

Fall 2019

## How Has (White Middle Class) Feminism Affected Graduate Student Labor?

Catherine A. Winters  
*University of Rhode Island, winters\_ca@uri.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Winters, Catherine A.. 2020. "How Has (White Middle Class) Feminism Affected Graduate Student Labor?." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 16 (Fall): 67-69. 10.23860/jfs.2019.16.06.

This Special Forum is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu).

## SPECIAL FORUM

# How Has (White Middle Class) Feminism Affected Graduate Student Labor?

Catherine A. Winters, University of Rhode Island

**Keywords:** graduate student, contingent labor, intersectionality

Copyright by Catherine A. Winters

How has white middle-class feminism affected graduate student and contingent labor at the university? It has failed us. Despite awareness of class, race, and power alongside gender, white middle-class (or mainstream) feminism has allowed the systems that benefit white middle-class women, particularly white supremacy and capitalism, to remain intact. As a white middle-class woman, being aware of the relative privileges I have because of my race and class has been significant in helping me to understand how contingent and graduate student labor conditions are justified.

This is not to say that all feminisms are equally likely to dismiss or ignore intersectional issues, but too often it is lauded as a success when women “get a seat at the table.” The issue is the narrow focus on individual systems of oppression rather than understanding the systems as linked. We are not subject only to oppressions that affect our social identities, but through the interwoven systems of sexism, racism, imperialism, heterosexism, capitalism, and more. Together these forms of oppression keep a range of people from achieving equity (not equality) primarily by discouraging our working together. This is especially true at the university.

The definition of feminist success at the university has been on the terms of the university: expanding the canon, creating Women and Gender Studies departments, achieving tenure, educating future feminists. These achievements seem to be steps forward, but it has been made clear that achieving within these boundaries is not enough. For example, while Marxist feminist scholars have long questioned how “productivity” is defined in our capitalist society (Nicholson 1985, 367), the justification is still used that women are not hired or promoted because of their “productivity” (Parker 2015, 9). Examples of the lack of academic equity for women are numerous, from how parental leave benefits men in academia more than women colleagues (Antecol et al. 2018), to the closing and defunding of humanities departments and other programs that have the highest proportions of women (Okahana and Zhou 2018, 59). By accepting part of the system, such as the definitions of productivity and feminist success, we have failed to protect ourselves from continued oppression.

Furthermore, many of the successes of the past are being slowly eroded. The university workforce has shifted to primarily contingent labor, including graduate students serving as “assistants,” instructors, fellows, and adjuncts. There have been successes for graduate student labor, including recognition of several graduate employee unions, that seem to suggest a pro-labor movement is aiding all graduate students. It is great to get a 4% raise each year in a three-year contract—except when a 4% raise will not get the lowest-paid employees above the cost of living until that third year and the cost of living increased 3% last year. In context, many of the wins for contingent labor only increase the standard of living to the bare minimum for those who cannot hold a second job due to visa restrictions, do not have family support, or otherwise do not fit into a mold that was created for a graduate student who has a network of

resources. It is not just at public or “failing” universities that contingent and graduate student labor are barely surviving; a recent story described Stanford students scavenging fruit trees on campus because their pay was not enough for them to cover the basic need of food (Curnin 2019).

The university and especially the professoriate have long been male-dominated fields—some disciplines are still male-dominated such as engineering, mathematics and computer sciences, and physical and earth sciences (Okahana and Zhou 2018, 4)— even though women have earned the majority of doctoral degrees since 2009 (65). Women also make up the majority of first-time graduate students overall (4). Likewise, efforts to reduce barriers to entrance that discriminate on racial and socio-economic markers have only been moderately successful and the degrees conferred have increased for all racial groups except Native American students (McFarland et al. 2017, 1). On the other hand, the administration of universities and ranks of full professor are still overwhelmingly white men, about 86% and 75% respectively (Parker 2015, 9; McFarland et al. 2017, 255). What these numbers do not capture is in addition to women having heavier teaching loads, lower salaries, slower advancement, and fewer prospects (Parker 2015, 9), higher proportions of faculty are now non-tenure track, including adjunct and graduate student labor. In 2016, 20% of the instructional workforce nationwide was graduate employees, 40% was part-time contingent faculty, and about 11% was non-tenure track full-time faculty, with tenured professors making up only 20% of the instructional faculty and tenure-track professors less than 10% (AAUP 2018). The fact that women are paid 81.6 % of what men make in full-time positions pales in comparison (AAUP 2019). There is no hope of women and other underrepresented groups earning the same amount as white men if women and other underrepresented groups cannot find jobs as tenure-track professors.

The lack of sustainable academic jobs and the inequity of who gets access to them is justified by the administrative discourse that positions need to be cut because universities serve more students with less government funding. Feminism for too long has accepted this rationale that relies on a broken system. I refuse this system. I do not want my piece of the Imperialist White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchal pie. I do not want a system in which we are fighting each other for ever-smaller crumbs. I want to work with allies across social and political identities and listen to how these intersectional systems of oppression affect us differently. Academic feminist success to me is working together to make real change that attempts to remove all oppressions rather than basing my definition of “success” on a system that was made to keep me, and most of my colleagues, out. Graduate student labor needs intersectional feminism because white middle-class feminism does not attend to how the struggles of other minoritized populations affect us all.

---

## References

- American Association of University Professors. 2019. *The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2018–19*. Washington, DC: AAUP.
- . 2018. “Data Snapshot: Contingent Faculty in US Higher Ed.” *AAUP Updates*, October 11. <https://www.aaup.org/news/data-snapshot-contingent-faculty-us-highered#.Xh3thFNKhNo>.
- Antecol, Heather, Kelly Bedard and Jenna Stearns. 2018. “Equal but Inequitable: Who Benefits from Gender-Neutral Tenure Clock Stopping Policies?” *American Economic Review* 108 (9): 2420–41.

- Curnin, Charlie. 2019. "Every Day Was About Survival': Inside the Graduate Student Affordability Crisis." *The Stanford Daily*, February 28.
- McFarland, Joel, Bill Hussar, Cristobal de Brey, Tom Snyder, Xiaolei Wang, Sidney Wilkinson-Flicker, Semhar Gebrekristos, Jijun Zhang, Amy Rathbun, Amy Barmer, Farrah Bullock Mann and Serena Hinz. 2017. "Certificates and Degrees Conferred by Race/ Ethnicity." *The Condition of Education*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Nicholson, Linda. 1985. "Feminism and Marx: Integrating Kinship with the Economic." *Praxis International* 5 (4): 367-380.
- Okahana, Hironao and Enyu Zhou. 2018. "Graduate Enrollment and Degrees: 2007 to 2017." Washington, DC: Council on Graduate Studies.
- Parker, Patsy. 2015. "The Historical Role of Women in Higher Education." *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research* 5 (1): 3-14.