Intersectional feminism and fact Women's experience in practical workshops

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Introduction

Discovering through making is recognized as a critically significant and valuable part of life, yet women are most often in the minority both in education and later in their careers, if they choose furniture making as their vocation. This paper proposes that dealing with feminist issues will make for a workspace that would benefit all genders.

Intersectional feminist issues highlight dynamics that have often been overlooked by movements and theory in the past, challenging preconceived ideas about feminism and presenting a positive environment for women, men and others, helping to dismantle the rigidity of a gender binary society for the benefit of all people.

This paper was presented by two women conducting live research and collating evidence to find out the prevalence of intersectional feminist issues in wood workshops. The 33 years age difference between the two researchers might suggest that their experiences of working in workshops would be somewhat different, and in some ways they are–think mobile phones, digital technologies, and globalization–but in fact their experience of women remaining in the minority within this field remains almost identical.

Intersectional feminist issues in workshops are rife. They were in 1981 when Dr Lynn Jones started her training and here we are in 2019 and men in furniture workshops and on furniture making courses still massively outnumber women. Therefore, we need a revitalized workshop ethos for the future. If we are to combat feminist issues in this industry, we need something new: new formats, new approaches, new thinking, new courses and new environments within which to experiment, inspire and excite:

> Most furniture workshops I visit are quite uninspiring places actually, with poor facilities for people like me. The environment I want to work in needs to be bright and vibrant and full of inspiring images, with an inviting, social place to take my breaks. I also need somewhere to wash out my Mooncup and to change my sanitary towel in comfort!
> Furniture Graduate, 2019

The research

Qualitative data was collected for this paper by collating feedback from participants in workshop events held in Oxford between 2017 and 2019. Interviews with women designers and makers, carried out as part of the This Girl Makes blog (Speed, 2019),

HOW FEMINIST IS YOUR WORKSHOP?
Side 1 of 2

SPACE
- 800mm+ width of doorways
- Wide spacing in layout of room
- Height adjustable/mobile workbenches
- Step-free access
- Hand rails where required
- Accessible heights of shelves/storage/light switches/sinks
- Washing facilities
- First aid kit/period pack
- Levelling of floor
- Good quality of light/natural light
- Sound insulated areas
- Good extraction
- Accessible toilets
- Water fountains
- Period-friendly toilets (including: bins, sinks, supplies)

If you score the pass mark or above,

pass mark 8/15 | your mark 15

then you score a point for the section.

Colour me in if you get a point!

8/15 | 15

SPACE

ENVIRONMENT
- Empowering imagery (especially of women)
- Positive/inspiring imagery and messages
- Colour
- Plants
- Moodboards
- Display shelves
- Models, moquettes, samples

*Negative/objectifying imagery negates all tick boxes

4/7 | 7

ENVIRONMENT

WORK-WEAR
- Uniform provided by the employer
- Gender neutral
- Apron/Tool belt
- Safe and practical
- PPE
- Employees are satisfied with the uniform
- Branded uniform
- Employees feel this instills a sense of belonging

5/8 | 8

WORK-WEAR

INFORMATION SHARING
- Noticeboards for public use
- Regularly updated pinboards
- Employees are signposted to opportunities/events/resources
- Work group chat (WhatsApp, Messenger)
- Mailing list
- Communal online forum
- Regular invitations/updates
- Sharing opportunities

5/8 | 8

INFORMATION SHARING

How did you score?
Colour in the scale to find out how well you are doing... Use the checklist to identify which areas you could improve.

Side 2 of 2

COMMUNICATION
- Clear channels for communication
- Regular meetings
- Suggestions box
- Structures to give feedback
- Buddy/mentoring system
- Channels for communication that are regularly used (email, texts)

4/6 | 6

COMMUNICATION

COMMUNAL & PRIVATE AREAS
- Break room
- Break room with door/blinds
- Kitchen facilities
- Communal space to eat lunch
- Employees eat lunch together on/off site
- Private seating areas
- Quiet spaces in/outdoors
- Medical room

5/8 | 8

COMMUNAL & PRIVATE AREAS

SAFE SPACE
- Judgement free atmosphere (workers agree)
- Supportive environment (workers agree)
- Equality and inclusivity training is provided
- Visual reminder of expected behaviour
- Inclusivity and equality policies are publicly visible
- Respectful language and behaviour

4/6 | 6

SAFE SPACE

EDUCATE
- Training readily available on all tools and equiptment
- Thorough and considered induction provided
- Regular and consistent training opportunities
- Workers are aware of all workshop systems and procedures
- Workers feel confident in using equipment
- Workers can carry out machine maintenance/tool changes
- Workers are independent and feel confident
- Workers have what they need to feel self-sufficient
- Supportive culture of helping, teaching and assisting
- Workers are not punished for making mistakes

6/10 | 10

EDUCATE

FLEXIBLE APPROACH
- Flexible scheduling of working hours
- Job sharing is possible
- Time allowed for personal-development projects
- Work from home is allowed
- Regular scheduled breaks
- Taking breaks is allowed
- Getting fresh air is encouraged

4/7 | 7

FLEXIBLE APPROACH

INCLUSIVE
- Involved decision-making takes place
- Pro-active attitue to change and development
- Workers feel valued
- Workers feel their opinions are respected
- Feedback is recorded and considered
- Transparency regarding salaries
- Diverse workforce
- Minority groups are encouraged to join
- Inclusive language

5/9 | 9

INCLUSIVE

HOW FEMINIST IS YOUR WORKSHOP?

Figure 1. The ten feature checklist (image courtesy of the author).

and observations made during workshop visits both in and out of the UK have also informed this paper. Alternative research methods, both photographic and film-based (Speed, 2019), have also highlighted some significant findings, relating to how women are represented in workshops online and across social media. Methodologies adopted by other women-only or communal-use makerspaces have also been carefully analyzed as part of this study, such as Young Women's Music Project (YWMP, 2018) and Makespace Oxford (Makespace, 2018).

In response to the issues that have been highlighted, we propose a pragmatic, creative and positive solution for the future: A checklist that details what we believe needs to happen, in order to make workshop environments more easily accessible and inclusive to all women and their supporters. The ten features outlined in the checklist were devised in response to findings from several sources.

THE TEN FEATURE CHECKLIST

Feature one – space
This includes ergonomic considerations, access and facilities relating to the physical layout and functionality of the workshop. This is a feminist consideration, firstly because it provides the necessary facilities for all, but also enables women (and supporters of women) of all abilities and physical builds to access and be productive within the space.

Several craftswomen and makers were consulted during the development of this checklist, to ensure it was fully intersectional. Having grown up with a disability,

Shawanda Corbett's experience of practical workshops is especially unique. She was able to offer constructive feedback:

> Accessibility in economics, both background and cost of supplies, in ethnical backgrounds, in supporters of women, and in use of the facility and tools are strongly present in this [check]list, but I've noticed that the only diverse physical access to the facility is the mentioning of toilets. Something to think about: physical access is more than just toilets. Have you ever worked with anyone that's differently abled? Think beyond gender. What would any functioning facility need? What would women and supporters of women need? Keep in mind how this could be beneficial for other communities.
> (S. Corbett, February 2019)

Feature two – environment
The ambience of the workshop and how it aims to inspire through the use of images, objects, bookshelves, and models is another important feature. This creates a welcoming and more positive space for all. No one should feel negatively represented within the space: any imagery should be a source of empowerment, rather than the reverse, such as objectifying images of women. The benefits of this are improved focus and positive attitudes towards working, leading to better productivity, as workers are inspired and motivated. The environment also sets a precedent for the standard of behaviour to be expected within the space (Stokholm, 2017).

> Carrying out an online search for images and video content showing women in practical workshops, it was found that searches for "makerspace", "workshop", and similar terms produced little to no images of women. Interestingly however, the American term "woodshop" produced more results than any of the British terms. Following this, the online searches were amended to more specific terms: "woman in workshop" or "woman making". Typically, images of western cisgender women, dressed semi-provocatively were the default result to this search. In an attempt to find image and video content representative of a wider range of women, the searches had to be made even more specific, profiling the women on their race or other characteristics. This anecdote highlights that based on imagery across the internet and social media platforms, women are not presented as the default users of workshop spaces, and in the minority of instances where they are, it is often a very specific type of woman, perhaps presented for the interest of a male viewer. This finding might also suggest how in a world that is increasingly structured or ordered using algorithms, by gendering our referral of women who are makers as "women makers" or "female makers", rather than simply "makers", means that their online representation will remain exclusive or segregated from the masculine default; perpetuating the perception that women in workshops is a novelty and not the "norm".
> (Harriet Speed, May 2019)

Feature three – Work wear
By ensuring everyone is dressed comfortably and appropriately, preconceptions of individuals are removed by having everyone equally presented through a gender-neutral uniform. In addition, it shows a practical and professional approach to work that should positively influence the behavior of users of the space, promoting teamwork and instilling a sense of belonging (Silverlining, 2018).

Feature four – Information sharing
This could take place via: notice boards, posters or physical handouts, but also through digital platforms, such as email or social media networks. This establishes

a more egalitarian environment, where opportunities are openly shared to create an informed and engaged community. This is inherently political, as it brings people together, encouraging transparency and promoting personal and professional development. The positive benefits of such initiatives are increased: motivation, confidence, and self-esteem (Makespace Oxford, 2019).

Feature five – communication
By providing open and warm channels of communication, possibly through initiatives such as a buddy system, the outdated perception of hierarchy is removed, and allows users of the workshop to communicate and operate on the same level. This communicative culture encourages feedback, enabling growth and development for both the workshop and on an individual level. This is an intersectional feminist consideration because it ensures all voices are heard, considered and given equal weighting (YWMP, 2018).

Feature six – Designated communal and private areas
This addresses the needs of other minority groups within a feminist context, as it may be a requirement of those who are differently-abled or have specific needs for peace and quiet, for example those with mental health illnesses or autism. It shows an acceptance of other people's needs, and respects their personal space (Lee, 2019), whereas communal areas encourage cooperation and integration between workers, leading to better equality and inclusivity within the workshop. Providing a space for people to spend their breaks together supports other features within the checklist, such as education and information sharing, but also encourages healthy routines and a better work-life balance.

Feature seven – Safe space
This means the workshop has an atmosphere of tolerance, acceptance and the abandonment of judgment. Existing models of such spaces suggest that it is beneficial to have this explicitly stated somewhere within the space, for example through the application of a poster.

It is important because it removes preconceptions of others' abilities, including the expectations put upon men, and the disbelief that women can do things. The removal of socially constructed roles allows everyone accessing the space to feel comfortable in expressing themselves and their identity.

Figure 2. Didcot Girls School students following their Creative Clinic, a workshop-based event in collaboration with Ercol Furniture and THIS GIRL MAKES (March 2019) (image courtesy of the author).

Figure 3. THIS GIRL MAKES stool making workshop event at Pegasus Theatre, Oxford (May 2017) (image courtesy of the author).

Figure 4. Andrea Stokholm in her cabinet making workshop in Copenhagen (August 2017).

Feature eight – educate

This includes how to use all types of tools, equipment and systems within the workshop. By ensuring that all those accessing the space are confidently trained and self-sufficient, then the division of labor is equally and appropriately distributed, allowing workers to take an active role within the workshop's operations. The benefits of this include: a safer, cleaner and more efficient workshop, personal and professional development, and team building, as workers learn from and assist each other.

Feature nine – Flexible approach

Adaptable ways of working are needed in the modern age. Family dynamics have changed, and we are now better aware of what different people need in order to be productive, happy and healthy. The scheduling of working hours is therefore just one example of how workshops can make themselves more accessible. Finding a way that works for everyone is not always possible, so being flexible and finding different approaches that suit the needs of individuals will lead to a happier and more productive work environment. Other positive benefits are longevity of workforce, reduced stress, maximum engagement, better work-life balance, and a sense of mutual understanding.

Feature ten – inclusive

By inviting all parties to be part of proactive decision making, the barriers faced by minority groups are more likely to be highlighted and dismantled through a more democratic process. By successfully addressing the other features outlined in this checklist, then the workshop should be inherently inclusive, and the diversity of the demographics accessing the space will be a reflection of how successful the workshop is in being inclusive. However, there are external factors that are perhaps beyond the workshop's control, such as its geographical location, which will influence who is able to access the space. However, by addressing as many features within this methodology as possible, in addition to implementing some positive discrimination, for example when offering opportunities or during the recruitment process, then it is far more likely that the imbalance will be addressed at the progressive rate that it needs to occur.

Figure 5. THIS GIRL MAKES developed stool making workshop event at Pegasus Theatre, Oxford (May 2018) (image courtesy of the author).

Testing the theory

To test out our theory of this ten-feature methodology, we approached four workshops based in Oxfordshire (England) that represent a cross-section of environments a furniture maker is likely to experience throughout their progression from education into industry.

Table 1: Application of the ten-feature checklist in four different workshops.

	Ten-feature checklist	Secondary school	Commercial workshop & Furniture school	Communal workshop & Wood school	Commercial workshop
1.	Space		√	√	
2.	Environment		√	√	
3.	Work-wear				√
4.	Information sharing			√	√
5.	Communication		√		√
6.	Designated communal & private areas		√	√	
7.	Safe space		√		√
8.	Educate	√	√	√	√
9.	Flexible approach		√	√	√
10.	Inclusive		√	√	√