

Lifelong Learning Book Series

The Inclusion of Other Women
*Breaking the Silence through
Dialogic Learning*

Lena de Botton, Lilia Fulgert and Montse Sánchez-Aroca

 Springer

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*Breaking the Silence through
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Lena de Botton, Lídia Puigvert and

THE INCLUSION OF OTHER WOMEN

Lifelong Learning Book Series

VOLUME 4

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Aims & Scope

“Lifelong Learning” has become a central theme in education and community development. Both international and national agencies, governments and educational institutions have adopted the idea of lifelong learning as their major theme for address and attention over the next ten years. They realize that it is only by getting people committed to the idea of education both life-wide and lifelong that the goals of economic advancement, social emancipation and personal growth will be attained.

The *Lifelong Learning Book Series* aims to keep scholars and professionals informed about and abreast of current developments and to advance research and scholarship in the domain of Lifelong Learning. It further aims to provide learning and teaching materials, serve as a forum for scholarly and professional debate and offer a rich fund of resources for researchers, policy-makers, scholars, professionals and practitioners in the field.

The volumes in this international Series are multi-disciplinary in orientation, polymathic in origin, range and reach, and variegated in range and complexity. They are written by researchers, professionals and practitioners working widely across the international arena in lifelong learning and are orientated towards policy improvement and educational betterment throughout the life cycle.

The Inclusion of Other Women Breaking the Silence through Dialogic Learning

by

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Printed in the Netherlands.

To all the women who participated in the elaboration
of this book, whose voices you will read.

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Foreword

Why we are the “other women”

This book recognizes a reality, our reality, that of the “other women”. Why are we the “other women”? Because we are women who, given the fact that we have not had the chance to obtain an academic education, were silenced and have remained outside of the spaces for public debate about women. This exclusion is worse if we are immigrants or belong to an ethnic minority.

Those of us who are housewives, domestic workers or factory workers, because we do not have academic degrees, do not have spaces in which our voices can be heard, where we can say what we want. At times women whose voices are heard, because they have been able to go to university or have been leaders in the feminist movement, speak for all of the other women who have not been able to get a formal education, without asking us what it is we really want or think.

Through our participation in educational and cultural centers and associations, many of us have formed associations and women’s groups. In this way, we are creating spaces where we can discuss issues that we are concerned about: solidarity among women, demands for better widows’ pensions, exploitation of domestic workers, etc. And we are organizing ourselves to get our voices, demands and opinions about these issues out there into the public debate.

We would like to see all women joined together, everyone in solidarity with each other, and all of us who have not had the chance to study and to be able to participate in spaces for public debate, in spaces where we could express our concerns, demands and find solutions all together. Solidarity among all women is essential for this struggle to be possible. We dream of a day when “other women” do not exist. This would be the day that all women in the world would have equal rights, be heard, and taken into account.

We, the “other women”, who have not been heard and silenced, did not have the opportunity to study. Some of us, at best, were able to study in primary school, others did not even learn how to read and write. The only choice we had was to work at a very young age, some of us starting to work as domestics at the age of nine.

Our participation in adult education centers and women’s associations has helped many of us to become literate, or get our secondary education degree, and some have even been able to reach university.

The daughter and granddaughter of one of our *compañeras*, who is over seventy years old, gave her a computer with Internet. Now she says that she will put the sewing machine away and the computer will go in its place.

All of these transformations are only possible if, through solidarity, all women recognize us, “other women”, who, although we could not get an academic education, know what we want. All we need is the opportunity to come out of silence.

FACEPA Women’s Group¹

¹ FACEPA is the Federation of Cultural and Adult Education Associations

Introduction

The protagonists of this book are the “other women”, non-academic women who can be considered a majority. There are many prejudices they have had to face on a daily basis. These prejudices are emitted in the mass media; they come from opinions on the street, and even from supposedly qualified voices. They have generated many difficulties for the “other women’s ” participation in the cultural, public and academic spheres, where decisions on issues that are relevant to their lives are made. However, these women’s consumer power and vote is in high demand. The ways in which feminism has approached the “other women” has not always been the most suitable. Many times they have been treated paternalistically, as if their ideas and actions had to be defined by experts. Other times they have been accused of taking part in a male, patriarchal system. In any case, their voices have always been silenced, crying out outside of the political, intellectual and economic decision making spaces.

Things are beginning to change. Different movements of the “other women” are managing to make a mark in spheres they were unable to reach until now. They are showing us the work they are carrying out, which is as essential as it has been quiet. In this way they are contributing to the importance that dialogue is acquiring in the social processes that characterize our societies today. One of their main claims, that interests us most in this book, is the coherence between theory and practice in feminist thought. The “other women” tell us that feminism should be socially useful and that it must offer valid solutions, beyond digression about linguistic or corporate issues that are distant from the realities of women. The practices that characterize the movements of the “other women” show valid ways towards a transformative feminism, capable of connecting with social reality as well as mobilizing women - all women.

In adult education centers, Lidia and Montse have seen women who have gone from not reading or writing to creating literary circles in which books of classic literature that used to be out of their reach began to have a profound impact on their lives. Lena also remembers the daily conversations with women of her own family. In the midst of comments and laughs around the kitchen table, among the *filo* for the cheese pies, the meat for the *Koftas*, the spices for flavoring the different courses and the coffee boiling on the stove, they wove the stories that now are especially relevant for her. For us, solidarity and references to the collective when facing obstacles, seems to be an important element for resolving gender issues. How can these experiences not influence our conception of feminism?

The three authors share similar backgrounds: we are academics, related to university teaching and research, participating a great deal in experiences with the “other women” and collaborating on an ongoing basis with them in social, cultural, plural and democratic movements and actions. During our college years we had been introduced to feminism, but it was through our participation with different movements of the “other women” that we realized we were actually in contact with feminist thinking, one which was not expressed at the university. Nevertheless, university helped us to acquire certain skills that made it possible for us to participate in debates that we would not otherwise have had access to. Thus, we propose democratizing access to all educational levels, and, at the same time, we call for reflection on how enriching the incorporation of the “other women’s” knowledge is for the academic sphere.

Lidia had to wait for an experience in a rural women’s encounter in El Bierzo (León, Spain) to discover what she now considers to be a transformative feminism that embraces solidarity. She was invited to go with women and educators from the center she was participating in at the time. The trip was already an experience, plenty of women of all ages, sharing the excitement of going together to meet women from different rural areas on March 8, the International Day of the Woman. During the encounter, around one thousand rural women had the opportunity to talk and share different experiences and actions they organized in their villages. Till then, Lidia was convinced that feminist theory was contributing to social transformation: the academic conferences she had attended and the feminist debates she had participated in were enough for her to believe she had a lot to explain to rural women about change. However, in El Bierzo, she realized that the “other women” she met were contributing to feminist theory and social transformation. The dialogues in the work groups and the feelings they shared with her, full of hope and struggle and of solidarity among women, led her to see she also needed to learn from them. On her way back home, Lidia decided to learn more about the actions and contributions that women from these learning centers and associations were carrying out: so transformative and yet so unknown. Curiously, it was in a classroom of non-academic adults where she got in touch with a constructive and innovative way of thinking about gender. It was based on solidarity and social practice, on people’s struggles as well as their hopes. Only those who have directly participated in the literacy process of an adult would know what it means for a person when the written messages around her acquire meaning, or to be able to write her own name or communicate with loved ones through print. In the initial steps, she acquires the

self-confidence that she had given up a long time ago. It was outside of the classroom where Lidia discovered the full extent of the solidarity and transformative power of the “other women”. After participating in different centers for adult education in Spain, and for some time in the U.S., she collaborated with popular women’s movements.

Lena is especially aware about issues of immigration and multiculturalism. She is quite conscious of the difficult situations that women have to go through in order to set up a life in another culture. There are so many demands on these women and so little recognition in all spheres. Between nostalgic feelings for Egypt, adapting to a new cultural environment (Spain) and subsistence, her grandmother and great aunt found a way to create a warm and comfortable environment for the whole family. Themes of love and responsibility to the family were inevitably mixed with cultural issues and respect for these practices.

She attributes her feminist concerns to the women of her family and to the movements of the “other women”. This concern culminated in the desire to do her doctorate about the Arab community and the social movements generated in France, at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris. France is a country with an extensive migratory tradition and a crucible of cultures, which has also suffered significant racist and anti-Semitic outbreaks. All these events have led to a deep theoretical debate on democracy and multiculturalism that has important implications in feminism, especially since there is an important feminist mobilization in cultural minority groups. This was evident in the demonstrations in Paris on March 8, 2002. There were women from many different backgrounds, with very different realities and experiences, united by the aim of gaining recognition of their voices and their rights.

In a literacy classroom, an illiterate Romaní woman made a reflection out loud that has become essential in Montse’s life. The woman was looking at everyone intensely in order to catch our attention, and asked us: “If a garden with flowers of all different colors is more beautiful, why isn’t it the same with people?” This reflection on racism and differences reflected a deep wisdom that she wanted to share with everyone in the class, as a woman and as Romà. It was intense experiences like this one that inspired Montse to work on demonstrating that Romaní women want to improve their lives and are working hard towards equality, gaining respect for their cultural features and overcoming reductionist approaches that oppress them. This is why Montse participates in the Romà women’s Association *Drom Kotar Mestipen*, in Barcelona. She is convinced that ongoing moments of reflection with Romaní women would be very enriching for the social and feminist debate. To see Emilia, the president of this