

# **Teaching Gender and Social Justice at the University of Malaya, Malaysia**

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## **Abstract**

*The paper outlines the institutionalization of Gender Studies at the University of Malaya, describing a Gender Studies program that is involved in international networking, community activities, and policy intervention. It presents data gathered from graduates of the university's Gender Studies Program and analyzes how doing gender studies impacts their activism. This is done by measuring graduates' awareness of discrimination against women, general awareness of discrimination against others, as well as their involvement in feminist activism and social activism in general. About half of the respondents reported that their level of gender-related social activism had increased since studying in the Gender Studies Program. The paper therefore finds that Gender Studies training increases gender awareness and critical thinking among students, and facilitates personal, social, and intellectual transformation. It also posits that Gender Studies enables students to develop meta-discourses about their experiences, which in turn help them to confront discriminatory practices and inform their activism.*

## **Introduction: Gender Studies at the University of Malaya**

Year 2010 marked the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Gender Studies Program (here forth referred to as the GSP) at the University of Malaya (UM). The Program was officially launched during the 1994/1995 academic session under the Dean's Office of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. It is multi-disciplinary in approach and offers courses ranging from theory to methodology, which deal with subjects as varied as family, economics, politics, peace and conflict, law, and religion. Gender Studies, as a teaching discipline is a novel idea in Malaysia, because it

requires academics and students to deconstruct and reconstruct traditional discriminatory values (Thambiah 2000).

The Program nurtures students to be sensitive to gender issues in order to generate new insights and understanding of all aspects of social, economic, and political life. With this exposure, students are able to provide critical perspectives on gender-related issues. In addition to undergraduate courses, the program provides supervision for post-graduate students and a platform for academic discourse on gender by organizing forums, seminars, workshops, and conferences (Thambiah 2000).

Under the leadership of Professor Nik Safiah Karim, the first Coordinator of the GSP, a few senior faculty members were given the responsibility of preparing the Program's course outline. Two senior faculty members, Dr. Rokiah Talib and Dr. Susan Oorjitham, visited several Canadian universities, which assisted in the development of the curriculum of the GSP. This venture was sponsored and supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (Thambiah 2004).

The GSP's objective is to train gender-sensitive students who can apply their training when they enter the job market. Students benefit from the wide exposure of course offerings in various academic disciplines and are expected to have critically informed perspectives on gender relations and gender roles in society and culture. The GSP encourages students to take a minor (33 credits) in Gender Studies. The GSP courses are also offered as electives for students from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences as well as for students from other faculties. They are expected to gain sensitivity to and progressive perspectives on issues related to gender through their training (Thambiah 2004).

It is important to emphasize here that the GSP at the University of Malaya has addressed many and interrelated issues on gender in development at the national and international levels, especially in courses such as Gender and Development; Gender and Citizenship; Gender, Conflict and Peace; Gender and Law; and Gender and Politics. The University of Malaya is the only institution in the country that offers a teaching program in which undergraduates can minor in Gender Studies.

Other universities in Malaysia, such as the University of Science Malaysia, the University Putra Malaysia, and the National University of Malaysia, have Women's Studies Programs; their focus, however, is on research and they offer minimal teaching (Resurreccion 2004).

## **Networking, Outreach, and Policy Interventions**

### ***Networking with International and Professional Organizations***

The GSP networks with both local and international organizations; these are regularly relied upon for support. Local organizations include those from other local universities, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development,<sup>1</sup> local women's groups, and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The international organizations that have supported the GSP are the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Asia-Pacific Gender and Development Center (APDC), and the Committee for International Co-operation in Higher Education (CICHE) under the British Council. The GSP also networks with the Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML), the ASEAN Gender Studies Network, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). The local networks that the GSP works with are the Joint-Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), the Bar Council, the Centre for Poverty and Development Studies, the Health Research Unit, the Faculty of Medicine, UM (HERDU), and the National Network for Gender/Women's Studies (SAMA).

### ***Community Activities***

The GSP provides training, seminars, and workshops; it is involved in drafting memorandums, conducting gender analysis of national policies, and writing pre-budget dialogue session memorandums for non-governmental organizations. The GSP has been invited to conduct trainings for the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO), the Women's Aid Organization (WAO), Empower, the Women's Development Collective (WDC), the National Youth Consultation (Bar Council and Youth for Change), INTAN, and the NAM Institute for the

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly the Women's Affairs Department under the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development and later under the Prime Minister's Department.

Empowerment of Women (NIEW) under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. There is a continuous need for gender training and the GSP is committed to engaging with various communities and the state to address that need.

Fiesta Feminista, a well-received, vibrant conference organized by the Joint-Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) and the GSP in 2007, provided a platform for academics, students, and activists to discuss issues ranging from patriarchy, human rights, development, neo-liberal globalization, fundamentalisms, and democracy and ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and racism. It was able to draw a large number of young volunteers and participants from various sectors of Malaysian society.

The Gender Studies Club (GSC) is an initiative of students of the GSP within the University of Malaya. The objective of this informal club is to build linkages and develop solidarity and a sense of community within the campus to discuss and exchange ideas pertaining to gender equality. The club organizes a Faculty “Hop,” in which it visits other faculties to promote and share the gender perspective. The GSC also organizes get-togethers, fundraising, and community work.

### ***Policy Interventions***

The GSP curriculum addresses both national and regional issues of women/gender in development, particularly in courses such as Gender and Development, Gender Issues in Non-governmental Organizations, Gender and Citizenship, and Gender and the Law. The program also contributes a course (Gender and Public Policy) towards the Masters in Public Policy Program offered by the Institute of Public Policy at the University of Malaya; this course addresses national issues of women/gender in development. The topics covered in the other courses encourage critical reflection on gender issues across a wide range of key aspects of our society, culture, and everyday life.

During the last five years, we have seen an increase in the interaction between the academic community, government entities, and non-governmental organizations through consultations, seminars, workshops, and student placements. The Gender Studies Program has been a member of

three technical working committees of the national government: a committee for the project “Towards Achieving at Least 30 percent Participation of Women at Decision Making Levels in Malaysia” (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and UNDP, August 2007 to November 2008), the Technical Working Committee of the NAM Institute for the Empowerment of Women, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, and the Technical and Steering Committee of the National Action Plan to Empower Single Mothers (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and UNDP, 2008-2009).

The GSP has also participated in the Expert Group Committee formed by the National Institute of Public Administration. This committee prepares, coordinates, and teaches courses on the gender perspective designed by them for members of the civil service and others. The committee has developed two courses: one on “Managing Gender Issues in Economic Development” for international participants and “Gender Perspectives in Development Planning and Management” for national participants.

Academic staff of the GSP were involved in the preparation of the draft document for the Malaysian government’s 2001 report on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as in writing the CEDAW shadow report (articles 11 and 13) in 2003.

In July 2007, the NCWO commissioned the Gender Studies Program to write a memorandum on Extending Maternity Leave from 60 days to 84 days, which was successfully implemented in the public sector. The GSP has also been involved in writing the Pre-Budget Dialogue Session Memorandum for the National Council of Women’s Organizations (NCWO) that represented women’s non-governmental organizations in the Pre-Budget Dialogue with the government. In 2010, the GSP was involved in the writing of Millennium Development Goal 3 on Gender Equality and Empowering Women for the UNDP and the Economic Planning Unit, Government of Malaysia.

The GSP has also been involved in gender mainstreaming initiatives of the government. It was appointed as a consultant to write a paper on strategies to gender mainstream employment/human

resource development, which informed the Five Year Economic Planning of Malaysia (the Ninth Malaysia Plan) with approaches and recommendations for gender mainstreaming. In 2011, the GSP was asked to train the gender focal point persons of 24 ministries in the government as part of the government policy on the Government Transformation Program (GTP).

### **Doing Gender Studies and the Importance of the Curriculum in Activism**

In the wake of globalization, identity politics, fundamentalism, and new forms of patriarchy, the GSP recognizes the inequalities and power relations that need to be addressed in order to realize a just and equal society. It therefore ensures that courses instill feminist values and perspectives in order to achieve such a society. Some question the effort to institutionalize Gender Studies and view it as politically ineffective for reaching the goals shared by feminists (Gubar 1998). Feminist activists from academia, who believe that they contribute by disseminating knowledge and creating awareness amongst university students, disagree with this view and strongly believe that Gender Studies training contributes to feminist activism through the teaching and learning process.

Wiegman (2002) discusses the fear among feminist activists that Women's Studies has produced many contemporary feminist scholars who are more academic than feminist and who are more bureaucratic, hierarchical, and careerist than ever before. Nonetheless, she defends the significance of Women's Studies as an important part of the humanities and not merely the domain of a certain kind of anti-patriarchal theoretical obsession. She further notes that the methodological emphasis of Women Studies lies with the 'live subject' as the proper object of study and as the agent for reviving social justice goals. Meanwhile, Newman (2002) emphasizes the anxiety of Women's Studies' programs' around institutionalization, particularly when the role of the university is negotiated in its relation to the nation-state and its function is in danger of transforming from one of knowledge production and social change to serving as an agent of the nation-state. Newman further emphasizes that the presentism of Women's Studies produces a curriculum that registers the value of all knowledge according to its usability for the present as defined by our understanding of the needs of present politics.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See further Newman (2002) on presentism. Presentism, philosophy of time, asserts that only the present exists and that the future and the past are unreal. Past and future entities are logical constructions or fiction. The philosophy of

In her book “Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse,” Messer-Davidow (2002) centers her argument around the key question of co-optation of Women’s Studies, arguing that the field has become a part of an institutional system largely engaged in intellectual scholarship too removed from its activist components. She asks “How did it happen that a bold venture launched thirty years ago to transform academic and social institutions was itself transformed by them?” A reorientation is needed to reach the goals originally set in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and to achieve those goals now requires new thinking about strategies, tactics, and organization (Messer-Davidow 2002).

In “Women and Gender Studies in East African Universities and the Need for a Transformative Pedagogy: Issues and Challenges,” Ogachi (2006) explains the increasing significance of gender analysis as critical to Social Science methodology, as integral to all disciplines, and as a strategy to broaden academic discourse and the culture of the institutions. Ogachi argues that these developments represent a great leap in the quest for women’s empowerment and the struggle of feminist scholarship for visibility in academic knowledge (Ogachi, 2006).

Acker et al. (1991) examines three principles of feminist research and discusses attempts to use these principles in systematic ways in their own research. They argue that research should: (a) contribute to women’s liberation through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves, (b) use methods of gaining knowledge that are not oppressive and should continually develop a feminist critical perspective that questions dominant intellectual traditions and (c) reflect on its development. According to the authors, they consciously apply these principles in researching the relations between changes in consciousness and changes in the structural situations of individuals. They acknowledge the impossibility of creating a research process that completely erases the contradictions in the relationships between the researcher and the researched, the difficulties in analyzing change in process, the tension between the necessity of organizing the data and producing an analysis which reveals the totality of women’s lives, and problems of validity, particularly those raised when the research process becomes part of the process of change.

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presentism has been heavily criticized by many academics and feminists, for example through the works of Robyn Wiegman (2002), Anne Marie Rasmussen (2000), and Lynn Hunt (2002).

Despite the difficulties and obstacles, Malaysian women and men have contributed to the development of Gender Studies by conducting research projects, holding dialogues, and teaching. They mobilize their internal capabilities and take advantage of the opportunities provided by both international and national agencies. Yet, both male and female academics need to continue to struggle to incorporate feminism and the gender perspective into mainstream courses.

Through our experiences in teaching Gender Studies, we would like to share the voices of our students at the Gender Studies Program of the University of Malaya. The survey results of this study and feedback from the students serve as testimonies that Gender Studies does indeed ignite personal and knowledge transformation, and impact the way the students think, critically analyze, handle discriminatory practices, and engage in activism.

In addition to examining the impact of Gender Studies on our undergraduate students, the study also responds to feminist critiques about the significance of Gender Studies as an academic entity, the incorporation of feminism into the university, and the role of academics, specifically the criticism from feminist activists that academic professionalization is a depletion of political energy from arenas of greater social concern (Wiegman 2002). It is our hope and belief that this initial research will reveal that academics who are aware of the importance of gender-centered studies are not merely concerned with theory, but also facilitate students' agency to shape a just and equal society free from any discrimination, particularly discrimination against women, demonstrating that Gender Studies training contributes to feminist activism through the teaching and learning process.

We also agree with Wiegman (2002) that universities must become directly engaged with civil society and government in finding and applying solutions to pressing social needs. Boothroyd and Fryer (2004) assert that the idea that students should simply absorb knowledge generated and imparted by professors, and then wait until they graduate before applying it, reflects an incomplete conception of personal and social learning processes. Boothroyd and Fryer (2004) highlight that pedagogy, discovery, and access to higher education are all enhanced when universities and their members become directly involved with social problem solving, especially when the involvement

is made an integral component of teaching and research rather than being relegated to the academic sidelines. All of this literature is in line with an important tenant of Gender Studies training: that it cannot be detached from social needs.

Previous studies have found a connection between gender studies and feminist identity, feminist attitudes, and feminist politics (Jackson 2000; Macalister 1999). Gender studies students usually identify themselves as feminist, and value the politicized and feminist nature of women's studies as a discipline (Jackson 2000). For example, Griffin and Hammer (2005) found that gender studies impacts students' gender awareness; enhances their feminist identity; enhances resistance toward intolerance as expressed in sexism and discrimination; generates a goal to dismantle patriarchy, inequality and discrimination; and leads to a perception of political feminism as a lived philosophy. Similarly, Bargad and Hyde (1991) found that gender studies students' feminist identity increased over time.

The following section presents data from a survey conducted among graduates of the Gender Studies Program at the University of Malaya.

### **Method and Sample**

A quantitative assessment was conducted by administering a questionnaire to 43 graduates of the 1999/00 to 2006/07 academic sessions of the Gender Studies Program of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Malaya.

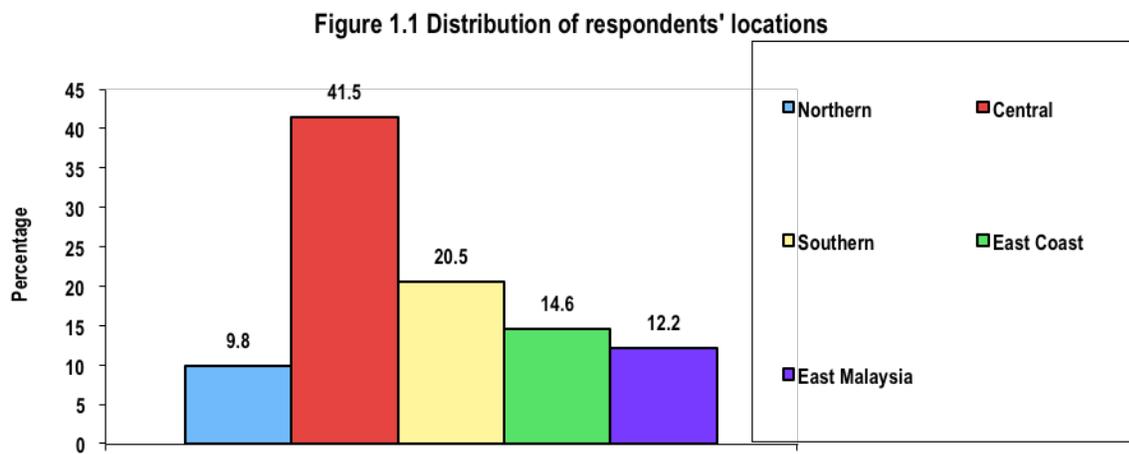
A total of 97 percent of the respondents were female (N = 41), and 3 percent were male (N=2). An average of five male students enrolled in the Gender Studies Program from the year 1996/97 to 2006/07. Therefore, the total number of two male respondents is representative and reflects the overall enrolment trend of male students in Gender Studies Program.

The age of survey respondents ranged from 20-40 years, with a mean age of 26 years. A total of 37.2 percent of the respondents were between the ages of 20-25 years; 55.8 percent were between the

ages of 26-30 years; 4.7 percent were between the ages of 36-40; and 2.3 percent were between the ages of 36-40 years.

In terms of ethnicity, 20 percent of the respondents were Malay, 62.9 percent Chinese, 8.6 percent Indian, and 8.6 percent Pribumi (indigenous). Over 80 percent of the respondents were single; 14 percent were married. Only 2 respondents reported having a child.

The respondents come from the 14 states in Malaysia. The state of Selangor had the highest percentage of respondents (23.8 percent), followed by Johor (11.9 percent), and Kuala Lumpur (9.5 percent). This represents a more urban population as a whole. The distribution of respondents across the geographical regions of Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia is illustrated in Figure 1.1.



The majority of the respondents were enrolled in the 2004/05 academic session (23.3 percent), followed by the 1999/00 and 2002/03 sessions (each with 18.6 percent of respondents), as seen in Table 1. As illustrated in Table 2, the majority of respondents graduated in 2003/04 and 2005/06 (46.6 percent), followed by the year 2004/05 (18.6 percent).

**Table 1. Respondents' year of enrolment**

Year of enrolment	Frequency	Percent
1997/98	1	2.3
1998/99	2	4.7
1999/00	8	18.6
2000/01	2	4.7
2001/02	7	16.3
2002/03	8	18.6
2003/04	5	11.6
2004/05	10	23.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 2. Respondents' year of graduation**

Year of graduation	Frequency	Percent
1999/00	1	2.3
2000/01	2	4.7
2001/02	3	7.0
2002/03	4	9.3
2003/04	10	23.3
2004/05	8	18.6
2005/06	10	23.3
2006/07	5	11.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The majority of the respondents (50 percent) majored in Media, Languages, or Literature, while 100 percent of the respondents minored in Gender Studies.

### **Scales**

Several criteria were considered in choosing the scales for the questionnaire. These criteria included:

1) relevance to the Gender Studies Program and cultural appropriateness for use in Malaysia; 2)

validity, reliability, and international use (to facilitate international comparisons); 3) ability to address a wide range of issues relevant to the Gender Studies Program; and 4) scope and ease of administration. With these considerations, the following scales were employed:

### **i) Awareness of Discrimination against Women**

The Awareness of Discrimination against Women Scale was adapted by Stake and Hoffman (2001) from the Social Order Scale (Worell and Worell 1977). The 6-item measurement consists of 4 positive and 2 negative statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example of a positive statement is: “Women have more to gain than to lose by asking for complete equality.” An example of a negative statement is: “Most women have only themselves to blame for not doing better in life.” Alpha coefficients of internal consistency at pre-testing, post-testing, and follow-up were .73, .70, and .71, respectively (Stake and Hoffman 2001).

### **ii) General Awareness of Discrimination against Others**

The General Awareness of Discrimination against Others Scale was adapted by Stake and Hoffman (2001) from the Equal Opportunities / Rights Scale (Miller, et al. 1993). The 6-item measurement consists of 4 positive and 2 negative statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example of a positive statement is: “We would have fewer problems in this country if all people were treated more fairly.” An example negative statement is: “We have gone too far in pushing equal rights.” Alpha coefficients of internal consistency at pre-testing, post-testing, and follow-up were .76, .75, and .77, respectively (Stake and Hoffman 2001).

To examine whether graduates of the Gender Studies Program are positioned to transform society and/or believe in the importance of their active contribution to transforming society, we also included two sub-scales: one measures feminist activism and one measures activism on behalf of such populations as Orang Asli, people with disabilities, the elderly, refugees, migrant workers, people facing health and sexuality challenges, and the poor.

### **iii. Feminist Activism**

The 3-item Feminist Activism Scale, designed by Stake et al. (1994), measures involvement in women's rights activism. It captures a range of activist behaviors that attempt to operationalize activism on behalf of women's rights. Respondents rate how often they engaged in each of the following behaviors: (a) staying informed about women's rights issues; (b) talking with others to influence their attitudes about women's rights issues; and (c) contributing time to women's rights causes (for example attend a meeting about women's rights issues, circulate a petition related to women's rights, attend a rally related to women's rights). The 5-point rating scale ranges from 1 (never); 2 (once or twice); 3 (three or four times); and 5 (on a regular basis). Alpha coefficients of internal consistency at pre-testing, post-testing, and follow-up were .88, .88, and .89, respectively (Stake and Hoffman 2001).

#### **iv. General Social Activism**

The 3-item General Social Activism Scale, designed by Stake and Rose, parallels the Feminist Activism Scale (Stake et al. 1994). It measures activism in the same way as described above, but on behalf of the rights of marginalized groups more generally, such as people with disabilities, immigrants, and the elderly. Alpha coefficients of internal consistency were .90 at pre-testing, post-testing, and follow-up (Stake and Hoffman 2001).

#### **Procedural challenges**

Identifying the total number of graduates of the Gender Studies Program from 1996/97-2006/07 was a difficult task. Some of the data provided by the Dean's Office of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences was out-dated and incomplete, which made it difficult to contact and communicate with the graduates. In some instances, the contact information was that of the parents of the graduates, who in turn were reluctant to divulge the contact details of the graduates. However, after explaining to them the purpose and objective of the research, a few of them agreed to cooperate and provide the contact details of the graduates.

## Findings

The findings show that participation in the Gender Studies Program had a major positive impact on the awareness and activism of the graduates.

The study evaluated the impact of the Gender Studies Program on the graduates' awareness of discrimination against women and awareness of discrimination against others. Respondents scored slightly above the neutral point on the Awareness of Discrimination against Women Scale (mean = 20.09, standard deviation = 2.44, total score = 30). On the General Awareness of Discrimination against Others Scale, which consisted of 6 items, respondents also scored slightly above the neutral point (mean = 22.33, standard deviation = 2.13) (see Table 3). The findings therefore suggest that respondents were generally non-discriminative against women or others as a whole. Unless compared to a control group, it is difficult to infer whether this is a result of pursuing Gender Studies. Nonetheless, the findings reveal a low level of discrimination among graduates of the Gender Studies Program.

**Table 3. Awareness of Discrimination**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Awareness of Discrimination Against Women	43	12.00	25.00	20.09	2.44
Valid N (listwise)	43				
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Awareness of Discrimination Against Others	43	18.00	26.00	22.33	2.13
Valid N (listwise)	43				

### **Impact of the Gender Studies on Graduates' Gender and Social Activism**

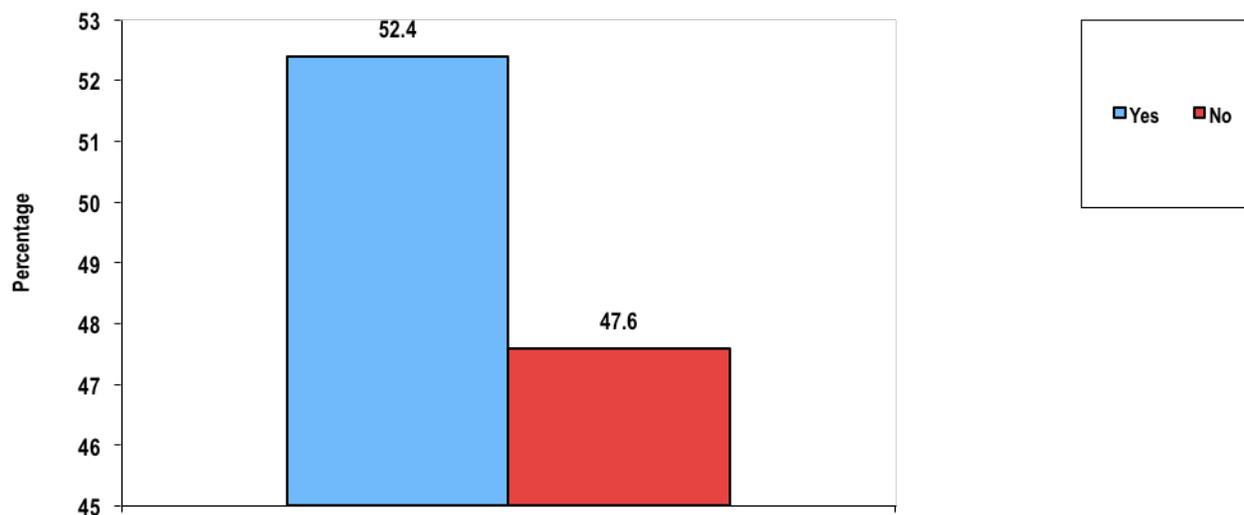
To evaluate the impact of the Gender Studies Program on the extent of graduates' activism and contribution to social transformation, we examined two variables: feminist/ gender-related social activism and general social activism (see Table 4). Items 54-56 in the questionnaire measured gender-related social activism. These revealed that respondents' activist behaviour was minimal (with a mean score of 6.47 and standard deviation = 2.73). Findings from the General Social Activism Scale yielded similar results, showing a mean score of 6.23 (standard deviation = 2.80), which is also only slight above the neutral point. When asked whether pursuing Gender Studies had increased their involvement in activism, however, 52.4 percent answered "Yes" while 47.6 percent answered "No"(Figure 1.2).

In summary, the findings suggest that doing Gender Studies has had an impact on respondents' involvement in activism (see Figure 1.2).

**Table 4. Feminist Activism and General Social Activism**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Feminist Activism	43	3.00	12.00	6.47	2.73
General Social Activism	43	3.00	12.00	6.23	2.80
Valid N (listwise)	43				

**Figure 1.2 Has your involvement in activism increased since you were involved in Gender Studies Program**



## **Conclusion**

Analysis of the findings suggests that Gender Studies training facilitates personal, social, and intellectual development and transformation. About half of the respondents reported that their level of gender-related social activism has increased since graduating from the Gender Studies Program. The experience of the program allows students to reevaluate relationships and to articulate the inequalities they experience. The research findings also show that Gender Studies increases gender awareness and critical thinking. Many students enroll in Gender Studies because its content reflects their personal experiences and concerns. They then find that Gender Studies allows them to develop meta-discourses about their experiences, which help them to confront discriminatory practices. The research reveals that the teaching and learning process within the Gender Studies raises the intellectual ability of the graduates, produces members of the public conscientized about gender discrimination, and provides a platform to voice experiences and thoughts in different ways.

We believe that this study demonstrates that academia and feminist activism are not separate worlds, but rather are interwoven and interrelated. The learning and transformation occurring in Gender Studies is a force that will challenge patriarchy, fundamentalism, racism, and neo-liberal globalization. Cultural factors, religious values, and norms are often seen as conflicting with Gender Studies. We propose that they can instead compliment the program to encourage and foster a just

society. Finally, one cannot avoid the ‘culture of fear’ embedded within us, which discourages open engagement with and discourses on gender that touch upon ‘sensitive’ issues. It is our hope that the training and learning process provided by the Gender Studies Program will facilitate social engagement and critical thinking in higher education in spite of the many challenges.

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