

Women Interrupting, Disrupting, and Revolutionizing Education Policy and Practice

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reviewed by [Karen Monkman](#) January 12, 2016

Title: Women Interrupting, Disrupting, and Revolutionizing Education Policy and Practice
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Stemming from a series of discussions at recent women's academic conferences in the U.S. and abroad, *Women Interrupting, Disrupting, and Revolutionizing Education Policy and Practice* is born of the frustration many scholars have expressed over the stagnation of the study of women in educational leadership. Whitney Sherman Newcomb and Katherine Cumings Mansfield have brought together the works of a broad range of feminist scholars—seasoned and newer academics and students—to address the questions: in what ways is feminism in the field of educational leadership stalled? What can we do to move ahead?

Popular culture would have us believe that at least in the Western world, we have overcome racism and sexism. Indeed, women in our society and in education have made great strides, with more women in leadership positions than ever before. But the crux of the book's argument is that despite our great and visible progress, many of the same struggles continue. As Margaret Grogan argues, most of the barriers to women in educational leadership that were documented earlier still exist (p. 11). Gender stereotyping and discrimination continue. Women's career patterns are still affected by home and family responsibilities. Gender gaps in administrative salaries still persist. Hostile work environments discourage women from participating in educational leadership.

As a scholar with many years in the field, Charol Shakeshaft introduces the book with a personal and historical perspective and challenges us to think about how to move forward. The three chapters of Part One provide a strong foundation in the thought and motivations in feminism in the 50s-70s from which we can build upon today. Grogan (Chapter One) challenges us to transform the field with more theory-based and robust feminist research by looking at gendering practices and practicing genders (p. 8), and more explicitly engaging intersectionality and the politics of recognition in our work. Mary Hermann (Chapter Two)

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elaborates on women's progress and pitfalls in attaining leadership roles in the workforce, shining a light on the recent increase in demand on everyone's time in work and in life, and how the struggle to achieve work-life balance in the current corporate career climate can stymie women's leadership trajectories. With a focus on feminist academics internationally, Miriam David (Chapter Three) draws from her 2014 book, delineating personal accounts of over 100 women academics throughout three generations, and how they have integrated feminism into their lives and work. David challenges the framing of feminism as three waves and its segregation between generations (p. 51).

The chapters in Part Two focus on leadership as seen from students' perspectives. Creating safe spaces for girls and young women in single-sex schools and assisting them in finding their voice is the focus of Mansfield's Chapter Four. The theme of finding voice continues in the next chapter, with the authors Anjalé Welton, Brooke Brock, and Mercedes Perry giving personal, retrospective accounts from participants in V.O.I.C.E.S., a student-run, student-organized high school group for young women of color. Brock and Perry were students in this group. At first an unofficial answer to the boys group endorsed by the administration, V.O.I.C.E.S. was subsequently embraced and expanded to other schools due to the influence of the program on the original members' academic success. Marybeth Gasman (Chapter Six) provides a brief history of female students in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), delineating a striking contrast between the low expectations and severe restrictions their female students experienced in the early years and today's success, with large numbers of female HBCU students choosing to study STEM and other nontraditional fields. Cathy Brant (Chapter Seven) highlights the need for integrating the study of gender and sexuality into teacher training, as teachers and administrators' evasion of the subject directly leads to students with non-normative gender expressions often feeling unsafe in school, facing verbal or even physical harassment.

Delving into the lived experiences of female administrators and their valiant attempts to overcome sexism by becoming change agents, Part Three weaves together a series of studies that speak to gender entrapment, sexism, racism, and misogyny. Noelle Witherspoon Arnold (Chapter Eight) and Cosette Grant (Chapter Nine) explore Black women's unique perspectives on their roles as principals in poor, chronically low-performing schools. In her exploration of how the male model of leadership (p. 128), combined with the pressure women face to be nice or else be labeled a bitch, Arnold reveals how gender roles entrap both men and women. Grant examines the lived experience of women of color in leadership positions charged with the responsibility of turning around challenging urban schools.

Chronicling the stories of former superintendents and the varied reasons why they enter and leave the profession, Kerry Robinson (Chapter Ten) elucidates the struggles of women in this demanding role to assert themselves in a male-dominated field, while also managing families, marriages, and friendships. Robinson urges us to reconceptualize the position of superintendent, to embrace a new model for work-life balance in leadership (p. 190). Shifting the focus from K12 settings to women in the professorship, Newcomb (Chapter Eleven) details the struggle to navigate the political terrain associated with gender inequity in the academy. She highlights feminist activism and collaborative mentoring as tools for social and political solidarity, as well as for negotiating expectations around tenure, publishing, and leadership endeavors.

In Part Four, Pressing Forward to Change the Future, Christa Boskes (Chapter Twelve) research pushes women public school leaders to reflect on their work through art making and to lead for social justice through their senses" (p. 215). In urging us to revolutionize our research, Mansfield, Welton, and Grogan (Chapter Thirteen) discuss how the current push toward scientific educational research is a type of backlash against feminist scholars (p. 246) and they outline a plan to vindicate feminist approaches to distinguish between feminisms and use feminist theory more aggressively to understand both organizations and policy.

Engaging student voice appears once again later in the book, as Rachel McNae (Chapter Fourteen) examines global citizenship in an analysis of young women participating in youth-adult partnerships in schools aimed at creating dialogue, developing leadership, and engaging in shared decision-making. The last chapter, by Autumn Tooms Cyprés, focuses on what it means [for women] to fit or not fit as a leader (p. 303). Using autoethnography and poststructuralism and the image of Athena she examines how identity, hegemony, and social construction are played out in an organizational setting, noting implications for leadership.

In the epilogue, Mansfield and Newcomb remind us that, well-behaved women seldom make history (pp. 317-318, quoting Laurel Thatcher Ulrich). They provide a coherent overview of the book's overall message, with a list of strategies for interrupting, disrupting, and revolutionizing education, as well as suggesting research agendas for moving forward.

As with Moore's [*Schooling Girls, Queuing Women: Multiple Standpoints and Ongoing Inequalities*](#), this book shows us how things seem to change while remaining the same. As feminist researchers and educators, we are ready for a more concerted effort to interrupt, disrupt, and revolutionize educational policy and practice, not only in education leadership, but in all educational disciplines. Because gender isn't socially constructed by women alone, but in gendered social

relations that involve men as well, we need to engage men challenge them to work against their own perceptions of self-interest and toward more socially just educational spaces, policies, and practices. We still have much work to do.
