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Retrospect and Reflections—Introducing Gender into the Academy: An Interview with Professor Elsa Leo-Rhynie

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Abstract

Elsa Leo-Rhynie was appointed Professor of Gender and Development Studies in 1992 and served as Regional Co-ordinator of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS), University of the West Indies (UWI), from that appointment until July 1996 when she became Deputy Principal of the Mona Campus. She later created history at the University of the West Indies in February 2006, when she became the first woman to be appointed Principal of a UWI campus, the Mona campus. On Friday, April 4, 2008, having retired from the institution in September 2007, she looked back, in this interview with June Castello, on the progress the CGDS has made in institutionalising gender.

JC: What is your assessment of the success of the project of institutionalising gender into the academy here at UWI?

ELR: We started in 1982. I use that as the starting point because that was the entry point into the academy, although the Women in the Caribbean Research Project had been located in the academy through the Institute of Social and Economic Studies at UWI, Cave Hill, Barbados. This was viewed as a project of the Institute and not seen as a University programme. It was at the end of that project, and as a result of the research carried on in that project, that it was recognised that this material was so rich, that it was so bountiful. Also, in terms of movements in other parts of the world where Women's Studies was becoming one of the major new thrusts, we recognised that we needed to move towards institutionalisation.

In the twenty-six years since we've been going, I think the results are evident, and I think, worthy of commendation. The introduction of Gender Studies has been very successful. I think the fact is that we started out from a point of nothing and we've come to a situation now where we have programmes at all levels. We have a research agenda, and we also do a certain amount of outreach in terms of policy, as well as implementing policy within the Caribbean. I think that speaks to the success over a relatively short period of time.

JC: Much has been said about the need for critical self-reflection as we bring Gender and Development Studies into the academy and into the public discourse. To what extent do you think that the women in the academy and activists who have been working in this area have employed this method?

ELR: I think critical self-reflection is always difficult. But I think it is essential. I don't think we have really done enough of it and partly, I think, because everybody is so pressed! There are so few resources, so much to be done and the people sort of go about their daily lives just getting the things done and the time when you can come together as a Centre with all people together then is taken up with planning as to what more is to be done and what are the priorities rather than that time for looking back and seeing, well, where we have been and what have we done and how could we have done it better. Even though this analysis should inform the planning going forward, I don't think that we have done it to the extent that we could have but I think that we have done some of it and I think that it is inherent in whatever we plan to do. We may not take a block of time and say, "Let us sit and engage in critical self-reflection" but I think that in planning to go forward we automatically say, "but that has not worked" or "that may not be the best way to go because of our experience there" and so, move forward. So, in a sense it is sort of inter-mixed and blended with whatever we plan to do for the future rather than separated out as a separate activity.

JC: Do you think that the process of institutionalisation has worked against the critical self-reflection?

ELR: You become more complacent about your position within the academy. I am surprised, for instance, to find that there is not that motivation and that eagerness among young academics to tackle things because somehow things have just become taken for granted. When we had to fight, for instance, to just get a course approved and offered...people would do it without pay. That's dead because you have become institutionalised, you are supposed to be part of the mainstream so everything has to be done a certain way and so that stimulus for continuing action has kind of died.

JC: Geertjie Lycklama à Nijeholt, of the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, is on record as saying that across the world one of the important tasks related to the institutionalisation of Women's Studies in the academy is ensuring that these "studies" remain organically connected to the Women's Movement so that women's needs and interests in the academy are centred in these discourses. How well are we doing here at UWI in that respect?

ELR: When we were establishing the Centre, there was a very strong concern that the activism and the activist role which had been so much a part of the Women and Development Studies Groups would not be lost. The two persons who started this were Joycelin Massiah, who was on the academic side, and Peggy Antrobus, who was on the activist side. So those two areas were strongly and equally represented. I think that once the institutionalisation took place, there was, for some time, a continuation of that interest in activism. But gradually, activism, in the form that we knew it (and I am stressing that, **in the form that we knew it**) changed.

But we have remained activist in another way, which I think is as powerful and as influential as the former type. For instance, the role of the Centre in setting policy through CARICOM, the role of the Centre in working with [the] United Nations, the role of the Centre in working with various government agencies and with governments in terms of how gender can be put on the front burner of their activities. I think that the level at which the activism had taken place has changed but there has been a strong activist agenda within the Centre for Gender and Development Studies. It has not been at the grassroots but it has been at a level where I think it has been making a very positive and strong contribution.

JC: How would you answer the charge that in disconnecting ourselves from grassroots activism, the Centre has, in fact, replaced the power relations of gender with the power relations of socioeconomic class?

ELR: I guess there would be that sort of criticism, but it is a matter of choice, when you have limited resources and when you have to make choices about how those resources are to be used and you do have to think about where the contribution can be greatest. I think that, given the shortage of resources and the expertise that

we have, I don't see us organising a grassroots movement which is going to have the impact that we would need to have in order to make a difference to the same extent as we can do with the expertise we have, for instance leading a gender-mainstreaming project within the government sector or training trainers who can go out and do that grassroots work with others.

So I see us really trying to identify our role within all this and accepting that many of these places are talk shops and paper producers etc. but, at the same time, I don't see how we would with the resources have been able to do, for instance, what Peggy was able to do with WAND, and which the University still supports in a sense saying, well, WAND is the activist unit but we want the Centre to do research, affect policy influence at another level. So, I think that our working with WAND has not been as strong as I had hoped it would have been. I felt there ought to be a complementarity between the two where the research that we do and whatever we teach would link in with what WAND is seeing on the ground and there would be a sort of organic link between the two. The Consultative Committee which used to function and which had a WAND representative on it has changed with institutionalisation, so we no longer have that link which allows us to blend our research with the grassroots practice.

JC: In your paper "Institutionalising Gender Into the Academy", you identified four tasks to have done so that we can achieve inter-disciplinarity. One of them was to deconstruct existing disciplinary structures and boundaries through a thorough critique, both of how they were built up, and the assumed artificiality of separateness. Do you think we at UWI have done that?

ELR: I don't think that we have achieved it and I think it is going to be very, very, difficult. I think to some extent we have tried. I think that many of our research projects have spanned different areas; they have been truly inter-disciplinary. But I think the whole business of the deconstruction has not been done, mainly because we have not had the expertise, the personnel, within the centre, who can undertake that sort of analysis. Looking at science, for one: science is a very difficult area and even in universities where they do have the resources, science is an area which people sort of steer clear of. Because if it is not dealing with health where it is easy to see where the gender issues are defined, science maintains its stance as an objective discipline and [one] cannot see how gender can be mainstreamed or even invoked when speaking about scientific results, findings etc.

Of course, there are some who do the deconstruction and look at different ways in which science has been prejudicial to women, not only to women scientists in terms of recognising their work—and of course you have the celebrated case of Rosamund Franklin and the DNA molecule where the men got the Nobel Prize and her contribution, which was central and really important, was just overlooked. And so the prize was given to her much later when she had already died and when women made a fuss about the fact that she had not been recognised. So I do think

that the deconstruction within this academy has not taken place to the extent that it could have been. I think that we have been very successful in the areas where we do have expertise, such as in Sociology and in Education. So, I think going slowly, we will probably achieve it, eventually. But I don't think we've done badly.

JC: Another task you identified was employing the tools of different disciplines (theories and methodologies) to arrive at a deeper, more textual, meaning of existing phenomena and to explain part dimensions of new concepts. How successful has the CGDS been in this instance?

ELR: Again, I think that we have been partially successful. I certainly have noted that over the years, there is much greater use of qualitative methodology, research methodology which allows for the voices of the "subjects". Quantitative analysis looks at masses of "subjects" in a holistic fashion which brings all their views down to one measure, whereas the qualitative analysis has allowed their voices to be heard. That, I think, has become much more prevalent in terms of the research which has come out of this academy over the past years. We have benefited—I would like to say that we have led that—but I certainly think that the Women in the Caribbean Project was a breakthrough in terms of how the methodologies were used. So, for instance they used film, they used video, they used the words of women to indicate how women's lives were affected and all of this was part of the outcome of the research project. And now, we see much more of that taking place in Education, in Sociology, in Psychology, in every respect although the quantitative remains, very often.

I am now reading about mixed mode methodology, where you use the quantitative and the qualitative together, and the qualitative has taken on different forms. I can't let the Centre take credit for that because I think that it is happening everywhere in the academy. I think there has been a recognition of the importance of the qualitative method and the use of the different media that are now so prevalent in terms of recording research. But I do think that we have not been backward in using that; in fact in many instances we have led the way in terms of the use of these media within the academy.

JC: It is a very topical issue for people to speak about the crisis of men, the marginalisation of men, and the UWI with the 82:18 male:female student enrolment ratio is very much a part of that discussion. In your opinion, has this focus retarded, in any way, the achievement of institutionalisation of gender here at UWI?

ELR: No, I don't think so. I think that the Jamaican situation is a special one. Granted it is pointing up what is also being seen in other parts of the world but maybe it is just being evident here first. But if we are speaking about ourselves as Gender, and Development, then we do have to look at the elements which affect male-female inter-relationships and, certainly, the condition of men in our society is a

major contributor to the male-female relationships. What I feel, though, is that when women realised that their situation was one which was untenable because of the asymmetries in the society, women got up and they pulled together, they worked together, they built their research, they put together the data and they used it now to create a case for themselves. What I find [is that] the men are expecting the women to do it for the men as well. And I feel that, yes, women do have a vested interest in ensuring that men reach their maximum potential and that we do make sure that they do not fall by the wayside. I mean, all of society will benefit from having men who are productive and creative and contributing to the national economy and also contributing, naturally, to family life etc. But I don't know why men seem to feel that it is women's role to take the lead in doing this for men when they have already done it for the women.

When I have raised this with men they say, "But you did it so successfully for the women so why not take on the men as well!" And it goes back to the whole business of some of our research, to the socialisation, because boys are socialised mainly by men and even if their upbringing is led by a woman, they look to men for the roles which they are going to assume. When they see the sort of roles that are out there now, and there is no male who is counteracting this or giving them another view, or showing them another path, then this is the path they are to use. And women's voices are not heard by young men after they reach a certain age and we have to know that... So I think that it is very important for both men and women to be involved in this. But I do see the male question as being part of our agenda.

JC: There is a popular understanding of "gender" as a term that, when used, must of necessity, include both men and women. What is your view on the "me, too"-ism in understandings about gender, this notion of "if women, therefore men"?

ELR: Yes, I guess that is the concern. But if it is gender, where are the men in gender who are going to assist in doing this. I mean, if it is gender, then we need to have men joining us. There are very few men and the very few men who work in this area have been with us over many, many years. Then there are very few new men; we can't find any new men who will come in and do this sort of work and analysis. So, we started out as Women and Development Studies and at the time, when we were setting up the Centre, there was a strong controversy about whether it should be Gender and Development Studies or Women and Development Studies because our focus had been women. The decision to go with Gender was brought about by the fact that we thought that it would be difficult to focus only on women. So we went with gender and I suppose that has given those who are pressing now, a foothold to say you are gender, so, you know, you must deal with this.

I do see it is as part of the agenda but I also see it as being thrust upon us by a patriarchal society that wants to maintain the status quo where men are concerned and so they expect us to fix it so that men retain their privilege. They are not

concerned with an equitable society where men and women are treated in similar fashion and have similar access and control etc. They want us to fix things the way they were that men remain in control. Patriarchy must survive.

JC: What are your views on mainstreaming gender in the academy?

ELR: Well, at the moment it is very difficult to even contemplate what it could mean. Right now we have eighty percent of our entry being female, twenty percent being male. There is a strong movement to have a sort of affirmative action type thing to increase the number of men. It is back again and what it is likely to mean is that some of that eighty percent of girls who are qualified to come in here are going to be told “you cannot come” and boys who are not achieving at the same level of those girls are going to come.

The whole business [of] mainstreaming gender is something which you have to consider in terms of what type of gender theory are we using in this mainstreaming. If we are using liberal, then we have to go along with it because we are saying that the society has fifty per cent men, we have to give them equal opportunity, etc., etc. Can we really agree to that? I certainly can't because I see that whoever is achieving, whether it be male or female, has to come in. Nobody was concerned about making equal numbers for girls when the men were eighty per cent of the student body here. But suddenly we are to make way for boys and it is always the women who must make way for the men. So, the whole business of mainstreaming is something which is very difficult especially in a situation where we have a charter which says that people are not to be discriminated against in terms of sex, race, etc. A number of persons looked at the management of the University recently and said that, oh, UWI is doing well. We have one campus Principal who is female. We have how many Pro-Vice Chancellors who are female? One of the posts that were occupied by a man has been filled by a woman and she is the only person now, along with the University Librarian, in the Executive Management of the University¹.

But then, you say, people were interviewed for these posts. The persons who filled the criteria best were the persons chosen. If they happen to be male, they happen to be male; if they happen to be female, they happen to be female. So, in terms of mainstreaming, it is a difficult thing because you are not sure how best to do it without disadvantaging, or seeming to discriminate against one or the other.

JC: What kind of position and advocacy should the Centre produce in this matter of proposed affirmative action in recruitment of males by the University.

¹ At the time of writing and subsequent to this interview, there have been two women added to the Executive Management team: Professor Rhoda Reddock, Deputy Principal, St. Augustine campus, and Professor V. Eudine Barriteau, Deputy Principal, Cave Hill campus. There are now five women on this team. It is to be noted, also, that the University Librarian, while being a part of the Vice Chancellery, is not a member of the Executive Management Team.

ELR: Quite frankly, I think we just go back to the charter. Once the charter says there shall be no discrimination, then you are talking about a meritocratic system and if the women are the ones with the merit, and if we have one hundred percent women qualified above any of the men who are seeking to come in here, then we have one hundred per cent women.

JC: But how do you think the argument about a meritocratic system would stand up to critics who say that UWI is supposed to be more accessible to the community it serves?

ELR: If we are talking about being more accessible, and we also have a system of selection where our basis for selection rests on criteria of achievement prior to entry to the University, then we have to rely on those criteria. If we are going to change, then we have to change the charter, and we have to change the criteria and we have to have agreement within the University Council that this is the change that we want. And it is going to have to be stated to say that “in each year we recognise that there are persons who have conditions which militate against their achievement and, therefore, ten percent of all entrants are going to be students who have achieved below our matriculation but who come from disadvantaged situations etc.” It would have to be something which is clearly defined and we would have to say we agree and we do not see this as discrimination.

I have heard someone say the other day—it is something which I have known for a long time—but I heard someone say the other day which is in keeping somehow, that a C+ from a child doing CAPE from the ghetto is equivalent to an A from a child doing CAPE in a privileged home where they have Internet access and everything laid on. A sociologist, some years ago, had said that universities and employers ought to use a ladder model of assessing entrants rather than a race model, because the ladder model allows you to see people having starting points on different rungs. And therefore, for someone who has no stresses of study, who has everything laid on, who comes to school in a car, who parks and has dinner ready for them when they go home etc. is starting from a rung which is, maybe, four rungs from the finish line. Whereas the one who has to go through gunfire, has to study by candlelight, has to scrounge around for something to eat, is starting out at the bottom of the ladder. So for that person to get to the finish line is a much greater achievement, is much greater than the person who only has the three rungs.

So, I see problems with the whole business about gender mainstreaming because it tends to have the liberal feminist guidance in terms of let us have equal numbers or let us have special provisions for the group that is seen at the moment as needing that special provision. But when we look at our graduates, yes, predominantly female, when we look at our work world [it is] predominantly male. Unemployment is higher among women than men and even among the qualified women. And when those men and women get out into the work world

the men are snapped up like that, whereas the women who very often have higher class of degrees, better degrees, are still searching for work. And when they are hired, they are hired at lower levels than the men who come out with those degrees.

So, I think we need to look at everything in terms of how we do it and we also need to look at what are the young men who are not coming to university doing because a lot of them are seeing university as something they do later if they wish. But they want to get into business, they want to start their own thing, they want to earn money quickly and they are going into other areas, some of them illegal but that's what the society is producing.

JC: Is it important for the people who are employed by the CGDS to be feminists?

ELR: Yes. The thing is, that word has become a bad word, has become totally misunderstood. When I say “yes”, by “feminist” I mean someone who understands that within the society there are different power relationships between men and women and that by labelling myself a feminist, I am seeking to overcome that. Now I can't see any reason why this should be offensive to anyone and I think it should apply to men as well as women. But it has been given a bad name by people who see feminists as a kind of crazy group, insane fringe group, shouting and screaming and thirty years later still burning bras and that sort of thing. So you will hear people saying—I have heard it several times—I am not a feminist but I do believe that men and women should have equal rights within the society. And I am saying, what on earth are they saying? So I think that there needs to be clarity in terms of what is a feminist so that people understand and get rid of the old baggage that goes with the term.

Yes, I think anyone who works in the Centre for Gender and Development Studies ought to be someone who not only recognises the differences and the prejudices and the discrimination and the whole issue about patriarchy in society, but is also willing to work through research, through teaching, through outreach to change that.

JC: Do you think that CGDS staff come under greater scrutiny for our personal politics than do staff in other departments?

ELR: Yes. I remember there was an issue of young women who were being molested on the campus and one of the first things was “Well, where is the Centre for Gender and Development Studies in all this? They should be the ones doing this and doing that”, when it hadn't even been brought to the attention of the Centre. But they assume that anything that deals with women and abuse ought to come—and I am not saying that it ought not to come—but the point is there is that sort of immediate reaction as if this is even more essential for the Centre for Gender and Development Studies. When we have problems with HIV, I suppose, they call on the medics so I suppose this is how we do our area of competence.

JC: How important would you say it is for the CGDS staff to conduct a full analysis of power among themselves as they seek to confront complex and unequal relationships of power in their work?

ELR: I think it is important, very important. I don't like to use myself as an example, but a number of people have said to me during the period when I was Principal of the campus: "But you have power; why don't you use your power?"...And somehow I felt uncomfortable about the use of power as I had seen it used by men in the past. It was not something which I felt was going to, in any way, enhance equity, bring about meaningful change, and so I resisted all those blandishments that people were talking about: "use your power, use your power". I think that women, and I don't like to speak for all women but I know that I certainly saw power in a totally different way. I think that to empower others is to make sure that things do get done. So, I could never, for instance, say, "Well, I have said so and therefore it is going to be so!" I would have to make sure that others feel, well, this is something which is going to be desirable; can we do it? Is it something that will benefit everybody? Okay, let's go, let's do it.

So I see power as something which allows you to share and bring others to a point where a particular action or a particular direction is seen as being a desirable way. I certainly do not see power as something which you wield like a heavy hammer and let it go. But for many persons, that's how power is to be used and they equate power with position and therefore, if you have the position, you now have the power to use that hammer and use it very heavily if necessary, not even lightly. So I think power is an issue which really ought to be considered seriously in the Centre and discussed in terms of the whole issue of feminism and what is feminism, in terms of the whole business of inter-relationships, male-female relationships, patriarchy and all the sort of framework issues of feminist scholarship which we have to deal with.

JC: Can you share with us your wish list for CGDS for the next ten years?

ELR: I am sorry to think first of all of staff and infrastructure. But basically, that's where it is. I think there is so much to be done, and therefore, I wish that we could have an allocation to have a centre building with a staff and with the ability to offer our degrees to a larger number of students and to really expand the scope of our scholarship into other areas. That's where my head would immediately go.