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## **Researching masculinities and the future of the WGSG**

**Peter Hopkins and Peter Jackson**

The editors have asked us to provide a 'male perspective' on the current debate about the possible renaming of the Women and Geography Study Group (WGSG), asking us to cover 'maleness, masculinities and the place of women, gender and feminism in geography in the twenty-first century'. In accepting their invitation we have set ourselves a more modest task, focusing on how our research on masculinities was made possible by the pioneering work of the WGSG and how it can be accommodated within the current constitution of the WGSG, without requiring a change in its constitution or name.

The WGSG has a long history which began with active opposition to its establishment. Senior figures within the IBG opposed the formation of the Group, arguing that its feminist stance and campaigning role was inconsistent with the disinterested pursuit of scholarship. Right from the start, then, the existence of the WGSG has been politicised and it should come as no surprise that debate continues to flourish about its central concerns and orientation. It might even be argued that the existence of such debate is a confirmation of the Group's academic and political significance in that it is something that people are prepared to contest.

We have both been members of the WGSG and have never felt that our biological sex has precluded our involvement in the Group. Indeed, the WGSG invited one of us to contribute a conference paper on the geography of masculinities that was subsequently published in *Transactions* (Jackson 1991) and which gave rise to a series of other work on related topics (Jackson 1991, 1994, Jackson et al. 1999; Stevenson et al. 2000). The other has been equally influenced by the work of WGSG in seeking to build upon this earlier work in researching Muslim masculinities (Hopkins 2006) and in editing a special issue of *Social and Cultural Geography* on masculinities (Hopkins and Noble, 2009). We both feel that there is nothing in the Group's current constitution or name that prevents an engagement with men and masculinities (indeed such work has been actively encouraged) and a name-change is not required to facilitate men's involvement in the Group or further research on men and masculinities. An alternative position might be to argue for a specific emphasis on feminism in the title of the Group which may encourage participation from men who engage with feminist research. However, this might deter some men from joining who do not feel comfortable appropriating the feminist label on the grounds that feminism is, above all, a women's movement.

More significantly, we are concerned that a name-change from a specific focus on women to a more generic focus on gender might dull the political edge of the WGSG. The WGSG has always had a dual role: encouraging research on 'women and geography' (and on gender relations more widely) and acting as a lobby group (campaigning to improve the position of 'women in geography'). Recent survey evidence confirms that the latter role is still required. In one sense, the trend is encouraging. For example, while only 4% of Geography professors were female in 1978 that proportion had risen to 16% in 2008 (Maddrell et al. 2011). But the gender imbalance in British Geography is still significant, with the proportion of female staff who are professors rising only slightly (from 7 to 8% between 1978 and 2008) while

the proportion of male staff who had achieved that grade had risen from 12 to 21% over the same period. This would suggest that there is still a clear need to campaign for an improvement in women's position in British Geography though it is open to debate about how this is best to be achieved and whether a name change might help this process.

Our other concern is that a change in name from Women to Gender signals the kind of 'gender mainstreaming' that might sound progressive but can deflect attention from feminism's more radical demands (for gender equality) that we, as men who are sympathetic to the feminist cause, are keen to support. The case is well made in Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2008) which criticises the view that while feminism may have lost its popularity as a public protest movement, it remains active 'behind the scenes', having been successfully incorporated into mainstream institutions and other channels of political power. McRobbie argues against this optimistic view of 'gender mainstreaming', showing how real inequalities persist in women's lives at home and at work and that these cannot be adequately addressed without a specific focus on women's unequal position in society. While the incorporation of gender within political and institutional life might look like a victory for women's rights, it can also be seen as a technocratic or managerial strategy for undermining the political struggle for gender equality.

A parallel might be drawn with other institutions which have changed their name from a specific emphasis on equal opportunities and gender equality to a more diffuse emphasis on social inclusion and diversity. One might ask whether this change has produced a noticeable increase in the effectiveness of such groups or whether it might lead, however unintentionally, to institutional complacency and inaction? Similar arguments might apply to the Equality and Human Rights Commission which focuses on nine protected characteristics.

We might also note that gender is far from being an unproblematic category in social science research. Having served as an organising term for generations of feminist research, critics such as Susan Bordo (1990: 135) began to identify 'a new scepticism about the use of gender as an analytical category' more than twenty years ago. For many literary theorists and other scholars, gender is now regarded as an inherently unstable, continually self-deconstructing discursive formation, however useful it remains as a political category. While some have championed its continued usefulness, accepting that gender is an important but not the only category in feminist research (WGSG 1997), others (such as Butler 1990) have talked about the dissolution of the term, arguing for a greater emphasis on the intersectionality of gender and other social categories (as described by Valentine 2007). While some might feel that an emphasis on intersectionality is open to some criticism as we applied to 'gender mainstreaming' above, it effectively challenges the unifying impulse of gender as a universal category, highlighting the many differences that exist within as well as between genders.

For all these reasons, we are sceptical of the need for a name-change for the WGSG. Such a change might be seen to signal greater inclusivity of men and a wider intellectual agenda that encompasses research on gender relations rather than focusing exclusively on women. But our experience suggests that men have always been welcome within the WGSG and that studies of the geography of gender (including

men and masculinities) are readily accommodated within the existing constitution of the WGSG.

1128 words excluding references

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