

Thematic issue of RELA: Gender sensitive research in adult education: Looking back and looking forward to explore what is and what is missing in the research agenda

Submission deadline: October 31, 2020

Editors for this issue: Joanna Ostrouch-Kamińska, (Guest Editor), Cristina Vieira (Guest Editor) & Barbara Merrill (RELA Editor)

Despite legislation, policies and practice, and while some progress has been made in many countries, there are still no countries who have achieved a hundred per cent gender equality (Gender Equality Index, EIGE, 2019). Over the years this has included several supranational agreements and mandatory regulations signed by countries such as the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the Platform of Beijing (1995), the Istanbul Convention (2011), and more recently the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015), among others. The failure of these initiatives indicate that gender inequality, discrimination and prejudice suffered by individuals and groups are embedded in structural unequal power relations. The ultimate goal of 'gender mainstreaming principle' is the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes (including research ones), with a view to promoting gender equality between women and men, and combating discrimination¹. This is still a challenge between and within countries but as stressed by the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025²: it is necessary to work together to build a 'Europe where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are equal – where they are free to pursue their chosen path in life and reach their full potential, where they have equal opportunities to thrive, and where they can equally participate in and lead our European society' (p. 19).

It is a myth to think that social evolution is a one-way movement, always in a positive direction. If we look, for example, the use of women's rights as 'a bargaining chip' in the international negotiations between countries seeking economic aid to solve internal problems (Carvalho-Pinto & Fleschenberg, 2019), it becomes clear the regrettable instrumentalization of human rights and the unequal situations and voices that are given (or taken from) specific vulnerable groups. As Verloo (2007) states more than a decade ago, despite the European Union and the Council of Europe's efforts to set standards in relation to the member states' legal and policy choices concerning the implementation of gender mainstreaming, the engagement with feminist principles and the meaning given to gender equality vary tremendously across European nations.

Gender sensitive research in adult education shaped by feminist thinking promotes the

¹ Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/what-is-gender-mainstreaming>

² Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A152%3AFIN>

use of the concept of gender as a grid to interpret reality and a tool – ‘gender lenses’ (Bem, 1993) – to identify specific areas where women and men suffer explicit and/or silent forms of inequality and discrimination across the lifespan (Ostrouch-Kamińska & Vieira, 2016). Talking about gender – a controversial concept among feminist scholars (Ubieta, Henriques & Toldy, 2018) – is about uncovering structural inequalities. cultural norms and values which have imposed unequal power relations between women and men.

Feminist research developed in the 1970s importantly critiqued male sociology or ‘malestream’ as termed by feminists as the study of women’s lives had previously been ignored and deemed unimportant. For Dorothy Smith: ‘The women’s movement has given us a sense of our right to have women’s interests represented in sociology, rather than just receiving as authoritative the interests traditionally represented in a sociology put together by men’ (1987: 85). Feminist research also opposed ‘traditional’ positivistic research by developing a humanistic and subjective approach through the use of biographical methods. Feminist research gives voice to marginalised women through the telling of their stories. Importantly feminists argued that research is political as echoed in their slogan ‘the personal is political’ by highlighting and challenging women’s oppression in society.

Similarly, female academics in adult education in Europe, influenced by feminism, challenged the dominance of male researchers, and using largely biographical methods, highlighted the lives of women adult students in a range of adult education settings such as community education, higher education, and training and the labour market. Gender studies was also introduced into adult education pedagogy and was aimed at women students.

While in the past resistance to studying gender came from the positivist paradigm new resistances and anti-gender discourses are now emerging. Many feminists themselves turned to postmodernism and other perspectives which led to a highly theoretical and abstract approach which excluded the lives of working class women (Merrill & Puigvert, 2001). Today researchers who study human rights’ violations in general and specific gender inequalities within the framework of gender studies, feminist studies and women studies face continuous adversities and hidden obstacles to their career progression and consolidation (Vieira, 2012). The distressing neoliberal times, the tendency for the marketisation of intellectual products and the ‘taken for granted’ weakness of social areas of knowledge when compared to exact or natural sciences makes the scenario even more difficult for researchers who have a self-commitment with gender equality principles.

Acknowledging that ‘knowledge has a situated nature’ (Haraway, 1988), there are epistemological, ontological, ethical, and political implications for planning and doing research. In recent years researchers have highlighted the intersectional nature of inequalities in people’s lives recognising that a person is classed, gendered, raced etc. so that being a black working class woman is different to being a white working class woman. As Skeggs asserts in her research ‘The women never see themselves as just women: it is always read through class’ (1997: 2).

The choices of research methodologies and the tools used for doing research must give voice to inequality and diversity experienced by women and men. As Ollagnier (2014) states when emphasising the importance of a gender sensitive approach on the education and training of adults, the uses of the gender lenses in doing research may open to

participants – and to researchers – the possibility of access to (new) life opportunities. For this thematic issue on gender we invite papers which are theoretical, conceptual, research or policy-based which reflect back on gender and adult education studies and research, the changing nature of gender and adult education and current and future possibilities, including what is missing, as well as pedagogical approaches to gender learning and teaching. Deadline for submission is 31 October, 2020. Papers should be submitted and formatted following the author guidelines available at www.rela.ep.liu.se.

Papers should be submitted through the online system. Please note in the submission that it is related to the call for papers on “gender”.

<https://journal.ep.liu.se/index.php/RELA/about/submissions>

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