coming up on the horizon in other ways. Before that my feminist politics were separate from my work. I had politics about the workplace and being accepted and had feminist principals about that, and personally, you know, I didn't believe in getting married and things like that. It sounds really odd now, but I hadn't seen how that could impinge on the work I did.

L. Was that because it was geography?

S. Oh, geography was definitely lagging behind. But when I met people from what became the Women and Geography Study Group suddenly I began to see a way in which I could understand the situation as not just being something personal, so that was really, really helpful. When we all started talking to one another, suddenly it was really exciting to think that your work could be political and that you could research something that also related directly to the politics of the workplace in which you were working. The thought that the Group could simultaneously be concerned with research and with the position of women in the discipline, that seemed really exciting and I felt a tremendous sense of a network and a purpose and the thought that I could work on something that was *useful*, useful politically, that had a political purpose, that was really exciting.

We went on to discuss the aims and reception of the book 'Geography and Gender', the WGSG and its influence on Lisa.

S. My memory is that we wanted to persuade geographers who hadn't realised that feminism was important that this would make a difference to the *subject* and the book's very deliberately pitched to pick up on themes that seemed important in geography at the time like urban structure and employment and to say, 'you can't think about employment sensibly if you don't think about women and gender'. And in the book there is an early discussion of moving from *women* and geography to *gender* and geography. So it's also about that move from just thinking about women, although the book itself is primarily about women, it is trying to talk about gender relations rather than gender roles.

C. How important was it that it was a collective work? I don't know how common collective work was then.

S. Totally *uncommon*, and we felt very strongly - and that came out of the feminist politics of the time - that collectivity was really a good thing and that we should deliberately go against the academic requirement that it was about your own individual endeavour. So it was very clear that we wanted this to be a group statement and that the final product should be something that was agreed amongst a group and produced by a group. Obviously individuals wrote different parts of it and we had lots of meetings in people's houses, over cups of tea and coffee, spending a lot of time talking about other things and chatting and gossiping and talking wider politics but also talking about the book and then thinking about the sections and who would write different bits and things like that and then people went away to write them. Out of that we got a script which we could correct and so forth. It was so different from now with emails, there were a lot of phone calls, a lot of *long, intense* phone calls about different parts of it and what it meant and what it should say.

C. And were there a lot of intellectual differences between you all? Just because you were a collective doesn't mean your politics and your intellectual stance were going to be the same.

S. I think that the socialist feminist paradigm was fairly dominant so there wasn't too much disagreement on that front, where there were disagreements was over access to abortion. One woman was deeply opposed to abortion herself while others felt it was an important right. So the politics were more about that. The other bit of politics which was quite a deliberate choice was to have John Silk involved - and there was another man who was supposed to contribute on environmental issues but who never did. We felt at the time that it was very important that feminist geography, and therefore the book, shouldn't be seen exclusively, as far as teaching and research were concerned, as the preserve of women. It was somewhat contentious because there was the whole debate about 'could men be feminists?' John was already committed to feminist politics and involved in the Social Geography Study Group [of the Institute of British Geographers] so it was in terms of knowing a trusted male who was committed to feminist ideas and politics.

C. So, to move on then to when the book came out. I wanted to talk to you about its usefulness as a teaching tool and its reception if you have any thoughts on that.

S. I can't remember the reception very well. It got a good reception from the more radical left wing geographers and there was a feeling, I think, amongst that kind of circle that they *ought* to be in favour of it. I have a feeling that at some seminar meetings organisers said, 'oh we need a contribution from somebody from you know, from the WGSG, there ought to be something said about this', that was the kind of feeling that was about. So the book and the Group gave us visibility and identity. My guess would be that most of the people who actually used the book in teaching were feminist geographers. We *hoped* that lots of non-feminist geographers would read it and think, 'ah, they're talking sense, this is important ...' but I would say it took a very long time for that to become practice and I wonder if it's become practice even with '*Feminist Geographies*ⁱⁱⁱ'.

C. Do you think it paved the way for it to become unacceptable to have conferences or perhaps radical, left-wing type seminars without Women and Gender issues being included?

S. Yes, I do think so and then of course, other research papers began to be published soon and people had to pay attention to that. But I remember our Head of Department, about 5 years after the book was published, writing a statement about research in the department and he had a phrase that I was quite upset about, he said 'there were also some interesting minority interests, for example 'gender''. So the book and the Group and published research had resulted in feminist geography being seen as acceptable, a nice little research area - it was fine - but it wasn't mainstream.

C. This seems like a good place to bring Lisa in who did an undergraduate degree in geography. Do you have any memory of being taught from the book or in feminist geography specifically?

L. It didn't come into my undergraduate studies until my second year. I started my degree early nineties, 1992. I had studied sociology at A' level^{iv} and became very animated about feminist arguments so I was already thinking about it personally, my personal politics. I don't think I really knew there was a 'geography of gender'. It certainly didn't appear in my first year curriculum as an undergraduate. So it was in the second year when we were looking at theoretical perspectives and there was one lecture and it was 'geography and gender'. I was really excited about it, it sounds really sad, but I was really, really excited about this lecture coming up. It was about gender and not just 'feminist geography'. It included work on masculinities as well and sexuality was there somewhere, so it was this kind of all encompassing thing. But the first WGSG book was definitely referenced. I think it was talked about in the, kind of 'this is how [feminist geography] developed' in a 'geographers started talking about feminism at this point and now it's come to this point' kind of way. And I wrote an essay and drew upon the WGSG book then, and also Gillian Rose's 'Feminism and Geography' which had just been published. I drew upon the WGSG book quite a lot and then all of these names like Sophie's and Linda's [McDowell] started to become familiar and I started to look at what else they had written. But it was a totally different time to what Sophie was referring to, you know, the early nineties. But I do remember going back my sixth form college and talking to my former tutor about work that I'd been doing and he said "I hear they're doing *feminist* geography now!" in an outraged way, 'I can't quite work out how you can do that' kind of way and I told him 'No, you *can* do that' in no uncertain terms. But, actually, it was always something I was going to pursue. It influenced my dissertation and it's difficult to know what the impact of feminist geography was on others, given that it was something I was particularly interested in. But the WGSG book was certainly flagged up as a critical text

C. And what kind of contacts did you yourself have with WGSG?

L. That started when I began my PhD. Working with Sophie I had a founding member as a supervisor and Tracey Skelton, who was WGSG Chair at the time, came to give a colloquium I think in my first term at Reading. We went out to dinner afterwards and I remember thinking that she was really nice, really friendly, approachable, supportive and interested. So when it got to the IBG conference that year, she was a familiar face and then I got introduced to other people within WGSG. They seemed interested and I think that was what was really nice, it was really supportive. People gave me references and hints and tips and email addresses and things like that. I've always felt comfortable with the WGSG and I became a committee member later on.

S. I think it's always had that intention to be a group that as well as campaigning about women's position in the discipline also provided a supportive network and was a resource. I think that's always been a very strong intention, not necessarily always successfully but always the intention.

C. Lisa, you then went on to be a lecturer. Can you talk about your own teaching of feminist geography?

L. Yeah, I used the first WGSG book heavily. I first used it when I was a postgraduate, teaching first and second year tutorials and I would ask my students to look at the first chapter of the book as well as few of the other really early publications, because what's good about those early texts is that they were having to convince people that this was legitimate study and it was right to look at the experience of women. Whilst the arguments have shifted and become more sophisticated and the emphases would be different now, they're really good starting points to say 'OK so how can you look at employment without thinking about this?', 'How can you look at the city and not think about this?'. I would only give them 3 or 4 references to look at and to talk about feminist geography in that way. I also used the first WGSG book when I was a proper lecturer teaching gender and geography but more in a kind of historical, developmental way, where it started and where it is now.

C. I like the cyclical feel to this, that's why I wanted to interview you both together, that Sophie you, as part of the WGSG collective of women, were breaking boundaries, putting feminism and gender on the agenda. Then there's Lisa, coming to geography with a pre-existing feminist knowledge and wanting more of it, going on to teach herself. How did you find the students taking these courses today Lisa? Do you have sense that there's another mood?

L. Yeah it's weird because a lot of the students were certainly very supportive of the arguments but hardly any would say they were feminists. And Sophie, you were saying earlier about 'feminist' being quite a radical phrase when the WGSG started? Well I think it still is.

C. Do you have any other thoughts on being women academics and/or feminist academics today?

L. I've moved contexts now and I think Reading was a really good place to be a woman researcher or postgraduate. There were certainly lots of women on staff, in both human and physical geography, and at various levels up and down the hierarchy. When I went to Sussex there was one woman member of staff on a permanent contract, she was a physical geographer, that was it. When I started there were two new women, both of us full-time but on 9 month contracts, at the beginning of our careers. I don't think I necessarily felt marginalised because of the way that Sussex worked. Geography wasn't in one building, people were spread over 6 schools. I was in the School of Cultural and Community Studies which had sociologists, media studies, art history and so on, so there were quite a women around. But I would look around the table at geography staff meetings and there certainly was a difference from being in Reading, but I don't think I felt marginalised. I knew in a wider kind of national context of colleagues, I had friends and networks within geography. Now I'm in education, it's just such a radical shift. In this organisation at the moment there are 10 Research Managers, 5 of whom are women, my Director of Research is a woman, my line manager is a woman, all 4 Researchers are women. You go to education conferences and they're full of women. It's amazing. I don't feel out of place.

S. So you feel it's actually a positive thing?

L. Yes, I think so. I could just feel such a contrast.

S. See, in the late 1970s or the early 1980s, that would've seemed almost like a nirvana and I think we might have naively thought that it would therefore be full of loving supportive relationships which I'm sure it's not.

L. Well feminism doesn't come up much I can tell you that much. There isn't an awful lot of analysis along those lines, although I think that's partly because I'm working in a policy context. I think if I went into the Institute of Education that would be a whole different thing.

C. What do you think about teaching now, Sophie?

S. Well, I don't know about the 'Geography and Gender' book. Like Lisa said, it's still quite useful for people who haven't thought about it at all as a kind of introduction because it's very simple and, although it is very dated, from the point of view of students a lot of them still haven't thought about that. I now teach a third year option now, on 'Social Inequality and Difference' in which I try to weave in gender throughout, so that's a very important part of the whole course, gender inequality. And I was quite struck, and I know it's only a comment by one student about two years ago, but one said "Oh I really liked the course, nobody ever talks to us about this sort of thing". It was a woman, and I had been talking about work-life balance, issues of promotion at work, through the geography literature and the gendering of jobs as well as things to do with the labour market. But although there's such a huge amount of literature now, they hadn't really applied it to their own lives and like you said, they see it as irrelevant. Maybe it's because it was third year course and they're beginning to think about careers and they're suddenly thinking that maybe some of these issues might touch their lives. This is the women particularly. I don't think that's so true for a lot of the men. I would say that gay men are more likely to think about those things inasmuch as I also talk about issues of sexuality in it which isn't written about in geography and gender book 1 at all.

C. At all?

S. I would say no, not at all. We talked about it a lot (laughter)

L. But you just didn't get it in there.

S. In subsequent women and geography meetings and I think a lot of the things that were talked about at those meetings went far beyond the kind of things that were being written at the time theoretically. But that was partly because of the politics of the time and I don't think there was a literature anyway to relate it to for students. I'm not saying that we *suppressed* it at that moment. We were talking about those things but we hadn't seen a way to bring it forward and it was really much later people's work that showed that. What I'm trying to say is that politically we weren't unaware of those things.

C. Was it even more unacceptable for you to talk about sexuality at the same time as gender and feminism?

S. Oh yes, yes. I don't recall and any discussion of "we mustn't include this in the book". I don't think we thought of including it. I don't think we had academic work that we felt we could use to talk about issues of sexuality because it was really much later, you know Gill's [Valentine] work, in the early nineties, when people started actually doing research on sexuality in geography. There was Knopf's work on gay areas and so forth, but that was in America, so there wasn't the *material* in a way. When I was saying we were talking about it, I mean the feminist movement has always talked about sexual politics and the sexual politics of heterosexuals as well as the politics of homosexuality as a response to heterosexuality. So it's always talked about those things and I think we talked quite a lot. But the issue of being gay (then lesbians) was right there from the beginning because when we were told the first attempt to set up the Women and Geography Study Group as a Study Group was rejected by the IBG [Institute of British Geographers], our spies told us that one of the aged gents on the panel had said "I'm not having those dykes in my group" (laughter) – something to that effect. And so despite the fact that, funnily enough, I think all women who'd actually signed were heterosexual it didn't matter. It was very much seen as if you were feminist, you were lesbian, you were a man hater. I mean it was that kind of, very Sun [tabloid newspaper] politics, kind of view.

L. It still happens though, I've said in lectures. I've said that "lots of people here will agree with the arguments I'm making but how many women here identify as feminist? Feminism gets a bad name because everyone sees feminists as bra-burning, dungaree-wearing

lesbians". And there's always a snigger of kind of uncomfortable recognition, that that might be the case and that's why I've always made a point of saying it just to shake people a little.

Later in the interview we began to talk about some of the existing gaps in feminist geographies and the future.

C. In my experience, and of course these reflections are informed by theory, my struggles in academia have never felt most strongly rooted around gender but have been continuously mediated by other things. Feeling distanced in terms of class just going to university in the first place, then having my class and feminist politics challenged by the politics of 'race' and ethnicity being discussed in Cultural Studies at the time [where I did my first degree and masters]. I owe a huge debt to friends, colleagues and theorists from that time who lived and analysed the experience of being racialised in Britain. They were hugely influential on my work and life and I am mindful of the politics around that, but debates around ethnicity still felt overly polarised to me and I wanted to find my own way to insert Irishness into the mix. That's just two aspects of myself. I feel like I inhabit a number of 'in-between spaces' and I've been most interested in work that tries to deal with that, with complications, bodies that don't fit neat boxes, with diversity and difference. In that respect I have found geography and feminist geographies underdeveloped. The problematic roots of geography have been documented as well as critical interventions on whiteness, heteronormativity, able-bodiedness and so forth but there is still a way to go and I'm interested on your thoughts about that.

L. I think I agree. There are a lot more women around but it's still incredibly white. Geography's history is incredibly problematic and there's been lots written on this and why it's so white but that still doesn't mean that it should be. It persists. If you look at the undergraduate intake it was massively white in the departments I've experienced.

S. At the time at which *Geography and Gender* was written, the issue of race was simply unexplored in geography. Racial categorisation was taken for granted. I brought back from America concern with race as an issue of inequality and of civil rights which was very important politically in the American context but I don't know how important it was seen to be theoretically. In British geography I think it was neatly popped in the bit labelled 'development'.

C. Which makes it always about the other.

S. Yes, absolutely, yes. In the *Geography and Gender* book, the intervention was in relation to Marxist politics. Marxist analysis had been seen as the way forward in geography in the 1970s and our intervention was to say but there's another dimension of inequality which is just as important which is also about a kind of class struggle between women and men, if you like putting it very simply. So that's where that stayed and it wasn't until later, as feminist politics began to grapple with issues of race and difference, that it came into feminist geography. But I still think it's only recently that the debate is really beginning to make any impact on research and teaching beyond sub-dividing women into different categories. There's a lot of discussion of post-colonial theory in development so in that area it is being debated. Notions of whiteness - I do teach them, thanks to you Clare, and there is a debate beginning in geography but the voices that talk about this are still quite few and to some extent from outside Anglo-American geography. Going back to the intake issue I do wonder if in schools the way in which development is taught is still very much dominated by the kind of 'whiteness is best, we're sorry for them, we're going to go and help them'. I still think that is a dominant paradigm in schools. I think if I was a young Asian or young Afro-Caribbean or young African in Britain that wouldn't speak to me very much - well it would probably piss me off.

L. Yeah, it doesn't make it appealing does it? And I guess theorising it in the way that WGSG developed, in terms of getting the numbers and making political interventions when it's part of your identity, that doesn't happen in geography as people are so white.

C. I'm not trying to say wait for black geographers to come along before being critical about these issues.

L. No neither am I. I think I'm saying that in some ways sexuality is far more at the forefront than issues of race, because there have been a few out gay people who are willing to shake their fists and I think that really does help in some ways.

S. I think in a way feminist geography got a bit stuck after having abandoned homogenous ideas of woman, I think Lisa's right, I think the thing that's been most successfully integrated has been issues of sexuality, integrated in terms of being part of the analysis. I still think that in geography there's a tendency to think that race is in 2 compartments. It's out there in the third world, in terms of development and it's become radicalised through post-colonial theory so out there in that context it is questioned, but still within the standard Year I, Year II urban geography that most students do, where race comes into urban geography it's still residential segregation, and it's an unquestioned category. I mean there are white people, there are Asian people, there are African-Caribbean people and 'Oh gosh, they live in different areas!' And then poverty and deprivation gets talked about and issues of inequality and it's all done in the spirit of 'these are problems and we've got to solve them' but I don't think that the theoretical questions of what one might understand by those racial categories is brought in at that level so many students never encounter those arguments.

L. I think gender does come through other people's courses so it's getting integrated and flagged but it's partly to do with personnel willing to do it when they've got high teaching loads and you're trying to fit things in with your interests often it is the lone (feminist) geographer trying to get something in, maybe feeling that politically this should be taught but do I mention it when I've got five other courses to teach?

C. And so in light of these critiques, what is the logic behind this 3rd WGSG book? I know it's partly a historical account to mark the 20th anniversary of *Geography and Gender*, but where are we headed politically and strategically with the WGSG and this project? Does it still make sense to you to forefront gender in this way? Will it bring complexity and diversity? Is it time to write cutting edge feminisms without having to explain why we're doing it, why we're here, or is it still more beneficial to write a more focussed piece that's instructive, and aimed at students?

S. Of course the easy answer is to say there's a place for both. I think there's still a job to be done in inspiring students to question and I think there is a big lag behind where feminism has got to and where many students are. Because many students feel that the battle has been won, there are no issues as far as gender is concerned and I think that one can still alert them to the falsity of that. And it's certainly important to alert them to issues of race and whiteness. But it's a good and provocative thought that perhaps we can afford not to worry too much about persuading others and say "right we're writing for ourselves and to try and understand where we are".

C. Lisa what thoughts do you have on the future directions of feminist geography?

L. Well this is very weird because I'm feeling very outside of it at the moment really. I don't know to be honest. I'm excited about this project given that WGSG has been crucial in shaping my experience as an undergraduate, as a postgraduate and as a lecturer. I wanted to get involved in something done by us, but beyond that I'm in a different space at the moment where I'm not theoretically engaged in a lot of things. I'm taking part in lots of policy debates where gender really isn't pulled to the front. We do a lot of 'quick' research to give answers to the government and funding bodies. It does feel really different doing that kind of more a-theoretical work that gets listened to and changes things to the more theoretical work that changes minds and attitudes and ways of thinking. So I don't know how I feel about the future.

S. Presumably some of the work that you're doing is informed, by feminist analyses from the past?

L. Of course. My geography background has actually been really important and I think feminism comes through most explicitly with me methodologically and that's the reason I got the job here – methodological expertise, ethical issues and inclusiveness. You might not be able to do it as much as you'd like to in type of research but I can't portion it off

and say “no that was my feminist theoretical life” so it has been really important. But I don’t think I’ve really talked about gender at all since I’ve been here which seems odd, and scary.

C. Yes, but in that respect I think there’s a politics around the kinds of decisions we’ve had to make as well in terms of our working practices because getting a permanent job is significantly easier outside of academia. How long as a young woman researcher can you continue to work on one and two year contracts or even worse, nine month contracts where they don’t even pay you for the summer? These are very serious issues: going from contract to contract, city to city.

S. At a practical level there are problems that are important for all women. I mean even within Britain the people who are going to end up with rotten pensions, very little decent care are all, a lot of them are going to be women. That’s a big structural issue. And it seems to me that the Women and Geography Study Group still has a straight down the line policy argument to win which is about the position of women in the structure of the discipline. In the past very few women were in it. Now there are lots of women in it but they’re in short term contracts, or don’t have good conditions of service or if they are on permanent contracts they’re less likely to be promoted, that’s still the case. We still haven’t solved work life balance, still in the home women take a wider share of chores and this does affect their employment prospects. All of these things are still there. Now, so in that sense there’s been such a *huge* change in academia, I don’t think women feel nearly as marginalized. They have an analysis to turn to and it *is* accepted that women will have jobs and things, BUT, the thought, ‘but will you leave and have babies?’ still lurks there in some people’s minds. It’s still seen as something that’s to do with women and not to do with men and I think that affects women who have no intention of having children. And I think there are all sorts of structural problems for those women who actually do have children because the whole work place is not set up for work-life balance. I don’t think it’s only to do with children, for example I think there’s still an awful lot of prejudice over sexuality. People are more accepting than they were, but I think there’s still a lot of people for whom it wouldn’t be acceptable.

L. I think it’s something that’s still very much gossip worthy. People have realised it’s unacceptable to be overtly homophobic in academia, but it’s still gossip worthy I would say. But we have made some progress. Being publicly homophobic is unacceptable, there are more women in academia, and they’re acknowledged as legitimate actors in the discipline and there are women who are senior and important and respected in the discipline.

C. How do you think it compares now, amid this visible progress and the kind of discourse that’s grown up around social change, equality and feminism, talking about gender or other persistent inequalities? Like if you stand up at a conference today and talk about ‘women’ in the labour market do you think people are like “are you still really talking about this?”

S. I do think to some extent that’s true because it’s not exciting theoretically it’s just boring old stuff again and you feel as if you’re repeating, well you *are* repeating yourself. So I think there is a tension between a policy message which is old hat but still important and then putting our energies into talking about these theoretical challenges which we still haven’t got to grips with, like about how does gender relate to ethnicity. Yes, we say they’re all mediated by each other, but we haven’t yet managed to deal with that in a way that doesn’t reduce itself to just saying “oh well everything’s connected to everything else and there are a whole multiplicity of different power relations” and just not getting anywhere very much.

L. yeah saying nothing.

S. But, going back to your earlier question about this 3rd WGSG publication, I think it’s a very good thing to do. I certainly think it’s a good idea to do something that isn’t RAEable at a time when the RAE and top-up fees are all driving towards increased elitism in Universities and encouraging each of us to prioritise our individual careers and compete as individuals. In a funny way doing a non-RAEable publication echoes the first book and its attempt to say let’s get away from sole authors, to some extent let’s step outside the

promotions rat race. In a sense the second book partly gave away some of that so it's nice to go back to that. It feels right.

ⁱ Contact Clare on clare.roche@ul.ie and Sophie on S.R.Bowlby@reading.ac.uk.

ⁱⁱ Research Assessment Exercise - method of assessment in British universities related to funding.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Feminist Geographies' was the second book written by the Women and Geography Study Group.

^{iv} A' Levels (Advanced Levels) are usually taken in post-compulsory education and are normally required for entrance to University.