

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 52

The impact of Women's Studies on Women's Employment Opportunities in Europe

Context of the Research

The Amsterdam Treaty identified a gap in the employment rates of women and men in Europe, resulting in the greater economic and social exclusion of women. However, over the last thirty years, significant numbers of women have undergone Women's Studies training. But, little is known about what happens to these women in the labour market. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Women's Studies training significantly impacts on women's employability, adaptability, entrepreneurship and the promotion of equal opportunities.

This is the first project to produce systematic cross-European data and analyse the impact of Women's Studies training on the employment of those that undertake such training. Women's Studies training include - university degree courses in Women's Studies and gender training received through non-governmental organisations. The project involved an all-female research team from nine European countries - Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Key Conclusions

These conclusions have been grouped according to how Women's Studies has been institutionalised; its impact on women's employability; adaptability and entrepreneurship; education and work related migration; and on the promotion of equal opportunities.

Institutionalisation of Women's Studies

1. Recognition of Women's Studies as a discipline in its own right is unevenly spread across Europe despite it helping to foster greater understanding of gender roles.
2. Women's Studies is predominately taught in higher education as part of traditional disciplines at undergraduate level and in its own right at postgraduate level. However, in order to maximize its impact it should also be an autonomous discipline at undergraduate level, and integrated into teacher training courses.
3. There is a lack of recognition and visibility of Women's Studies in many European countries including Hungary, Slovenia, Italy, and France. Students therefore tend to discover the subject by chance while at university.

4. Women's Studies does not form part of teacher training education despite teachers being vital for facilitating learning and change, including on issues around gender roles in primary and secondary education. Gender issues are rarely included in any school curricula.
5. As more than 50% of the European population do not enter tertiary education, it is vital that the changes in gender roles be inculcated within primary and secondary education.
6. Women's Studies is a vital source for the dissemination of equal opportunities knowledge.

Employability

7. Women who are keen to participate in the labour market are attracted to Women's Studies.
8. Women's Studies students acquire significant knowledge of gender and diversity issues, equal opportunities and tend to become critical thinkers with self-confidence, and the ability to argue effectively.
9. However, students sometimes think that Women's Studies, is viewed with hostility in the employment market, and sometimes deny that they have taken subject.
10. Employers appear to have little understanding of the knowledge and the skills Women's Studies students acquire.
11. Careers advisors, where they exist, tend to encourage girls into traditionally feminine occupations. They also have no or very limited understanding of the skills and knowledge that Women's Studies students acquire or the kinds of careers that require gender expertise.
12. Few Women's Studies courses require in-course work placements. However, students who have had such placements report a more realistic view of the job market and have sometimes found employment through their work placements.
13. Women's Studies training encourages the professionalisation of its students through its high retention rates into postgraduate level, which as EU data show, is a key factor in labour market participation.

Adaptability and Entrepreneurship

14. Although Women's Studies is often held in low esteem in academe, and employers are sometimes hostile to students taking the subject, it produces individuals who are independent-minded and relatively high-risk takers - both desirable qualities in an uncertain job market.

15. Women's Studies training provides women with key knowledge and skills for the labour market. These include: -

- Gender awareness
- Knowledge of equal opportunities
- Self-confidence
- Critical thinking ability
- The ability to establish and sustain complex arguments
- Abilities to work in a communicative, open style
- Competence in dealing with diversity.

16. Women's Studies students are more willing to go into less established, innovatory work environments where work cultures are less entrenched.

17. Women's Studies training impacts most significantly on how women carry out their work, making them potential change agents in the workplace.

18. Women's Studies students reported a willingness to 'invent' their own jobs - that is to think creatively about making employment for themselves.

19. Women's Studies facilitates upward professional mobility in its students.

20. Women's Studies students benefit greatly from the female friendship and mentoring networks at local, national, and international levels that they acquire during their Women's Studies training. These networks act as facilitators in finding post-training employment.

Education and employment-related migration

21. As exchange programmes have grown and knowledge of Women's Studies has become more widespread there has been an increasing tendency for students to study abroad – although this is not the case with those from the UK.

22. As expected, countries with well-established Women's Studies programmes such as the UK, the Netherlands, Finland and Germany are more likely to receive foreign students than countries where the subject is less well established.

23. Students also tend to be attracted to countries in which English is spoken.

24. Overall, women still tend to be under-represented in terms of educational mobility.

25. Those who study abroad tend to do so predominantly for a semester or a year. But, few students take an entire degree abroad.

26. Problems concerning accreditation at the home university, of courses taken abroad persist, especially where no equivalent exists.

27. Although increasing numbers of students study abroad as part of an EU mobility scheme, a significant proportion are self-funded.
28. The most important barriers to studying abroad are lack of, or insufficient funding, lack of language skills (which is particularly acute in the UK), and family and/or care commitments. Women are also less likely to study abroad once they have a family.

Equal Opportunities

29. Equal opportunities legislation and supporting infrastructure varies across Europe - often being dependent upon the "political will" within specific countries for effective implementation.
30. Equal opportunities legislation in most European countries is not well understood, nor widely known by many people including those who have an awareness of gender issues.
31. In many countries including France and Finland, gender expertise is not a requirement for people working in equal opportunities jobs.
32. Women's Studies training changes women's understanding of equal opportunities issues and increases women's perception of their involvement in equal opportunities issues.
33. Women's Studies training equips women to address the following issues at work: -
 - Refusal to put up with sexist behaviour at work
 - Introduction of gender issues into the workplace
 - Working in a non-sexist manner
 - Fighting discrimination at work
 - Feeling more confident in making applications for promotion
 - Being more sensitive to issues of diversity
 - Being more supportive of female colleagues
34. Women's Studies training facilitate students' understanding of the gendered power asymmetries they routinely encounter in their working lives, enabling them to make sense of those experiences.

Key Recommendations

Institutionalisation of Women's Studies

1. The EU should use the Bologna process to encourage the establishment of Women's Studies as a fully recognised independent discipline at under- and at postgraduate level in all European Union countries.
2. All national governments should facilitate the establishment of Women's Studies as a fully recognised discipline at under- and at postgraduate level by including it as a discipline for all assessment and funding purposes, and supporting it with endowed chairs and studentships.

3. National governments and ministries of education should ensure that Women's Studies forms part of all teachers' education curriculum. It should also form part of the primary and secondary education curriculum.
4. Ministries of education and equal opportunities bodies in European Union countries should explore the ways in which Women's Studies bases in tertiary education might be built upon and supported to disseminate equal opportunities knowledge more widely in society.
5. National governments and ministries of education should ensure that Women's Studies Centres are supported to act as dissemination centres for gender research and equal opportunities along the lines of the Swedish National Gender Secretariat.
6. Women's Studies students out-perform their mothers in terms of reaching higher professional and/or managerial positions than their mothers did.
7. Women's Studies students, especially in Italy, Finland and Germany, reject the conventional male career model which emphasizes climbing a career ladder and making increasingly large sums of money, instead defining their ideal job in terms of job satisfaction, making a difference, feeling valued, and working in a non-sexist environment.
8. The EU and national governments should agree a common process for keeping track of students following modular courses across interdisciplinary areas in order to enable them to be analysed more effectively. In addition there is also a need for tracking students when they leave university or training and go into employment or other activities.
9. As women's employment is inadequately captured by current conventional employment categories as used by EUROSTAT, the OECD, and other bodies, this needs to be addressed. Culture-sensitive employment categories need to be developed.

Employability - European level:

10. Policies to reduce working hours for all employees should be given more weight than policies encouraging part-time employment for women.
11. The EU and national statistics offices should develop gender sensitive employment statistical indicators for women's employment. This includes the development of gender sensitive statistical indicators for unpaid care work.
12. Careers advice services for students should be available in all European Union countries, and the Bologna process might be used as a tool by the European Union to support the establishment of such services where they do not exist.

Employability - National level:

13. Education ministries and equal opportunities bodies should facilitate Women's Studies staff to help them market the knowledge and skills Women's Studies students acquire to prospective employers.
14. National governments should develop initiatives to enhance employers' knowledge of the kinds of knowledge and skills students acquire during their training, including Women's Studies training.
15. Women's Studies courses for women aged 40+ should be set up to help them enter or re-enter education and the labour market.
16. Careers advisors should be trained both in equal opportunities and in knowledge of the kinds of careers that require gender expertise. Such training might be delivered via Women's Studies programmes, and national ministries of education as well as departments of trade and industry that should set up initiatives to enable this.
17. Careers advice services should produce annual gender audits.
18. National governments and ministries of education should ensure the establishment of postgraduate courses and research centres in Women's Studies in all higher education institutions.
19. Measures need to be developed both nationally and at EU level to facilitate cultural change in men so that they become producers and not merely consumers of domestic labour. These should include compulsory teaching on gender issues at primary and secondary school level, the development of positive role models for men doing domestic labour in the media, and incentives via employers and tax breaks to encourage men to take on proper care responsibilities for dependents.
20. National and local governments, public and private-sector companies, leisure and cultural institutions, third sector service providers, political parties, etc. should be required to meet a series of norms in relation to the promotion of women's rights in employment. So-called "family-friendly" personnel management practices could be one of the first areas to be recognised with a "best practice" gender equality certification scheme.

Employability - Local/course level:

21. Women's Studies courses should include training for students in how to articulate and market their specific skills.
22. Women's Studies staff should seek to develop awareness raising programmes for employers regarding the kinds of knowledge and skills Women's Studies students acquire during their training.

Adaptability and Entrepreneurship

23. National/regional ministries of education and departments of trade and industry should develop strategies for promoting greater knowledge of the skills acquired through Women's Studies training.
24. The EU and national/regional governments should develop and support female mentoring systems for Women's Studies graduates to sustain the latter in unconventional employment arenas, and to spread knowledge about the opportunities around divergent career paths.

Education and employment-related migration – at European Union level

25. Revise student and staff mobility programmes to include opportunities for short-term exchanges (one week to one month) to enable women and men with care/domestic responsibilities to participate in such schemes.
26. Review the financial incentives aimed at achieving harmonization and a more competent workforce through greater mobility for educational purposes, as finances are often too limited to enable students to take educational mobility schemes up.
27. Use the Bologna process to enforce language teaching in countries such as the UK where lack of knowledge of languages impedes educational mobility.
28. Revise mobility schemes to enable participation even when there is no exchange of equal numbers of students.
29. Use educational mobility schemes to further international networking and mentoring for women by encouraging support schemes that transcend the duration of the actual mobility scheme.
30. Establish measures and sanctions that ensure the accreditation of courses taken abroad in the student's home country, including courses in subjects not taught in the home country.
31. EU, national governments and education institutions should use educational mobility users to act as advocates of such schemes and to promote them.
32. Encourage the establishment of a greater diversity of mobility schemes including summer schools.

Equal Opportunities - European level:

33. Promote measures to speed up the implementation of equal opportunities legislation in all its member countries.
34. EU and national governments should ensure that equal opportunities infrastructures are set up and maintained independently of changes in local/national government and of the political will.

35. EU and national governments ought to develop effective sanctions to enforce the implementation of equal opportunities legislation.
36. EU and national governments should develop campaigns to facilitate a greater degree of dissemination and understanding of equal opportunities legislation.
37. EU and national governments should ensure that gender expertise is a standard requirement of all equal opportunities posts.
38. International mentoring schemes for women with Gender Studies expertise need to be developed and promoted throughout the European Union through bodies such as the 'Women and Science' Unit.
39. EU and national governments ought to agree on incentives to be offered to employers (tax breaks; benefits) designed to transform gender segregation in the labour market through making gender awareness part of their job specifications, and to promote greater gender balance in employment.
40. European policy should support targeted positive action at national level to enhance women's participation and advancement in academe.

Equal Opportunities – National level

41. Equal opportunities bodies should be encouraged by national governments to collaborate with Women's Studies programmes to facilitate training in equal opportunities.
42. National governments and departments of trade and industry should ensure that careers advisors are trained to promote jobs in equal opportunities to Women's Studies students.
43. Employers in all European countries should be required to carry out gender audits and to include action plans for improving gender imbalances in their work place.
44. Careers advisors should receive gender awareness training. Their activities should be regularly monitored and audited, including a gender audit, and incentives created to facilitate the promotion of men into traditionally female jobs and women's opportunities to work outside the service sector.
45. National mentoring schemes for Gender Studies experts need to be put in place through ministries of education and departments of trade and industry.
46. National governments should consider using tax incentives and other fiscal measures to encourage employers to improve gender imbalances in areas such as promotion, the pay gap and parental leave taken by men rather than women.
47. Gender audits and relevant action plans should be established as a central aspect of all public funding policies.

48. Countries such as Germany and France should introduce standardised job descriptions for commissioners of women's affairs/equal opportunities officers.
49. Ministries of education should ensure that all teacher-training courses include a compulsory equal opportunities element.
50. National campaigns are required to promote equal opportunities legislation and women's rights within the work place.
51. National campaigns are required to promote awareness of issues such as violence against women, and the need for men's participation in domestic and care labour.

Equal Opportunities – local level

52. As part of schools' training for citizenship, curricula ought to be developed to incorporate knowledge of rights under equal opportunities legislation and an understanding of how one might use that legislation to seek redress in case of violation.
53. Women's Studies courses should be encouraged to give more curriculum space to equal opportunities.
54. Domestic and care labour training should become part of the primary and secondary schools training for all boys and girls in all European countries.

Further Information

The full title of the project is: "Employment and Women's Studies: The Impact of Women's Studies Training on Women's Employment in Europe". The final was completed in October 2003.

The project web site at <http://www.hull.ac.uk/ewsi/>

[Final Report](#) [Partner details](#)

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