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Upside Down/Inside Out: Critical Debates on Gender and Women's Studies

Heike Flessner, Lydia Potts, *Societies in Transition-Challenges to Women's and Gender Studies*, Opladen: Leske&Budrich, 2002, 233 pp., ISBN 3-8100-3529-7, Price 24, 90 € Reviewed by Ozlem Ezer¹.

In this collection of essays, the editors Heike Flessner and Lydia Potts set for themselves the task of bringing various women's voices together in an international and interdisciplinary engagement with Women's and Gender Studies programs. The book presents an overview of the conditions in which international research on women and gender is conducted and provides women's insider perspectives on how societal transitions influence the emergence and development of programs. Discussions on Women's Studies' collaboration with activist women and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), especially in the developing countries, form the backbone of the book, which evolved from an international conference held at Carl von Ossietzky Universitaet Oldenburg, Germany, in summer 2001. Contributors come from a variety of countries: Great Britain, Hungary, India, Jordan Nepal, New Zealand, Poland, South Africa, Turkey and Yemen. The book consists of eight chapters and there are seven titles of focus, three of which are centered on Europe only, entitled as *Europe (I) -Germany*, *Europe (II)-Eastern Europe*, and *Europe (III) - European Union and Nongovernmental Organizations*. The fourth focus is *Middle East*, and the fifth section's heading is *India and Nepal*. The last focus before the conclusion chapter has the title *Republic of South Africa*. The opening section is on global viewpoints with an overview of gender and women's studies worldwide, as indicated clearly: *Global Perspectives*. The editors arranged this volume's table of contents according to the agenda of the summer 2001 conference itself. They also point out that due to the place of the conference the focus shifts first to the women's studies on German universities, and then followed by other perspectives.

As the title suggests several of the articles engage with the transition and transformation processes in societies and in academia. The questions addressed are posed from both directions: What have been the challenges for women's and gender studies in different countries and how have feminist activists and academics positioned themselves in relation to the broader issues of political change and their impact on universities? In this context transition is defined as societal ones that influence the emergence and developments of women's studies programs as well as transactions of international networking and transnational exchange of knowledge among women's academic and activist groups.

In her introductory essay, Gabriele Griffin lists the major issues involved in establishing women's and gender studies in higher education, such as the profoundly patriarchal characteristics of the "public", and the problematic nature of hegemony in monologic traditional disciplines. She also makes a list of warnings against the globalization of knowledge which obscures the very real differences among women today. One of her subtitles, (*How Global Is Sisterhood?*) signifies her skepticism about the notion of sisterhood reflected in the statistics by the UN or the World Bank. One striking example is the %100 literacy rate in Australian women with its bracketed postfix "EuroAustralian". As verified clearly in all articles of the collection, inequality is not evenly spread, and global statistics on women which are disseminated and taught in every gender and women's studies program "frequently mask the differences in circumstance under which women exist". (Flessner 15)

Many of the articles are presented in the form of case-studies, so that the readers can make a comparison of the first-hand experiences of the contributors. Terminology in general is identified as still seeming to cause account for the miscommunication among the academics and

activists. This issue is raised more than once in the collection and several contributors redefine terms such as 'gender mainstreaming' or 'inter/trans-disciplinarity' for their own purposes.

It is striking that the tone of the chapters on the non-Western practices of women's and gender studies programs is markedly more like "advertisements" and "success stories" in comparison to the Western ones. "Turkish Women's Studies: The METU Gender and Women's Studies Graduate Program Experience" and "Strategies of Women's Empowerment: Women's Micro Enterprises in Nepal" are two examples to these articles. Consequently, more facts and figures are presented in these chapters and these could have been summarized more succinctly. The Western-oriented articles focused more on gender activism, which may be a result of the "divorce" of most university programs from the grass-roots organizations and policy-making in the West. "Women's and Gender Studies in Germany-Strategies for Internationalization" and "Strategies and Demands of Women's NGOs from Central and Eastern Europe in the Beijing +5 and the European Union Enlargement Process" can be given as the illustrations of the western concern I have mentioned above in contrast to the concerns of the authors from non-Western countries.

Although the obvious shift in the last section of the collection is mentioned in the introduction of the editors, my sense is that this shift is not a very swift one and Zafar's article on the legislative framework and the impact of HIV/AIDS on Women in South Africa could have raised more attention in a different collection.

The compilation does not shy away from providing room for some disillusionment with the past and present contradictions such as the utopist sisterhood phenomenon or the cuts from the university funds for women's studies programs in several countries. However, it concludes in a generally optimistic tone. I think this is more than wishful thinking fuelled by the fact that recognition of gender at an international and policy-making level has offered women globally an increasing range of opportunities for participation in public sphere. In the course of time, a transformation of that sphere may well be realized in ways which would probably not previously have thought possible. In fact, it is true, as the chapter by Flessner argues that in some Western countries, due to too much institutionalization, the excitement and motivation got obscured in Women's Studies Programs. Nevertheless, this is wittily diagnosed as a "midlife crisis" (Flessner 19). It is also true that in some countries or institutions, the women in charge may serve as the "gatekeepers" of the patriarchal system as exemplified by some of the articles such as "Co-option or Transformation?" This outstanding contribution by Griffin in which the major problems that feminism faces in the global politics today can be recommended as a source material to open up controversial discussions in any women's studies class. However, I believe that women should not fail to see the potential for opportunities and challenges that lie under the problems for future.

Potts and Flessner manage successfully to expand our understanding of feminist debates on gender and women's programs from an international angle and these up-to-date contributions are likely to prove useful in many fields and forums. Possibly with a risk of leaving out several other collections on the debates of women's and gender studies, I would like to mention two collections which offer critical and complementary views when combined with this collection. One is *Agents of Change: Virtuality, Gender, and the Challenge to the Traditional University* by Gabriele Kreutzner, Heidi Schelhowe (2003) and the other is a previously published one yet it remains as a significant compilation by Ann B. Shteir, *Graduate Women's Studies: Visions and Realities* (1996). There are a number of parallelisms between these books such as transnationalizing academic women's education in the global information society as well as

some commonly underlined experimental projects such as the *IFU* (The International Women's University).

The collection is not addressed only to scholars in this area, but also addresses students of gender and women's studies programs, feminist activists that belong to different generations, and the curious reader with an interest in gender and women's issues in general. Its success is precisely in helping readers to realize how complicated yet important these issues are for the transformation of women's studies and the whole of many societies.

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