

Looking back, looking ahead

ANNE ELSE

My time as editor of four volumes of the *WSJ* is difficult to recall clearly, because it was shadowed throughout by the death of my son Patrick in October 1987. It also coincided with my tenure at the Stout Research Centre, researching and writing *A Question of Adoption*. Hard to imagine now, but it was not until the late 1980s that we moved to computerised typesetting and production. The issues didn't focus on a major topic then, except for the Katherine Mansfield centenary issue (*WSJ*, 4:2).

Looking back over these issues, and constantly finding myself completely absorbed in rereading, I realised that they contain a very high proportion of work which continues to be highly relevant today, as do many other earlier issues. It would be valuable for new researchers to go back and revisit many of the studies reported on here, to see what change there has been since. For example, looking at 'Poverty/Planning/Power' (*WSJ*, 7:2), is it any easier to set up a new women's refuge now than it was when Jennifer Dixon reported on the tortuous process – and violent local opposition – faced by the women who opened Dinsdale House in Hamilton? What has changed for the better – or worse – in terms of Maori women's housing (especially given that 50 per cent of Maori children live with sole parents, most of them women) since the appalling findings of Nori Parata's landmark research, '... for the sake of decent shelter'? How does the latest round of benefit 'reforms' compare with that of 1991, in terms of the implications for women?

So many areas covered, in such a rich collection of material. Introducing the first issue which I edited, I described the *Women's Studies Journal* as providing 'a unique interdisciplinary forum for feminist work within the broad framework of women's studies in New Zealand'.¹

I think this description captures something which is, for me, one of the most important features of feminist scholarship in general, and the *WSJ* in particular, and which has been evident in every issue since *WSJ* began. It recognises that feminist work is done (or could

be done) within virtually every field of scholarship, and that much of this work does not stand easily within disciplinary boundaries which were never designed to accommodate it.

It also recognises that this crossing and blurring of boundaries is not a weakness or a difficulty, but a strength. One of the best ways to generate new insights is to think across different fields. The *WSJ* is so valuable precisely because it does encompass such a broad range of fields, and enables those working in them to see what is going on elsewhere. Its contents often challenge received wisdom and shed a different light on current debates.

Looking ahead

While a steady stream of excellent feminist knowledge continues to be produced in New Zealand, and the *WSJ* continues to be indispensable for publishing it in a feminist context, this work is not being successfully promoted or publicised. Given the increasing emphasis on narrow specialisation, and the pressures of academic career-building, does anyone else – that is, anyone who is not consciously involved in building feminist knowledge – even know it is there, let alone regard it as relevant?

In both my paid and my unpaid work as a writer and editor, I continually come across ‘expert’ reports, essays and presentations which can, at best, be described as gender-blind. They display clear evidence that the author has never considered that gender might be a significant dimension to investigate, and/or has never read even the major feminist thinkers in his or (more rarely) her field, no matter how relevant they are. (One of my favourites was a solemn Treasury statistical analysis, best left unidentified, which concluded that having children does have an impact on women’s labour force participation....) Are we all just talking to, or even shouting, at each other in a dark corner, while the so-called ‘general’ conversations in each discipline – now (thanks to feminism) including some women – carry on regardless in the centre of the room?

When feminist work is not being ignored, it is often being attacked. One surefire way of drawing public attention to your work is to highlight the ways in which it bravely contradicts what is claimed to be the ‘politically correct’ position. Anything to do with feminism offers by far the safest target. Feminism is now popularly characterised as an outdated, knee-jerk perspective which unjustly blames men as

a group for their alleged misbehaviour towards women as a group, in much the same way as individual women bring 'false allegations' of rape or child abuse against individual men.

Although most of the acknowledged major social issues of our time are deeply embedded in gender, as well as race and class, this is routinely ignored or downplayed. Key terms such as 'parenting', 'sole parent', 'domestic/family/sexual violence', 'caregiver', even 'pay equity', obscure the marked gender relations at work. There are very few currently acceptable overt forms of concern for women in terms of gendered position, whereas overt forms of concern for men in terms of gendered position are prominent and widespread. Don Brash and his supporters attempted, with only limited success, to make Pakeha seen as the new Maori; there is much more widespread support for attempts to make men seen as the new women.

I'm particularly concerned about the lack of attention-catching, dynamic feminist forums on the internet (which is littered with dedicated anti-feminist sites, some of them with an academic base and credentials). The *WSJ*'s old web presence was excellent, extremely well done and very user-friendly, and the new one at wsanz.org.nz is too (though as an ageing feminist, I must admit that I preferred the larger font size in the previous version). The next step is to make full content available on-line (not necessarily to the exclusion of paper). But what I would really like is to see the *WSJ* become the nucleus for an interactive site that would be capable of conveying just how vibrant, ground-breaking, and above all indispensable feminist scholarship continues to be for the kind of twenty-first century society that is fit for all New Zealanders to live in.

How can this be accomplished? Like many other voluntary organisations which do vital work, but don't offer obvious individual benefits, the Women's Studies Association is struggling with a lack of womanpower. In terms of tapping into the kinds of academic resources that sustain other knowledge communities, its cross-disciplinary strength is also a disadvantage. But working out how to make feminist knowledge better heard and heeded is, in my view, the most urgent priority for the WSA and *WSJ*.

Note

1 Anne Else, Editorial, *WSJ*, 4:1 (1988), 3.