This paper focuses on the field of gender and education and its development over the last two decades. Over the years it has moved away from investigating ways in which schools might minimise gender inequality to become a strong academic field, theoretically and empirically. The question I want to pose is to what extent 21st century Academia is incompatible with political activism. I have been thinking about this for some time, as an academic whose work originates in the ideologies of 2nd wave feminism, and whose academic career grew out of feminist politics yet who has always found feminist theory exciting and illuminating. So I am not a ‘theory-hater’: I am just questioning its limitations and its inability to replace action.

This paper draws on a number of issues. First, the success (to my mind at least) of academic feminists in penetrating academia; second, the emergence and changing nature of the field that has come to be known as gender and education; third, the gap that has grown between feminists working in the university sector and school teachers and other education practitioners; and fourth, and perhaps most important, the disparities that continue to exist between men and women, in the UK and worldwide, and therefore the continuing need for a politics of gender. The question I want to pose is: have the interests, passions and choreographies that feminist academics have developed in order to climb the greasy pole of Academia, been counter-productive to gender and education as a field and to practitioners and the children they teach and care for? Put another way, have feminist academics lost sight of their aspiration to eliminate inequalities between men and women within and outside education. The author of a recent popular book on feminism thinks so. Caitlin Moran says that academic feminism has ground to a halt, and is of little help to newer generations of girls as they struggle to become women:

Again and again over the last few years, I turned to modern feminism to answer questions....but found that what had once been the one most exciting, incendiary and effective revolution of all time had somehow shrunk down into a couple of

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1 Gaby Weiner is Professor at Umeå University, Sweden; Visiting Professor at Sussex University, UK and Visiting Professorial Research Fellow, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.
increasingly small arguments, carried out among a couple of dozen feminist academics, in books that only feminist academics would read (Moran, 2011, 12).² Moran says feminism is too important to become the exclusive concern of academics. She castigates academic feminism for concentrating only on ‘heavy’ issues (e.g. pay inequality, domestic abuse) – not that they are unimportant but more that feminism also needs to engage with the everyday life of ordinary women and their concerns and worries. Transfer that argument to education – and what is needed in my view is a re-turn to children’s and teachers’ everyday issues and concerns, and a re-forming of education feminism as exciting, incendiary and effective.

Feminist academics working in Education

As already mentioned feminist and gender researchers in education have been successful in scaling the walls of academia, and in getting gender recognised as of serious concern to educational research. Gender has become accepted over the years as a valid topic for research (rather than as a joke as in the 1970s) and it is to the credit of serious and brave feminist scholars that this has been achieved. Once thought of as a risky and low status career option, ‘coming out’ as a feminist in university education departments is now no longer a handicap in terms of career progress, as can be seen by the number of academic feminists rising to the position of professor and beyond. Gender is also popular as a subject with authors and publishers alike. Following the example of the feminist publication imprint Virago in the 1980s which successfully published feminist literature often long out of print, publishers have found that gender sells. For example, approximately a quarter (8 out of the 33) new books announced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) in its March 2008 newsletter, focused primarily on gender³.

Researching gender in education has come to offer a potentially productive career and publications pathway, at least for those whose language and cultural milieu is western-oriented and English-speaking (Öhrn and Weiner, 2009). However as I shall show, in seeking credibility as serious academics, feminists have failed to sustain their original challenge to

² Caitlin Moran, How to be a Woman, London: Ebury Press, 2011

³ Research Intelligence, 102: 26-7, 2009
the education status quo and their responsibility for engaging in the struggle for equality. Bell hooks, the noted American-African feminist scholar likewise sees revolutionary feminist potential in universities, particularly in Women Studies which has been the main forum for development and dissemination of feminist thought, but likewise notes that feminist activism has become secondary to the ‘goals of academic careerism’ (hooks, 1989).

The changing field of gender and education

The field of gender and education has been remarkably successful in its short period of existence. Following a number of individuals, small projects and supportive local authorities in the UK, all of whom threw their lot in with gender change (in schools mainly but also in higher education) at the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, the field found legitimisation in the establishment of an academic journal *Gender and Education* in the late 1980s. Since then interest in gender and education has grown and the field presently: ‘owns’ what has now become a high-ranked international journal, runs a well-attended biannual international conference as well as sponsoring regional conferences and seminars, and has instituted an academic society of the same name. In 2011, there were more members of the Gender and Education Association than ever before, and for the first time, non-UK members outstripped members from the UK. However, it seems that the field, originally created to expose and eradicate bias, has missed the opportunity to forge a discipline that embraces practitioners as well as academics, practice as well as theory. For example, rather than challenge the conventions of academic writing and publication to make the field more permeable and inclusive, feminist referees and gatekeepers have (in my experience) been among the harshest of disciplinarians in terms of their comments on, and reviews of, the work of would-be entrants to the field. This is justified on the basis of a new discipline which needs to achieve acceptance; however this position offers a contrast to others such

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5 For more details of the Gender and Education Association, see http://www.genderandeducation.com/
as action researchers (also representing a new sub-discipline of education) who have been much braver and more sustained in their challenge to elitist academic conventions.\(^6\)

The field’s rejection of its earlier values is evident from a small survey I conducted several years ago, of the content of articles published in the *Gender and Education Journal* between 1980 and 2007. The remit of the journal is articulated as to further ‘feminist knowledge, theory, consciousness, action and debate’\(^7\) but my judgement is that the priority has been accorded to ‘knowledge’ and ‘theory’ rather than ‘consciousness’ and ‘action’.

While the journal cannot be said to be representative of the overall field, it is generally the first choice of gender researchers working in education, in the UK and in other countries, and therefore indicative of general trends. Thus, the growing popularity and maturity of the field can be seen in the increased number of articles and issues over the period. Other trends include greater emphasis on theory and abstraction over the years, less attention given to policy/practice and practitioner viewpoints (missing altogether from some later issues\(^8\)) and a preoccupation with issues of Western feminism rather than of other parts of the world. The journal’s recent inclusion in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) has given the field added academic status, but has also made practitioner and less theoretical viewpoints yet more difficult to include.

My survey and other publications on gender and education over the years have confirmed my perception also from doctoral students and new career researchers, that the field has become increasingly dominated by theory, often drawing heavily from outside education, in particular from sociology, cultural studies and other social sciences. Indeed, doctoral students with an interest in gender have appeared to have little option but to

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\(^6\) For example, see the *Educational Action Research Journal*, website at http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/09650792.asp

\(^7\) The journal website elaborates as follows: ‘The journal grew out of a feminist politics and is committed to developing the critical discussion of gender and education in its broadest sense. It is particularly interested in the place of gender in relation to other key social differences and seeks to further feminist knowledge, theory, consciousness, action and debate. We welcome which examine and theorize the interrelated experiences of women and girls and men and boys, and how these shape and are shaped by other social differences. We expect articles to engage in feminist debate and to go beyond the simple description of what boys/men and girls/women do. Education will be interpreted in a broad sense to cover both formal and informal aspects, including nursery, primary and secondary education; youth cultures inside and outside schools; adult, community, further and higher education; vocational education and training; media education; parental education’ (http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/carfax/09540253.html)

\(^8\) Response from the editors of the *Gender and Education Journal* to the subsequent article (Öhrn and Weiner, 2009) proved positive, and content seems to have changed substantially since the 2008 survey
throw in their lot with the latest intellectual icon. Of concern to me has been that those
gender researchers who were previously school teachers or the like, have gradually moved
away from their earlier interest in researching and changing practice in favour of what I
have termed, an *addiction to theory*. Over the years, theorists have come and gone - a
seemingly endless roll of French sociologists and cultural theorists with a few American
feminist philosophers thrown in. Where can we see the feminist curriculum specialists or
the serious feminist pedagogues? Why haven’t they attracted similar kinds of reverence? It
was always thus, you might say. Educational scholars have rarely been up among the greats.
But my response is that I had greater hopes for feminist scholarship.

**Rift between university feminists and school practitioners**

I have also witnessed a growing gap between feminist academics and school teachers and
other practitioners, in particular in the English-speaking world. I provide an example from
personal experience. A couple of years ago I was invited to a government-sponsored
seminar on gender, to give a lecture and to spend some time with teachers who had already
carried out or were interested in carrying out research on gender. Having been away in
Sweden and then in Scotland for over a decade and after years spent in higher education, I
welcomed the chance of re-engaging with teachers and looked forward to hearing how the
greater awareness of gender issues for which I had fought in the 1980s and 1990s was being
interpreted and carried forward by today’s teachers. The website blurb about the seminar
seemed neutral enough, although emphasis on ‘under/performance’ and ‘improving
learning’ might have alerted me to what was to come.

My contribution on the day was to present a literature review that I had undertaken
for the European Commission (EU) on the state of gender and education across Europe
(Weiner, 2010). Assuming I was talking to a relatively informed audience, I provided a
critique of the EU’s increasing focus on boys’ underachievement and the relative
ineffectiveness of cross-national surveys such as PISA in identifying causal factors for gender
differences. I also emphasized as have many other gender researchers in recent years, the
interweaving (intersectionality) of different social factors that impact on gender in schooling
and wider society and the relative complexity of the relationship between curriculum,
pedagogy, schooling, families, labour market and so on. The message was that there were no simple solutions.

The participants at the conference were far too polite to tell me what they really thought about my input, but in the small group discussions that followed I found little interest in what was going on in the rest of Europe or indeed in any of the issues that I raised in my talk. Attention instead was concentrated on how teachers could improve the examination results of their underachieving pupils, particularly boys; indeed it seemed that the teachers’ futures and that of their schools depended on it. While these were clearly committed, well-meaning and professionally-engaged individuals, their interest in gender was narrowly focused and their knowledge of gender issues such as the significance of gender gaps, theories which explain such differences, previous research etc. was minimal. Stereotypes abounded in the discussion about the whys and wherefores of gender differences, and assertions were made about the intrinsic nature of girls and boys that made my hair stand on end. It was as if I was stepping back 30 years.

How was it, I pondered, that the huge efforts made by education feminists of previous decades had disappeared? I was aware that gender research was flourishing in university education departments, and being published and highly ranked; but the important link between feminist work in universities and those working in schools seemed to have been lost.

Certainly, the increase pressure to do research, intensification of work demands of the university and the narrow interpretation of gender taken by governments and policy-makers have not helped. Gender policy across Europe is increasingly equated with statistical analyses of differences in patterns of boys’ and girls’ under/achievement (e.g. DCSF 2007) and interpretations ignore school gender processes and the lived experiences of children, schools and families (GEA, 2009). Popular critiques of government policy on gender have been few and far between. An exception has been the Gender and Education Association (GEA) which has sought to provide a platform for critique, for example stating in 2009, that UK government policy was reducing gender in education to a technology for determining and reducing gaps in examination results. Such research, the Association argued, is of little use to teachers in aiding their understanding of the complexities of gender or in addressing
gender inequalities and discrimination in their classrooms – as demonstrated by the bewilderment and stereotyping of the teachers as mentioned above.

**Explaining educational disparities between girls and boys, men and women**

A problem for education feminists in Western countries is that their initial arguments for focusing on gender, concentrated primarily on girls’ poor representation and achievement in public examinations, and the consequent impact on university and career prospects.

Although other arguments were used concerning what was termed the 'hidden curriculum', i.e. the socialisation aspects of schooling that underpin stereotyping, and the range of masculinities and femininities available to young people, the main thrust was on examinations. Thus many, including governments, now perceive education feminism as only to do with improving girls’ access to, and success in, examinations. So, given that girls in many countries are outperforming boys in many subject areas, the main goal of education feminism is seen to have been achieved. Indeed, the perception of boys’ relative exam failure has turned the original argument on its head so that now it is boys who are seen as the oppressed sex, and the main concern of the gender and education field. This interpretation however is simplistic in its failure to address, for example, the relationship between schooling, the professions and the labour market (where women remain under-represented) or the intersectional complexity of gender, social class, ethnicity and sexuality.

Other arguments continue to be made: that girls still lag behind boys in many parts of the world, or are excluded from education entirely; that educational achievement is more that just about examination success or failure; that schools initiate girls and boys into socially acceptable but also highly differentiated forms of masculinity and femininity, that schools are sites for girls’ earlier and heightened sexuality, and so on. But these are not the arguments that are being heard or listened to.

Meanwhile disparities between men and women continue. For example, even in a so-called advanced country such as UK, men outnumber women four to one in Parliament, earn on average 16.4% less than men in fulltime work, constitute 64% workers categorised as low paid, and are only 10% women of directors of top FTSE 100 companies. 45% women
experience domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking at some time in their lives, and so on (Fawcett Society, 2010). But despite this evidence of continued inequality, academic feminism seems to have lost its high moral ground and its major justification for action. Enthusiasm for and debates about, feminist and political action now come from elsewhere, in the UK at least: from, commentators and journalists (such as Caitlin Moran, Laurie Penny, Julie Bindel, Tanya Gold and Suzanne Moore) researchers of feminist activism (such as Jonathan Dean), as well as from new forms of grassroots activism such as SlutWalks, ‘Reclaim the Night’ marches and feminist summer schools.

**Feminist revisited**

The new calls to feminism offer a different perspective. For example, the feminism that Caitlin Moran advocates is shouty and strident. A newspaper columnist and sometime TV and music critic, Moran evokes a passion that reminds me of the heady days of the late 1970s when feminism was exciting as well as threatening, hopeful about the future as well as critical of the past. She uses her own experiences - of being fat as an adolescent, of masturbation, of developing breasts, of having her first period, of suffering sexual rejection and falling in love, of being married, having children and having an abortion – experiences that most of us have had but have rarely admit to in print. All this provides the context for what she admits is a ‘rant’ about the need for young women (and men) to become strident feminists.

For Moran, feminism is ‘serious, momentous and urgent’ but also thrilling and fun. For her, today’s feminism should include the popular stuff of women’s lives such as a rethink on pornography, Lady Gaga, the OK magazine, £600 handbags, hen nights and big weddings as well as the serious ‘big stuff’ of pay inequality, female circumcision and domestic abuse. Drawing on Germaine Greer, Moran demands zero tolerance of what she terms ‘patriarchal bullshit’ but advocates humour and ridicule as a means of challenge. Feminism is re-defined by Moran as the ability to act individually and to take on the world.

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It is portrayed as attractive and empowering, fun and exciting, dare-devil and dangerous. It is no wonder that her recent book is walking off the shelves.

A more scholarly re-presentation is that of a male feminist researcher, Jonathan Dean whose recent book *Rethinking Contemporary Feminist Politics* explores groups and events that characterise feminist politics in the UK in the first decade of the twenty-first century. He reports on three organisations, the *Fawcett Society*, a feminist campaigning organisation (liberal suffragist in origin, well-organised and well-funded; *Women’s Aid*, a single-issue activist and campaigning organisation on domestic violence (roots in second-wave feminism, autonomous, well-organised and relatively well-funded); and *The F-Word* - an internet feminist magazine established in 2003 (third-wave feminist, open-ended, specifically for young feminists). Each of these organisations is seen by Dean as having elements of respectability/managerialism/individualism on the one hand and ‘radicalisation’ on the other.

Dean makes the argument that UK feminism has maintained a ‘vibrancy’ and radicalism but has been undermined by discourses of pessimism and disappointment of left-leaning theorists - what he terms ‘left melancholia’. He shows that the three organisations’ pathways to feminism have been different. For example, after a long twentieth-century history of fighting for women’s equality in the workplace and civil society, Fawcett underwent a rebranding in 2005 to embrace third wave feminist issues and to take in the activism and discontent emerging from feminists ‘at the moment’ (p88). Women’s Aid has over the years consolidated its position as the campaigning organisation on violence against women in the UK at the same time as renewing its radical agenda by constantly evoking a rediscovery of domestic violence as a feminist issue. The F-Word aims to encourage ‘a new sense of continuity among UK feminists’ (p130), especially among younger feminists, and to foster a new updated version of feminism, different from previous generations. Dean concludes that there has been no death of feminism but rather, an increased feminist vitality and a renewal of radicalism.

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So, if feminism is alive and well in the UK, what can we say about activism? Is it possible, given the work pressures on academics today and the neo-liberal shift in education policy? Well, a good example is Amnesty International which has campaigned for human rights with much success for more than 50 years. Launched in 1961, it sought to challenge human rights abuses, coined new terms such as ‘prisoners of conscience’ and introduced symbols such as the candle (proverb: ‘better to light a candle than curse the darkness’) which caught the public imagination. It supported high profile prisoners such as Nelson Mandela and inaugurated postcard writing campaigns for lesser known detainees. It led campaigns against capital punishment, abolition of torture and women’s domestic abuse. It used popular comedians and well-known faces to support its cause through events such as the Secret Policeman’s Ball, Live Aid and Comic Relief. It showed that activism is possible on a large and sustained scale, and what can be done.\(^{11}\)

While not on such a scale, feminists too have had some success, for example, the Fawcett Society, Women’s Aid and the F-Word as we have seen. Other achievements more recently include the Slut Walk movement which spread quickly round the world earlier in 2011 (with marches in Cardiff, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and London) triggered off by a Canadian policeman who told law students that ‘women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to become victimised’. Tanya Gold (2011, 7\(^{12}\)) described Slut Walk as ‘a scream of dirty, unfeminine rage ripping through conventional gender stereotypes’.

There is a reported ‘massive appetite’ for feminist courses and summer schools which suggest young women’s discontent and a perception that ‘feminism is an unfinished revolution’ (Davies, 2011)\(^ {13}\), and a renewed interest in feminism as a movement. For

\(^{11}\) Al now has more than three million members, supported and subscribers in over 150 countries and territories in every part of the world. ‘We campaign for internationally recognised human rights to be respected and protected. Throughout the past 50 years, we remained independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or region’ (Amnesty at 50: special issue of Amnesty Magazine, 167, May/June 2011, p.65)

\(^{12}\) Tanya Gold, Walk this Way, The Guardian, 7 June 2011, 6-9

\(^{13}\) Lizzie Davies, New wave of feminists head to ‘boot camp’. The Guardian, Saturday 6 August 2011.
example, there has been a recent call for papers on the state of feminist social movements in 21st century Europe for a special issue of the journal Social Movement Studies.\footnote{See http://sociologyatwarwick.wordpress.com/2011/10/10/call-for-submissions-new-feminisms-in-europe/}

Towards a revolutionary and revolting education feminism

So far, I have put forward the arguments for feminist activism and provided some feminist and non-feminist examples of activism. What might we do as education feminists that is exciting, compelling and urgent and which reduces the gap between university theorising and school practices? Well, first of all, we need to \textit{re-connect}. I was involved at the beginning of the 1980s in a small project on gender using the teacher-as-researcher model which developed mailing lists and newsletters to disseminate ideas and information on events and to galvanise teachers into action. Even though short-lived, its influence was felt for many years. An MA gender module on gender and education that Madeleine Arnot and I pioneered at the end of the 1980s had a similar effect. Both seemed to catch the \textit{zeitgeist}, the feeling of the moment, and provided the basis for many actions at the level of the schools as well as higher education.

The Gender and Education Association (GEA) has attempted recently to make gender knowledge more available and accessible by providing web resources on gender and education (e.g. summaries, definitions, references, web links and topics) for teachers and school and college students. In addition, regular posts are uploaded to its website\footnote{http://www.genderandeducation.com} on popular gender issues of the day. Recent posts have focused on feminism and veganism, gender and the English riots, women and the Arab Spring, EU gender policy and so on. However, the scheduling of a special teachers’ day at the Association’s main conference in 2011 failed to recruit. So we need to do more than just write posts or strive to do well as gender researchers or rest on our laurels as successful academics.

Specific feminist strategies of change may help us, based on the foregrounding of gender and development of understanding of how it is played out in terms of power, relations, representation, identity and so on. Strategies include:
- Feminist praxis developed from the 1970s onwards to challenge hierarchical and oppressive forms of working, e.g. collective and non-hierarchical organisational structures (e.g. Stanley, 1990)\textsuperscript{16}.

- Feminist intervention projects developed by gender researchers to examine the multiple identities, power relationships and positionings of those involved in action research (Maguire, 2006)\textsuperscript{17}.

- Feminist leadership models, which both challenge and change male dominated and shaped notions and hegemonic institutional practices and organisation (Blackmore, 1999)\textsuperscript{18}.

- Feminist pedagogy/ies focusing on critiquing and revising classroom methods, and drawing on the individual experience of teachers and students to increase equality in power relations and to use power transformatively (Weiner, 2006)\textsuperscript{19}.

- Feminist networking involving individuals and groups who are interested in promoting feminism, and who join together with like-minded people for the purposes of more effective political activity.

Further, in connecting with practitioners, we need to focus on (feminist) teachers’ practices, wishes and responsibilities, and provide support where they need it; for example, in developing curriculum and assessment, in making their views known to management, in dealing with students and their parents, and so on. We must learn to see teachers less as research subjects or dollar/pound signs as purchasers of courses, and more as collaborators and professional equivalents, albeit working in a different educational sector. We also have to put much more effort into learning about feminist activism, what works and what doesn’t, and develop theories around feminist action. We need finally to unlearn our hard-


\textsuperscript{18} Blackmore, Jill (1999). \textit{Troubling women: Feminism, leadership and educational} change. Buckingham, UK: Open University.

won sobriety and respectability, and strive to be revolting (in both senses of the word) once more.

**Concluding points**

So, is this just a blast from the past, a polemic from someone who is resistant to change, out of date, boring, or all of these? Is this just one more sign of 2nd wave feminism’s failure to give way to their daughters of the 3rd wave and beyond? I sincerely hope you think not. The point I am trying to make is that a new feminism has emerged, one that is positive and optimistic and which rejects ‘left melancholia’ and discourses of pessimism. It is primarily an active feminism of the young who seek to layer their prevailing values of individualism, pleasure, justice and hope over the more sober ideas and practices of feminists from previous generations. They want to create something new, immediate and exciting. We have also seen a break, a schism, between the serious theoretical work on gender going on in the universities and what teachers understand about gender and how they work with it in their schools. I have also offered ideas on feminist-oriented practice and change. The question I want to ask is, is it possible to combine the energy and passion of the new feminism with the experience of the old, and as a consequence revitalise the gender practices of schools, as well as of ourselves?

Or, do we just sit on the sidelines and disapprove because this new stuff is not ‘our’ brand of feminism, and/or we are just too busy doing more important and serious things?

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