

HOW LONG YA'IN FOR?  
THE USE AND ABUSE OF WOMEN IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Is there truly is a crisis of feminism, or is this simply a media creation? There is a tremendous gap in the literature about why women do or do not define themselves as feminists, and what that identification does for women as a tool to help them cope with the obvious rigors of graduate school. I filled the gap by extensively interviewing sixty-five women graduate students at USC. In addition, what is not clear from all of the recent articles on this topic, is how closely the "non-feminists" resemble the "feminists" in terms of their opinions about the equality between men and women in the workplace. Both groups of women agree that men and women should be treated equally in terms of pay, promotion and hiring, but only feminists tend to see themselves as part of a larger whole, a part of all women. Non-feminists are really individualist in their outlooks in graduate school, and in their lives.

Why is it that some women experience graduate school as a crisis of gender inequality, while other women do not genderize their experiences in this manner? Graduate school is difficult for men as well as women, but is there something in the oppressive graduate school milieu which is especially noxious to women? And which women, feminists or non-feminists would be more likely to feel that graduate school is particularly offensive to women, thereby making them more likely to feel a sense of alienation? I assumed that since non-feminists do not tend to align themselves with a group, that they would be more likely to feel alienated while in graduate school. However, I found that the feminists were much more likely to feel alienation in the forms of powerlessness and meaninglessness than were the non-feminists. What then is the function of feminism for women graduate students? Might some women graduate students define themselves as feminists in an attempt to use feminism as an empowering force to help them deal with the strain of graduate school, while others might use feminism to conceptualize their seeming failure to conquer the male bastions of academia as a manifestation of women's oppression? Since completing the Graduate Women's Survey in 1986, I was shocked by how many women reported being sexually harassed while in graduate school. Fully twenty percent of the women surveyed either had been, or knew of someone who had been sexually harassed at USC. This study prompted me to delve deeper among USC graduate women to understand their opinions and experiences in graduate school. Using structured and unstructured interviews, I obtained a large amount of data about women's attitudes toward feminism, their experiences with sexual harassment and discrimination while at USC, and whether or not they felt alienation in the forms of powerlessness and meaninglessness while in graduate school.

I based my study on the results of sixty-five interviews with women graduate students at USC. I was particularly interested in finding out whether women in traditionally male fields felt relatively more powerlessness as compared to women in traditionally feminine fields, and how feminism fit into their lives. Of the sixty-five women interviewed, thirty-nine defined themselves as feminists, while twenty-six did not define themselves as feminists. The classifications of "feminist" and "non-feminist" are based upon the women graduate student self-classification, and include considerable overlap of ideology and opinions. The interviews lasted anywhere from one to six hours. Many women (mostly the feminists) described, often in great detail, their experiences with sexual harassment, discrimination, powerlessness, meaninglessness, loneliness, and general abuse while in graduate school. Women in various departments emphasized to me during their interviews that it was wonderful to sit and talk about women's experiences at USC. Just spending the hours of the interview talking made these women, non-feminists and feminists, and myself, feel a sense of connection to one another, a recognition that, "I'm not alone in my feelings," and most importantly, "I'm not crazy." I wanted desperately to get all of these women in a room, pour everyone a glass of wine, and just sit and talk for hours about our shared experiences.

#### GRADUATE SCHOOL AS A CRISIS OF GENDER INEQUALITY

Both the non-feminists and the feminists experienced a shocking amount of sexual harassment and discrimination at the hands of faculty, staff, and male graduate students, but only the feminists tended to internalize these events in the forms of powerlessness and meaninglessness. It is clear from my study that women in graduate school have a difficult time making it, not only in their coursework, but also avoiding sexist professors and colleagues. The non-feminist women reported discrimination against them in a number of areas including: the men in their programs being seen as more serious students, appearances of women being seen as more important than their work, and simply being ignored. They insisted that their experiences were individual in nature however, and were not likely to feel that they were experiencing anything out of the ordinary for all graduate students, male and female alike. They would not define themselves as feminists even in the face of blatant sexual discrimination such as professors showing slides of scantily clad women in class, sexist comments and jokes, and even sexual harassment. They did not internalize the events the way the feminists tended to do, and they often mentioned the fact that these "idiots," (the abusive male faculty and male graduate students), were just making the women stronger and better able to deal with the real world when they completed graduate school. The non-feminists tended to become empowered each time they were mistreated, whereas the feminists tended to feel more and more powerless at each act of mistreatment. These women felt that it was unnecessary for

them to align themselves with a group of women in order to achieve their goals in life. They felt that the word "feminist" itself sounds unfavorable, and that as individualists they could believe in their own strengths as people (no sex specified.) These women commonly cited their ability to work hard to achieve their goals, including their common sense and natural talent. It was implicit in their discussions that since they could make it on their own, other women should naturally do so as well. The non-feminists felt that women should be fully responsible for their own success, or lack thereof. Many of these non-feminists acknowledged that the feminist movement did much for the advancement of women's rights to equality in the workplace. Yet, they didn't align with the movement because they want to be seen as individuals.

#### INDIVIDUALISM AS A PROTECTION AGAINST ALIENATION

The non-feminist respondents generally denied feeling powerlessness or meaninglessness while in graduate school. The general attitude among these women was that despite the sexism they experienced they believed that they were no more alienated than the average male graduate student, and that it was the graduate school experience itself that was bad. These women were likely to focus their frustration and anger at the faculty, staff, and financial aid office, rather than any generalized feelings of meaninglessness and powerlessness relating to their gender. Most stated that if anything, their experiences in graduate school, (while quite abusive generally), were actually making them stronger, and made them feel more powerful. They did share feelings of anger however. Those non-feminists who did discuss feelings of alienation, focused primarily on isolation. This is entirely in keeping with their individualist stance. They felt little or no connection to other students, and certainly no other women students, either in their programs or in graduate school. They noted that they would just have to work harder than other students because of their jobs or families. It was simply an observation, not particularly a complaint. The isolation they experienced sounded as if it were just something they would have to live with, and not something to sway them from their course.

While the non-feminists did recognize sexism in their departments, they still would not define themselves as feminists. They did not want to be seen as "women \_\_\_\_\_," and did not want to align themselves with a group. The non-feminists had a type of mental negotiation between their suffering and their strengthening while in graduate school. The feminists seemed to focus more on the suffering aspect of graduate school. These were clearly individualist sentiments.

#### FEMINISM DOES NOT PROTECT AGAINST ALIENATION

While most of the women interviewed in this study defined themselves as feminists, they were also much more likely than the non-feminists to describe feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness while in graduate school. In terms of

isolation, the feminists who mentioned feeling isolated always discussed this in relation to their interest in women's support groups, women's centers, or women role models. The feminists felt that their isolation would have decreased if only they had more women to talk to and depend upon during their graduate careers. Non-feminists were unwilling, or unable, to attribute their sense of isolation to their gender, whereas the feminists generally tended to attribute their isolation almost exclusively to the fact that they were women, a reflection of the importance of the connection between women in their daily lives. Many of the feminists were searching for connections to others, especially other women, and when their attempts were foiled, they tended to feel alienation. They felt a heightened sense of cooperation compared to the non-feminists, and found that cooperation was more productive, in terms of dealing with the stresses of graduate school, for them than competition. When they were unable to find other women in their programs with whom they could bond and interact, they felt a greater sense of isolation than did the non-feminists. The feminists genderized their experiences of isolation where the non-feminists generalized these experiences.

By far the most commonly reported type of powerlessness was the sense that men were almost always taken more seriously than the women were. Many women described professors who seemed to always be much more interested in what male graduate students had to say, male voices taking precedence over female voices. They insisted that males were more likely to be given teaching assistantships, research assistantships, computer assignments, lab time, and generally treated better than were the women. The disparities in handing out assistantships were never mentioned by these women for fear of reprisals, often in the form of never passing ones exams or orals. They also described their sense of powerlessness as resulting from the verbal mistreatment and lack of respect on the part of male faculty and male students with regard to women's attire or appearance. They felt that they were seen as nothing more than decorations for men's personal enjoyment, rather than legitimate academics worthy of respect as colleagues.

Individualism seems to be a much better tool to use as a protection against the stresses and strains of graduate school than is feminism. It appears that many of the non-feminist individualists have taken the best that feminism has to offer, such as self-determination and the belief in equality between men and women, whereas the feminists have taken perhaps the worst, the victimization facet. The irony in these findings is startling. The feminists seemed not to be empowered by their identification, indeed, felt more powerlessness than did the non-feminists, who reported feeling empowered by their graduate school experiences.

#### SOLUTIONS

Clearly, most of the women interviewed for this study experienced some type of sexual harassment, verbal abuse, or

mistreatment at the hands of the faculty of this university. And while the non-feminists were not as likely as the feminists to internalize those experiences as powerlessness and meaninglessness, they nonetheless could have had a more pleasant graduate school experience. The feminists in this study felt that their lives would have been much better if there were more supportive women faculty in their programs, indeed, if there were simply more women in their departments to whom they could turn for advice and support. But the feminists often felt that there were few if any other women that they could depend upon for support. These feminists tended to search out connections to others, especially other women in their fields, and when they could not find women colleagues, role models or mentors, they ultimately felt a sense of powerlessness. Since the feminists in this study saw their experiences as shared by other women students, they also felt that through their work, perhaps women to follow would have an easier time of it in graduate school. Most of the feminists felt that, if given an equal opportunity, they could show themselves to be equal to men in their programs. But they were not given equal opportunities. If women are given the same opportunities for advancement as are men students, the women feel that there is no doubt that they would be considered to be equal to men.

Since the non-feminists tended overwhelmingly to be individualists (twenty-two out of twenty-six), it seems plausible that individualism immunizes women to feelings of alienation in the forms of powerlessness and meaninglessness. Perhaps the feminist women graduate students might learn something from the individualists, especially how to overcome the barrage of mistreatment in graduate school. The non-feminists tended in fact, to become more empowered at each act of sexism or mistreatment by a faculty member, while the feminists tended to feel powerlessness at these same acts. The individualist non-feminists wanted to blend in with the other graduate students in their departments, but the implication was that they wanted to be seen as "one of the guys." The non-feminists see the gender discrimination around them, but view it on a case by case basis, rather than as a form of social control. This is a successful strategy for avoiding feelings of alienation while in graduate school.

Since some of the women who defined themselves as feminists did so only after taking a women's studies course in graduate school, it can be postulated that some of the non-feminists might also self-define if they were simply more aware of the diversity of feminist thought. Clearly, the image of a bra-burning, man-hating, screaming bitch feminist is still largely seen as the prototypical feminist by many women. One of the functions of consciousness raising must be to dispel the myth of the only feminist being this type of woman.

Perhaps most importantly however, I think that feminism's constant hammering away at the victimization of women is not

particularly helpful to women who are trying to empower themselves and other women. Rather than insisting that women are victims, as feminists often do, why not adhere to the empowering individualist sentiment, that as individuals we have the capacity to do whatever we desire. Since the non-feminists tended not only to not feel alienation, but also to clearly have a better time in graduate school than the feminists did, it seems obvious that individualism is a much more successful strategy in dealing with the stresses of graduate school. While the feminists may meet with one another in rooms to empower each another with ammunition for the argument that the world is unjust to women, the individualists are smoothly sailing on to their degree objectives.

I assure you, it is not at all easy to report findings such as these. I am particularly troubled that I may be seen as a traitor to feminism. I believe that I show my belief in and commitment to feminism by reporting the shocking findings of widespread sexual harassment at the University of Southern California. As a feminist, I believe that women should work together to better the lives of other women. Perhaps a women's group which consisted not only of graduate students but of faculty as well might solve the problem of women not feeling respected by faculty. But in what way would this compel the male faculty, or the male graduate students, to recognize these women as equals? Why do the individualists feel that they are already equal, and therefore do not need to identify with a women's group? I think that many of the individualists are seen as equals in their programs, whereas the feminists may be looking for gender discrimination where perhaps none exists. Or perhaps as feminists we might work within the existing system, as the individualists tend to do, and show that as women we are in every way as capable as men in our fields. Again, this is where the faculty in each of these departments needs to do some serious soul-searching to find if they are sexist, abusive, or otherwise unprofessional. Women on both sides of the feminism coin need to feel that they are safe from abuse and harassment while in graduate school, and safe from reprisals.

Ultimately the changes needed in graduate education regarding its treatment of women scholars will need to come from the more established members of the academic community. Graduate students are not in a position where action can easily be taken, because their presence at the university is temporary, and time spent on activism inevitably detracts from time spent in studies, as well as placing the individual at risk for retaliation. In addition, the ethos of the American university emphasizes individualism and competition, not cooperation, thus atomizing potentially cohesive groups. Thus, it is incumbent on the academic system itself to mend its ways, at the risk of losing an enormous pool of talent necessary for its own self-preservation, as well as the economic and intellectual health of the society at large.