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Our sovereignty, our lives hang in the balance
if we are not for women, who will be?
There are women put in prisons and prisons put in women
but our history need not be our destiny.
(*J. Gorman "For Women's Lives" 2003*)

Gender Equity in Scottish Higher Education

Since its inception in 1451, Scottish higher education has been centrally situated within the larger sociopolitical context of its national history, culture, and governance. A historically male domain, the Scottish university now works toward gender equity in relatively fragmented ways, primarily alongside recent government mandates. An absence of research and writing on the experience of Scottish women in education, combined with a pervasive "myth of equality" in academic settings, masks the institutionalized sexism still prevalent in contemporary Scottish universities (Breitenbach, Brown & Myers, 1998). Despite the fact that women scholastically outperform men from primary school to university, including in the hard sciences and medical fields, little attention is paid to their importance as scholars in the Scottish academic landscape (Breitenbach et.al., 1998).

Equally concerning is the backlash to Scotland's increasingly liberal educational opportunity policies, which have been dismissed by critics who claim that "universality is the antithesis of excellence" (Luckhurst, 2002, p.37). For women, this negative response enabled a growing movement for the return to traditional Scottish norms, where higher education was a choice for the few, not an expectation for the many. Women achievers, as a result, are sometimes dissuaded from pursuing a university education, despite evidence that teachers consistently report better motivation, comprehension, and performance from female scholars at all levels (Schuller, 2001).

To fully understand the experience of women in Scottish higher education, one must consider the complex social systems of gendered politics, sociocultural history, and educational policymaking. In this paper, I will examine and critique the cultural climate in Scotland that simultaneously champions diversity while subtly dismissing feminism and inhibiting women's academic success. From my experiences visiting five Scottish universities (University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, University of St. Andrews, University of Edinburgh, and Napier University) and an extensive literature review, I will present a short history of women in Scottish education, summarize Scottish diversity and feminist philosophies, describe the current climate for Scottish women in higher education, evaluate existing strategies designed to overcome institutional gender discrimination, and recommend ways to develop a more empowering academic environment for Scottish women students.

A Brief History of Women in Scottish Higher Education

Since Queen Margaret College opened its doors in 1883 as an institution solely dedicated to developing female students, higher education for Scottish women has undergone significant sociopolitical change. In a society where women are twice marginalized, first by English cultural hegemony and next by Scottish male domination, female students constantly struggle to find affirming identities in higher education (Breitenbach, Brown & Myers, 1998). During the late nineteenth century, as gender equity in higher education advanced, the ancient Scottish universities formed a Ladies' Educational Association as a precursor to the formal admission of women (Myers, 2001). Additionally, independent colleges such as the Glasgow-West End College of Domestic Science offered classes for women in the "feminine arts," including cooking, housewifery, and etiquette (Lockhead, 2006). Though these efforts may seem patronizing in retrospect, in the late nineteenth century they were necessary to "establish a separate power base from men by stressing the special virtues which women could offer in education" (Salisbury & Riddell, 1999, p.3).

Despite these advancements, women remained conspicuously underserved in a system that defined the student as "master of his own fate rather than the object of a subtle patronage system" (Neave & Cowper, 1979, p. 18). Women were no more "masters of their own fate" than the men of color who were also denied access to higher education at this time. Translating the public esteem for universally accessible education into the broader idea of genderless social citizenship was difficult, even for 20th century Scots. In fact, nearly a century after they were welcomed into the hallowed halls of the university, women still comprised only 28.1% of all students (Neave & Cowper, 1979). It was not until the UK Equal Opportunities Commission established the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 that women could fully realize their potential as equals in higher education.

Conceptualizing Diversity in Contemporary Scotland

Today, Scottish universities are at a crossroads of several controversial issues, including potential top-up fees, internationalization, and the burgeoning conflicts of tradition versus innovation. At the intersection of these concerns lies a distinct conflict between the sanctity of the ancient Scottish university and the new governmental call for more diverse, pluralistic institutions of higher education. What is the university's role in ensuring a diverse student population? What responsibility do universities have in altering their traditions to adapt to a changing student body? How much institutional flexibility is necessary to maintain an authentic sense of community? Questions like these continue to arise as the Scottish university renegotiates its relevance and assumes a more active role as diplomat and problem-solver.

Current Scottish approaches to diversity engagement in higher education parallel those of American universities in the 1990s. "Blindness" strategies intended to minimize crucial identity differences and emphasize human commonality abound, as evidenced in the lofty proclamation that "Scotland has good race relations because there is no racism here" (Breitenbach, Brown & Myers, 1998, p. 48). Furthermore, hate crime legislation in Scotland still protects only two identity-based violations, racism and sectarianism,

turning a comparatively blind eye to the prominent issues of homophobia, sexism, and classism (Howie, 2006). A recent presentation on the historically inclusive policies of the University of Glasgow mentioned its “no barriers” approach to higher education, which allowed for the first black male medical student in the world, yet ironically remained closed to women of any color until the late 1890s (Richmond, 2006). Philosophically, both Scottish administrators and legislators advocate diversity, though actions necessary to achieve inclusive communities still elude most universities.

However, several Scottish agencies are making notable strides to develop progressive programs and services that address various aspects of diversity. The Commission for Racial Equality is working with the Scottish Parliament to establish the Commission for Equality and Human Rights to combat all forms of discrimination in the public sector. Scottish Women’s Aid, a domestic abuse support organization founded in 1973, recently launched the National Strategy for Domestic Abuse to reduce a growing social ill. The government-sanctioned Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), which oversees the Women and Equality Unit, promotes equality and diversity by providing free consulting, liaising, and publishing services in a collaborative, multi-agency format. At the grassroots level, all-female student organizations like the University of St. Andrews’ “Pink Links,” dedicated to supporting local low-income and physically abused women, are beginning to embrace and articulate the message of gender equality both inside and outside their campus walls.

Locating Post-Thatcher Feminism in Scotland

A recent study of male and female Scottish university students revealed that 27% of students aged 18-45 would “never” self-identify as feminist, while another 59% vowed to claim the identity only “occasionally” (Callaghan, Cranmer, Rowan, Siann, & Wilson, 1999). The sole feminist magazine to find success in the Scottish student underground scene, *Harpies and Quines*, lasted for only two years and is both eulogized and criticized as a fleeting liberal fancy. During a conversation with the Student Association advisor at the University of Edinburgh, I was informed that of over 200 student societies present there, only one (Women of the World) dealt exclusively with women’s issues (T. Shotton, personal communication, July 24, 2006). Another comment from a group of Scottish female teachers demanded answers to this feminist plight, commenting that:

We want an explanation of the unfairness of sexist oppression and a description of its pernicious effects. It is particularly important to demonstrate that it is not mere slugging or unpleasant forms of personal behavior that are being dealt with but rather a deeply embedded social oppression which affects every area of women’s lives (Salisbury & Riddell, 1999, p. 46).

From these anecdotes, one must wonder: where have all the feminists gone?

In a society still recovering from a “Thatcherized” regime, which “contributed both to the deradicalization of feminism and to fragmentation within it,” women are confused about their place in the movement (Breitenbach, Brown & Myers, 1998, p.57). Contemporary literature on the topic describes a lively debate that questions the

sustainability of UK feminism, suggesting that the ‘micro-politics’ of everyday life may have superseded the need for a visible movement (Nash, 2002). During a candid student panel at the University of St. Andrews, I inquired about the presence of women’s organizations on campus as well as the overall status of female students in comparison to male. I was told that due to campus policy, single-sex societies cannot legally exist, after which the female student perplexedly explained, “but, I’ve never really experienced any discrimination based on gender here anyway.”

Until the UK plan for gender equity is fully enacted in April 2007, young Scottish women will endure a relatively stunted feminist movement without established vehicles for activism in the university environment. Negative media messages about feminism and feminists combined with a resistance to postmodern essentialist models of gender difference still plague Scottish culture at all levels (Callaghan et. al., 1999). Scottish women earn only 72.7% of comparable male income, which is surprisingly higher than the all-UK average, though still unacceptable (Clayton, 2000). The new 2004-2007 Gender Equality Scheme, one of three requirements of the Equality Bill, requires all public sector organizations to introduce 3-year plans to systematically and intentionally “eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment and promote equality of opportunity between women and men” (UK Commission for Equality and Human Rights, 2004). More than any preceding legislation, this bill will serve as a strong catalyst toward academic gender equity.

Hitting the Glass Ceiling: Scottish Women in Academe

For too long, Scottish female students, staff, and faculty have subscribed to a “tradition of silence” that excludes them from public sector success and equity by quieting their collective voice (Breitenbach, Brown & Myers, 1998, p. 49). Paternalistic, often sexist university norms are lauded to potential parents as evident of a “duty of care”; their effectiveness allegedly proven by low rape statistics and the promise of insularly protective campuses. The four ancient universities have never elected or appointed a female principal or rector; women in positions of university leadership are still regarded as “rare animals” (McNeish, 2006). A nearly tangible glass ceiling exists for female university administrators; they account for only 20% of senior lecturers and 14% of full professors (Schofield, 2006). More women than ever are finding employment in the universities, yet the disproportionate amount of women to men in lesser-paid positions threatens to produce a feminized academic ghetto, void of the degrees and opportunities necessary to advance.

Two of my personal conversations with female administrators painted similarly dismal pictures of the potential for women to succeed in higher education. One noted the wage and promotion gap for women working in management, explaining that some supervisors hire women only to caution them, “don’t expect a promotion” (S. McNeish, personal communication, July 18, 2006). Another confessed that “women are always disadvantaged” and went on to comment that universities are comfortable, flexible places for women since their main faculty role is to teach, not research like the male professors (E. Browne, personal communication, July 21, 2006). Pigeonholing women into positions with little potential for pay raises or promotions ensures a base-level female administrative force that in turn propels males into higher positions basically by default.

Raw data confirm these observations of women's disenfranchisement at the university. Nearly two thirds of the students seeking counseling at the University of Edinburgh are women; eating disorders, relationship problems, and academic pressures top the list of frequent complaints. The University of St. Andrews instituted eating disorder support groups through their Sports Centre in 2002, and Napier University recently introduced a minority women's one-on-one counseling service for international students. Gender struggles do not end with undergraduate students and are intensified as women move up the educational ladder. The University of Edinburgh employs 2,500 male academic staff as compared to only 1,750 female; they also have double the amount of women versus men in clerical or part-time positions (Jennings, 2006). The number of women in high-level university positions is actually decreasing; the percentage of female professors dipped slightly over the past five years (Schofield, 2006).

There are, however, universities making purposeful change. The University of Edinburgh's most recent strategic plan aims to increase the amount of female faculty in the sciences during the period 2002-2006 using aggressive recruitment and training efforts. Glasgow University reconfirmed its efforts to rigorously enforce equity policy and to actively address issues of discrimination on campus (Schofield, 2006). Napier University recently appointed a full-time Diversity Partner through the Equal Opportunities Commission to help develop a markedly progressive three-year equity plan.

In addition, several innovative academic efforts are helping to ensure awareness and education on a variety of women's issues. The University of St. Andrews, for example, now offers a course entitled "The Weaker Sex? Women and Scottish Society" which promises to examine and critique the political, social, and civil rights struggle facing Scottish women both historically and presently. A 2005 collaborative EU research project entitled "Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society" joined several Scottish and other European universities to explore issues of female image, culture, and policy. Most compelling are the two new research centers dedicated to the study of women and gender in higher education, the International Centre for Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Glasgow and the Scottish Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology jointly sponsored by Napier, Glasgow, and Glasgow Caledonian universities, both of which provide an institutional voice for women's issues in higher education. In terms of empowering female administrative staff, the University of St. Andrews now offers a three-month, workshop-based women's development program called Springboard which aims to increase confidence and job satisfaction while encouraging participants towards greater personal and professional achievements. Clearly, campuses nationwide are devising immediate and effective strategies to close the gender gap in higher education and support broad anti-discrimination policies.

Recommendations for Scottish Colleges and Universities

Models and Mentors

Universities must do more than simply tout their gender-inclusive policies; indeed, they must create intentional programs and services to achieve equity goals in supportive academic environments. Pairing female faculty with women students in

mentoring relationships can enhance the potential of undergraduate students to pursue postgraduate education and help women envision themselves within a more gender-balanced future professoriate. These relationships will be particularly meaningful if they unite women in nontraditionally female disciplines such as engineering, medicine, mathematics, and the hard sciences. An even more progressive university may consider employing a full or part-time staff member to design, implement, and assess diversity education programs, many of which should necessarily address gender equity. In addition, the ancient universities should look to the modern or “1992” universities and further education institutions as role models for the proactive recruitment and retention of diverse students.

Strategic Planning

In the vein of the University of Edinburgh and Napier University, other Scottish universities must follow suit with deliberate strategic planning for gender equity. Governmental legislation such as the Sex Discrimination Act and its supplemental documents, like the “Delivering on Gender” plan, constitute sound models for university strategic plans. Setting concrete goals with measurable outcomes, such as increased expenditure for women’s studies and research, an increase in high-level women administrators and full professors, and the inclusion of gender concerns in curriculum and literature, is the only way to make accurate progress toward an equitable campus environment (Lasonen, 1995). Furthermore, the effort for equity cannot succeed if it only begins in higher education. Discrimination in early education induces a “snowball effect” which can negatively affect female scholastic attainment in later years (Tinklin & Croxford, 2000). Unbiased gender messages must be absorbed into curricula at the primary and secondary levels in order to ensure lifelong commitment and comprehension from Scottish adults.

Student Organizations

Finally, any bona fide movement toward gender equity in higher education must employ the initiative and energy of undergraduate students. Student associations can sponsor and plan events that spotlight women’s and human rights issues, both nationally and abroad. Student association advisors can encourage the development of female-focused and feminist-friendly student societies on campus. Student services departments can construct gender-specific leadership opportunities such as assertiveness workshops or all-female immersion retreats aimed at developing self-assured female leaders. Existing academic departments in cultural, liberal or social studies can begin to formulate gender or women’s studies curriculums and degree programs for undergraduate students. The holistic and unbiased support of women and men, both academically and personally, defines the core mission for gender equity in Scottish higher education.

Conclusion

As the empowering lyrics in Judy Gorman’s 2003 song suggest, for Scottish women, “our history is not our destiny.” Women still face multiple levels of oppression in Scotland, such as discriminatory employment practices and the absence of a strong and unified feminist movement. Despite these setbacks, positive progress is evident in

several key arenas. Higher education, buttressed by the Sex Discrimination Act, Equality Bill, and Equal Opportunities Commission, serves as a leader in eliminating gender bias from the Scottish public sector. To further this mission, more extensive research on feminism in the Scottish university, the girlhood experience in Scottish primary and secondary schools, and the reality of women in the Scottish professoriate is necessary. In sum, current university and government strategies are proving increasingly effective at giving women a voice in higher education. The 'new rules' are set and the players cast; it is now the responsibility of Scottish higher education to seize the opportunity to recreate the game.

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