9-1-2016

Building Solidarity for Women Faculty in Higher Education

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Abstract

Book review of *Disrupting the Culture of Silence: Confronting Gender Inequality and Making Change in Higher Education* edited by Kristine De Welde and Andi Stepnick. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2015.

Building solidarity for women faculty in higher education

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A Review of:
Disrupting the culture of silence: Confronting gender inequality and making change in higher education
Edited by Kristine De Welde and Andi Stepnick. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2015.

    Disrupting the Culture of Silence: Confronting Gender Inequality and Making Change in Higher Education couples personal narratives with sociological research to bring to light some of the lesser-known challenges faced by women in higher education. The editors, Kristine De Welde and Andi Stepnick, frame the book with their membership in Sociologists for Women in Society. As founding members of the Society's Committee for Academic Justice, De Welde and Stepnick spent over a decade developing workshops and compiling research on injustices faced by women in the academe. The editors themselves are established members of the academe in the United States; De Welde is an associate dean and associate professor of sociology at Florida Gulf Coast University, while Stepnick is professor of sociology at Belmont University. Their collective personal experiences and academic interests served as the impetus for this collection.

    The editors' research questions largely involve understanding what specific challenges are faced by women faculty in higher education, where these challenges originate, why gender inequality persists, and how affected individuals can take action to protect themselves and strive for successful careers. These questions are posed with an underlying motive of applying feminist sociological frameworks to gender inequality in academia. But while *Disrupting the Culture of Silence* is a collection of research, it is also carefully structured with an intended audience of women faculty who themselves have experienced struggles due to rampant gender inequality in higher education. The editors include case studies and personal narratives with the intention of not only fleshing out qualitative research, but also sending a clear message to women faculty: You are not alone.

    Acknowledging that research into gender inequality has been developing over the last half century, the editors draw on research examining women faculty across disciplines at a variety of universities. An intersectional approach attempts to illuminate the numerous forms of discrimination and hostile environments present in academia, shedding light on the wide range of ways in which women faculty's careers are impeded by perceptions of their gender, race, sexuality, or marital status. The overall story told by the research offers two explanations to why women in academia are suffering: First, women "settle" for less-secure, less-valued positions that either do not offer tenure or that make tenure exceptionally difficult to attain. Second, established traditions and stereotypes shut women out of the "old boy clubs," create pressure on

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women to take on unreasonable amounts of responsibility in the hopes of job security, and pigeon-hole women into roles of nurturance and/or service. Case studies and narratives illuminate the diverse ways in which a faculty woman's position in society can be detrimental to her career; the story told by a White woman caregiver of an elderly parent presents a different set of challenges from that of an Asian immigrant woman who speaks English as a learned language.

The intended audience is women faculty, though this includes tenured and tenure-track professors, contingent faculty and lecturers. By focusing on faculty in particular, the editors are able to reveal longstanding inequalities amongst a population presumed to be of power, making individual stories and quantitative statistics alike salient to those with experience of any kind in higher education. One section is written by a woman who struggled with contrapower harassment for many years, and pioneered research into the phenomenon with the hopes of sharing it with other women experiencing the same hardships; this spirit is embodied throughout the collection as women share their own experiences in the hopes of gaining allies, support, and visibility. The collection runs the risk, however, of tokenizing particular backgrounds or experiences: only one section focuses on lesbian women faculty, with no intersectional focus on LGBT women and no mention of transgender women. Despite these limitations, the book provides solidarity for women faculty, and breaks down complex social and institutional problems in a digestible introduction to gender inequality. Beyond the intended audience of women faculty, *Disrupting the Culture of Silence* is a useful resource for anyone looking to start a conversation on gender inequality in higher education.

References

Welde, K. D., & Stepnick, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Disrupting the culture of silence: Confronting gender inequality and making change in higher education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.