Discussions

Speech by Jamie Magnusson, CWSE Interim Head, at protest against threats to feminists at the University of Toronto, September 2015.

Those of us in Women and Gender Studies, and who are feminist sociologists, understand that our academic work is a political struggle. Our diverse histories of exclusion from academia have compelled us to work closely with women’s communities, creating knowledge, building solidarity, and mobilizing against gendered oppressions. The work that we take on through our teaching and research challenges the multiple systems that organize violence against women. We study gendered migration, sex work, child trafficking, cartographies of diaspora, missing and murdered Aboriginal women, the racist militarized police state, super-exploitation, the gendered impact of war, poverty, and insecurity. No wonder so many women have endured death threats in the course of their academic work. We are doing political work to dismantle powerful systems: colonialism, imperialism, racism. Death threats are not new to us. Silencing is not new to us.

This past Friday, September 11, I was sitting in the President’s Council Chambers where an emergency meeting was organized by central administration
on the most recent death threats. I was thinking about Sunera Thobani and her post-9-11 speech at the Conference on Women’s Resistance. Her speech, which challenged U.S. imperialism, and called for mobilizing solidarity with Afghanistan women, made her the target of hate mail, harassment, and death threats. I was wondering about how many women in that room at that moment had endured death threats over the course of their careers as activists and academics.

We are here today because the long history of death threats and attacks against women and feminists on Canadian campuses continues. This past Friday, those of us present in the president’s council’s chambers heard a presentation by a forensic psychiatrist who, along with the Toronto Police Services, determined these threats were ‘low risk’. As feminist activists and scholars who work to end gendered violence we have many examples of the Toronto Police Services failure to provide women with the necessary information to protect themselves in situations where there has been a known threat of violence. The decision to not share this information with feminist scholars in the targeted departments, and in other feminist and trans spaces across the university, represents the lack of acknowledgement of feminist scholars’ and activists’ expertise on gendered violence.

The targeted nature of the threats signals to us that we need to continue to struggle against these forms of institutional complicity that denies voice and visibility in situations where our work, teaching and activist lives on campuses are affected. Women and Gender Studies represents a site of knowledge production and activism wherein the systems that organize gendered violence is challenged full on. At the same time, Women and Gender Studies and feminist sociology is under threat on many fronts. Increasingly our professors are precarious workers, living in poverty and paid from contract to contract, and from stipend to stipend. Institutional funding for the Centre for Women’s Studies in Education at OISE has been reduced to a shadow of what is was a few years ago. Funding to our journals, our programs, and our centres has been restructured to mirror the knowledge production of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) fields, which emphasize corporate funding and commercialized knowledge transfer. These politics prioritize the private sector, and do not acknowledge the contribution that Women and Gender Studies makes to the public sphere and civil society.

As we stand here today to protest this egregious attack on our work as feminist educators and activists on campus, let’s resolve to challenge the multiple ways that our knowledge making and activism is under threat. At the same time let’s celebrate the fearlessness and perseverance we have always shown and continue to demonstrate in our work as anti-racist feminists, lgbq and trans scholars and activists.

In Solidarity and Struggle,
Jamie Magnusson, CWSE Interim Head