



Lea(r)n In: Feminism in the fashion classroom

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The presentation is meant to inspire discussion regarding the role of the feminist perspective in the fashion classroom and the lives of fashion professors. The authors argue the current status of the industry and the growing activism around feminist issues, specifically (a) work-life balance, (b) female leadership, (c) female support systems, and (d) power/knowledge dynamics in Academia, demands recognition from our discipline. Discourse on these issues are important to prepare our predominantly female students (and their male peers) going out into the apparel industry as well as to educators in the apparel and textile discipline. The authors argue not for an institutionalized feminist ideology integration but rather an acknowledgement by textile and apparel educators of the multitude of issues facing the industry—and in the academy—that may benefit from a feminist perspective. A selection of these issues are outlined below.

The apparel and textile discipline is historically rooted in the fundamentals of home economics. A dominant objective was to advance the status of women by addressing the practical problem and concerns of female education (Laughlin & Kean, 2002). Many of these efforts have paid off. In the U.S., Women are now 52 percent of all workers employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012) and this is even true in the apparel industry. In many countries, the apparel industry may be one of the only opportunities to move into the formal sector and is frequently one of the few jobs acceptable for women (International Labor Organization, 2014).

In the home, many women still fall into traditional gender roles and bear the majority of the domestic duties and emotional work (Strazdins & Broom, 2004), which can cause stress on her career. Women are conflicted with balancing a successful, but demanding career with a fulfilling personal life. The division of labor persists today despite equal opportunity and affirmative action policies, which have simply enabled women to shoulder both household and paid work rather than to share them equally with men (Stivers, 2002). These disparities are an important reality for both students and academics. These issues may benefit from a feminist perspective examination to illustrate structural and cultural issues that have potential for change.

Leadership is an idea used to support and rationalize the continuation of existing political, economic, racial, and gender arrangements. Men are rewarded for decisiveness, rationality, and visible leadership and women for routine service (Bologh, 1990). As a result women who aspire leadership positions have the complex task of self-definition. If women display the expected leadership characteristics, they risk being seen, almost inappropriately, as masculine. Also depending on personality, women may feel a certain amount of dissonance between their sense of themselves as a woman and what is expected as them as a leader. Fostering female support systems, modeling strong female mentorship, and having frank discussions of gendered stereotypes can all help mediate women's ambivalent position.

Beyond the classroom, adopting the feminist perspective in the academy is an even more onerous task. It assumes there is a problem with ‘traditional’ power/knowledge dynamics in Academia. The authors argue that fashion scholarship has struggled in the same way feminist scholarship has struggled. That is, it has been delegitimized, marginalized, and encountered conceptual hostility within the Academy (Jenkins, 2014). Thus, the authors hope to discuss the role of the feminist perspective in the lives of fashion academics in the traditional landscape of modern higher education.

Feminism as an ideology may not be for everyone, but it does offer a platform from which so many other productive conversations can flow. The authors would like to share how and where they have integrated such discussions in their classrooms and in thinking about their careers as academics. The authors hope this presentation will prompt further discussion as well as inspire future studies exploring the scholarly and pedagogical issues raised.

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