Original Article

Editorial

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Emerging feminist research: courage and determination

This volume is the third edition of *Dearcadh* journal. When we issued our first call for papers in November 2019, we did not know that the journal's first three editions would all be carried out in the context of a global pandemic and associated public health restrictions. The past two years have seen far-reaching social interventions with specific, disproportionate impacts on women and girls, quite separate to the impact of the burden of disease and death brought by the pandemic. They have brought pre-existing issues to the fore, including global inequality (not least gender inequality), social polarisation, and the limitations of democratic processes at times of crisis.

As a journal of gender, globalisation and rights, Dearcadh is centrally concerned with the contribution that feminist thinking can make to global crises and indeed contemporary opportunities. The world is urgently in need of fresh and challenging thinking that enables us to confront complex and interconnected crises: ecological crises like climate change, biodiversity collapse, and pandemic waves; crises of inequality, repression and migration; and the ongoing emergency of violence against women. At times like these, simplistic heuristics and trivial arguments too-frequently dominate public discourse.

The concepts that define the pursuit of gender equality are constantly shifting, and indeed, the need to hold meaning in place can serve as a barrier to deeper understanding (Scott 2010, p.5). Rather than acting out of a place of unquestioning expertise (Zalewski, 2019), graduate students in feminist research are called upon to cultivate curiosity in times of uncertainty. Informed curiosity is underpinned by well-identified values and principles, even as it embraces the ambivalent and the fluid. Good research in gender, globalisation and rights ventures down challenging paths using a defined compass: feminist researchers seek to centre the agency of each individual human (Butler 2004); and understand social positioning as a key element in exploring any social phenomenon (Harding, 1991).

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The early 2000s saw a turn in academic institutions in the anglosphere from women's studies towards the consolidation of gender studies (Scriver and Ballantine 2020). The topic of gender grew in legitimacy in policy-making and practical applications, and gender studies graduates found employment in mainstream spaces, advising governments, NGOs and even military forces. The marriage of women's rights and human rights seemed a comfortable one, and UN agencies emerged as global champions of gender analysis in policy and practice. There is an inevitable trade-off between influence and criticality, a tightrope which feminist and queer researchers are required to navigate constantly (see, for instance, Browne 2007). Our current moment is one of destabilisation, where the critical tools of women's studies are urgently required, and consensus among feminist researchers cannot be assumed (not that it ever could). Rather than buoying up apparatuses of state which are clearly failing, now is a time to challenge orthodoxy, and sharpen the conceptual tools we have inherited.

Growing uncertainty is evident in the pages of academic journals as well as in the media, traditional and new. Debates about the subject and object of violence against women (Dolan, 2014, Ward, 2016); the place of men in violence research (Hearne 2004); and even the nature of womanhood itself indicate such uncertainty. While the existence of a rape culture is largely uncontroversial (UNGA 2006), its parameters, perpetrators and victims are intensely debated – with minoritized and trans women often caught in the crosshairs of the debate. Further controversies follow: the nature of consent in the context of transactional sex (Kelly 2003); the role of pornography in upholding rape cultures or contrarily acknowledging sexual freedom (Boyle 2011); the proper education of children in the nature of gender and sex; the role of the state in upholding the rights of those it simultaneously oppresses (Shepherd 2019), and so on.

Graduate students of gender, globalisation and rights make use of the tools of feminist and human rights thinking to grapple with contemporary difficulties and propose new perspectives and approaches. What is striking about this issue of Dearcadh is that contributors did not shy away from the most challenging questions of our time. The volume includes authors who are challenging established practice, alongside those seeking to improve it: considering the cultural underpinnings of Image Based Sexual Abuse (Gannon) ; sex workers' agency within a context of liminality (Ford); and, exploring same-sex female intimate partner abuse (Spelman). This volume includes articles that grapple with the limitations of human rights from the point of view of the collective (Mustapha); the decertification of sex (Wilkinson); and, considering the limitations of Ireland's welfare model for tackling the work-care conflict (Monks). Taken together, these six articles demonstrate a new cohort of researchers and writers who are unafraid to engage with controversy, not for its own sake, but out of a commitment to make things better.

Articles in this volume engage with the complications of technology in understanding issues and addressing long-standing concerns in relation to violence against women and sex work. While feminist research has a long history of engaging with such issues, articles in this volume recognize the ways in which technology, including social media and platforms such as OnlyFans, create additional and new means for exploitation. Gannon's work investigates the issue of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) – a particular occurrence of violence against women (VAW) and a form of Sexual Violence (SV) where sexually explicit content involving a woman is circulated on the Internet without her consent in order to sexually-shame her, discredit her

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or as an act of revenge. Using a content analysis methodology, the author explores the public opinions posted on Twitter in the wake of the notorious 'Slane girl' case in Ireland where sexually explicit images of a 17-year-old woman spread throughout the Internet in 2013. In her article, Gannon exposes the gendered allocation of responsibility, blame and shame in IBSA cases as well as the public propensity to downplay the seriousness of the incident, commonly labeled within public discourse as an embarrassing experience of 'bad sex' rather than as SV.

While the 'Slane girl' case identifies clearly the exploitative potential of social media, and the underlying gendered attitudes, that shape public reactions, Ford explores how online sex work questions both the ownership and the identity of adult-content creators. The research is substantiated by a case study of 'Ria's' experience as a sex worker on the OnlyFans platform. This experience exposes the liminality – a state of transition from one state, status or reality to another – that is experienced by Ria as a result of her engagement with the platform regarding both the content creator's social status and identity as well as her ownership over her own content. Ford notes that while Ria enjoys a great deal of control over the production of the content itself via the online modality, she rapidly loses control over her content once it has been uploaded online. The content creators have then little to no means to keep track of their content to ensure that it isn't shared against their will or used for commercial purposes without their consent. Should they become aware that this has actually happened, the adult-content creators are left with extremely scarce and ill-defined legal protection to seek redress. Similar to public reactions to the 'Slane girl' case, persistent gendered stereotypes towards sex workers (such as assumed sexual consent) and social stigma (such as their low social status) feed into rape culture and/or are reflective of it. Further, the online circulation of sex workers' content without their consent, or even with malicious intent, may fall under infringement of intellectual property rights, rather than an act of Image Based Sexual Abuse – downplaying the severity of the violation.

In the work of Spelman, however, we are reminded that in instances of intimate partner violence, gendered and sexual stereotypes continue to shape reactions and understanding of whom is considered as legitimate victims/survivors. Spelman seeks to contribute awareness and understanding of queer (more specifically, lesbian) intimate partner abuse to the literature on domestic violence. Building upon the award-winning memoir from Carmen Maria Machado '*In the Dream House*' as her core resource, Spelman debunks the myth that queer love is inherently egalitarian, free from power struggle, and non-violent; she exposes the reality of lesbian intimate partner abuse and the additional layers of burden and silencing that such victims and survivors encounter as 'non-traditional' victims. Indeed, the prevailing discourse of egalitarian and non-violent lesbian relationships gives little leeway for public discussion on intimate violence in queer relationships, resulting in a denial of its existence within the lesbian community and beyond. Therefore, the author seeks to shed light on such abuses while emphasizing the power of literature and writing to recount the lived experience of queer violence and the complex narratives that surround these stories of abuse. Spelman argues that literature and writing in general – and Machado's memoir in particular – offer a path forward to break the narratives of shame and silence as they provide victims and survivors adequate means to recognize such abuses as well as the language tools to articulate them.

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Articles within this volume also shed light on the gendered nature of policy, legislation and rights and the implications of such. Monk examines the Irish family-friendly policies in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market. In an Irish liberal welfare model that relegates unpaid care work to the family, the massive recourse to remote working arrangements in a period characterized by school closures and lack of extra support, such as grandparents, had significant gendered consequences. The difficulty of reconciling one's caring responsibilities (essentially women's) with the demands of one's professional life in the neoliberal market – known as the work-care conflict – translates directly into comparatively lower rates of full-time labour participation and shorter working lives for women. This, in turn, contributes to lower potential income in the long-term for them, meaner pension entitlements and a greater risk of poverty in old age. Although policies are but one aspect of gender equality, they do play an elemental role in how the relationship between family and professional lives is structured. The researcher gives particular attention to policies focusing on leave regulations, flexible working arrangements, childcare provisions and child allowances. Monk's review of Irish family-friendly policies exposes the lack of affordable and accessible childcare as well as the lack of support for parents and carers. Besides, Monks reveals the shortcomings of the Irish National Remote Working Strategy which devalues the role of care and relegates it to the private sphere while increasing women's dependence on men or the state by forcing them out of the labor market. The author concludes that Ireland, as a liberal welfare state, must invest further in family-friendly policies, primarily regarding increased access to childcare and family leave, in order to ease the work-care conflict for Irish women.

In the work of Mustapha, concerns about the implications of policy are extended to the international arena through an examination of the right to development discourse. The right to development, as a human right, recognizes massive disparities between the developed and developing world and the need to ensure global and social justice, with clear implications for gender equality. While, as Mustapha notes, there are many proponents of this discourse, she also identifies the challenges of this right in practice – including the 'who' of rights holders (individuals vs collectives) and duty bearers (states vs. international order), politicization between developed and developing states, and the challenge of enforcing a positive, progressive right. Mustapha outlines the various mechanisms in place which could bring about the enactment of the right to development (state-level guidelines and policies; a Special Rapporteur of the UN; independent monitoring committees) – but notes that these are characterized by 'political rhetoric' rather than real world practice. Mustapha argues that at its root, the challenge of elevating the right to development out of the realm of ideas, derives from the concept's embeddedness in natural – as distinct from positive – law. For Mustapha, there is a potential tension between the sovereignty of developing states and the responsibility of developed states to support the realization of the right to development – a tension exemplified, for instance, in the matters of foreign aid and retributions. This tension is challenging, but for the enjoyment of rights to be secured, it must be negotiated.

In the final article in this volume, Wilkinson considers France's relationship to race/ethnicity, in particular the decertification of race, in order to expose how the state's policies effectively led to the racial disestablishment of French citizens. While the focus of the article is on the

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French 'case', the purpose is to examine this situation as a means to better understand the implications of gender decertification, a proposal in which individuals would no longer have a legal sex/gender identified through documents such as birth certificates. In the case of race decertification, French citizens' races/ethnicities are deemed irrelevant to their French identities; the French government even went so far as to prohibit discussion groups and gatherings based on shared racial identity. In order to explain how the concept of *laïcité* (which translates loosely as secularism) has been increasingly instrumentalized, Wilkinson draws on both France's colonial history and on the current heightened concern for national security. She demonstrates how *laïcité* increasingly attempts to secularize not only the state but French citizens themselves. This is exemplified most forcefully through the enactment of two laws in 2004 and 2010 that infringe Muslim women's freedom of religion as they ban, indirectly yet purposefully, certain items of clothing worn by Muslim women. These women find themselves at the intersection of three identity-markers that each leads to discrimination in today's French society: gender, race and religion. When both race and religion are made invisible in what constitutes French identity, it becomes virtually impossible for these women to be heard and seek redress. Wilkinson therefore warns of the consequences of making invisible identity-markers that do shape citizens' experiences of life, specifically referring to feminist-decertifiers's project in England and Wales. Although decertification (the removal of the legal gender status) might well have an emancipatory potential for those categorized as "women", Wilkinson cautions that feminist activists interested in identity-markers must be mindful of the political and societal landscape where their activism takes place.

This third volume of Dearcadh once again demonstrates the importance of feminist research to understanding current processes, policies and practices. From gender-based violence and sex work, to family-friendly policies in the context of Covid 19 and decertification of race and gender, to human rights discourse and the right to development, the articles in this volume reaffirm the importance of locating gender and inequality within social, legal and policy developments. Flowing through these articles is the recognition of social change and the need for contemporary feminist research to ensure equality, justice and dignity, in the face of crises, technological advance, and societal transformation, for all. Despite widespread destabilisation internationally of our social, political and economic worlds, the informed curiosity of the post-graduate authors featured in this volume gives us good reason to believe in the value of feminist research to help us navigate an uncertain future.

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About the Authors/ Editors

Dr. Carol Ballantine completed her PhD in the Centre for Global Women's Studies in NUI Galway in 2020. She is a postdoctoral researcher in the school of geography, UCD. Her interests include gender, migration, race, violence and narrative research.

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Trained as an elementary teacher with experience in both French Guiana and Paris's poorest suburbs, I sought to foster gender equality, gender awareness and girls' self-confidence in my classes by giving them prominent and leading roles and responsibilities and by including them as main participants in building class lessons. In 2021, I felt the desire to take that initiative further to learn more about what it means to be a woman or a girl in this world – I have a particular interest in intersectionality that emerged during my experiences in Guiana and Paris's suburbs. I therefore resumed my studies at NUI Galway with the Postgraduate Diploma in Gender, Globalisation and Rights. After completing the program, I am returning to the teaching field to teach French as a Second Language in Ontario, Canada.

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