

## Women and Gender Studies and the Potentiality of Feminist Leadership

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## Abstract

Graduates of Women and Gender Studies (WGS) programs gain skills that aid in the development of feminist leadership, a leadership practice that is committed to challenging oppressive structures and institutions and empowering others to reach their full potential. Through semi-structured interviews, this qualitative study explored the experiences of five graduates of WGS undergraduate programs in the Northeast region of the United States. Participants post-graduation work across a variety of professional fields has offered them opportunities to practice feminist leadership. While research on both WGS and leadership is abundant, this research addresses the gap in the literature on feminist leadership and how it is practiced in both formal and informal ways.

## Introduction

This research explores WGS student outcomes and how that experience aided in the development of feminist leadership. Research participants (given pseudonyms) held a variety of professional roles (Fig. 1) post-graduation and opportunities to practice feminist leadership were enhanced by their experiences as WGS graduates. Leadership is often a male-normed practice and feminist leadership practices are committed to examining oppressive structures and creating cultural change.

## Research Questions

- 1) Does Women and Gender Studies, as an interdisciplinary program where faculty employ a feminist pedagogical practice, aid in the development of feminist leadership for students?
- 2) How do WGS alumni practice leadership post-graduation and in what ways is that leadership practice feminist?



## References

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## Definitions

The following definitions were provided to research participants at the beginning of the interviews and helped to frame our discussions:

- **Feminism:** a social movement that seeks to eradicate oppression that keeps people from reaching their full humanity (Peipmeier et al., 2014);
- **Leadership:** is understood as a process of complex interactions between people and their environment; and
- **Feminist Leadership:** is a leadership practice that is committed to disrupting existing power structures and hierarchies that perpetuate oppression and bringing about social change.

Pseudonym	Professional Role
Alice	Domestic Violence Advocate
Katie	Sex Educator (Business Owner)
Lucy	Business, Strategy and Planning Director for major health insurance provider in Maine; Chief of Staff to President
Rebecca	PhD. Student and Research Fellow
Sarah	Medical Social Worker

Figure 1. Post-graduation professional roles

## Results

Three themes emerged during analysis of the interview transcripts with five (5) graduates of WGS programs in the northeast. Overall, students are drawn to WGS for multiple reasons and influences, both positive and negative and their experiences in the program influence their professional work across a variety of professions.

- 1) **Family Background and Feminist Identity** plays a unique role in that not every WGS student has a strong feminist role model or feminist identity coming to WGS, but that the experience helped them develop a strong sense of self. Students from adverse backgrounds found a future of freedom in the ability to explore new ways of creating knowledge and challenging cultural expectations.
- 2) **Faculty and Mentoring Relationships** were a key piece of the WGS experience. Faculty act not only as mentors, but as role models of self-care and self-confidence. Relationships with faculty often helped students forge a path forward not only in their academic pursuits, but when dealing with challenging life situations, such as issues with peers.
- 3) **Foundational Knowledge and Skills Development** developed in a WGS classroom served the participants throughout their post-graduation experience. This includes the ability to engage in difficult conversations, confidence in who they are and the power they hold as people, and how to challenge cultural norms in ways that make an impact.

## Methods

- Semi-structured qualitative interviews took place and were recorded via Zoom.
- A feminist theoretical lens was used to provide an orienting lens for the development of the interview questions and data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
- Participants were chosen purposefully to meet the criteria of being a WGS major or minor who graduated in 2019 or before, from the Northeast region of the United States.

## Discussion

- In line with Stake's quantitative research on WGS student outcomes (2007), research findings point to WGS students gaining critical thinking skills as a direct result from feminist pedagogical practices in the classroom. This is also reflected through engagement of feminist theory as a way to understand alternative ways of knowledge creation. Developing language skills to better communicate ideas and engage in difficult conversations is a skill participants credited to their WGS education.
- The WGS experience provide students with applicable skills and knowledge in a wide variety of professional settings, including corporate insurance, social work, and entrepreneurship. The development of a feminist identity through the coursework directly informs professional and personal practice post-graduation, with students from both feminist and non-feminist background benefiting from feminist pedagogy, theory, and faculty.
- Through these interviews, research participants identified themselves as someone who practices leadership that can be described as feminist in their own contexts and in individual ways. Differing from Shea & Renn's research (2017) conceptualizing feminist leadership as leadership pushing for large scale change, research findings point to quiet ways of leading that align with feminist leadership values. Research participants identified working from the inside out to create cultural change and the ability to create agency in contexts where people lack it as being examples of feminist leadership in practice.

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