

## Preface

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The compilation of this volume is one of the very first actions undertaken to promote collaboration and mutual interests within the field of gender studies at the University of the Free State.<sup>1</sup> The authors of the articles are all based at this university. In the course of 2000/2001 a new cross-faculty inter-disciplinary Masters qualification in Gender Studies was established. The institution of this postgraduate course built upon established expertise in the field of feminism. This process revealed that the need for feminist researchers — who until then had been insufficiently informed about the extent to which their colleagues were inspired by feminist perspectives — needed to collaborate and to share their research. This volume indicates the extent to which certain researchers in the various disciplines of sociology, political science, comparative literature, art history, philosophy, geography, education, Near-Eastern studies and jurisprudence have been influenced by feminist inquiry. As one of the very first attempts to promote collaboration, the diverse articles are linked by the introductory article, in the common context and circumstances in which feminist research at this institution originated, rather than by an integrating theme.

The introductory article is based on the first Equity Report presented by the Equity Committee of the Faculty of the Humanities to the Faculty Board in May 2000, as well as on subsequent research done by this committee. The brief of the committee was to identify problems experienced by female staff members and to make recommendations as to how these should be addressed. All the recommendations of the first Report were accepted by the Faculty Board. The introductory article assesses to what extent these recommendations have been influential in the decision-making processes of the Faculty.

1 We would like to thank Johann Visagie for first suggesting that the Equity Report of the Faculty of the Humanities (May 2000) should be published, as well as Elsabé Klinck who first suggested the format of an introductory article in an *Acta Academica Supplementum* on gender.

Most importantly, it assesses whether or to what extent the promotions of 2001 changed the situation for women in the Faculty. The conclusion, unfortunately, is disconcerting.

This volume demonstrates how personal experiences and “fighting from within” against gender discrimination have sharpened contributors’ sensibilities, prompting them not only to notice the effects of gender inequity in society and theory in general, but also to refine theoretical distinctions with regard to the effects of gender on society and on theory. Ideology critique is often closely related to social experience. However, relations of domination are not limited to social experiences; they also emerge at the level of theory as the domination of certain values by other values. The effects of such relations of domination can usually be experienced not only in the matrix of our everyday lives, but also in research practices and in the application of theory. Gender is considered to be a complicating dimension affecting the ideologies manifest in academic discourse, as well as in socio-culture. The introductory article lays bare women’s experiences of unjust practices in the patriarchal scholarly profession at the University of the Free State. Such experiences undeniably provide the most urgent driving force behind the feminist research endeavours presented here.

The critique of ideologies related to gender is as pressing an “academic” (theoretical) assignment as it is a “political” (social) one. The evolution from feminism to women’s studies to gender studies is often perceived as a progression from the narrow activist politics of the incipient movement to the more academically and historically orientated women’s studies and thence to the analytical thrust of gender studies — legitimised by its distance from political struggle. Obversely, in a similar rendition of the evolution of feminism, the “retreat” to academia is deplored as “depoliticising” feminism and rendering it socially ineffectual (Scott 1991: 42-3). However, we would insist that a critical feminist theory of ideology has to contend with social domination as well as with value domination in theory and thought. Such a stance opposes a “subjectivist” conception of ideology, which would attend only to the human agents engaged in power struggles, as well as an “objectivist” conception of ideology, which would concentrate only on the cultural dominance of systems like science and technology

(Visagie 1998: 3). In this broader definition of feminist ideology critique, feminist “academic” commitment is neither more nor less ideological than any other research endeavour. From such a perspective, theorists are encouraged to integrate gender into their analytical frameworks. After more than three decades of feminist scholarship, there is hardly an academic discipline unchallenged by reflections on the effects of gender in research and theory.

The contributions to this volume are related neither by their use of a common methodology, nor by similar starting points. Feminist research tends to be interdisciplinary and does not prescribe a single style or method. Various feminisms are represented here, which use different research strategies to challenge the assumption that the process of any kind of inquiry can be gender-neutral.

The article by Philip Nel demonstrates an essentially women’s studies approach. It sketches the social and legal position of women at the time of the first legislative provisions pertaining to the veiling of women in Mesopotamia. The veil is described as a sign that the female wearer is owned. It signifies legal prohibition against injuring her owner by means of any abusive behaviour towards her. Women of the lower classes were legally barred from veiling themselves. The rationale behind the veiling of women is a form of female sexual reification and exploitation. Nel argues that Mesopotamia constitutes the cultural cradle for the dominant religious text influencing Western society (the Bible), and that developments in Mesopotamia were closely followed in Israel and throughout the Graeco-Christian world. On this account a historical understanding of the practices related to veiling is significant in clarifying one of the early stages in the Western tradition of patriarchy. Nel perceives analogies between the codes of belief motivating such practices and the basic ideologies of contemporary “patriarchy”, although he does not specify the historical connections between these patriarchal tenets. He thereby introduces a classical women’s studies problematic of bridging past and present; exploiting historical facts for their relevance to the present-day position of women.

In contrast to Nel, Margaret Raftery takes a gender studies approach. Raftery re-reads the English prose text *Mary of Nemmegen* (c 1518), which is a translation of the famous late medieval Dutch work

*Mariken van Nieumeghen* (earliest extant edition c 1516), with an eye to the social construction of the medieval concept of womanhood. She follows the text's presentation of Mary as a virgin, a sexual being, a whore and a witch, concluding that these repressively circumscribed images of womanhood derive from the (male) discourse of religion — the authoritative interpretations of the Bible by the Church Fathers, and the discourses related to the Inquisition. The description of these roles, invariably related to female sexuality, is aligned with the constructed contents of the concepts of good and evil. Through identity criticism and the deconstruction of these textual representations of good and evil womanhood, the constructed identity of women in patriarchal medieval society is highlighted. The gender studies approach replaces "nature" by an idea of "culture" as the techno-social manipulation and construction of gender identities, and is a reaction to the imbalances of power resulting from essentialist assumptions about women's "natural" being.

Raftery's "resisting" re-reading implies that in order to understand we need to decipher various presentations of meaning. Cultural presentations of meaning are rooted in cultural traditions and carry ideological baggage. By means of a mistrustful, wary and careful version of the art of interpretation, surface appearances are doubted and conflicting nuances of meaning embedded in texts are sought out and exposed. Ricoeur (1970: 32-6) described this self-conscious method of interpretation as an exercise in suspicion. The term "resisting reader", coined by feminist literary theorists like Judith Fetterley (1978), correlates with Ricoeur's description of the self-conscious deciphering of hidden ideological meanings.

A hermeneutics of suspicion underlies Suzanne de Villiers Human and Johann Visagie's ideology-critical approach. The association of art with deception, illusion and magic provides a link with the classical definition of ideology as delusion.

The feminist ideal of bridging theory and practice by means of "theoretical practice" is scrutinised and explored in this article. As a substitute for the invisible events behind it, the motif of the curtain depicted in a painting by Nicolaes Maes, *The eavesdropper* (1655) becomes a metaphor for the mediation between theory and practice. The curtain is interpreted as an invitation to "see" more concretely what is

veiled by theories and concepts. The article demonstrates a “figurative semiotics” in which theories are not simply “espoused”, “illustrated” or “applied”, but in which theory is rather “seen to be done”. This corresponds to the marked tendency in feminist art to exploit various strategies in order to address “actual readers” and to concretely affect the “real” and even the intimate worlds of human beings.

Heidi Hudson’s feminist endeavour to understand security in terms of the real-life, everyday experiences of human beings, and to link private and public violence, is another instance of conceiving of “the private as the political”. The broadening of the narrow concept of military security to include all forms of protection against violence, particularly violence against women, is a move away from a state-centred approach to a human security approach in which all forms of violence (in the family and the state) are interrelated. It represents an expanded conceptualisation of global security in which the insecurities generated by power inequalities are accounted for. In her approach Hudson chooses between the correlates of a posed dichotomy: difference and multiplicity, rather than harmony and stability. She defends the ideal of a “fractious holism” which would tolerate difference, tension, disagreement and multiplicity.

The next group of articles, by Marais, Niemann, and Snyman and De Bruin, evaluate specific South African practices and make pertinent recommendations. Moreover, they all deal with society’s prescriptive, differentially valued gender roles and gendered needs.

Lochner Marais distinguishes the effects of the post-apartheid housing policy and delivery on men and women. He concludes that in spite of gender-sensitive policies, women are relatively disadvantaged. Female heads of households often find it more difficult to access subsidies and land. Even though there are women-led firms of developers and contractors (on paper), women generally have too little influence on patriarchal community structures to have a significant effect on the planning, design or construction of housing.

Marais’s article demonstrates that in spite of acceptable policies, social-welfare practices still encode sexist and androcentric interpretations of women’s needs — interpretations erected on the basis of ideological gender-linked dichotomies such as “domestic” versus “economic”, “home” versus “work”, “mother” versus “breadwinner”, and “pri-

mary” versus “secondary” labour. As Nancy Fraser (1989: 9-10) has pointed out, these also provide the public with a tacit but powerful map of normative gender roles. What is required, not only in terms of policy, but also with regard to the practical realisation thereof, seems to be a needs assessment from the point of view of gender.

The articles which follow address this requirement and draw further attention to the effects of the stereotyped and prescriptive differentiation of gender roles in South African society.

Rita Niemann scrutinises the South African education sector in order to provide guidelines for a purposeful movement towards gender equity. She isolates this sector as an extraordinarily influential organisation with a potential role to play in redress and empowerment by means of the eradication of sexism and discrimination. In her article, quantitative research instruments, qualitative interviews, and literature studies are used to arrive at her findings.

Elizabeth Snyman and Jaco de Bruin investigate ways of legally addressing the dilemma of sexual harassment — an area invested with powerful and unyielding gender stereotypes in terms of judgements and behaviour. They conclude that a combination of objective and subjective testing is required in order to determine liability in sexual harassment cases, in view of the intricacy of the societal and individual preconceptions involved.

The introductory article concludes that the lengthy “fight from within” at this University has not resulted in enough change to the gender-discriminatory work environment and remuneration structures affecting most female employees. However, even though the position of women has not improved enough in relation to that of men, this collection of articles proves that the effort has not been in vain. Three articles in this volume result from co-operation and collaborative authorship, and the entire volume is the product of teamwork over a lengthy period. As this volume goes to press, the collective “fight” continues.

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