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## Participatory parity and the ‘second chance’ learning opportunities for women

**Abstract**

There have been stark funding cuts to Further and Adult Education in England since the economic crash. Until the mid 2000s women represented the majority of all learners on a variety of vocational and academic courses in the FE sector. As such, the numbers of women learners accessing courses has halved and funding cuts have been justified as part of the broader austerity measures. Furthermore, the narrow economic policy discourse which deems women learners that fail to go into immediate or better paid employment after their courses by what they are held to lack. This paper presents the findings of my longitudinal qualitative PhD study which found that women return to education to escape abusive relationships or to rebuild their lives after leaving them. Pertinently, many women learners in this study were trapped in low paid work, poverty, zero hours contracts or were new migrants. The findings from my study were framed using Nancy Fraser’s Gender Equity Principles and Participatory Parity. They revealed how women re-engaged with Further Education were marginalised by intersecting inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and relationship status. The women learners in this study gained emphasise the broad range of benefits they stand to gain from engaging in education for their own lives as well as enabling them to better support their children. As well as the obvious qualifications they gained confidence, an opportunity to gain new employment, and mental well-being. However, the deepening cuts and the biographies of these learners served to highlight what women stand to lose from the ever-diminishing opportunities.

Keywords: Nancy Fraser, Women Learners, Education, Further Education, Austerity

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**The Context**

My study focused particularly on women who returned to education in the English Adult and Further Education context (FE). A review of education by Helena Kennedy QC in 1997 ‘The Learning Age’ recommended substantive investment in education for adults who had not achieved their potential at school as part of the ‘widening participation agenda’. As part of this agenda the government offered financial support for caring, tuition fees and equipment to support participation. This was a highly successful initiative, and as a consequence there was a rapid growth in participation rates of adult women learners in FE colleges; at its peak in 2004, there were 2.7 million adult women learners who represented the majority of all students in FE (including young people). Women who were on Job Seeker’s Allowance were permitted to study for 16 hours per week and those with preschool and young children received child care support.

Since 2004, a gradual reduction in funding for FE resulted in a ‘tightening up’ of the rules on who was eligible for funding and for what courses. In tandem with these cuts, changes to welfare benefits and child care funding have contributed to the reduction of women learners, as they are pressured back into work (any work) rather than education. The most significant and deep funding cuts can be traced to the economic crash in 2008 and the resulting ‘Austerity Policy’ which has seen numbers of adult learners half to 1.26 million. Moreover, these decisions have been justified on the basis that women learners who do not progress into immediate employment or earn a higher salary following their course fail to offer a good ‘return on investment’ (Blanden et al, Jenkins, Jenkins,). These narrow measures are problematic and have been contested in more recent analyses by Jenkins (see also Bebleavy et al, ) who argue that women learners do progress into work or higher salary after training, but they take longer to do so. It is not only troubling that women are deemed by what they are held to lack within this narrow economic discourse, but in the process their needs are interpreted and inscribed upon them by policy makers and in the process their voices are silenced. It is against this complex backdrop that my study sought to understand why women learners return to FE and what they gain from doing so.

**Methodology**

This paper draws on empirical data from my PhD research on the aspirations of women learners on VET courses. Twenty-one women learners who participated in the study from five Further Education colleges across the UK who were on a variety of vocational programmes. A longitudinal approach was taken to collecting in-depth interview data about their life history, aspirations and the barriers to achieving them and how these evolved over their course. My research epistemology and methodology was underpinned by a critical feminist and capabilities approach

**Selected findings**

The learners returned to FE with ambitious aspirations of gaining qualifications that would support their re-entry back into work, entry into different (better work) or to gain access to higher vocational qualifications. Most of the women in the study had underachieved during their compulsory education and either progressed straight into poorly paid work with limited prospects, got married or had children, and in a few cases they did all three. All of the learners explained how school had given limited or no targeted careers support and described being disaffected and disenfranchised with school. This was exacerbated for some learners who were expected to stay at home to help care for siblings, parents with addictions and depression or because they suffered childhood illness.

Their biographies were characterised by patterns of poorly paid work, caring responsibilities, lone parenting, migration and lack of agency in their relationships. Saliently, the women learners in this study regarded education as critical to being able to escape oppression and abusive intimate relationships, poverty, being geographically mobile and for helping them to overcome complex mental health problems. For many, they describe reaching a ‘turning point’ where they decided that education would support not only their economic well-being but their broader life goals too. What was evident from the complex biographies, was that most women used their engagement in education either as an opportunity to gain freedom from difficult circumstances (oppressive relationships, migration or asylum and mental health problems) or to help them to rebuild their lives having managed to escape them. It is important to note that in spite of these positive outcomes, learners across the whole range of courses, colleges and levels had significant barriers to overcome.

The women in this study faced significant barriers to achieving their goals and for some women these combined to compound the inequalities they faced. The conditions that they articulated that they needed to achieve their educational goals were complex, but could be categorised as:

* Access to courses that met their goals (in terms of timetables, location and choice)
* Funding for courses and care which is not ‘means tested’ on household income
* Time autonomy (from work and caring responsibilities to engage in education
* An adequate material standard of living
* Good mental and physical health or access to support which they needed to participate
* Intellectual and learning support
* Adequate and timely careers support
* Agency within their personal relationships to choose how to live their lives.
* Freedom from physical, emotional and sexual abuse.

Unfortunately, some or all of these conditions were absent in the lives of the women who had shared their stories. Drastic and continued cuts to funding meant there was not only a limited course offer particularly on lower level qualifications, but even those pursuing higher qualifications were now liable to pay significant course fees or take out a student loan. Worse than that, new migrants who needed to gain language skills faced extensive waiting lists and this prolonged the time it took for them to gain the vocational qualifications that they needed for work. In addition, the narrow definitions of caring and eligibility for financial support meant that not all learners who needed help got it.

The majority of learners had returned to college with goals of achieving greater economic security in better quality jobs, however in order to realise these many had to navigate exploitative work and work experience. Over half of the women learners had to work during their period of study, although this was largely related to the welfare cuts and the associated punitive measures that they faced. The majority of these women were on zero hours contracts in precarious and low paid work, in feminised ‘caring’ vocations that would enable them to work, study and care for their children. While they did this out of necessity, it meant that many who were lone mothers or new migrants had to leave their children with relatives so that they could do night shifts and this frequently involved them coming to college without having slept for a few days. In addition to paid work, a substantive number of courses had unpaid and long term placements which rarely led to employment. These were not only exploitative, but this meant that learners had less time to engage in paid work and pay for child care with few or no tangible benefits.

**Conclusions**

Although this study focused on the English Adult and Further Education context it reveals issues that are pertinent to all educational contexts. It is important to acknowledge that women learners do not always fulfil their potential in their compulsory education for a variety of complex reasons. Despite policy interventions aimed at raising school attainment over the last three decades there is little evidence that these have been effective. Whilst in isolation this does not prevent them from leading flourishing lives, however the combination of being trapped in violent relationships, poverty, and bearing the burden of the caring responsibilities compounds to limit their agency and well-being. Given these complex factors, it is essential that women learners can get a ‘second chance’ to engage in their education. However, the combination of austerity measures such as cuts to education funding and punitive welfare policies, alongside a lack of recognition of ‘invisible’ forms of care work and poor work contracts threaten to thwart their attempts to escape the poverty, abuse and oppression that characterises their lives.

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