

# **Intersectional Pedagogy**

Creative Education Practices for Gender  
and Peace Work

**Gal Harmat**

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## **Chapter 2**

### **Practical gender in critical pedagogy**

Analyzing everyday objects

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## 2 Practical gender in critical pedagogy

### Analyzing everyday objects

This chapter offers a theoretical and methodological framework for implementing feminist critical pedagogy in compulsory courses in gender studies. The method examined presents a gender analysis of daily objects by students as a means of dealing with resistance to gender studies and feminist theory, as well as creating a consciousness-changing experience for the participants. The study is based on the documentation of courses I taught in three higher education institutions between 2012 and 2019: The Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts and the Academic College of Society and the Arts, both in Israel, and the UN's University for Peace in Costa Rica. In addition, the educational practice was used in international trainings for peace and development workers from various international development agencies. Throughout the chapter, I will discuss examples of the objects presented by the students and the discourses generated by these presentations. These examples will form the basis for my analysis of how the objects were analyzed, regarding the material, social, and symbolic qualities they hold. Deconstructing and restructuring them allows for the implementation of wide critical gender observation skills and can bring about a significant change in consciousness among the learning community.

I will argue that using a gender-oriented analysis of everyday objects promotes understanding from a gender perspective of real-life situations and their influence on men, women, and people who do not identify by binary gender while focusing maximal attention on cultural differences and intersectionality. The chapter is structured according to the course learning process, beginning by briefly discussing the changing status of academic gender studies and the special challenges posed by these changes to students in compulsory courses and development organization training courses that include a compulsory module on gender. I will present the theoretical framework of working with everyday objects and

discuss how it enables the lecturer to handle resistance and support a meaningful learning process, using some of the main themes that emerged in the courses and occupied the students: the beauty myth and body image, models of femininity and masculinity, and sexual violence. I will describe the dilemmas and conflicts arising from issues of feminism and academic language and specify the dynamics that promote multiculturalism in learning groups. I will demonstrate how the methodology promotes the creation of a safe space and solidarity within learning groups, and supports the sustainment of a positive, fruitful, and dialogical relationship between the lecturer and the students.

### **Gender in the academic (and development and peace work) field**

Elective courses in gender studies have been offered in institutions of higher education since the 1990s (Herzog, 2009). Over the last decade, following the efforts of local feminist organizations in the public and legal spheres and in response to the international pressure regarding the UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 to increase women's participation in decision-making processes, gender-oriented perspectives have been implemented in different spheres. For example, courses and continuing education programs on gender issues have become compulsory in some training programs for education workers, social workers, therapists, and workers in international peace and development organizations. At the same time, a change has taken place in gender studies programs. From programs intended mostly for upper-middle-class women already committed to the subject, imparting broad general knowledge on feminist issues and an aspiration to learn and deepen this knowledge, gender studies programs evolved into courses available to the public at large. This change was driven by the growing perception that gender-oriented perspectives should be assimilated in all aspects of life and "Feminism Is for Everybody" (hooks, 2000b). Turning to new "unnatural" and wider audiences presents a promising opportunity to deepen the social effect of gender studies programs. However, it requires rethinking and refreshing pedagogical tools to support the political and social change promoted by these programs. For example, the comprehensive emphasis on reading articles in English, a foreign language for the vast majority of students, may hinder the learning processes of new target audiences and impair the pedagogical, political, and social aims of the programs. Embracing the perceptions and methodology offered by feminist pedagogy can aid the formation of joint knowledge, as can studying and critically reading existing knowledge (Hird, 1998, 517–527).

Critical feminist pedagogy maps and analyzes the power structures in society with recourse to cultural and financial capital and hegemonic power possessed by different groups in the current social order (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2004). It creates awareness of the power distribution in society and manifestations of inequality in education with a critical approach, disassembling power relations in and out of the classroom, and via constant dialogue between the lecturer and the students. Questions of power, dominance, and related interactions are addressed in the learning group. Critical feminist pedagogy strives to make a change in society by presenting critical theories and translating them into emancipatory educational practices that examine the implications of identity—personal, collective, ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual orientation—in terms of access to various spheres of power. It further promotes understanding of social power relations and the ability to reflect on them as products of the everyday practices in which we engage (such as division of labor or tracking in the education system). Awareness of social structures and their reproduction develops an understanding of one's place in the world and the ability to mold and change it. Education is praxis; that is, theory and action in combination. The learning process is not strictly academic and theoretical, but also relates to everyday life. Changing the acceptable relationship between theory and practice and challenging the existent hierarchies of knowledge affects not only the content being taught but also the educational methods we use (McClure 2000, 53–55).

Feminist critical pedagogy addresses education while handling resistance as a means to structuring identity by viewing reality through a critical lens. Joint learning, and a raised awareness of political and social issues, generates an identical, cultural, and political narrative within a learning group that allows for a different and reflexive understanding of the world, how we operate in it, and the forms of reproduction and resistance available to us. Gender studies at its core is built on the recognition that gender is a relevant theory for analyzing reality (Butler & Scott, 1992) and that gender power relations must be recognized and altered. Feminist critical pedagogy suggests social change can be promoted by learning about the production and reproduction of the social structure mechanisms that preserve financial and cultural capital for certain groups (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2004). Studying enables learners to observe how they and the social contexts in which they are rooted are formed by power relations. Analyzing these enables the weaving of a historical narrative that validates and interprets personal experiences (such as sexual violence), employing these to inspire counter-action. The analysis also reflects on practices that reproduce certain power relations

in everyday life (for example in the gender-based division of domestic tasks). At their best, gender studies courses move beyond the boundaries of traditional academic classes and become courses in “practical gender,” meaning the direct application of gender theories to the students’ everyday activities. Such courses promote viewing reality from a gendered perspective that is not focused on the difference between the sexes but on how society constructs power relations based on them. Gender analysis maps the manner in which this situation affects people of various genders in different ways, in terms of access to financial, social, and cultural resources, social and domestic roles, responsibilities both in the home and in the workplace, positions of prestige as well as elected posts, participation in decision-making systems, and power relations derived from legal and economic privileges and social structuring. Gender analysis offers a wider and clearer picture of people’s needs in the light of their layered, complex, and intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1991).

“The personal is political,” one of the key slogans of the second wave of the feminist movement, is validated by gender studies. Several articles have already pointed out that gender studies have a profound effect on students, their paths through life, and their personal and professional interactions (Craig, 1992; Katz, 1999). For a considerable number of the learners, gender studies courses raise questions about their genders and sexual identities, as well as significant life choices such as relationships, family and parenthood. How these questions manifest can depend on one’s social group and culture, class and/or life opportunities. For many women suffering intersectional oppression or discrimination and exploitation in various areas of their lives, the encounter with academic gender studies is also an encounter with the power fields that take part in forcing oppressive cultural and social norms.

Feminist critical pedagogy framework conceives of learning as a collaborative process between the lecturer and the student’s personal life experiences while frequently pointing to the power relations in and out of the classroom. The classroom forms a space, a microcosm of social relations in which complex and sometimes painful issues in gender studies can be safely examined in a critical manner. One of the lecturer’s roles in this context is to assist the students to share personal experiences, place them within a political and theoretical framework, and mirror to the learners how power relations based on class, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, and sexual preference are manifested in class. This offers the students a critical model they can adopt, as they do, both in classroom discussions and in their everyday lives (Banks, 1995; & Finkel, 1995). Critical pedagogy is oriented to social and political justice. The pedagogic approach suggests

that raising students' awareness is a means for political and social change, and that it is raised by using relevant material and content from the learners' world (Slater, Fain, & Rossatto, 2002).

The goal of learning is to refine the learners' ability to think with a critical view of reality, to doubt, to ask questions, and develop an empowering consciousness of their subjective position. At the same time, critical pedagogy is meant to develop the learners' love of knowledge and their natural curiosity, often oppressed by society's view of underprivileged groups—typically the lower classes, racial and ethnic minorities, and women—as intellectually inferior. In other words, learning itself is intended to be an empowering experience. It affirms the value of the knowledge the learner already has, as well as her own value as an intellectual and theorist able to sustain a dialogue from a powerful position with the current (often non-inclusive and hegemonic) bodies of knowledge (Giroux, 1983; Luke & Gore, 1992). The lecturer's part in this process is to expose oppressive mechanisms and reassemble critical awareness and pedagogical alternatives (Giroux, 1988; Zalmanson-Levi, 2004; Darder, 2015). Most important, the lecturer must create a safe critical space that allows each student to undergo a personal process.

### **Gender analysis based on the relevance of everyday objects**

Objects unveil a great deal about culture and identity and suggest unwritten narratives of social and political conflict (De Visser, 2006). The feminist scholar Adrienne Rich invites us to see, look at, and re-examine the current reality and to suggest new interpretations. Further dimensions of reality are revealed to us as we consider the part our own identities play in this examination (Rich, 1973). Sociologist Ervin Goffman suggests analyzing the symbolic meanings in images of objects within the context of gender identity structuring, where men are in control, active in the world, and play a central role in culture, while women are left on the margins of culture and society, often serving a decorative purpose (Goffman, 1956).

During the course, the students were asked to perform gender analysis on an object from their everyday life and to present the object and the analysis in class. The object might be a tool, a spiritual object, a luxury item, an object of sentimental value, and so on. The personal connection to the subject allows a gradual assimilation of gender perspective and thus a shift in consciousness. The object, any artifact from any field of life chosen by the student, is subject to a series of questions: How is the object used and by whom? Who manufactures it? How is it marketed and sold? Who is it intended for (explicitly and implicitly)? Who is

allowed—and not allowed—to use it? What images and symbols are associated with the object? Which power relations does it embody? How does it reflect accessibility to resources, cultural or religious standpoints, group inclusion or exclusion? Is it private or public property? What are the various ownership relations pertaining to the object? (Evans, 1980; Giroux, 1983; hooks, 2000b). The students are specifically directed to examine how the object they chose affects men, non-binary, and women differently, and how it is influenced by men and women or femininity and masculinity; how the object participates in the relationship between gender and sexuality and how it symbolically reflects them. The place of the object in the world and of the world in the object makes room for critical analysis of power relations. Throughout their task, the students start to notice hegemonic mechanisms and power relations in many aspects of life and connect them to the lives they lead and to their own identity. The students were asked to present an object they believe reflects something from the culture or social world they come from. The term “culture” is not taken for granted but researched and applied in relation to local and ethnic traditions and global popular culture such as commercials.

When presenting the object, the student can “bring something of herself” to the classroom, literally or metaphorically. For students accustomed to having someone more qualified talk about the world and about themselves, this in itself is a substantial—if challenging—learning experience. Analyzing everyday objects allows the learners to tell their life stories themselves, as they choose to present them, and gives them a clear voice as subjects analyzing a relationship with an object. This exercise promotes analytical abilities with the interpretive freedom to feel confident in developing them. Integrating one’s personal identity develops reflexive knowledge: What is my place in the world and why? Is this place fixed or changeable? What is it influenced by? The method also promotes critical and empowering observations on subjective structuring processes (Mohanty, 1988).

The reflexive aspect of the learning process requires particular consideration. Elizabeth Minnich (1988) defines reflexivity as a practice of examining our set of moral and cultural beliefs and scaling advantages, disadvantages, and implications from various and multidisciplinary perspectives. The reflexive position is the key to social change because it is based on the understanding that attitudes and values are contingent, historical, and cultural, and are bound to power relations. Attitudes and values can evolve, but a truly radical shift requires the agents of this change to critically examine their own premises. Students learn to doubt even what they perceive as obvious or absolute truth, and to notice how

attitudes and values can be embodied in the physical material. Shifting one's focus to how both knowledge and facts are manufactured by assembling discourse and fields of practice calls for rethinking and discussing the politics of knowledge. The class learns to imagine the social and political consequences of different forms of knowledge of the world by creating their own gender studies learning and teaching materials (Freire & Macedo, 1987), examining the truths offered by different versions of knowledge, and evaluating whether the suggested world of knowledge is desirable or worthwhile. In other words, the class learns to view knowledge not as a series of mere logical procedures but to observe how knowledge touches the body, the emotions, the private and the public, the material and spiritual. As mentioned earlier, integrating diverse points of view and perceiving knowledge as a process originating from different theoretical and practical sources undermines the perception that knowledge itself is an artifact or an object that can be possessed once and for all. Knowledge, knowing, and learning are profoundly understood as an ongoing call for a dialogue (Minnich, 1988).

### **Handling resistance with feminist critical pedagogy practices**

The courses I discuss in this chapter were originally designed as “classic” gender and women’s studies courses, meaning a curriculum based on differentiating sex from gender as a collection of social structuring notions and reviewing the various waves of the feminist movement, with a focus on body and sexuality politics and layered, complex identities. The reading list I prepared included central and fundamental theories of gender inequality in culture and public institutions, theories regarding the construction of feminine and masculine identity, layered and intersectional identities, the representation of men and women in the media, economy, government, and politics, and the beauty ideal. It was designed to provide the students, most of whom were unacquainted with feminist theory, with a broad and multicultural perspective on the various ideologies in the movement. But my academic plans hit a wall of resistance as of the first lesson. The students objected to the academic language used in many of the articles (generating the feeling of being belittled and excluded), and also to feminist positions perceived in the public sphere as anti-feminine (suggesting the expectation that one detach oneself from the hegemonic culture and the beauty ideal in particular).

“I came to this course loaded with resistance, I didn’t want to study gender but it is mandatory,” is a sentence I hear at the beginning of each



of my gender courses. The courses trigger strong resistance and emotions on three levels. The first concerns the very idea of studying a subject that questions social structuring and undermines the obvious regarding the learner's identity, social class, and social position. The second is a profound resistance to academic and theoretical jargon, the latter being associated with hegemonic power of a certain cultural capital and perceived by the students as foreign and alienating. The third level concerns perceptions of feminism, especially regarding the beauty myth; students criticize what they refer to as "the beauty and slimming industry." At the same time, however, the students make statements such as "I don't want to look like an ill-groomed feminist after the course," suggesting a perception of feminists as women who deliberately wish to look ill-groomed in order to "prove a point."

At the beginning of the semester, many of the students' views on gender and feminism are saturated in stereotypes, and they often claim that gender studies are "not for them" because they are not feminists. Friedman (1999) presents stereotypical perceptions of feminism held by many women and even by activists for gender equality. Her research shows that many women perceive feminism as threatening, aggressive, and extreme, and therefore as an ideology or practice that does not represent them. Others perceive feminism as a movement for white upper-class women with whom they do not identify (Abu-Baker, 2007). The students often describe experiences in which feminist lecturers have behaved in a judgmental and conflictual manner, blaming the students for internalizing oppression and being unaware of the discrimination against them. Some students raised concerns that the course might destroy their motivation to be pretty and feminine, leaving them angry and bitter (Wolf, 1990). In many cases, a gender analysis of everyday objects bridges gender, feminism, and everyday life in such a way that these students began to speak of a "connection" with the subject.

The statement "I won't learn from you" or simply "not learning" is analyzed by Kohl (1999) as a political act of resistance to learning and deepening knowledge that can undermine the student's identity. Kohl defines refusing to learn as a political act that can be altered by a political reading of an act or a behavior and a relevant profound connection of the learners to the study materials. Kohl claims that recognizing this is a necessary step in working with resistance that helps to expose the mechanisms of political, economic, and symbolic power that operates on all levels of the education system and throughout society. Students who can identify with their own language, culture, religion, and the identities that intersect with those elements will do better in their studies and

contribute to the group process. Students who refrain from bringing materials to the classroom that represent their ethnic, racial, gender, and class identity might feel out of place, actively resist, and even drop out (Zinn, 1974; Gates, 1986; Ayers, 1995; Cleaver & Cleaver, 2006).

Freire and Shor, in their well-known book *Pedagogy of Liberation* (1987), discuss in detail the subject of resistance in education and offer a number of strategies. Shor stresses the importance of dialogue with his students:

Dialogue must be understood as something taking part in the very historical nature of human beings. It is part of our historical progress in becoming human beings. That is, a dialogue is a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become more and more critically communicative beings. Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on the reality as they make and remake it.  
(Freire & Shor, 1987, 98)

One method of overcoming resistance is to design the lesson together. This challenges the traditional power relations between lecturer and students, reconstructing learning as an act of sharing and mutual recognition in the equally valuable, if different, contributions that every participant brings to the group. Constructing the curricula and the specific lessons around the students' knowledge of the world and the subjects relevant to their lives is an integral part of this process. Addressing resistance is not meant to make it "disappear"; on the contrary, in critical pedagogy, learners' resistance is of political value and meaning—whether conscious or unconscious—to the student. Discussing resistance creates an opportunity for empowering dialogue and learning while giving the students and their knowledge of the world a voice (Freire, 1976). While their voice is heard throughout the course in the way they express themselves in their own spoken language, dealing with other languages such as academic English or other languages associated with social power and exclusion is part of the course's learning process (Freire, Freire, & de Oliveira, 2014).

One of the first examples of class and gender analysis in the course was the language in which the articles are written. During my courses, I often meet students who are threatened by the concept of academic learning and display a profound resistance to the unfamiliar academic language. They describe dealing with articles and material that are supposed to represent them and their lives as detracting, alienating, and belittling. The very existence of those feelings and the willingness to openly discuss them in class in a respectful and serious manner opens the

door to an enabling educational dialogue. The students' feelings are recognized, and they learn that the differentiation between "feelings" and "thoughts" is historical and political, and itself reflects settled power relation with gender aspects.

In response to the students' resistance to the academic language, we offer a critical analysis, inquiring as to who benefits and who loses from using it: What power relations are promoted and reproduced by academic language? And in what power fields is it rooted? Exploring power relations and the term "hegemony" led students to organize study groups focused on "translating" the academic texts into clearer language, while studying the sociological and gender-based jargon and concepts out of a deliberate and political intention to take part in the academic discourse (Newberry, Gallant, & Riley, 2013). At the same time, I assist in clarifying the central arguments and theoretical contexts of the texts studied by writing every new term on the board and translating it into accessible everyday language. This formed trust and enabled a smoother entry into the world of gender studies.

Academic writing that describes and analyzes phenomena such as racism, ethnicity, and class and their intersections with gender, religion, and geographic location offers a theoretical and intellectual framework in which students can confront the worlds in which they live; however, the way in which many academic texts are written causes many of them to feel alienated and out of place, along with difficulties in understanding the academic materials and a sense of failure. Discussing the politics of language allows the student to place herself as the critic and analyst, and not only a passive subject to the analysis of the symbolic social power holders. This is the path from resistance to empowering discourse (Mackie, 1980). The principles of feminist critical pedagogy were expressed in the construction of the lessons. In each lesson, a student was to present a gender analysis of her everyday object, a process that undermines the hierarchical order subordinating the learner to the closed and dominant knowledge possessed by the lecturer. Since the students presented an object they are familiar with and rooted in their unique worlds, the lecturer became part of the learning group, turning the learning process into a more collaborative one. The main learning methodology is an open discussion guided by the lecturer with the students' participation; all present pay attention and use clear language. Questions and clarifications are accepted at any stage of the discussion, and every unclear term is written on the board and clarified by the group (Giroux, 1983; Luke & Gore, 1992).

A large part of resistance to studying gender-related materials is grounded in negative stereotypes of the feminist movement and

feminist women. A prominent concern raised by the students was that a feminist discourse that highlights power relations will be in essence a violent aggressive discourse that promotes “hating men”, a discourse that might antagonize them towards what they consider to be feminine and destroy the beauty model to which they are accustomed. Analyzing an object that is related to a discourse about the body and the beauty industry usually opens the course, opening a discussion on the divisions between masculine and feminine, beauty and ugliness, and what political meanings are hidden in the beauty and cosmetic industry. For many women, choosing to present an object from the beauty industry, for example a beauty or skincare product they use, is an act of resistance since they assume feminists are not pretty or well-groomed. Sun,<sup>1</sup> a Japanese student at the UN’s University of Peace, presented skin-whitening creams which are common in Japanese consumer culture. Using images from commercials, newspapers, fashion photography, and traditional Japanese art she demonstrated how the Japanese perception of beauty perceives white skin as beautiful, correct, attractive, pure, and clean, and dark skin as inferior, ugly, shameful, and in need of creams to whiten it. In this course, half of the learning group was of Asian origin and the discussion revolved around the effectiveness of the cream and the levels of skin whitening possible. The connection between ethics, aesthetics, and skin whiteness was not challenged. I therefore concluded that, at that point in time, the critical approach was too intense, the discussion reflecting the common view with no reflection or criticism.

One important question at this stage is how, if at all, the lecturer should point out the hegemonic processes that mold the obvious social and cultural connection between skin color, gender, and the beauty myth. I decided, at this stage of the course, to present the development of body and beauty perceptions worldwide to the students while discussing key theories on the subject. For example, *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon (1967) was discussed in a dialogue with Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*, suggesting a meeting between worlds and texts that encourage critical questioning about economy, culture, globalization, ethics, and aesthetics. The fact that the lesson was focused on Western beauty perceptions allowed the conversation in class to move away from specific criticism of Asian culture in a way that allowed Sun to remain open-minded and draw conclusions about her own culture from learning about Europe and North America. The conversation around the beauty myth and its connection to power relations in the West created an opportunity to present objects related to the cosmetic and beauty industry in the east without direct criticism, and led to a

series of presentations of various beauty products by East Asian students. Reading selected parts of Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* created a discourse acknowledging that different cultures operate different mechanisms that are identical in their motives and methods regarding women. Such mechanisms produce a beauty ideal that financially, physically, and mentally enslaves women, working hand in hand with other socialization, exploitation, and subordination mechanisms. This has paved the way to certain norms in different cultures, such as hair dying or wearing high heels as a professional demand, strict dress codes, body hair removal, and makeup. The conversation in class focused on the differences in how these norms are applied and enforced on both men and women, and the sanctions on each gender. This raised questions on femininity, power, and beauty, and led to anger, criticism, and doubt on the part of the students regarding the transparency of those mechanisms to them. The wall of resistance was cracked and opened up the possibility to discuss the beauty industry in the context of body image and constructions of femininity and masculinity.

### **Femininities and masculinities**

The question of whether the differences between women and men are biological or that gender is not necessarily bound to biological sex is frequently raised by students. Many of them begin by arguing that there are biological differences between females and males, such as strength and women's ability to give birth. Classic feminist theories (de Beauvoir, Paul, Wolf, Steinham) are new to a large number of students, and the perception that there is a fundamental difference between sex and gender is surprising and confusing. The more they link feminist criticism to characteristics they perceive as masculine or feminine, the more they point out that these phenomena—discrimination, oppression, exploitation, a clear division into gender roles, and more—were relevant to their grandmothers and mothers, and today they have faded somewhat. Many students purport that dealing with social structures of the past actually damages women who are perceived by society as inferior to men. Female students voice their concern that merely discussing different perceptions of femininity and masculinity will engender inequality.

Through a gender analysis of objects, a wide variety of body gestures, styles of clothing, hobbies, occupations, and behaviors with a negative or positive charge, active or passive, feminine or masculine are discussed in class. This variety lays out the possibilities of choosing or not choosing actions that are tied to the structuring of femininity or masculinity. The

main insight that emerges in class from this process is that the accepted distinctions between women and men are deceptive; a range of behaviors and gestures reflect both genders. We discuss the fundamental differences between biological sex and social structures and how we are all “gendered” (Butler 1993). For example, in one of the first lessons at the University for Peace in Costa Rica, Christa presented razor blades designed for men and women. She showed, among other things, that razors are designed, planned, and manufactured in the same way, the only difference between them being the color of the plastic and the cost, which is about 30 percent higher for women’s razors (the so-called “pink tax”).

Dialogue, and critical questions about the objects they present, leads the students to the understanding that “becoming a woman” implies a profound process of socialization; that there is no “natural” feminine behavior and no “real” masculine behavior, but a socially structured range of gestures, symbols, use of language and other practices that shape masculinity and femininity as cultural and discursive performance. The students put into writing their questions and dilemmas about biological difference versus social structuring and examine these against the reality of their lives. They inquire as to what “natural” resistance is and what stems from a social-historical power structure. This creates a complex picture. On the one hand, the students claim that many of their behaviors are “natural” and “innate,” and on the other they choose a different behavior that is not dictated to them. At the same time, we map and classify behaviors that are considered masculine and classify them according to accepted social values: high/low and positive/negative. Among other things, they present walking, sitting, and standing in a “masculine” and “feminine” way, examining, among other things, the social structuring acquired through observing others, imitation, and cultural messages from photographs and advertisements (Goffman, 1956). The mapping process sharpens their understanding that most of the characteristics defined by the students as positives are perceived by them as masculine characteristics and what they define as female characteristics are seen as negative.

Following the discussion on how social structuring creates masculine or feminine behavior that can be perceived as negative or positive depending on the culture, the time, and place, Odette, a French-American student employed in international organizations, chose smoking cigarettes as a gendered practice in different parts of the world. Odette’s analysis, based on her life experiences, related to the way men and women perceived her as a smoker in different places and contexts. She presented nine brief situations in different parts of the world (India,

Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo). On the one hand, she felt perceived variously as a permissive woman, sometimes seductive, or even as a prostitute or as a woman who allows herself to be seen as such. On the other hand, she felt that smoking lent her the image of a masculine, powerful, and aggressive woman, or a respectable older woman. Odette compared this dichotomy of the smoking woman to the male smoking culture in the same places. "In indigenous communities in Ecuador, I walked for hours to distant communities, and the people around me connected my smoking to power, and I felt that they saw me as a stranger and as masculine and also as an old woman because only old women smoke." Odette's encounters and interactions with different cultures in the world once again emphasize the different cultural patterns of femininity, and at the same time raise the issue of the privileges of the European woman, whose smoking may be tolerated in places where smoking is considered forbidden for local women. At the end of the analysis, Odette shared with the group another dimension of smoking as a gendered phenomenon: She said that her partner stopped smoking as a signal to her that it was time she became pregnant.

Odette analyzed an object that constituted a recurring motif throughout her life. The daily, almost obvious motif enabled her to examine smoking from a critical and complex perspective that takes into account the gender aspects of structuring femininity and masculinity in cultural, class, economic, and physical contexts, paying close attention to how they affect the environment. She dealt with how the environment structured her feminine-Western identity facing the ethno-cultural and class-based "other" (Shochat 2001). Odette ended her presentation by saying that the environment, culture, and the transition between cultures have established the (feminine) woman she is today. She added that, following the critical point of view acquired during the course, she had decided to give up smoking. Odette spoke of how, as a smoker, she was supporting the exploitative processes of tobacco companies that enslave, humiliate, and impoverish women at the levels of production, advertising, and marketing, alongside the more severe health consequences associated with smoking as a woman. The discussion revolved around the connection between the way smoking is perceived in different parts of the world for different genders and that smoking as a practice and cigarettes as a product are perceived in a completely different manner based on gender, class, age, and personal status. The lack of debate about smoking among older men was related to the concept of "transparency" and social structures of masculinity. The way a man who smokes is perceived positively as "normal" and "ordinary," while a smoking

woman is perceived as negative, different, permissive, or sexy. The social structuring of smoking women requires special attention—and became an example for gender power relations in the course. Students who firmly argued that inequality is largely based on biological differences and that, in their country, there is gender equality now perceived social structuring in terms of the price women pay, for example, for smoking in public, for broader mechanisms of oppression and discrimination. This reflective action in the learning group was received with enthusiastic applause. The students commented that the personal exposure connected them to the subject and made them think about how their own identities are structured in relation to the place or places where they grew up.

### **Power relations, objectification and reclaiming**

Power relations and the issue of “objectification” arise regularly in the students’ presentations. Understanding and recognizing the objectification of the female body (that is, the transformation of the female body into commodity and object, and comparison of women to objects and property) is introduced gradually in the course in order to avoid resistance. The realization that gender power relations exist in society and the awareness that almost all women in class had felt objectified at some point in their lives generated a discourse of female solidarity and astonishment inflamed with anger and self-doubt: how could we not see these mechanisms of power and objectification to which we were subjected? The gender analysis at this stage of the course focuses on objects; comparing objects to women and men; object–subject relations; rereading of ownership relations; and reclaiming objectification (Redfern 2013).

Lina, a Swiss student who took part in a master’s degree course in gender at the Department of Media of the UN’s University for Peace, presented a Swiss watch and examined how this product affects, and is affected by, power relations between men and women. She focused on analyzing the product’s instruction manual and advertisements for watches designed for women and men. She demonstrated, among other things, that watches marketed to men transmit power, prestige, and status. The advertisements for these watches display all the clock’s technological functions, even if, as Lina rightfully wondered, it is unclear how many of the men who wear a Rolex use it to navigate or to measure air pressure in the depths of the ocean. On the other hand, parallel “feminine” watches were presented as jewelry that women receive mainly from the men who are courting them. The gender analysis of the watch advertisements focused on the watch’s appearance and



sexual symbolism. Lina argued that women who wear a Swiss watch that cost tens of thousands of dollars radiate not their own power but the power of the man from whom they received it. The women in those advertisements seem unusually happy; some appear to be receiving a gift or an engagement present, and most of them are semi-naked, wearing a gold watch and diamonds as a prestigious status symbol. This connects the watch and the woman as masculine status symbols. According to Lina's analysis, the advertising targets men as the audience for both men's and women's watches. The imagined woman in the advertisement is supposed to be impressed by the male watch or devote herself to a man who gives her a feminine watch that represents his power and his economic and social status. "The watch" was conceptualized in class to describe the cases in which women represent an object bought by men to glorify themselves and represent their social and economic power. Following the gender analysis of the Swiss watch, women in the class raised questions and dilemmas about accepting gifts and object-subject relations in an intimate relationship. Many wore a watch or another piece of jewelry that represented to them their partner's economic and social value. They commented that in North America the cost of an engagement ring is equivalent to a full monthly wage of the future spouse and is supposed to reflect his economic power that will be given to "his woman." Students presented examples from around the world of cultural perceptions centralizing size and economic value, and hence the social status of cars, apartments, dresses, and jewelry, and raised questions about the status of relationships and love in light of power and property relations. In general, social structuring, hierarchical gender perceptions, objectification, and subject-object relations are complex teaching and learning subjects for a course in gender because these subjects make the theoretical and political personal. Mediating the theories through practices of feminist critical pedagogy, analyzing objects that are relevant to the students, refines the feminist argument regarding objectification using examples brought by the students. The learning process is based on changing the attitudes towards, and reflection on, these objects.

Lina's cultural context (Switzerland) opened up an intense discussion about how worthwhile it can be to reveal to "others," people who do not share the same culture, the deficiencies, and inequalities that objects from different parts of the world represent. The students raised dilemmas about exposing inequality, which was linked to broader questions addressed in the course: the "transparency" (or lack of) of power relations, oppressive mechanisms, and perceptions of how different cultures treat women, which can often be thoroughly challenged when multi-cultural work is based on personal narratives and life stories. During the

work on gender analysis of everyday objects, the students' narratives clearly show that the mechanisms in different places around the world are similar, albeit different daily realities. A seemingly simple matter of "airing one's dirty laundry in public" has become a critical discussion about the concealment and exposure of mechanisms that preserve the existing gender status quo. Some cultures often perceive exposing mechanisms of oppression as a betrayal of their culture, nationality, or religion, such as Asian and African students I spoke with at the UN University for Peace, or Palestinian citizens of Israel in Jewish-Israeli academia. As a minority group within a hegemonic culture, they feel that they must positively represent the place they came from. They often mentioned in class that when they could speak their language or relate to elements of their culture in a way that was not perceived as "special" or "exotic" it would be easier for them to speak about their experiences of gender discrimination (Brooking, Foster, Smith, & Runnymede Trust 1987; Kaplan & Miller 2007; Sleeter & Grant 2007).

In the same course, Rah, a student from Cambodia, introduced women's sexual objectification through the simple act of eating a banana. Rah opened the presentation of his object with an act that could be seen as "reclaiming"; he handed each student a banana in its skin and asked them to eat it (White, White, & Korgen 2014). He said that, in Cambodia, men pick, peel, and eat a banana directly from the tree, while women will be considered promiscuous if they do likewise. Women will generally pick the banana and not peel it until they are at home and have cut the banana into small pieces with a knife and fork. The phallic connotations of bananas prevent Cambodian women from eating them in public. This and other similar presentations inspired discussion on how women are expected to eat and the sexual connotations that the masculine objectifying gaze might associate with this act. When a man smokes a cigarette, uses a fork, or eats a banana, it is considered normal, socially transparent. However, when women smoke or eat, especially in the public sphere, it has far-reaching social implications that are not directly related to their biological sex.

## **Relationships, love, and sisterhood**

The students also analyzed everyday objects symbolizing love and relationships. They examined commercial representations of love, such as balloons, roses, and chocolate given to women on Valentine's Day, the gender-related division of labor between spouses, the use of contraception, and rituals such as engagement and marriage. For many of the students, relationships and love represented a conflict with the theories of power

property relations addressed in the course; the dilemmas were discussed openly with the support of the women's group formed during the course.

Shirley, a Danish student at the University of Peace in Costa Rica, showed YouTube videos of marriage proposals around the world, where a man gives a woman a very expensive ring and "becomes his." She analyzed this ritual as a promise of masculine economic and physical protection and "marking" the woman as traditionally entering the tribe of the man. The marriage proposal itself is perceived as a proactive action, and therefore masculine, and the woman can passively accept or, not in all cultures, refuse, the proposal. For men, entering into marriage is a commitment to protect and provide for the woman and the family unit. On her part, the woman guarantees loyalty, support, love, and family. "Taking a woman's hand," Shirley continued, means, in other words, accepting the services that this hand can carry out. Shirley analyzed the way in which she herself had proposed marriage to her partner and wondered whether she might have put her wife in an uncomfortable position when she asked for her hand in front of the whole family. Did the spouse actually have the option of refusing? Did it involve power relations? Can women apply patriarchal oppressive mechanisms and is exploitation of power in a marriage proposal always negative? Can marriage be a feminist act? What do "feminists" have to say about love and relationships? Questions and presentation requests about feminist theories discussing monogamy versus polyamory and open marriage rendered the lesson more attractive and stimulating for students who shared their life experiences with the learning group. The students compared the institution of marriage to that of academia in terms of the lesson structure, arguing that just as it is possible to teach in a non-hierarchical way, it is also possible to maintain a relationship built on equity. The groups conducted an intersectional analysis, that in this practice includes economic analysis, to marriage and discovered that men tend to earn more after they marry as the workplace perceives them as more stable and in need for a permanent position as providers. Women, on the other hand, tend to earn less and will be encouraged by many employers to reduce their responsibilities and hours and thus, tend to earn less.

In feminist critical pedagogy, practices that break down the power relations between learners and teachers are created on the basis of appreciation and the desire to learn. Such practices fall under the broad definition of dialog and empowerment. The dialog in critical pedagogy is an educational, political, and ideological tool that creates a bond of reciprocity, love, and solidarity between the teacher and the learners (Freire, 1972). The lecturer studies the students' world with them through dialogue and by sharing varied types of knowledge (Zalmanson-Levi, 2012; Freire & Shor, 1990). Dialogue and empowerment throughout the course are multi-

dimensional and multi-directional. The open and nonjudgmental discourse, together with the opportunity to present a gender analysis of objects from their lives and thereby bring their own voices, opinions, and dilemmas into the classroom, creates a network of women (and men) who support, consult, receive, and offer to help one another. This network creates an empowering feminist solidarity that shifts the boundaries of academic discourse and the daily reality of the students (hooks 2000c).

## **Sexuality and rape culture**

According to the data provided by the World Health Organization, one out of every three women in the world has been sexually assaulted, and one out of everyone—all women—has experienced sexual harassment. The #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport campaigns highlight how “rape culture” is present in the everyday reality of women from all layers of society and most cultures and shed light on sexual misconduct also within academia, peace organizations, major development agencies, and the UN. Naturally, this subject occupies the students in the compulsory course in gender studies. The discussions around the body as object, body image, and relationships between genders have transformed the subjects of sexual abuse, harassment, rape, and rape culture into central issues. In the first few weeks of the course, some students left the class when the subject of rape was mentioned or when a student presented an analysis that referred to sexual assault. Later, more and more students shared personal stories, often accompanied by self-blame. On the basis of the trust and support built within the group over time and the visibility of the discourse around “rape culture” in social media and the wider culture, the students were increasingly able to critically discuss the mechanisms of victim-blaming and spoke of exposing sexual assault as a tool for personal empowerment and a change in consciousness, as well as for solidarity and sisterhood among students.

At the Academic College of Society and Arts, Ravit, a student working as a waitress in a bar, presented a gender analysis of the glasses in which the various drinks were served and analyzed the fact that many men wanted to replace the cocktail glass so as not to be perceived by their friends as feminine. The presentation gave rise to a discussion among a few students, all of whom worked as waitresses, who decided to conduct an experiment on Ravit’s hypothesis in their various workplaces. This initiative led to further findings on the perceptions of femininity and masculinity in bars and restaurants: Which foods are eaten by hand or with cutlery? Which drinks are sucked through a straw? The students learned the term “male fragility” and used it often to describe men who refuse to hold what they consider a feminine glass or drink.

The questions were developed into mini-research on “rape culture” that asked: What dangers lurk for women from date-rape drugs in bars and clubs and what might be protective measures? In another lesson, one of the students introduced the symbolic process of rape. She analyzed how rape affects women and men differently, described the various kinds of social support available to rape survivors, and the social, medical, economic, and psychological costs for both men and women. She finished her presentation by saying that the analysis had taken her on an inner journey to dark, silenced places that now can “have air,” and she can receive support and solidarity.

Kiyo-san, a Japanese student who took part in a compulsory gender course at the UN University in Costa Rica, began the course with a strong statement in front of the class: She spoke of her belief that all people are equal and that they have equal opportunities to work and realize their potential. In another lesson she claimed that body modification surgeries do not create a negative body image, but rather bring about happiness and increased self-esteem. Although she noted that it was difficult for her to deal with certain body issues, Kiyo-san asked me to present materials about women who had learned to “decide” about their own bodies themselves and rejected corporatized and commercialized control of their bodies. In this context, I introduced the class to the term “reclaiming” and the way activists redeem negative labeling into empowering language. We talked about the terms “feminist,” “lesbian,” and “witch” as examples of negative labels that can become a source of strength and power if we make them “ours.” As a result of the gender analysis of rape, Kiyo-san raised a question about the possibility of reclaiming the raped body. The learning group carefully asked how these questions are related to the object she chose to present, which led to Kiyo-san sharing a difficult experience of sexual assault during an internship at a United Nations agency. The stories of sexual harassment and assault accumulated and the class conversation contributed towards a body of knowledge about sexual harassment and assaults in workplaces, academia and peace work, in the wake of the #MeToo campaign. We could see how the discourse on these topics transformed into a topic that is discussed and therefore also conceptualized, learned, and processed by the group and hopefully later by them as teachers, trainers, and peace workers.

Kyle (one of the students from Japan) brought a raincoat to analyze and said that while men use it to protect against the rain, she uses it in the subway to protect her clothes from “the outcome of public masturbation.” She described a situation on cramped public transport where people stand very close to each other and some men take advantage of

this and masturbate on their way to or from work. The group asked why she wouldn't vocally protest or hit back against her assaulter and Kyle explained that in this context she is ashamed, embarrassed, and therefore silenced. We linked her and other experiences to politics of silence and social network campaigns such as "breaking the silence #MeToo—why I didn't complain" campaign which provide support, theoretical, and context framework to survivors of sexual assault. It highlights that rape culture exists in nearly every country in the world. The mechanisms that maintain it, I claim, are silence and the notion that rape is a localized incident—we feel it only happened to "her," effectively clearing one of agency and responsibility. The campaigns that undercover the size and scope of the phenomenon raise awareness that almost every woman has experienced sexual harassment during her life, and that by raising our voices we may create defense mechanisms to protect women and men who are survivors of rape and sexual assault. Such consciousness-raising also goes some way to educating the public that rape culture exists, is morally reprehensible, and needs to be transformed by men and women. By challenging cultural norms, open discussion, and providing mutual protection, we may contest a woman's decision to wear a raincoat on the subway in the faith that others will be empowered to intervene and shame the sexual offender rather than the survivor. Silencing in society is further reflected as a widespread phenomenon of women and girls in the education system.

Kiyo-san presented a gender analysis of Bento boxes used by children to carry meals to school. The food is cut, prepared, and decorated in a highly aestheticized manner. According to Kiyo-san, in Japanese schools, there is an unwritten but implicit competition between schoolchildren as to who has the most beautiful Bento box: a reflection of the social status of women in society. The labor-intensive process of designing food as bears, flowers, and *anime* characters has been offered as a partial explanation as to why majority of Japanese women do not work outside the household (Inoue, Nishikitani, Tsurugano, 2016). Kiyo-san also linked the external image of the food box to that of women in Japanese society, and especially to the constant preoccupation with external beauty as symbolic of inner value. The value of women, she explained, was measured in their ability to decorate their children's food boxes while underscoring the difficulty and effort associated with this unremunerated labor. Kiyo-san compared the silence of the women regarding the competition between them over Bento boxes to the broader social demand of hiding the traumas associated with the female body. The hidden mechanisms that keep women in modern society at home are, according to Kiyo-san, the same mechanisms that preserve the

conspiracy of silence regarding both sexual assault and the feminine role (as decorative) in society at large.

Kiyo-san explained that she had conducted a survey among her friends, which suggested that few women in higher education plan to marry because they wish to work outside the household. The class discourse on the social pressures faced by women to be beautiful and well groomed, while hiding the physical and emotional pain they experience, revealed to Kiyo-san the symbolic nature of Bento boxes as perfect feminine motherhood, decorating the world for children and men. Kiyo-san's gender analysis is illustrative of a broadened social consciousness created during the course; one that directly links the theory of gender, discrimination mechanisms, rape culture, the silencing and oppression of women, and everyday objects as symbolic of culture. The disclosure of Kiyo-san's own sexual assault brought about a fundamental change in the student and in the group as a whole. Questions about ways to regain control of the body and turn derogatory names and traumatic events into a source of power took on a different meaning in the context of the sexual assault.

Another example from Japan was given by Horimo, who spoke of how, in Japan, women dried their underwear inside the house in order to avoid its theft. Horimo explained that men buy used women's panties (laundered ones are cheaper) for sniffing; such products are called, in free translation, "women's panties for inhalation." Such used underwear can be purchased from vending machines at railway and bus stations and on street corners. Underwear is also often sold on the Internet by young girls, who can receive up to \$500 for them. Here again, as the class discussed, female sexuality is objectified. However, Japanese students in the class who were embarrassed by the discussion stressed that not all Japanese men buy and "sniff" underwear. Comparing this practice to sex work for girls appeared unfounded to them. They explained that it is a social phenomenon resulting from men wishing to be perceived as consumers of pornography or other symbols of sexuality in the public space, and especially on crowded trains. This is, in other words, a phenomenon related to the production and representation of masculinity just as much as it relates to femininity. The group discussion following the presentation revolved around the relationship between the female body and the masculine gaze, the existence and shape of a woman's view of the woman's body, and the manner in which representations of the woman's body in different cultures are shaped within the framework of power relations, hegemony, and cultural symbol systems.

May, a student from Vietnam, presented a lubricating gel. She explained that with this object she hoped to address the pain that many women suffer

during sex. During the presentation, she shared her embarrassment about using the lubricant and concluded by saying, “There’s nothing to be done. For a relationship, you have to suffer some pain during sex.” The other students applauded and cheered May for daring to share such an intimate and embarrassing subject; some classmates hugged her. In addition, a group of students insisted that sex should not hurt at all. We talked about the complexities of sex and about the awkwardness of discussing it, both with one’s partner and with other people. We linked sex to critical and queer theories that undermine the notion that there is only one way—in essence heteronormative—to have sex. We also discussed the perception that sexual relations are defined by the penetration of a woman by a man. This concept received a mixed reception by the students, as liberating, funny, and yet embarrassing at the same time. One student volunteered to bring sex toys for women into the classroom that offer alternatives to penetration. As a result of our course, she later led a workshop and then a lecture on queer sex.

## **Conclusions**

A large number of students shared difficult experiences of sexual harassment, assault, and rape in both the distant and recent past, which they were able to address with the solidarity and support of the group. Critical questions were voiced regarding the political structures that allow for control over women, especially those vulnerable to multiple discrimination because of their intersectional identities. At the same time, the group began to critically examine the possibility of sharing personal stories. What is the price of differential exposure imposed on women from different groups? To what extent is this kind of exposure a cultural function, and/or a privilege that not all women share?

This method of combining a critical scrutiny of society with and within a supportive group renders the subject of gender studies a unique experience for the students, especially those for whom this is the first encounter with the field. It is the finding of this methodology that women experience particular empowerment when sharing difficult and complex experiences; the objects and symbols associated with these, and reclaiming them: turning pain, shame, negative labeling, or trauma into sources of strength and power.

The examples discussed in this chapter show how students gradually acquire a broader perspective on gender and learned to translate common practices in their lives into the theoretical language required for the course. The encounter of the personal social and cultural world within the academic context generated a change in the student’s consciousness that manifested both personally and collectively in the learners’ group. This new encounter between theory and pedagogy is compelling and creates a new



practice that may have important implications on the development of an academic field originally designed for feminist women (and perhaps a few men allies) into a subject studied in compulsory courses by much broader audiences. Gender and women's studies lecturers today face new and existing challenges concerning the theoretical and political achievements of the feminist movement for diverse groups. This opportunity highlights the lecturers' and scholars' commitment to learning through listening to their students. This new integration of practice and gender theory has the potential to advance gender studies into a theory that goes hand in hand—both politically and pedagogically—with practice.

In addition, active inclusion of the students in the learning process—the possibility to bring material they find interesting in relation to gender—assists in broadening the range of language and discourse used in the course. The learning process is thus not only based on a passive study of feminist theory but also on how it can be translated into everyday language. Precisely because this translation is never comprehensive or absolute, integrating academic language with spoken language gives voice to multiple points of view and interpretative options. The personal, cultural, and social perspectives of the students become a relevant source for understanding the world as legitimate gender theorists. Academic language gradually transforms from a foreign and alienating jargon to a challenge the students willingly accept.

This profound systemic integration of the students in the learning process brings about a shift in the traditional authoritative lecturer–student relationship. The lesson was largely based on the students' commitment to broadening the scope of discussion from their own personal and cultural worlds; they became the expert for the lecturer and the rest of the learning group. The course offers a safe space that enables both deliberation and active experimentation in new forms of human relationships: mutual respect, positive acceptance of authority, and rejection of authoritarian and oppressive practices.

For the students who claim at the beginning of the course that gender analysis is not relevant to the second decade of the twenty-first century, the course generates a change in consciousness thanks to the accumulation of experiences raised in class, the proposed analysis, and questions of femininity and distribution of labor in private and public contexts. Positions and patterns the students believe belonged to the past were suddenly made explicit in numerous contexts. Naturally, the students began to “see gender” everywhere, question and examine the relation between the personal and the political, and for many it resulted in feelings of anger, insult, and helplessness. However, the safe space of the course and the possibility to gently and respectfully analyze personal life experiences allowed the women to turn the surfaced facts on oppression into a source of power.

Many students give positive feedback about the course, describing it as one of the most central and meaningful courses in the degree curriculum, and some even as “life-changing.” Students comment that they are no longer able to view reality without the lens of gender analysis. Many mention that they read all the items on the reading list, spend many hours in research and thought, and present their projects and the object to friends, family, and significant others. The final course paper requires the students to elaborate on their presentation in class; these papers exceed in terms of quality papers submitted to me in other courses, both in terms of the depth of the research and the level of scholarly analysis. This begs the question as to the long-term effects of compulsory courses in gender on students and the gender analysis assimilation in their educational and development and therapeutic work—a promising topic for future study.

The same practice has been introduced in gender training programs in addition to gender mainstreaming modules for politicians, diplomats, and civil servants, and has had a strong educational effect on their understanding of what gender analysis is and why is it important, in addition to a connection between personal experiences and the world knowledge needed to map and analyze a given situation.

## Note

- 1 The names of all students mentioned in the text have been changed to protect the individuals' identity.

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