



The Elsa Leo-Rhynie Legacy

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Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the male student/female academic experience through the personal journey of a student who, at the time, unknowingly came to recognise the importance of gender and leadership in education. It is a narrative. A narrative, because it is a tool that best captures the way in which I wish to reflect on the work of Elsa Leo-Rhynie.

I have chosen to present the ELR legacy in my voice; in the first person; and the “I” of which and through whom I speak is deliberate. Yet I will speak in the third person, as a way of attempting to be objective and less personal. That is, I step out of myself to speak of me, so to speak. This voice is reflective of the voices of many men whose lives have been made possible and important within and without the woman's movement. I have chosen to take the unconventional path of telling a story because traditional conventions embedded in quantitative methodologies speak little of feelings. I can make the connection now between the lives of the many women in my family and the lives of women and men in education and leadership because of the legacy bequeathed to me and us through the work of ELR.

Long before notions of gender, masculinities and femininities entered the discourse in higher education, business, and the professions or even in the family, there was some degree of recognition of the significant role of women in the family and the broader society. I also recognized that there was something different in being a boy/man in a family dominated by women and the immediate community in which I grew up and was nurtured, where the mothers and grandmothers of my friends were the bedrock of their family. I might have recognized that was how things were then. I did not understand what it meant in the context of gender and leadership. All I knew then that boys and girls, men and women were different anatomically and to be masculine and feminine were clear distinctions and there were no overlaps in their social constructs.

Connecting the past and present

Long before gender was a sociological construct, to be studied, researched and written about, I figured out the differences between men and women and among men and women. I had worked out quite early the differences as they were manifested in my family, among my friends and in the wider community: the many infant, primary and high school teachers in schools in Port Antonio, the ones who gave me voice in their classrooms, whose faces and personalities remain with me all these years. There were those who also sought to keep me silent: the ones who wrote on my report – talks too much in class, and there were others who gave me the space to be free. There were the mothers of my friends on that familiar French Avenue neighbourhood of Port Antonio; my sisters, sisters' friends and my friends' sisters all were the bedrock of that early knowing of the importance of women in “keeping it all together”.

But now, it is only in retrospect that I have come to know and understand and articulate the issues of gender across time and space, enabled by the lives of women in my family who were standard bearers and the strong foundation on which I stand: Amelia Williamson (my maternal grandmother), Linnette Perry (my mother), Linda Crosdale, Icylin Smith-White (cousins) and Violet Tate (my aunt). Then there were the contemporary women in education like Joan French, Amy Miller, Marlene Hamilton, Barbara Bailey and Elsa Leo-Rhynie.

Understanding the epistemology of gender in education

My journey (odyssey) through education and my career in teaching and educational policy has been, to a great extent, influenced primarily by women. So now I have come to this juncture of understanding and clarity because I have been able to connect the two halves – one of the long lines of women of my family and the other of women in education. The whole has provided a

deeper sense of knowing and has cemented in my consciousness the belief that the lives of women are played out on different stages yet speak to the same sets of values. Quite early though, there had been some understanding of how the lives of men and women connect in different ways; but much later how patriarchy was an accepted and acceptable construct that defined how men see themselves in relation to the women in their immediate space and in the wider global communities and permeated all aspects of our social, political and economic environment.

So this paper is not so much about exploring the epistemology or the contending and contentious debate about femininity or masculinity. It is my story. It chronicles the impact that ELR has had on education and specifically on one man whose education and career has been part of that legacy. It is about a man who has been supported, guided and nurtured by the women in his family and who has been mentored by an exemplary leader and academic as he navigated his way through university as a student and academic administrator. It is about the woman who encouraged him to go on to pursue higher education and paved the way for him to do that at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. It is about the woman who helped to sustain his professional path in the same institution where the academic relationship began. The legacy of Elsa Leo-Rhynie is rooted in what I believe to be her own personal philosophy - one not of radical feminist exclusivity or about just simply being here as an outstanding academician. Hers is one of transforming lives and "winning over the enemy" (Leo-Rhynie, 2002).

The Legacy

But what is this phenomenon that we call a 'legacy'? I believe that legacy is what George Washington Carver said it was:

No individual has the right to come into this world and go out of it without leaving behind distinct and legitimate reasons for having passed through it.

So it is. Elsa Leo-Rhynie is a legacy. In a quiet, deliberate, consistent, and conscientious manner Elsa created, carved and carefully constructed a path of academic excellence within the academy. Elsa Leo-Rhynie, through teaching, scholarship and service to this country, region and the world, broke the glass ceiling (sometimes reluctantly) before we recognized that there was one. One could argue that this outstanding academic leader did not fit easily into any category of the women's movement of the 20th century that was defined, that she herself recognized in her article "Women and Development Studies" (2002). Yet she was sensitive to the interpretations and challenged accepted notions of femininity.

Elsa was constantly engaged in feminist discourse; and published widely about science, women and development theories. Elsa Leo-Rhynie's legacy has been appropriately documented, repeatedly articulated and debated. Her legacy speaks to the academy in loud and unequivocal terms that gender and development studies are not peripheral to the work of academy.

The process of coming to understand fully the role of women in education happened over a 20-year period and Professor Elsa Leo-Rhynie concretized for me what a woman, an academic and leader meant without either being in conflict with or overshadowing the other. Through her work, she demonstrated that being in leadership did not mean she had to sacrifice her humaneness. She did not have to justify why her family was always the sustaining force that kept her anchored.

It is upon reflecting on the legacy of Elsa Leo-Rhynie that I have been able to make the link between the educational experiences of Canada and the work

of women in Jamaica. There were always women around and it made no difference to me. They were there in the home and in the classrooms. So, before I left Jamaica to study in Canada in 1987, I never had to confront issues of gender; gender disparities; gender inequities or gender bias. I recognized that women were/are in the majority at all sectors of the education system. I knew they made significant contributions to family and community.

My years as a graduate student and graduate assistant at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto were more than completing graduate school. It was while at OISE that I began to understand the work of feminists within higher education. It was at OISE that I began to appreciate the work of the women's movement at a time when some colleges and universities in the United States and Canada ignored women's issues and when some academics believed that women's studies were challenging traditional theories of femininity and masculinity. Also, at that time in the 80s, feminism was still unfriendly territory that was perceived to be dangerous for women who wished to enter the mainstream leadership or study outside traditionally female disciplines. In fact, the massacre of 14 women engineering students at the Ecole Polytechnic de Montreal on December 6, 1989 by a lone gunman who blamed affirmative action policies promoted by feminists and their sympathizers, drove home in a sadly profound way to me, the rage that some men felt and the kind of virulent attacks that others would perpetrate to make their case. That bitterly cold winter night on the St. George Campus of the University of Toronto captured the mood of the moment as the news of the murders spread across Canada. Women and men, students and faculty members huddled together in lecture theatres, coffee shops and libraries, along corridors and outside elevators and washrooms, wondering what had gone horribly wrong in one man's head to drive him to commit such a crime against women. The answers and explanations were many.

I recall also the experiences of Jackie Thayer Scott (I served as her administrative assistant for one year) who was the Director of the School of Continuing Studies

at the University of Toronto in the late 1980s and the early 1990s and then President of the University College of Cape Breton Island in Atlantic Canada. Jackie fought against gender discrimination; championed the cause of violence against women at the University of Toronto and OISE and vigorously defended her stance on the nature and level of relationship that students and faculty/staff had with each other. Her soft-spoken manner and her sometimes hard-nosed yet principled position did not clash. Men and women within the university resisted her efforts to have the university confront the uncomfortable, contentious and insidious manifestations of gender discrimination and sexual harassment (the latter of which I was ignorant, sometimes believing that there was no such thing) when she chaired the committee that drafted the sexual harassment policy for the university. Some of her colleagues scoffed at her efforts and a few women within the University thought she was too strident. It was at the University of Toronto that I understood the significance of the word 'ogle' in gender discourse, when a distinguished professor charged and found guilty of 'ogling' at the University pool house. I used to wonder if any man would ever be so charged here at The UWI.

It was at the University of Toronto that I first heard Angela Davis speak about gender, feminism, racism and how women of colour had to navigate their way through the silence and the invisibility. So it was not difficult for me to recognise on my return to Jamaica and The UWI, that there was the indefatigable Elsa Leo-Rhynie who was foremost among those who were leading the 'quiet revolution' in women's studies at The UWI – one course at a time. The Canadian experience had led me to understand that feminists were not necessarily hostile to male ways of thinking and doing and being. I was conscious that women spoke with 'different voices'; were motivated by different social, political and economic experiences and came to higher education through various routes; some of whom did that delicate dance between family commitments and higher education. I can recall a woman who was in the Faculty of Education at the same time I was a graduate student who said to me that she could not continue because her husband had more than hinted that he had become

uncomfortable with her doing a master's degree and that their marriage was undergoing strain.

The legacy of Elsa Leo-Rhynie enabled the university to focus on gender; its multifaceted theoretical constructs; and the sociological perspectives that helped to explain the educational inequalities of the times. I recall, with some amusement I must confess, when a young female student leader commented at a university meeting that The UWI, particularly Mona, should find ways of getting more men in since she and other women were running short of options of suitable qualified men to be their husbands [my words] or something of the sort. Elsa and others almost "frothed at the gills" (a phrase I borrowed from the inimitable Marlene Hamilton). And it was Elsa (I believe) who took the young woman aside and scolded her (chastised might have worked better) for her apparent lack of understanding of the bigger picture.

I had long rejected the male marginalisation "theory" before I became involved in some of the work of the CGDS. The legacy of Elsa Leo-Rhynie empowered me to consider myself a pro-feminist as I made that connection that expressions of gender did not mean subordination of women to men. In understanding the lived reality of the domesticity of women in the Jamaican family I was able to resolve much of the gender ambivalence I harboured in spite of my earlier experiences in Canada. And the question I kept asking myself was 'where are the men in gender studies?'

But the legacy of Elsa Leo-Rhynie as a skilled, ethical and compassionate administrator will never be a footnote. I suspect that like Marlene Hamilton who came from the same science background, Elsa's careful, measured and meticulous method did not just happen. Her legacy speaks of how support from colleagues and the inspiration and joy one can get from what they do can make work easy. The work of the Board for Undergraduate Studies could not be described as easy, but Elsa made it so. She listened. She consulted. She

counseled. She cared. She spoke. Her voice was reasoned – anchored in an assured sense of self and purpose and she gave others a voice. I recall the early days of planning the 2007-2011 Strategic Plan when the entire Campus was called to add their voice to the discourse. A man from the Maintenance Department remarked that in all his years – and from all accounts he had been employed at The UWI for many years – it was the first time anyone had asked for his opinion – and from the Principal!!!! That is her legacy. – one of inclusion – devaluing no one, no position. A legacy built on the foundations of others she herself recognised as having left her a legacy.

But for me, if there is no other lesson to be learned from this journey through education that started in a 1968 programme; its twists and turns, peaks and valleys, it is that women in leadership can navigate all the routes that take them to that place of quiet confidence; belief that others have a voice, without giving into men's ways. That has been the legacy of Elsa Leo-Rhynie – of grace and dignity, of compassion and caring, of strength and unshakeable conviction, who believed and has demonstrated through her life's work that service is the tax paid for the space she occupies on this place called earth.

Reference

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