

# Feminism and the Academy: The Experiences of Women Graduate Students in Geography

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This collection of papers on women's experiences as graduate students in geography seeks to contribute to the dialogue about women's lives in the academy from the specific perspective of graduate students. Collectively, the contributors raise questions related to disciplinary equity, fieldwork, child care responsibilities – among others – and reflect on how feminism informs their engagement with these issues. These introductory remarks contextualize the five papers collected here by providing an overview of trends in graduate enrolment in universities and in the discipline of geography specifically. Some statistical evidence is followed by a discussion of how the graduate student experience is gendered.

*Keywords: Geography, feminism, graduate students, equity*

**B**eing a female geography graduate student at the start of the new millennium is an exhilarating experience. In an era where environmental and social problems defy narrow compartmentalization, geography's integrative and synthetic approach to scholarship offers innumerable opportunities to undertake innovative research projects. Through research that reveals the processes and patterns that constitute particular configurations of space-time – or places – student researchers are provided with the tools to understand and evaluate the complex nature of modern society. Within the academy, due to equity advancements, women are now free to pursue any aspect of geography, be it in the physical or the social sciences or the technical aspects of the discipline. At the master's level in particular, women are no longer token examples of female scholarship and, as our academic careers progress, there appear to be increasing opportunities to develop long-lasting and collegial relationships with other women in the discipline. Further, the brave women who preceded us have demonstrated that, while it is not an easy path to follow, some women do manage to combine challenging careers with long-term relationships and motherhood (see for instance, Monk 2001).

Of course, like the “young Turks” that have come before us, we feel it is both our right and our duty to be discontented with the status quo. Our predecessors questioned the concept of areal differentiation and then the subsequent paradigm of spatial analysis. This, in turn, was criticized by structuralist and humanist geographers and the first feminist geographers. As the numbers of women in geography began to grow, some academics started to question what it is to be a geographer and what constitutes the legitimate elements of the discipline (see for instance, Christopherson 1989). These fundamentally different questions about the nature and structure of the discipline itself built on the work of earlier geographers, principally women, who documented the taken-for-granted patterns of marginalization both in society and in the discipline. Both of these threads of feminist geographical inquiry are still very much in evidence today.

Now it is our turn. What do we wish to deconstruct? What do we stand for? At the present time we are lost in the particularities of the moment and it is only in retrospect that general trends will be truly discernable. We do, however, have several indicators about what those trends may be. Wylie (1995), for instance, argues that there is mounting evidence that women's reduced levels of representation in academia, particularly beyond the master's level, is more than a “pipeline” issue. It is not just that women, in the wake of efforts to remove barriers to their participation, have had insufficient time to move up through the ranks – through doctoral programs and into junior faculty positions. The proportion of women at each successive level drops off substantially beginning with doctoral studies, and of the available pool of PhDs there is a substantially smaller proportion hired into full-time tenure stream positions. This trend continues in many areas of women's academic careers and is reflected in higher rates of faculty attrition, lower pay raises and later promotions (In this issue, Catherine Jean Nash notes a similar trend in the law profession). Combined, this pattern points to the existence of deeply-rooted, taken-for-granted power relations and social structures that systematically marginalize women.

The exposure of gender biases within geography has provided the current generation of feminist scholars with the empirical evidence to resist and reconceptualise the academy's

underlying notions and ideas. Today, there is an ever-growing realization that there are biases within the discipline besides that of gender (see for instance Chouinard and Grant 1995). More and more, the critical assessment of geography is encompassing issues of race, class, ableism and heterosexism (Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Pulido 2002; Mahtani, this issue). At this juncture these voices are still located on the margins, but it seems very clear that when (and not if) these perspectives are incorporated into mainstream geography, what is considered “real geography,” what are deemed legitimate research questions and who are respected as geographers will also continue to evolve.

The years in graduate school are pivotal for most scholars. With a freshly-minted undergraduate degree in hand, graduate school is, for many students, the first opportunity to actively contribute to the discipline to which they have made a commitment. Prior to graduate school, students tend to participate in the “banking system of education” wherein knowledge is deposited by teachers who maintain control of the product (Bell and Gordon 1999). To construct new knowledge is an exciting possibility. Indeed, it can be argued that the opportunity for innovation and growth within the discipline is intimately connected with the diversity and talents of the next generation of graduate students.

Though exhilarating, the years spent in graduate school are also some of the most uncertain. That brand new degree also means that students are vulnerable; they do not yet have much academic standing within the profession. Their ability to negotiate the vagaries of research topic selection, funding opportunities and course selection is very much dependent on the goodwill and support of advisors and departmental faculties. So, what does a student do when her enthusiasm for a research topic is squelched by comments such as “that's not geography?” Many authors, including Bell and Gordon (1999) and Mahtani (this issue) maintain that feminist theories and methodologies in particular are often not considered to be forms of legitimate scholarship. There is anecdotal evidence that this is changing: In our own case, despite our vulnerable positions as students and inexperienced academics, we feel comfortable publicly voicing many of the following issues and taking on the editing of a set of papers, because of the range and depth of support and encouragement we received in both this and other academic

endeavours. This includes support from fellow students, departmental faculty, advisors and academically-established feminists.

This collection of papers about women and their graduate student experiences evolved from a call for papers for another project. We were surprised to find that half of the abstracts we received in response to this call came from graduate students and dealt in some way with graduate studies. These proposals about graduate student experiences could not all be incorporated into the original project due to space restrictions. However, we felt we had inadvertently touched a nerve: the demonstrated interest in this topic and the dearth of published papers about women's graduate school experiences prompted us to seek out a home for this collection. Graduate studies is the period in many people's careers when intellectual territory is being explored and beliefs are being formalized, and the proposals we read convinced us that many women were anxious to theorise about the intersection of feminism and their graduate school experiences. In this collection we embrace a very broad definition of the word "experiences." These include the day-to-activities of university and home life, engagement with theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, empirical research and fieldwork.

We have three goals for this collection about women's graduate student experiences. First, we wish to chronicle the voices and stories of women graduate students in geography and through this contribute to the ever-growing documentation about women's lives in the academy. Second, we hope that incoming graduate students will find the collection a useful resource as they embark on their graduate careers. Third, we would like to contribute to the dialogues about the nature of inequities in geography and about how the discipline can become a place where an inclusive range of perspectives and approaches is embraced. We begin by outlining some of the predominant trends in graduate school and in the academy and then explore some of the issues that shape the graduate student experience for women. This is followed by a brief section introducing each of the papers in this collection.

## A Critical Mass? Trends in Graduate Studies and the Academy

It is important to place this collection of papers in context. In that spirit, we provide some statistical evidence regarding women and graduate studies – in the context of universities in Canada and abroad and in geography departments specifically. Individual contributors also draw on these and related data in their papers. For instance, using statistics compiled from a different source, Nash (this issue) reports similar patterns.

In Canada, between 1973 and 1993, the proportion of women involved in full-time studies has increased from 27% to 46% in the master's program and from 19% to 35% in the doctoral program (Nelson and Robinson 1999, 178). However, these increases disguise the fact that women still tend to be concentrated in traditionally female-dominated fields (Bradley 2000). For instance, in 1992, while the social sciences had nearly a 50-50 gender split, mathematics and the physical sciences lagged behind, with 27% of master's students and 17% of doctoral students being female (Nelson and Robinson 1999, 178). In geography specifically, Mackenzie (1989, 7) noted that the proportion of women granted PhDs increased from 6.7% in 1977 to 22.6% in 1987. A similar trend is noted for female faculty in general and for geography in particular. According to White (2000, 9), in the social sciences, while 17% of all faculty were women in 1987-1988, by 1998-1999, 27% were women. Again, geography lagged behind in that only 14% of faculty were women by 1998-1999. This proportion of female faculty was only marginally ahead of mathematics and physics, in which women comprised 11% of faculty members.

These same sorts of patterns have been noted in other countries, such as Sweden, where, in 1989, women predominated in traditional areas such as the social sciences and education and comprised about one-third of all graduate students (Bron-Wojciechowska 1995, 54). In the United States, female doctoral students in geography increased from 6% in 1950 to 27% in 1987, and from 15% to 35% for master's students (Lee 1990, 205). For American universities, these gender ratios corresponded to that of the physical rather than the social sciences. In the United Kingdom, between 1978 and 1988 the percentage of women in undergraduate geography programs increased from

42% to 44% and the master's degree proportion increased from 29% to 35%. Disturbingly, the percentage of women in full-time doctoral studies only increased from 31% to 31.8%, but part-time enrollment increased from 20% to 34% (McDowell and Peake 1990, 22). In this collection, Murphy and Cloutier-Fisher discuss the issue of part-time status in more detail. These statistics suggest that despite efforts to achieve gender equity within universities, there appear to be structural forces both within and beyond the academy that impede women's full participation in academia. In women's personal lives, we maintain that the reality of home and child care responsibilities may preclude their full participation in academic pursuits. This begs the question regarding the point of striving for institutional equity when the day-to-day world in which many women live is itself far from equitable.

These data demonstrate that what women in Canadian geography are experiencing is hardly unique; the patterns are repeated throughout much of the Western world. These statistics also serve to unsettle our conception that, as enlightened meritocracies, universities are somehow immune to societal norms and relationships. As McDowell asserts:

that academia – that bastion of rational and scientific thought – should also be the site of patriarchal domination established through the old familiar mechanisms of male verbal, vocal, visual and sexual harassment of women is hard for many to believe (McDowell 1990, 325).

McDowell (1990, 329) goes on to assert that while most individual men are not violent or oppressive towards women, all men “gain power from the current structure and practices of higher educational institutions.”

Institutional and societal contexts are important, certainly, yet we must also not lose sight of the fact that the statistics for geography, in Canada at least, diverge so startlingly from the social sciences more generally. It is true that universities do not always function as enlightened meritocracies, but even so, why is the number of women faculty in geography so low relative to their counterparts in other social scientific

disciplines? While the reasons why geography is lagging remain unclear, Rose (1993) maintains that geography is a particularly masculinized discipline and that women have been marginalized as producers and as subjects of geographic knowledge. She writes: “To think geography – to think within the parameters of the discipline in order to create geographical knowledge acceptable to the discipline – is to occupy a masculine subject position” (1993, 4). In conceiving of geography as a masculinist discipline, Rose suggests that with masculinism comes a claim of comprehensiveness, which results in an assumption that “no one else can add to its knowledge” (4). Rose paints a picture of a discipline that alienates women. The statistics reported earlier seem to support this claim.

All this is not to say that there have not been significant improvements in the relative proportion of women attending university and in their quality of life. As Janice Monk (1998) noted in her paper about American female graduate students between 1920 and 1970, especially those from the Graduate School of Geography at Clark University, there were very few academic opportunities for female doctoral students. In the past, many graduates never married in order to devote themselves to their academic endeavours and most graduate schools, especially during the earlier decades of the twentieth century, did not accept women. By contrast, Susan Hanson, in an interview with Linda McDowell, points to the fact that today, conferences and meetings are so well-attended by women, that “when you mill around between sessions, you bump into as many women as men” (McDowell 1994, 26-27). There is now a critical mass of women in the profession, she reports.

There seems to be a qualitative sense, then, at least among those with some historical perspective, that the discipline is becoming a better place for women. And yet this optimism still exists in tension with the statistical portrait of our discipline. We wonder if the unsettling figures reported earlier point to a plateau of sorts in the move toward equity. If things are truly getting better, why is this not reflected in the statistics on enrolment and hiring? Have equity policies gone as far as they can without more fundamental changes to university and societal structures and values? Has our “critical mass” gotten as large as it is going to get? The statistics can be quite disconcerting for female graduate students contemplating a career in the academic world of geography. In addition to all of the other uncertainties related

to academic careers, such as finding a supportive advisor and securing a tenure-track position, there is always that extra concern as to whether or not embarking on an academic career in geography is a wise decision.

## Gender and the Graduate Student Experience

Within geography, we argue that there are a number of key issues that affect the experiences of women graduate students. Many of the papers in the collection focus on particular ways in which the graduate student experience is gendered. We understand this to mean that the practice of geography is influenced by gender at a range of scales and in a variety of different settings. We cannot survey every issue here, but will make note of five interrelated issues that seem especially relevant to graduate students. These are harassment, the relative lack of role models and mentors, the evaluation of women's achievements, classroom dynamics, and the reality of home and child care responsibilities and their disproportionate impact on the lives of women.

It is generally agreed upon today that harassment is not to be tolerated in academic departments. Many people, often those with good intentions, assume that when we speak of a need for greater equity for women in geography, we are referring to harassment. We do not tolerate harassment anymore, the argument goes, so all must be well on the equity front. There are two problems with this belief. First, there is clear evidence that harassment still goes on in our discipline. Nelson and Robinson (1999, 268) report that in a University of Waterloo study in the late 1980s, 74% of female students indicated that they had experienced sexual insults such as an uninvited, offensive or suggestive remark, gesture or stare. Bagihole and Woodward (1995, 41) outline similar results at a United Kingdom university in which 65% of the female faculty respondents reported some form of sexual harassment including verbal requests for sexual intimacy, verbal comments and non-verbal displays. Some feminists have also written about their experiences of harassment (see for example, Valentine 1998). Harassment, especially sexual harassment, reinforces the subordinate position of women within academia and wears women down both physically and emotionally (Moss 2001; Ng 1993). Ng (1993, 201), for example, outlines

how her positioning in the classroom as a woman of colour, led to difficulties both with students, who questioned her authority, and the department, who did not provide her with the institutional support she required. She asserts that "doing antiracist work" in the classroom is both unsafe and uncomfortable; "teaching against the grain" is always a painful and risky experience that involves struggle and challenge. The second problem with equating harassment with inequity is that it allows us to be seduced by the argument that by eliminating overt forms of harassment we somehow solve the problems of inequity in geography. This is of course not the case, as inequities encompass harassment but also occur every day in much more subtle ways. We mention harassment first in the sense that it is a fundamental barrier to physical and emotional well-being, and unless steps are taken to ameliorate it, other attempts to achieve equity for women will fail. None of the papers in this collection explicitly address harassment, yet taken together, they show that we are far from achieving the goal of equity in our discipline.

The second complication that many women graduate students face in practice is a lack of appropriate role models or mentors. This fact speaks to a more general lack of awareness regarding the ways in which the graduate experience is gendered. Since women comprise such a small proportion of Canadian geography faculty, many departments have few, if any, female members. Consequently, students who would prefer to have a female advisor often cannot find one who specializes in the areas in which they are interested. In departments with tenured female faculty members capable of supervising graduate students, there is often the related problem of overburdening. Such women are often asked to sit on numerous committees and perform extra responsibilities in order to achieve a gender balance, leading to less time to devote to graduate students. These circumstances create a climate in which female graduate students find few opportunities to discuss questions about how to negotiate academic life with more senior women or to observe female academics "in action" (McDowell and Peake 1990).

From our experience, it seems important that students observe for themselves if women can manage to balance their various commitments in their professional and personal lives and to discern if women are an integral and respected part of the academy. Students need to see women balancing scholarship,

teaching, and personal lives. Anything less will not be conducive to swelling the ranks of the discipline with more women. As well as academic role models, graduate students also need to have access to personal mentors in order to receive the encouragement and advice so necessary to succeed in academia (Bagihole 1993). A mentor is more than someone to observe and emulate, a mentor is someone who takes a personal interest in the well-being and success of her students. This is not to denigrate male mentors, but to point out that some research areas are more often supported by women (e.g., gender studies) and that some career and personal issues can, realistically, only be answered by women (e.g., how did you combine breastfeeding and fieldwork?). This issue of role models and mentoring is a theme addressed in this issue by Mahtani and by Murphy and Cloutier-Fisher.

Another salient issue is related to the evaluation of work performed by women. There is ample evidence that even when controlling for education, experience, research contributions, teaching competency and a host of other factors, women are systematically undervalued (see Nash, this issue). Sandler (1991) notes that in studies involving written articles, pieces of art or resumes, the quality of work performed by women is consistently ranked lower by both men and women when the creator is identified as a woman. Further, a woman's success is often attributed to affirmative action or luck whereas a man's accomplishments are attributed to talent. In the graduate classroom, could this pattern mean that women must work that much harder simply to be considered equal to men? This issue also resonates with many women graduate students as they consider searching for a tenure stream faculty position and face the prospect of having their future employment depend on such evaluations of their work.

Within the classroom, some research suggests that women's socialization may predispose them to be polite and differential, rather than to state their opinions assertively. This could mean that women are less likely to fully participate in classroom discussions (Lee 1990). In a study of classroom dynamics, Myers and Dugan (1996, 337) investigated the perceptions of 254 doctoral students from three American universities. They report that gender-biased behaviour "remains a serious problem in graduate school classrooms." Seventy-six percent of respondents

noted that professors tended to use male generic pronouns, 41% reported that male students' opinions were more likely to be solicited than women's, 30% stated that their courses rarely contained material by female authors and 24% reported that their professors rarely portrayed women in non-traditional roles in their examples. Graduate students who have negative classroom experiences due to gender biases may suffer long-term consequences such as "the loss of potential advisors and mentors, difficulty in constructing a thesis, dissertation, or general exam committee; ... being tracked away from subdisciplines that seem unwelcoming; or leaving a graduate program altogether" (Myers and Dugan 1996, 346). In this issue, Mahtani in particular outlines the impacts of the exclusive white, male space of geography on women of colour.

Finally, despite egalitarian rhetoric, women are still the predominant home and child care providers (see Murphy and Cloutier-Fisher, this issue) and far more likely to interrupt their studies following the birth of a child. As we work to achieve equity in institutions, it is important that we recognize that the everyday lives of many women are themselves *already* inequitable. Thus, rigid institutional timelines, inadequate day care or financial support and similar issues are more likely to affect female students. This may cause completion delays and lead to a change of status from full to part-time. Also in this issue, Frohlick points to the difficulty of balancing family and research priorities while completing doctoral studies and Hall reports on interest among graduate students in spousal appointment. Innovations like spousal appointment represent progress within institutions, certainly, but, as one woman in Hall's paper reports, "it's still the women who will make the sacrifices." Archer (2001, 73) writes that despite innovations like spousal appointment, "at the debut of another century, the academic profession remains hegemonically biased in favor of single, unattached people who intend to remain such through the tenure process."

## Experiences: Embodiment of Systemic Power Relations

Following Roxana Ng (1993), this collection understands the experiences of the particular women who have contributed papers not only as individualized, idiosyncratic situations, but

also as instances of the discipline's and society's structures and power relations. It is through these experiences that the characteristics of socio-geographic organization are revealed and it is through these actions that structures and power are (re) constructed. All of these papers contain autobiographical threads. Experiences may be personal, but they also reveal the systemic properties that are embodied through these experiences. According to Moss (2001), geographers have tended to believe that personal experience should not be linked to theory: we can theorise *about* autobiography, as for example in reflexive writing about how our personal subjectivities influence our research, but for the most part we believe that autobiography is itself not theory. This attitude is changing, and we believe that the papers in this collection are useful *because* the autobiographical threads in them can be mined for theoretical insights.

In this collection, several of the contributors elaborate on some of the issues we have surveyed in this introduction and consider how they play out in particular contexts. Other contributors consider the nature of the discipline of geography itself: how it is organized, who participates (and who does not) and how feminism and equity are and could be integrated into geography. One contributor considers the intersection of feminism and fieldwork in graduate studies. Several of the papers make reference to the demands of motherhood, and the collection also features a paper that makes parenting while in graduate school its central focus.

Specifically, Minelle Mahtani addresses the issue of why so few women of colour pursue graduate degrees in geography. Geography, she argues, should be the perfect "site" for thinking about how race and gender intersect with space and yet she finds this literature lacking, and notes the dearth of women of colour as generators of geographical knowledge in feminist geography and other sub-fields. Through interviews with women of colour undertaking graduate studies in geography, a reconstruction of her own history in the discipline, and a survey of the literature on race in geography, she builds a case that other disciplines are often more appealing to women of colour because of barriers that exist within geography. She ends her paper with a practical list of advice for women of colour working on graduate geography degrees today.

Jennifer Hall considers how feminism and geography intersect in the professional lives of graduate students today, many of whom do not study women. She considers the way geography is organized into subfields and asks if there can be a feminist geography without a scholarly interest in gender. Through the organizing image of geography as a set of interconnected circles in a Venn diagram, she challenges the notion of boundaries and demonstrates that geographers can participate simultaneously in sub-disciplines whose fields of influence do not overlap. She uses a reflection on her own university career to outline how her interests in both feminism and landscape have been mutually beneficial, but did not result in a research focus in which the interests intersected. For Hall, feminism provided her first critical understanding of how landscapes and societies can be sexed, raced and classed. She maintains that feminist perspectives are important lenses through which to evaluate the profession of geography itself and to assess the social relations and power structures within which geography is embedded. Utilizing insights gained from an informal round table discussion, she further speculates on whether the mainstreaming of the concept of reflexivity and the taken-for-granted nature of feminism among many graduate students today point to the success of earlier waves of feminist geography, or if they are indications of the dilution and undermining of key feminist approaches and theories.

Catherine Jean Nash draws on her experience as a lawyer in private practice and as a graduate student in geography to compare how the two fields have dealt with issues of inequity. She argues that the legal profession and the discipline of geography have similar institutional structures, and that they have undergone similar changes in the demographics of those entering the fields. Like geography, the legal profession has been criticized for inequitable policies and practices. Nash surveys empirical data in the field of law that show women facing challenges similar to those in geography in terms of moving up the ranks, performance evaluation, and so on. She recounts that research comparing men and women's education, training, promotions, and work hours in the legal profession in Ontario indicated that these factors were insufficient to explain the gender differentials that exist. As a result of this research, the Law Society of Upper Canada has come to the conclusion that the system itself is inherently

inequitable and needs to be changed. Nash asks if geography can learn from the law profession, and suggests that working within academic cultures for change will only take us so far. She implies, then, that fundamental change in the ways we organize knowledge and evaluate progress will have to occur.

Brenda Murphy and Denise Cloutier-Fisher contend that combining graduate school and parenthood is a fundamentally different experience for women due to the underlying social and economic structure of society. They outline how, despite egalitarian rhetoric, women still undertake the majority of home-related chores and child care duties. They each provide an overview of their negotiation with these predominant social patterns in their own journeys through graduate school. By adopting a gendered, spatialised perspective of the structure-agency relationship, they attempt to make sense of their own experiences. They note how structures, such as the organization of space and cultural norms, including the dichotomy between public and private spaces, access to child care and norms regarding gendered roles in society, can constrain the ability of female graduate students to complete their studies. However, they also outline that agency, such as the active negotiation of structures and the interactive construction of identities, including the redefinition of parenting roles and graduate student norms, can empower women and lead to change within their families, the university and perhaps even within society.

Susan Frohlick reflects on her experience of conducting doctoral field research at Everest Base Camp. She was accompanied by her husband and two children, the youngest of whom was an eighteen-month-old infant. The embodied presence of her baby in this space contravened both cultural and medical taboos related to the possibility of altitude sickness and the remoteness of this location. Her positioning in the field as a scientist and a mother who breached the rules helped to reveal the way in which Base Camp was constructed as a place of macho independence. At the same time, this positioning also provided her with some unique opportunities to discuss the nature of Base Camp with a variety of individuals including medical professionals and local Sherpa guides. She notes that her experience contravenes the myth of the lone, solitary, detached researcher and provides an example of how a researcher's subject position interacts with the "field." She suggests that attention to

this interaction may provide important findings about the nature of the field.

## Conclusion: The Shifting Terrain of Feminist Inquiry in Geography

Earlier and current feminists sought to document patterns of inequity as well as their underlying causes. To ask about women and feminism in the context of graduates studies today is to ask about how feminist geography has changed. We argue that the terrain of inquiry may be shifting. Rather than attempting to work towards equity within the existing system, perhaps a new task is emerging. This new task is not about trying to gain equity for women and other voices in a paradigm defined by male, or white or heterosexist or ableist criteria. This new task is about redefining the academy in such a way that many voices, aspirations and needs – including women's – become integral and valued components of geography's accepted paradigm. Within geography, this means not shying away from redefining the field; sharing new ideas about how to value and actively support other ways of knowing, both as academics and research subjects; reconsidering appropriate criteria to judge the work of students and faculty; and asking unsettling questions about what ought to be the ontological and epistemic nature of geography.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Pamela Moss for her unflagging assistance. It has not gone unrecognized that the support and guidance she provided for two "green" doctoral students is an excellent example of the kind of caring and service work that often goes unrecognized in the academy. We would also like to thank Lisa Campbell, the editor of *The Great Lakes Geographer*, for supporting us in this endeavour.

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