‘They’ve never been taught what feminism is’: the case for teaching feminism, gender issues, and related topics in school.

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Interview transcript between Laura Stocker (researcher) and Dani (young participant aged 19-20 from British Columbia, Canada) as part of research data collected for dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MSc Gender, Sexuality & Society at Birkbeck, University of London, September 30, 2020.

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Introduction

Laura: So to get started and you’ve kind of already um told me this in our emails already but I just want to get a sense of your interests um so to get started if you could just tell me what you’re studying um at university and why you chose those subjects or that subject

Dani: um I’m doing a bachelor’s of science in psychology and then with a minor in gender studies and I chose psychology because like I love the brain and the science-y part of it but also like the functions and like behaviour and all that stuff as well and then the gender studies part I feel like that ties in really nicely because like it kind of has to do with psychology now and like figuring out like what genders mean and all that stuff and I’ve always been interested in it so yeah

L: ok great. And then um to follow from there would you say that there’s anything you’re particularly passionate about

D: um I’m definitely passionate about like the like human rights and like LGBTQ rights in particular. I have like a lot of friends who like identify in that community, I’ve always wanted to know more like make sure to help them out and stuff like that

L: ok great um thank you for sharing. Um I’m gonna move on to kind of the first set of questions and the first one um I’d like to know what comes to mind when you hear the word feminism

D: um [pause 1.20] equal rights mostly, not necessarily like all about women, women are better, but just yeah equal rights and making sure that women are equal to men

L: ok and what more can you tell me about feminism?

D: um [pause 3.32] I’m drawing a blank [laughter]

L: that’s ok, take take your time and uh--

D: [laughter] [pause 3.30] just also about like learning about the history of women and like about women and all that. Uuh I feel like people have a lot of misconceptions about it and they’re like, they think that it means men are bad and all that stuff but it’s not necessarily about that, it’s because like men are considered like superior in a way and like patriarchy and all that but just yeah just equal rights and making sure that women are seen for who they are [laughter]

L: mm okay um if you had to define it, how would you specifically define feminism?

D: uum I’d say just yeah equal rights and fighting for equal rights um yeah I don’t [laughter] I don’t really know

L: that’s ok I know sorry these are a bit tough, I don’t mean to put you on the spot [laughter] um you mentioned the history kind of of feminism uh what can you tell me about that um?

D: um just like how women have faced so much like oppression in different ways and I think it’s important for everybody to know about it um just like uh yeah

L: can you expand on that just a little bit um if I can just prod a little for more detail um like you said in in different ways, can you give some examples?

D: uh well there’s many different ways that women face oppression so like it’s intersectionality is a big one so it’s like a bunch of different ways so like a black women could face a lot of different oppressions that a white women or a first nations woman and so on so yeah feminism is like including all that together

L: great okay and um what would you say are maybe some maybe like key or major feminist issues?

D: um [pause] uh I honestly can’t think of any. I was just going to say just oppression in general

L: mm mhm and um [pause] this is going to be a hard question [laughter] um why do you think um why do you think women have maybe been denied equality or why is it that men and women aren’t equal, would you say?

D: well because men have such a long history of being the top person and being the leader and all that so I think it’s just trickled down now it’s I mean it’s getting better but patriarchy is still a thing

L: mhm and why do you think it was that men were kind of previously at the top?

D: um cause they were also portrayed to be like so macho people in the family like even like a long time ago they’d be like the ones to go out and get food and work and right and the women would stay at home

L: mm okay great thank you. Um I’m wondering how did you come to learn about feminism or hear about it if you can remember

D: um uh well my mom is always like kind of taught us a bit about it but I also like in my gender studies classes I’ve learned a lot about it. I’ve taken two so far and the one that I did was um about identities and differences and we learned a lot about [cough] sorry a lot about feminism

L: ok um so it sounds like your mom was a big one. Um do you have any particularly memorable conversations you’ve had with anyone about feminism or about kind of like topics where you’re maybe using a feminist lens

D: um in my gender studies classes yeah we had a lot of conversations about what is means to be a feminist and like the issues and all that stuff

L: um do you remember learning about it in high school?

D: uuh not really [sounds surprised]

L: no? And why do you think that might have been?

D: um I feel like high school is just like it’s just it’s not really geared to like your own like um like classes like you kinda just gotta take the certain things and then fill in whatever else you want but I feel like there’s not really any room to learn like there’s not really any good electives about it or anything

L: mm

D: and you can’t really put it into any other curriculum at least as that’s what I found anyway

L: mhm and would you have wanted that to be different at all?

D: yeah that would have been good like I mean I’ve had a few teachers that are like have had some passion about it and been like slightly talked about but not not in a big way

L: mm can you maybe just expand and tell me a little bit more about those teachers if any kind of stick out in your mind and why you might associate them with feminism

D: I think like yeah even now like more teachers are getting involved with it but um when there’s a bunch of like issues with it then um yeah like just like current events I’d say like, if there’s something that happened we’d talk about it in class but it wasn’t anything that was in the curriculum

L: mm ok [pause] Um I’m wondering um if anyone comes to mind for you as a feminist figure either past or present

D: like famous people?

L: could be famous er but it doesn’t have to be

D: uuh hm [pause] can’t think of their names. Uh. There’s a lot but I can’t think of any of their names [laughter]

L: that’s ok. Um maybe tell me a little bit more about your mom and why you would say that she’s maybe talked to you about feminism or has influenced you

D: um well she’s always I think she’s always considered herself a feminist and she’s always like wanted us to know what it means and like how it’s not that men are bad and all that um yeah uh trying to think of a person uumm.

L: or maybe a book that you’ve read

D: I think there’s so many there’s so many people that are doing feminist research and all that now

L: anyone that’s come up in your classes maybe?

D: uuuuh I can’t think of any [laughter] it will probably come back to me

L: that’s ok. If any come to mind just just uh jump in and let me know [laughter]

D: ok

L: um just uh sorry just checking my questions here um I’m wondering um gonna kind of switch gears a little bit. I’m wondering if you’ve heard of the MeToo movement and if yes what you can tell me about it

D: um I think I think I have. Sounds familiar. Um isn’t it just to like include everybody [laughter]. Um I’m not entirely sure

L: ok that’s ok um it broke out kind of on a wide scale on um on social media in 2017 um and it’s associated with uh like the sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood um

D: ooh yeah ok.

L: yeah can you tell me any more about it or does that ring a bell?

D: um yeah I don’t really I don’t really remember [pause] I think maybe just to get the word out about those things and like voices heard and stuff

L: mm hm and would you you would have still have been in high school at the time, do you remember talking about it then at all

D: um I don’t think yeah I don’t think we talked about it at all. Hm

L: and would you have liked a teacher to bring it up or do you think it was appropriate not to?

D: um I feel like it could have been talked about, yeah. I don’t think it’s something that we shouldn’t talk about [laughter]

L: mm Um. do any maybe can you tell me about some um hashtags or movements um that you know about um

D: um well the Black Lives Matter one is really big right now

L: mm can you tell me a little bit about what you know about that

D: um well it’s just like after the um those two that one guy that got killed by the police just everybody blew up and was like ‘yeah like we’re people too we deserve rights and we should be equal to everybody else and treated with respect’ and all that so yeah I think it’s really important

L: mm and did you talk about it with any of your friends maybe or family

D: um yeah I talked about it a bit with my mom and yeah it’s like it’s really sad that they need to protest about it huh because it should just be a thing like we should just treat everybody with the same respect and all that but eventually we’ll get there I hope [laughter]

L: [laughter] I hope so too. Um do any other hashtags or movements come to mind?

D: um there was one in my gender studies class that we talked about but I can’t think of the name of it [pause] um oh yeah we talked about the Idle No More one. That’s kind of an old one but

L: Idle No More, and what can you tell me about that?

D: um I think it was about it was about about the First Nations people in the prairies I’m pretty sure and I think it was the same kind of principle as Black Lives Matter and saying that First Nations People like we matter too. They I think they were protesting for rights and stuff as well. I think anyways

L: yeah I think it was quite a few years ago now that that came out. Maybe yeah I want to say 2011 but I’m not totally sure. Um any other come to mind?

D: I can’t think of any other ones but

L: and what do you think about kind of activism on social media

D: um [pause] I think it’s a good platform for activism. I think that it gets the word out but I’m not sure if people like yeah people see it and they’re like oh like that’s something that’s happening I don’t think that it actually like I don’t think people actually join in or actually like know what it is per say they just I think it’s more like I wanna say almost trendy to just like share it and then be like I’m a part of this er even if they’re not really doing anything or they don’t really know exactly what it is that’s going on

L: mm and um do you think that that maybe kind of outweighs maybe more positive things about kind of social media activism

D: maybe um yeah I feel like it’s it it’s a good like tool to get the word out but [shrugs] I’m not sure

L: would you say you’re fairly active on social media or not really

D: yeah I am yeah I like to be aware of what’s going on and I’d like to be more proactive and stuff but it’s hard

L: and are there any maybe like particular people or profiles that you follow that um you like to kind of get information from

D: um hm [pause] I’m not sure specific names of them. Um yeah there’s a lot of different ones

L: yeah

D: maybe just like the news sources. News accounts are good

L: is there any in particular you think are pretty good?

D: I mean I think CBC has good stuff um yeah usually I read like the articles and stuff on Facebook or whatever from CBC

L: mm um I’m just gonna circle back to something you said earlier that you’re interested in uh LGBTQ um rights um I’m just wondering if you could maybe expand on that um kind of maybe what you’ve learned about it or um in your classes maybe

D: um yeah I’ve learned a lot about the LGBTQ community in the past year in a bit um and just about like what they all mean and like what it means to be in the community and I also know I have a lot of friends who identify um somewhere in there and it’s it comes with a lot of oppression and a lot of like um what’s the word like labels I guess you could say like it’s yeah um like I don’t think people like a lot of people like really understand what it means like especially like the older generation I’d say like they don’t know like what it means to be LGBTQ or right but I think yeah um I think it’s important for everybody to know because yeah I mean it’s just a part of who they are but yeah it definitely comes with a lot of issues and things that come up.

L: can you just expand a bit more on that or just give a bit more detail on what you mean

D: um well I’d say like just harassment and stuff like a lot of people that are in the community just would get harassed because they identify as something like in there but um yeah I’d say it’s getting easier for people to come out these days but it was definitely not as easy before because people would be like who are you and why are you different [laughter] but I think a lot of people now are starting to understand what people are going through what these people are going through but yeah we’ll get there [laughter]

L: [laughter] if you if you had to explain maybe to someone who doesn’t really explain to someone who doesn’t really understand how might you explain maybe in simple terms about the LGBTQ community

D: um well I’d say that there’s it’s a big spectrum of gender because there’s no like it’s not black and white necessarily so you can kind of be anywhere in there but um yeah it’s just it’s basically just a community of people that are somewhere in there that come together and help each other out kind of thing make sure that, yeah it’s more like a support like if you’re to identify in there you have that support of other people that are in the same boat

L: um did you learn um in high school about like maybe in sex ed or other courses classes did they talk about um uh like I think the acronym is SOGI –sexual orientation and gender identity – was that really introduced in school or not really would you say?

D: I know my mom was um an advocate for that and she was um but I don’t think I think that was after I graduated.

L: mm ok

D: cause I don’t think yeah I think my mom was trying to introduce it to the younger kids I know that but I’m not sure if it’s I think it is now but I don’t think it is when I was

L: ok. You don’t remember talking about um like sexual orientation or anything in a in a sex ed class or or um

D: um [pause] \*shakes head\* but I think it definitely is now

L: do you remember talking about um like healthy relationships or consent or anything like that in school

D: oh yeah we talked a lot about that

L: yeah, can you tell me a bit about that?

D: um well I don’t I think a lot was in I want to say grade 8 we did sex ed we talked about um yeah like what it means to be like safe and give consent and like make sure that you’re not being violated in any way yeah

L: would you say you had a pretty positive experience in sex education or do you think there was a lot left out

D: I think that it could have been carried on throughout high school because like it gets it’s still important and even more so as we’re growing up cause we’re gonna have like relationships and all that but yeah I don’t think I don’t think I did it at all in high school

L: mm

D: I’m not sure why

L: I went to um to {high school in city} but obviously many years ago but I don’t remember very much um sex ed in my day [laughter]

D: yeah it was weird but it was a big thing in middle school {information about middle school redacted}

L: okay [laughter] um and I just want to circle back again just about feminism um would you say that there are or are you familiar with kind of maybe differing schools of thought or strands within feminism either about a certain issue in particular or just generally

D: um [pause] um I’m not entirely sure

L: that’s ok. Sorry they’re they’re hard questions [laughter]

D: yeah I’d just say like I want to say intersectionality is a big big part um yeah I dunno that’s all I can think of [laughter]

L: do you remember where you learned about intersectionality?

D: in my gender studies class in first year. Intro to gender studies

L: and what kind of conversation did you maybe have about it in class

D: um well we just learned like what it means and then we did like looking at things through an intersectional lens and like seeing all the different like issues and stuff and like picking apart all the different pieces that go into one issue in a way and all the different ways that people face oppression and um yeah it was just it was mainly just an underlying thing that was going through the whole course was that every time we just we would talk about things in an intersectional perspective

L: and would you say that maybe students in the class had heard about this before or do you think it was their first time encountering the concept

D: uh I think it was a lot of people’s first time. It was my first time.

L: mm and um do you have kind of a mix diverse gender spectrum in or class, or is it mostly like women taking it or what would you say?

D: there was a fair amount of guys in there which was actually really cool like I was kind of surprised but yeah um yeah I’d say there was a lot of diversity definitely.

L: yeah? In my program right now there aren’t that many guys in the class that’s it I was surprised I thought by now it would maybe be a bit more diverse but no so I’m happy to hear that in {city} it sounds a little bit more diverse and maybe for yeah undergrad maybe um yeah they’re starting to take it. Um are there maybe any other ideas other than intersectionality that you learned in your class that maybe come to mind that you learned in your class

D: um yeah feminism and like different like oppressions and. We did a unit on disability and everything that comes with that the different oppressions and all that

L: mm can you maybe just elaborate a little bit more?

D: well yeah if like if you’re if you have some kind of disability they like there’s a lot of um oppression that goes with it and I dunno it’s just um huh [mumble, pause] I’m drawing a huge blank

L: that’s okay, sorry I didn’t give you the topics up front and there was a reason for that um to be honest I kind of didn’t want to influence you ahead of time I kind of wanted to get a sense of your more candid views um about feminism so sorry that wasn’t very yeah it was quite vague my topic of gender issues [laughter]

D: [laughter] that’s ok

L: um and just to circle back, do any kind of feminist figures come to mind at all, have any popped in to your head?

D: um I want to say like uh Justin Trudeau’s wife

L: Sophie?

D: yeah she’s a big um she has I think it was her that there’s a not a movement but a foundation that I forget the name of it anyways I think she’s big about feminism and that kind of thing. [pause] Yeah I can’t really think of anyone else don’t know yeah

L: um do you listen to any podcasts? Um any in particular that you follow that maybe touch on gender issues or? LGBTQ issues or feminism?

D: no I haven’t really discovered podcasts

L: no yeah I’m not sure if that’s in your age grouping [laughter] does that sound ancient?

D: yeah maybe I’ll I feel like I should, a lot of people have been telling me about podcasts maybe I’ll look up a few and see

L: there’s a couple I like I can tell you there’s one I like called Unscrewed by I think her name is Jaclyn Friendman and she kind of does different topics. There’s one I remember on consent I thought it was really good

D: ok yeah cool

L: that’s what comes to mind [laughter]. Um and then I’ve got kind of maybe a hard question to close but I’m wondering um how do you think gender equality might be achieved or do you think it’s been achieved already?

D: Um I don’t think it’s been achieved yet but um I feel like it could be [cough] excuse me could be achieved um just with like education and like like people knowing like the issues and how we can come to some sort of um equality, yeah. I think I think my generation and is going to bring it forward I think

L: what makes you say that?

D: I don’t know, I think this generation there’s a lot of passionate people and just with the times like what’s happening and I feel like the young people are going to bring out some stuff [laughter]

L: I hope you’re right [laughter]. Um can I just ask you to specify what you mean a bit more by education like what kind of education or maybe what level as well

D: um well I feel like just educating people so like like just talking about it just going out and just this is what’s happening this is like why are we not equal and um yeah I think mainly just yeah talking about it and figuring out

L: raising awareness?

D: yeah.

L: And it sounds like you’re you’re optimistic?

D: yeah [laughter] sort of

L: [laughter] that’s good, I like to hear that. Great well I’m just going to quickly check my list of questions just before I let you go um but is there anything you’d like to add or revisit or anything?

D: um I don’t think

L: [pause] Um great, so that’s everything from me, thank you very much...

Debrief & concluding remarks

Dani is a pseudonym

Redactions indicated in {} to protect participant’s anonymity