

# WHEN GENDER TRAINING BACKLASHES

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## When Gender Training Backlashes: Participants' Resistance and the Fragility of Commonsensical Feminism

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### Abstract

Feminist educators often encounter different forms of resistance from both male and female participants. This article uses a neo-Gramscian theoretical perspective to discuss the importance of considering this resistance when analyzing the relationship between pedagogical design and outcomes. The study draws on survey data and participant observation from a case study of a workshop designed to raise awareness of gender issues. The results from a before-and-after survey show that the workshop had the opposite effect to the one intended in terms of changes in the participants' perceptions of gender. Having a "failed case" as the center of attention, the article sheds light on the fragility of mainstream discourse on gender equality and the dilemmas of engaging in a struggle over common sense.

**Keywords:** feminist pedagogy, resistance, neo-Gramscian theory, hegemony, common sense, popular education, gender training

### Introduction

Educational interventions for promoting awareness about gender issues are a widespread practice that is organized both in the context of social movements and in adult education in various forms. This has been addressed by both activist scholars concerned with the possibilities and challenges of feminist popular education (Manicom & Walters, 2012) and

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scholars studying the implementation of gender training in the private and public sectors (Ferguson, 2019; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Since the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing and the subsequent implementation of gender mainstreaming in various sectors worldwide, gender training has become an extensive field of its own (Ferguson, 2019). A discourse celebrating gender equality has entered the political and public mainstream in many parts of the world, but it often lacks a feminist critique of power structures and has been accused of being co-opted into neoliberal ideologies (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Recently, however, we can also see an anti-feminist backlash of global proportions, with far-right movements and conservative political forces occupying both public office and a growing terrain in the public discourse (Clover 2015; Köttig et al., 2017). At a time when feminist truth claims are broadly challenged, it is important to analyze the dynamics of backlashes and resistance against feminist discourses and to consider how they could be theoretically understood and studied in local adult education practices.

It is well known that feminist educators often encounter, and are restricted by, different forms of resistance when raising gender issues (e.g. Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Titus, 2000). It has also been noted that gender training designed to address women's issues and promote the influence of women in a social and political order dominated by men might very well reproduce and re-enforce the status quo (Clover, 2015). Such "failed" or more unsuccessful attempts at gender equality implementation have attracted less attention than successful cases, even though an analysis of failure is important to understand facilitators for change towards gender equality (Bergqvist et al., 2013).

The purpose of this article is to theorize on a studied pedagogical practice about gender issues in an adult education setting in which the outcome appeared to be opposite of the one intended. The theorization developed in this article is, we argue, especially relevant in relation to contexts where gender equality has become a rarely disputed ideal in the social and

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political mainstream discourse. The analysis addresses two challenges in gender training: resistance to feminist perspectives among participants and the fragility of mainstream discourse on gender equality. The resistance is discussed in terms of its significance for the outcomes of a pedagogical design. Particular attention, based on empirical observation, is paid to the importance of how participants, with opposing perspectives vis-à-vis the educator's perspective, intervene in the pedagogical design and produce counter-discourses. The analysis is inspired by a neo-Gramscian theoretical perspective where educational interventions of this kind are seen as involved in an ongoing ideological and discursive struggle in which feminist educators are forced to make strategic and tactical choices. This article intends to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on challenges in gender equality training by exploring the potential of neo-Gramscian understanding of common sense. Moreover, the article intends to make a methodological contribution by which it encourages the use of various methods to analyze and locate unsuccessful educational outcomes.

In this article, we use the results from a case study of a “failed” workshop on gender issues within a Swedish popular education context as a starting point for an analysis that draws attention to pedagogical challenges and dilemmas of theoretical and practical relevance in the field of feminist, and other forms of critical, pedagogy. Popular education here refers to non-formal adult education organized by civil society-based study associations, in this case the Swedish Workers' Educational Association, which receives government subsidies to organize study circles on a large scale across the country (Rubenson, 2013).

### **Resistance in and Towards Gender Training**

Even though the Council of Europe has stated since 1998 (p. 15) that a gender equality perspective should be incorporated ‘in all policies at all levels and at all stages’ there is continued resistance to integrating gender equality perspectives into higher education curriculums and institutions (e.g. Atchison, 2013; Verge et al., 2018). Recent research on

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resistance in gender training has contributed with knowledge on challenges when implementing gender training in various settings and how these implementations and changes can be improved (e.g. Ferguson 2019; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Verge et al., 2018). Such studies have shown how both institutional and individual resistance can take shape separately, but also how resistance can operate on both levels simultaneously in practice. For example, resistance from actors with high ranks or power can develop into institutional resistance through inertia toward the status quo and through non-priority in allocation and funding of e.g. gender-related education of staff (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013, Verge et al., 2018). Lombardo & Mergaert (2013) have identified three categories of explicit and implicit resistance: the denial of the need for gender change, the trivialization of the importance of gender equality policies, and the refusal to take responsibility. These conceptualizations of resistance are similar to those found in other adult and higher education contexts (Titus, 2000; Verge et al., 2018; Deleted for anonymity). Like others, we also define resistance as a phenomenon emerging during change processes (for example towards gender equality) which aims to maintain the status quo and oppose these changes (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013, p. 299). Since resistance towards gender equality is often implicit rather than explicit, resistance is more overt when related to change. In this particular case, resistance towards gender equality is manifested by the participants in a workshop on gender equality in an adult education program for study circle leaders.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The type of education we discuss in this article aims to challenge dominant power structures and create social change. More precisely, it can be said to focus on what in Gramscian theory is referred to as the struggle for cultural hegemony. Gramscian theory has not only been used to analyze class-based political and ideological mobilization but has also included other power relations such as gender and race (Carroll & Ratner, 1994; Hall, 1986). For a power structure where men are privileged over women to survive, it must be regarded as legitimate,

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natural and taken for granted. In other words, the idea of this power structure being justified must become part of what Gramsci refers to as the “common sense”.

Hall and O’Shea (2013, p. 8) describe common sense as a “form of ‘everyday thinking’ which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world”. Although the common sense, i.e. the things taken for granted by the overwhelming majority of the population at a particular time in history, tends to reproduce the status quo it is not a stable and coherent system of ideas simply reflecting the ideologies of the dominant groups in society. On the contrary, common sense is full of conflicting ideas and constantly changing. Or, as Gramsci (1971, p. 144) argued, “common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life”. It is a contested area, containing ideas with different origins. Common sense is a “compendium of well-tried knowledge, customary beliefs, wise sayings, popular nostrums and prejudices” (Hall & O’Shea, 2013, p. 9), and its ideas are spread by various political actors and movements. It thus includes popular notions confirming the status quo as a natural order, as well as including notions pointing out that the status quo is to some extent unjust and unfair.

The common sense is continuously recreated through continuous processes of struggle between various actors and elements of content. Within the hegemonic process, in which the common sense is produced, different counter-hegemonic forces are always present. In all hegemonic processes, there are alternative and oppositional streams that both confirm and challenge the hegemony. In Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, power is inter-relationally negotiated, always present, and people are agents with the potentiality of practicing resistance (Hall, 1986). An individual can practice resistance towards the common sense by articulating and thereby make alternative statements or discourses available in a context. The concepts of

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hegemony, common sense, and resistance make it possible to identify conflicts of interpretative prerogative.

### **A Neo-Gramscian Perspective on Feminist Education**

According to this perspective, the aim of feminist pedagogy or other pedagogies with counter-hegemonic aspirations is not seen as limited to “just” encouraging critical reflexivity. Educational interventions designed to challenge unjust power structures are also seen as part of an ongoing struggle about what is to be established as a dominant common sense (cf. Ledwith, 2009). From this perspective, an adult educator should actively point out a direction and promote a framing of the social world in accordance with his or her political objectives (Brookfield, 2004). In such a struggle over common sense, the aim is not to engage in anti-hegemonic mobilization, i.e. a struggle for a social order free of power relations. Such an endeavor is not even considered possible. Rather, the objective is to establish a new hegemony and to establish the ideas and values of the counter-hegemonic movement as universal. Consequently, for Gramsci the goal was a proletarian hegemony (Carroll & Ratner, 1994).

Applying this perspective to a feminist counter-hegemonic mobilization, the objective of such a movement should be to establish a feminist consciousness as general and hegemonic, i.e. a part of the common sense. From this perspective, the educator can be seen as part of a discursive struggle that is related to a wider war of position between interests regarding what interpretations of the social world should be regarded as general and common sense. Hence, educators need to establish “new regimes of truths” in Foucauldian terms (Brookfield, 2001, 2004). This does not mean that the prevailing common sense *per se* should be regarded as something negative vis-à-vis, for instance, a feminist perspective. Even in a capitalist and patriarchal society, the common sense may very well to some extent contain ideas that can be perceived as desirable for feminist or socialist movements.

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## **The Emergence of Commonsensical Feminism**

From a neo-Gramscian perspective, one can describe the emergence and large impact of gender policy, gender research, and ideals of gender equality in society as a consequence of the feminist movement's counter-hegemonic progress in establishing its own issues as common sense. From the 1960s (at least) onwards, a biological discourse on gender has slowly lost ground in the public discourse, in favor of a gender discourse which emphasizes gender equality, where differences between men's and women's positions in society are instead described in terms of culture, social norms and power relations. Elements of a gender discourse, favoring a somehow social constructionist notion of gender and gender equality, have been incorporated into both the contemporary mainstream media discourse and the common sense. This is apparent not least in Sweden, where the study was completed and where the current government (2014-) labels itself the world's first feminist government (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016).

The presence of elements of such a social constructionist notion of gender in the common sense becomes apparent if we make a comparison with conditions in early 1900s Europe or North America, when the dominant idea, the obvious common sense, was that men's and women's different positions in society were inherent as a result of biological differences. Although such notions still exist, it is difficult to argue that this discourse occupies the same central position today. Instead, it has in many ways been replaced by a new discourse about the reasons why men and women for instance often tend to end up in different kinds of jobs in the labor market, where the importance of norms in society and socialization/upbringing is emphasized (Nordberg, 2002).

It is important, however, to note that the Swedish public discourse on gender equality is constantly contested as well as being multi-layered, and it both reproduces and challenges power relations related to gender (Martinsson et al., 2016). Although it is possible to discern a

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hegemonic gender equality discourse in Sweden – a commonsensical feminism – there are still obvious gender inequalities between men and women, for instance in terms of economic distribution and the distribution of influential positions in several sectors in society. The commonsensical status of some social constructionist notions of gender should also be understood as constantly contested. The idea that differences between men and women in society are determined by biology should not be seen as belonging to a past era. Rather, it should be seen as one of many conflicting ideas constituting the common sense, which, depending on ongoing hegemonic struggles, could regain a prominent role in the public discourse – and to some extent it already has in the shape of a new biologism (Cameron, 2009).

### **Methodology**

The case study reported in this article was conducted within a larger research project on the enactment of different pedagogical ideas within popular education aiming for social change (Deleted for anonymity). Methodologically, the project was inspired by the design-based research tradition where the ambition is to produce knowledge about the outcome of pedagogical designs, with the intention to contribute to a theoretical discussion (Barab & Squire, 2004). Hence, the ambition was not to evaluate or define “best practices” or to draw simple conclusions about the relationship between cause and effect. The goal for the project was to characterize situations where specific educational ideas were enacted and identify the impact of various designs. Foremost, the focus was on how educators are forced to make choices and are faced with dilemmas, contradictions and paradoxes when trying to implement pedagogical ideas (Berlak & Berlak, 1981).

In practice, when pedagogies are enacted, educators and activists are forced to respond to contextual factors that create both constraints and opportunities. Often, they are forced to respond to circumstances that are far from ideal. One could even state that

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encountering resistance and difficulties is inevitable for popular educators who challenge power structures. In the interaction between the sometimes conflicting pedagogical ideals and contextual factors, educators are forced to make choices regarding the methods and content of teaching. In such situations, dilemmas, or even paradoxes, might occur that must be managed by the educator/activist on the basis of existing restrictions.

The purpose of the workshop which constitutes the case in this article was to encourage critical awareness of gender and power. More specifically, the aim was to promote an understanding of gender as something socially constructed and related to illegitimate structural power relations that could and should be changed. In collaboration between the research team and an experienced feminist popular educator, here referred to as Linda, a workshop design was developed. Linda had the role of a teacher, and one researcher acted as an observer taking notes in the background, distributing surveys, and giving information about the study and ethical aspects of participation.

Rather than trying to develop best practices, the ambition behind the research was to define, enact and analyze various educational designs based on distinctly different educational ideas. The guiding idea behind the specific workshop was to base the design on a tradition of enlightenment in the sense that the educator, Linda, would base her arguments on facts, accuracy and research, rather than moral dimensions and normative claims/values. The idea was to avoid what often proved to be a common way of dismissing gender perspectives, i.e. only reflecting the educator's normative and subjective opinions (Titus, 2000).

### **Sampling and Participants**

When selecting a setting for implementing and studying the designed workshop, the research team wanted to avoid a situation where all the participants already had the kind of

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critical perspectives the workshop was intended to encourage. The intention was not to preach to the converted, but to identify a population that was relatively uninitiated on, or even indifferent to, the issues in focus. Thus the ambition was to analyze how this educational intervention works when put in to practice in an authentic context which is quite similar to the one many feminist educator encounter, in for instance short in-service training in mainstream civil society organizations or in working life.

Through contacts within the Swedish Workers' Educational Association (ABF), the project team managed to get access to a context for implementation of the workshop in accordance with the abovementioned ambition. Therefore, the workshop was conducted within the framework of a two-day course for study circle leaders, organized by the ABF. The purpose of the course, which included the workshop, was to give participants basic pedagogical training for their work as study circle leaders. Hence, the course was an authentic event in the sense that it would have been organized by ABF even if no actions had been taken by the research team. The described workshop implemented in this course, on the other hand, was the result of an intervention made by the research team, although it was approved and supported by ABF and organized in way ABF found to be in harmony with other components of the course (covering for instance the ideology of the organization as well as the practical administrative aspects of organizing study circles). ABF is the largest organizer of popular education and study circles in Sweden. Ideologically, the organization was born out of the labor movement and is closely related to the Social Democratic Party.

The course participants were all study circle leaders with varying subject areas (computers, language, climate, photography, etc.). In addition to providing an opportunity to gain more knowledge about how to work pedagogically as a study circle leader, completing the course would also result in better salary for the participants when they worked for ABF.

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Consequently, the participants' primary reason for participation was not an interest in gender issues.

The intention behind implementing and studying the workshop was to search for knowledge that exceeds the level of evaluation and could contribute to reflections and a theoretical discussion. The ambition was to identify problems, central dilemmas and possible paradoxes arising in relation to the intentions and "typical" restrictions in educational settings. The paradoxical nature of the specific case study reported in this article was found generative for a more in-depth analysis and discussion on its own premises. Although it is limited in its data, it entails dynamics that, we argue, are of relevance in multiple adult education situations where potentially controversial issues are addressed.

### **Data and Analysis**

The data for the present case study are of two kinds: surveys before and after the workshop, and participant observation during the workshop. First, a survey was posed both before and after the workshop to get an indication of the participants' spontaneous framing of gender. One question consisted of three statements, and the respondents were asked to choose which of these three statements best fitted their opinion (see appendix). In addition, they had to indicate how strongly they agreed with the specified statement. The three statements corresponded to three fundamentally different ways of understanding gender. The alternatives correspond to the following three basic conceptions of gender developed during previous educational research on the perceptions of gender among Swedish adults (Gannerud, 2001; Hedlin, 2007):

*(1) Gender as difference*

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Men and women are seen as two separate beings. The differences are perceived as a natural biological consequence and there is a tendency to ignore the different social conditions shaping the lives of men and women.

### *(2) Gender as neutral*

No distinctions between the sexes are made. The same conditions are assumed to be the case for both men and women. Discrimination is not seen as a systematic social problem, but as an exception, something that affects individuals for different reasons.

### *(3) Gender as a category in society*

Gender is seen as part of a wider structural context and as related to power. Gender is seen as socially constructed, and our ideas about the concepts of female and male are seen as varying in time and place due to changing social norms.

The first survey was conducted on the same day the workshop took place, just before it began. The second survey took place the following morning after the workshop when all the participants were gathered. Participants were offered the time they considered necessary, which proved to be between 10 and 20 minutes.

Second, the study consists of data from participant observation during the actual workshop. Based on the researcher's field notes, a written summary of the actual event was thereafter constructed, which two participants received in order to comment on, supplement and correct. Based on these reactions, the summary was revised and used as the basis for an analysis of what happened. Such a document, called a respondent validated text (RVT) (Beach, 1999), formed the basis of the description of the workshop presented below. The RVT is presented below with the intention of drawing attention to the design enacted (what actually happened), and not only considering the intended design.

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## Findings

### **A Portrait of the Pedagogical Design Actually Enacted**

The workshop included 13 participants, seven women and six men aged 19 to 59. Nine of them had never (according to the survey) previously participated in any courses or lectures focusing on gender. Two indicated that they had participated “on occasion”. Two arrived late and didn't participate in the survey.

During the workshop, the participants sat at three tables in the classroom-like location. Linda, who was the educator, had never met the group before and started the session by introducing herself and asked the participants to briefly present themselves. Thereafter, the workshop was mainly characterized by Linda teaching, showing PowerPoint images, writing on the whiteboard and answering questions from participants. Linda wrote several concepts from gender research on the whiteboard, which she then explained. The main concepts presented were gender, equality, structural power relations (class, gender, and ethnicity), heteronormativity and homophobia. Additionally, she showed statistics on PowerPoint slides demonstrating inequalities between men and women, arguing that gender issues could be understood in terms of power and oppression in the same way as class, ethnicity and disability. These issues were first related to society as a whole, then to education in general and specifically to the context of popular education and study circles.

During the presentation, some of the participants made critical comments about the presentation. One participant criticized what he saw as a problem of “drawing too much attention to issues of gender inequality”, and stated that “Sweden, after all, is a good example of gender equality and that women’s situation here is much better compared to many other parts of the world”. Sweden can, he said, be seen as “a paradise in terms of equality and one should not complain too much”. Another participant mentioned that if you repeat that women are

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subordinate and less able to succeed in different contexts, this in itself could risk make it a fact. “It is better to focus on the strengths of people, and of women, than to talk about women being oppressed”, she said. She also argued that women in Sweden are more oppressed than in countries with a so-called “macho culture” where women are regarded as “Madonnas”. In Sweden, the participant claimed, “women are exploited both as full-time employees and as the ones taking care of the domestic work”, which leads to “many getting burned-out”.

When Linda showed statistics about parental leave, which in Sweden is a social right for both men and women (although mostly utilized by women), several participants commented on this subject at the same time, creating a chaotic discussion. To handle this situation, Linda suggested a break of a few minutes for discussion in small groups at the tables. At one table there was a discussion about the importance of both fathers and mothers taking care of small children. Some claimed mothers to have a special role just because they are mothers, which makes the unequal distribution of parental leave between men and women natural. One participant emphasized that women have a particularly close relationship with their child from birth and that mothers have a special kind of “mother’s love” for their children. Other participants argued that there were no fundamental differences between the fathers’ and the mothers’ relationships with children. Both are equally suited to taking care of small children and both can do it in the same way. One participant claimed that it is only because of society’s expectations on women to be mothers in a particular way that women spend more time at home with young children. The discussion about this issue was emotional and no agreement was reached.

At the end of the workshop, Linda finally encouraged the participants to spend five minutes discussing at their tables how they could work with the issues dealt with during the workshop in their future role as study circle leaders. When the participants concluded their

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discussion, they mainly argued that circle leaders should be alert to various forms of discrimination that had been raised during the workshop.

From this description, it is apparent that Linda basically carried out the educational project in accordance with the planned design and with a clear message about gender issues. Briefly, this message was about inequalities between men and women in society in various respects. These inequalities are socially created, and they are reproduced through our norms relating to masculinity and femininity that also exist in educational settings. Further, the message was that this could – and should – be changed, and that it is important for study circle leaders to be aware of these issues. The focus in her presentation was on facts and expertise, rather than values and ethics. This design was enacted by the educator by means of a presentation that included, for instance, statistics showing unequal relationships between men and women in society, and perspectives from gender research related to the participants' role of being study circle leaders.

However, during the workshop, some of the participants made comments advocating a perspective that differed from the one Linda represented. During these critical “interventions”, Linda avoided confronting the participants' views. Instead, she took the position of a moderator during the discussions, giving people the opportunity to freely reflect on the content of workshop, rather than correcting or confronting them. In that sense, she backed away from the idea of behaving as an “enlightened” lecturer. In the following sections, the enacted design described above will be analyzed and discussed in relation to the survey results. Firstly, the survey results are presented.

### **The Survey Results**

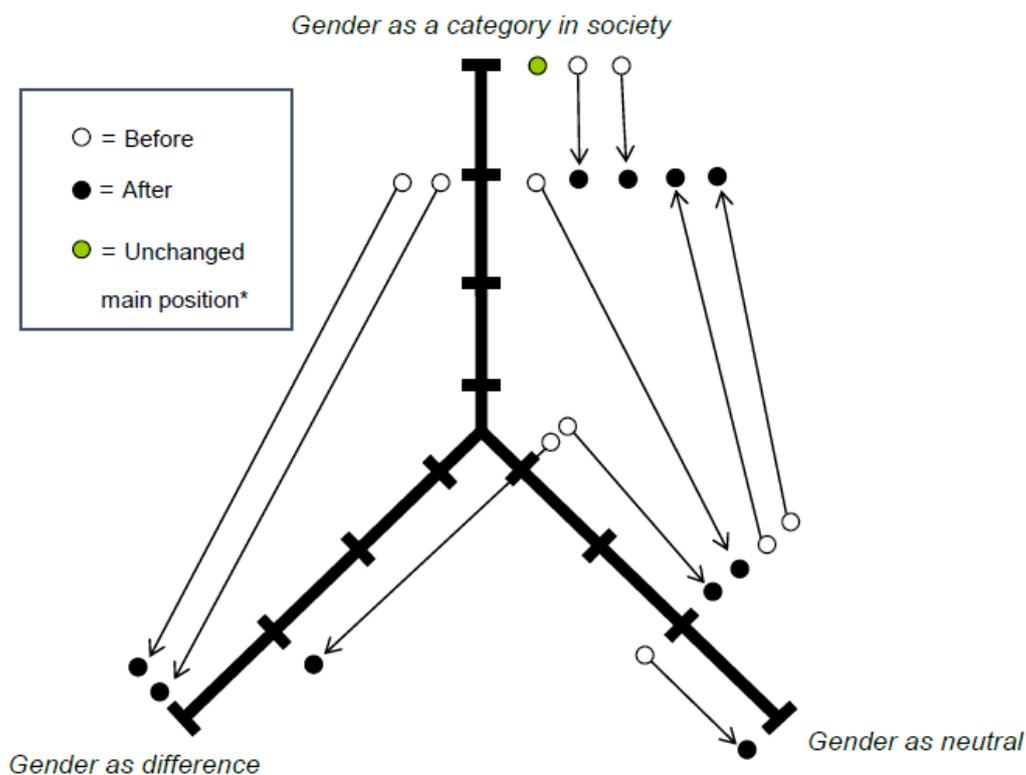
One objective of the workshop was to encourage critical awareness of issues regarding gender and power. However, the survey before and after the workshop showed that

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the outcome seems to have been the opposite of this objective. The figure below, which is based on the survey question regarding perception of gender (see the methodology section), illustrates this result.

*Figure 1: Outcome/changes in perception of gender before and after the workshop.*

\*Because of internal non-response, any gradual change cannot be measured for this individual.



The figure above shows the participants' responses before (white markers) and after (black markers) the workshop. The farther out on each "leg" in the figure the participants are placed, the more strongly they agree with the position held. The arrows illustrate the change at the individual level. The figure shows that the main trend is not in line with the aims of the workshop. Arrows pointing upwards illustrate movements in the direction of the position "gender as a category in society" (2), while the other arrows (8) illustrate the movements in the

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direction towards “gender as neutral”, “gender as difference” and less strong agreement with “gender as a category in society”. Previous research has shown that people in everyday situations tend to move between different ways of understanding gender (Hedlin, 2007; Magnusson, 1998). This in itself is perhaps not startling. However, what seems interesting is that the changes occur in the direction they do, i.e. the opposite of the intended change. Of course, no claims regarding the general outcomes of this kind of workshop could be made based solely on a single case study. The results do, however, point to the possibility that such reversed outcomes might appear.

The questionnaire also provided space for participants to write comments on both the questions asked and the workshop in general. In connection with the question regarding perception of gender, which the results above draw on, a participant made the following comment after the workshop:

A lot is about biological differences, I think, because we know anyway that the man, from a biological aspect, has by birth been given a stronger physique, and [the man] is the sex that can stand physical work most! While the female sex has other qualities making them unique.

In the pre-workshop questionnaire, the person quoted above – a 19-year-old man – marked the alternative indicating that he did not see gender as important in our society (“gender as neutral”), and saw no differences in opportunities for men and women. When asked how strongly he held that view, he stated the weakest option, that he really was quite indifferent to all the alternatives. After the workshop, he switched to the alternative that the difference between men and women’s characteristics and behavior are mainly due to biological differences (“gender as difference”). When asked how strongly he felt he supported this idea, he gave the second highest value (“pretty much”). Both the weight he placed on biology and the emphasis given to supporting this view, which appears after the workshop, are apparent in the comment above, which stresses what he sees as the fundamental difference between men and women.

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Another participant, a 46-year-old woman, indicated both before and after the workshop that she primarily sees gender as something socially constructed through changeable norms in society (“gender as a category in society”). However, after the workshop she appeared less convinced. Before the workshop, she replied that she feels “very strongly” about the answer she gave. After the session she modified this position to just “pretty much”. In addition, she wrote the following comment about her response after the workshop: “It is possible that biological differences are relevant, to some extent.”

The main changes occurring during the workshop were that the participants indicated biological differences between men and women to be more significant than they had indicated before the workshop, and/or that they shared to a lesser extent the social constructivist view of gender that the workshop was intended to encourage.

### **Competing Discourses During the Workshop**

The before-and-after measurement indicated that workshops of this kind may at times have the reverse outcome to the one intended in terms of changes in participants’ perceptions of gender. One way to understand this outcome is in terms of *the presence of oppositional and competing discourses* during the educational event. The resistance to change is thus seen as part of a gender order that simultaneously reproduces and naturalizes gender stereotypes, as well as promoting the status quo. This form of reluctance or resistance to aligning to a critical gender perspective in various adult education contexts has been observed previously (e.g. Titus, 2000; Verge et al., 2018; Deleted for anonymity). Similarly to Lombardo & Mergaert’s (2013) forms of resistance – the denial of the need for change, the trivialization of the importance of gender equality practices, and the refusal to take responsibility – all emerge during the workshop. More specifically, participants advocated statements that could be interpreted as an expression of a traditional and biological understanding of gender, i.e. gender as difference. This was made by drawing on gender stereotypes and notions of motherhood and childcare, and thus reducing

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both responsibility and the need for change. Comments claiming it was wrong to portray women as oppressed can be seen as related to an understanding of gender as neutral, and thus a denial of a need for change. Moreover, portraying Sweden as already equal compared to other countries constitutes gender equality as a luxury problem (cf. Deleted for anonymity). When participants' articulated other, conflicting, perspectives on gender than those presented by the lecturer, these perspectives become resources in term of counter-discourses that can be used to regulate gender equality, rather than recognizing or valuing gender equality. These counter-discourses operate to trivialize the need for gender equality based on multiple reasons and arguments, and can thus destabilize efforts to mainstream gender, or put differently, the common sense of gender equality. The competing understandings of gender could help explain the direction of the changes observed in the participants' understanding of gender. Some participants acted, so to speak, as agitators for another conception of gender than the one held by the educator, and mobilized other participants in their support.

There is a tendency in feminist pedagogy to provide space for participants to present their own views and to downplay the hierarchical relationship between teachers and participants. This is in itself regarded as an important break with patriarchal patterns. However, when implemented in practice, these ideals can create the space for alternative interventions that may seem counter-productive vis-à-vis the ambition of encouraging critical awareness of power relations related to gender.

### **The Fragility of Commonsensical Feminism**

What triggered these counter-discourses during the workshop? It is a well-known fact that a critical perspective of power and gender may be perceived as provocative and creates resistance in educational contexts (e.g. Titus, 2000). However, according to the survey, it seemed that the participants to a large degree shared a feminist-informed framing of gender as something socially created and changeable. We can assume that this framing was a part of the

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participants' spontaneous conception of the world, their common sense, as provided by their cultural situatedness. A possible explanation for why this resistance nevertheless appeared is that when something is articulated and becomes a possible subject for discussion, it means that it is no longer taken for granted. If we view ideology as something that works most effectively when it is not perceived as an ideology (Hall, 1985), but is considered as a general and neutral view, the reaction could be understood as a consequence of bringing the issue to the fore – making it appear as something political – which in itself creates space for resistance. The common sense is full of conflicting ideas. Not all of them reproduce the status quo. Some ideas could be fully in line with the emancipatory project of a counter-hegemonic movement. Gramsci refers to such elements within the common sense as the “healthy nucleus” of common sense, or simply as “good sense” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 328). When challenging the dominant common sense, this counter-hegemonic movement needs to build upon and strengthen the consensus regarding such ideas.

The political task for popular educators, designed to challenge the prevailing hegemony, would be to establish a new common sense in line with the interests of oppressed groups (Coben, 2002). From such a perspective, it is important for a movement to both challenge the prevailing consensus and build a new consensus around its emancipatory project (Carroll & Ratner, 1994). Drawing attention to an issue, even if it is done deliberately to strengthen the movement's position, could hypothetically have the opposite effect if the issue has already partially become incorporated in the common sense. It gives people reason to question an assumption they otherwise would take for granted: an assumption that could be seen as desirable to maintain as fundamental for a new common sense.

If we regard feminist pedagogy as being part of a war of position, where one type of gender discourse is challenged and a different type of discourse is promoted as a new common sense, the process of constructing a critical and radical consciousness partly includes letting

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things be taken for granted, thus establishing feminist “truths” as a part of the common sense. Accordingly, it may in some cases be a successful strategy for a movement, as well as for individual educators, not to articulate their own issues if they are partly incorporated in the common sense. A war of position regarding the cultural and ideological dimensions of the hegemony includes both destabilizing the hegemonic ideas that consolidate the dominant social order and establishing alternative ideas as dominant. When a movement’s ideas are established as common sense, the articulation of these ideas might destabilize their position. This could then provide a partial explanation for the outcome in this particular case. When the educator makes the feminist claims explicit, and relates them to the common sense notions of gender equality, these claims are brought to the surface, are made visible, and are accessible to confrontation. Such confrontation and resistance also appeared, as was discussed above. Like other ideologies, feminist ideology is most effective when it is not regarded as ideology – but as common sense.

### **Concluding Discussion**

The feminist workshop analyzed in this article had a different outcome than the intention behind its design. Exactly what caused this is, of course, difficult to determine. Although the findings indicate a shift in the participants’ views on gender, we cannot say anything about how the various gender discourses were used outside the workshop. Instead, we have used a neo-Gramscian theoretical perspective to illuminate possible reasons for the outcome and to locate and analyze dilemmas in this kind of pedagogical design. Having a “failed case” as the center of attention, the article thus sheds light on both the backlash of feminist perspectives and the fragility of mainstream discourse on gender equality.

One dilemma highlighted in this study involves ideals of deliberation and participatory models in relation to the intention of establishing a certain kind of critical gender awareness. On the one hand, a design where the participants cannot freely express their views

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could reinforce a patriarchal pattern of hierarchical relationships between teachers and participants. On the other hand, if the opportunity is given, there is a risk that different counter-discourses, e.g. traditional gender difference discourses, have a greater impact than the intended message. Accordingly, if the objective is to establish gender awareness as something self-evident, the participatory elements could be counter-productive.

In this study, we also point out another dilemma. Given that a discourse of gender equality and feminist perspectives to some extent is already incorporated in the mainstream common sense – it has become what we here refer to as a commonsensical feminism – should feminist educators always articulate and discuss gender issues (and thus make them overtly political and possible to question)? The incorporation of a discourse celebrating gender equality in the common sense does not necessarily threaten the basic power relations in society. A mainstream discourse celebrating gender equality may very well coexist with a robust, gender-related power structure. As argued by Kelly (2015), when feminism becomes perceived as mainstream, it may be more difficult for feminist movements to mobilize self-identified feminists to action. From that perspective, feminist gender training is clearly justified even in societies where commonsensical feminism prevails. However, establishing critical gender awareness as a natural and obvious part of a new common sense does not only involve making explicit the unjust conditions hidden in the current common sense. Such a counter-hegemonic project also entails the need to establish some feminist “truths” as self-evident starting points for any discussion. Here, a balance emerges between, on the one hand, deconstructing, undermining and revealing some dominant “truths”, and, on the other, promoting the “truths” of the movement as obvious and commonsensical.

The focus of this article is mainly on the discursive level, i.e. the ways of talking and thinking in relation to gender issues. Although material aspects are of crucial importance for how hegemonic power operates, not least in the Gramscian tradition (cf. Carpenter, 2012),

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pedagogical interventions of the kind focused on here are foremost seen as being a part of a discursive struggle (although they might have more material implications in the long term). The neo-Gramscian perspective on adult education practices applied in this article emphasizes the need for popular educators to establish “new regimes of truths” in Foucauldian terms (Brookfield, 2004). From this perspective, the objective of feminist pedagogy, is not just to challenge aspects of common sense but to establish a new common sense based on alternative feminist truth claims. This also includes defending ‘discursive victories’ in the hegemonic struggle, i.e. truth claims that have been integrated in the common sense. In this struggle, pedagogical choices must be made based on strategic and tactical concerns related to the counter-hegemonic aspirations, which sometimes might include downplaying participatory aspirations and even avoiding placing one’s “own” issues at the center of attention and thus inviting people to question them.

The educational intervention analyzed in this article was a single workshop lasting a few hours. As argued by Bisom-Rapp (2001), such short interventions may have counterproductive effects in some contexts. Our study supports that claim. Additionally, we also present a way to understand how and why it may happen.

It is reasonable to assume that it takes much more time than a few hours to develop or strengthen critical gender awareness among participants. An ideal pedagogical situation would require significantly more time and space for participants to process and reflect on the subject. However, adult educators engaging in feminist gender training often encounter situations that are far from ideal and include restrictions and limitations that need to be addressed. We therefore believe there are grounds to study this kind of short intervention, although we can assume their outcomes will be both limited and, in the worst case, counterproductive. We could also add that gender training should not be evaluated solely in relation to its outcome at individual level. Rather, as argued by Ferguson (2019), the impact of

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gender training at institutional level and how it affects organizations should be of prime interest. Although we agree on that, evaluating such an impact was beyond the scope of the present study.

Because of the limited empirical foundation of the reported study (a single case study), it is not advisable to give any clear recommendations regarding “best practice” to educators aspiring to create awareness about gender and other power structures. However, the perspective developed in the article offers a possible interpretive framework for understanding when and how such interventions may create counter-productive outcomes. By considering an educational intervention as part of a larger complex war of position of hegemonic discourses, we can hopefully develop a deeper understanding of the dilemmas regarding the relationship between counter-hegemonic strategies and micro-tactical considerations related to pedagogical designs in specific contexts.

In a time when the impact of feminist ideas on the public sphere are challenged and a devastating backlash is impending, as proclaimed through tweets from the White House and the policies of the growing far right in Europe, the fragility of historical discursive victories is more evident than ever. Developing our understanding of how feminist mobilization through educational intervention could fail is, we argue, an important step in understanding how this backlash could be met and counteracted.

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## Appendix

Survey Question 3 (Translated from Swedish)

3a) Which of the following three statements do you most agree with? Put a cross in the box after the statement that fits best with your views.

The different qualities and behaviors of men and women  
mainly depend on biological differences.

The fact that we regard certain characteristics and behaviors as  
masculine or feminine is due to values created in society that  
change over time.

Gender does not matter in our society. The same  
rules and norms are applied to both men and women.

3b) In the question above, you indicated which of the statements you agree most with. How  
strongly do you feel that you hold the opinion you gave? That is, how confident are  
you about your standpoint?

Very     Pretty much     A little     I am really quite indifferent to all the options