Abstract for session K

Social distinctions and gender patterns in higher education plus opportunities and barriers on the labour market

Gender awareness in the classroom generates social justice and democracy outside it

In order to reflect about methods that can generate social justice and democratization, this article emphasises on practical implementations, connected to gender pedagogy. Gender pedagogy aims at overcoming the myth of objectivity, and by questioning through teaching what is considered as common sense and ‘normal’. Studying gender in the classroom entails therefore, acting and reflecting on breakthroughs, for example about an understanding of how gender codes influence everyday instances as well as working life. The collected data is based on narratives from alumni students who were asked to memorise and reflect on their gender studies and particularly about how useful this type of knowledge is in connection with everyday and working life - as politician, lecturer, IT-manager, doctoral student etc. The aim of this article is to focus on how teachers support students to be gender confident and as a consequence of that, becoming gender actors outside the university, in working life. Some central questions are: how are gender issues represented and integrated in the different areas of studies; what can teachers do in order to generate equality in the classroom; in what way and how are students given possibilities of understanding, internalizing and discussing gender issues. Our experiences as lectors, especially in gender studies, play a central role.

Gender pedagogy, education, democracy, social justice, working life
GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE CLASSROOM GENERATES SOCIAL JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY OUTSIDE IT

One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness. Paulo Freire (1993:33)

In recent years we, the authors, have received plenty of examples of how some of our former students have become gender-actors in working life. We meet our former students at conferences, read about and see them being interviewed in media, read their articles and follow their blogs, and sometimes meet them in the street and talk about their lives today and the times when they were gender students. We are positively surprised to hear that after finishing their courses or receiving their diplomas some that were reluctant during their education, now, particularly in their professional life, take decisions and act as true gender-actors. This made us very curious and inspired us to this study based on evaluation, a kind of institutional ethnography-study, of some university courses with gender perspective that we were responsible for. In the following we will critically reflect about methods that can generate social justice and democratization inside as well as outside the university.

In our opinion gender-knowledge is related to knowledge-production as part of structural and relational aspects inside as well as outside the universities, today. By “teaching gender” we mean both teaching gender-theory and using “gender pedagogy” in higher education. Gender-pedagogy aims at overcoming the myth of objectivity, by questioning all forms of mechanisms that create social injustices, such as inequalities resulting from incorrect ideas of gender differences (including other differences), in general. Teaching gender and gender-matters includes inspiring to reflect about and problematizing societal problems and solutions that common sense tells us are ‘normal’.

The aim of this article is to focus on how teachers can support students to be gender confident and as a consequence of that, become gender actors outside the university, more specifically in private and working life.

Over the following pages we will describe how gender-perspective was implemented (studying gender) in some gender courses we held, how we helped the students generate
equality in the classroom, and how we as teachers experienced working explicitly as gender actors in the lecture rooms and in seminars. After presenting our views, theoretical perspectives, methods and material we will go deeper in analysing the students on: How do the students reflect on their experience as students particularly in gender courses, but also in courses which integrate gender matters? How do the students exemplify their gender knowledge and themselves as gender actors outside the university? How do they interpret their personal experiences particularly connected to their working lives?

**Standpoints**

As teachers on gender courses and as evaluators in this study we are inspired by some pioneers in gender studies and on matters connected with the focus in this paper. We are motivated by how Paulo Freire, Bell Hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty reflected as pedagogues, feminists and democracy-strugglers. We want to problematize the social and cultural distinctions reproduced by adapting hegemonic norms in higher education. From a norm-critical perspective it is clear that traditional structures and discipline-cultures obstruct possibilities for raising awareness and empowerment. These structures are seldom problematized in traditional pedagogy and invisible and absorbed without reflection by many of the students. Norms are shaped by ideas about homogeneity categories – the problem with this is that norms and structures become obstacles for equality and diversity (P. Freire 1972, b. hooks 1994, Ch. T. Mohanty 2003).

In all societies power is created by structures and norms and it develops in processes and relations that involve delegation of power (Iris M. Young 2000). This means that “power relations” include mechanisms that are intimately integrated in social life and that is why we need knowledge on how to resist injustices (independent of whether they are related to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, visible or/and invisible disability etc.). “Injustice” can be defined as an act that aims at preventing freedom in different ways, for example: a) the individuals’ own development and experiences as citizens, b) the individuals’ or groups’ possibilities of participating, deliberate, and making decisions related to social issues.

Generally, teaching in higher education (particularly in social science) focuses on a critical educational perspective. Therefore it is an everyday challenge for teachers to develop methods that interrelate “experiences” and “knowledge-seeking”, that are not predetermined, states Sandra Harding (1991: 271). In relation to this we argue that knowledge production involves
various and different dimensions for many teachers. Essential are the epistemological perspective and political aspects/praxis. These dimensions are closely related to “objective” ontological classifications for example structural oppression, discrimination etc. But there is also a personal – more subjective – dimension related to the one who makes the choice of how to teach (for example the feminist). In other words, teaching gender requires effort in order to inspire critical thinking and it entails a contribution to social justice, equality and democracy.

We, not only in our roles as teachers, have experienced that not all individuals (students) are familiar with equality rights and conditions, its implications and how it is related to social distinctions. Teaching gender entails therefore what we can call a “solidarity” act, for example helping students from minority groups to understand unjust situations they can be involved in; by inspiring them to explore and understand their own situation, and as a consequence of that, to analyse situations in terms of equal rights independent of social background. Concretely such experiences can be interpreted as “respect”, but it really expands to a more open gender awareness. Doying gender in the classroom in practice means acting and reflecting on breakthroughs, for example about an understanding of how gender codes influence knowledge, education in general, (not only humanities and social studies but also technology, entrepreneurship and care science etc.) everyday life and working life.

We, the authors of this article, have extensive experience of teaching many gender courses at all academic levels,¹ over a period of 20 years, at universities in the south of Sweden and in Argentina.

**Theoretical Perspective**

More or less temporary and fluctuating inequalities can be identified in all social relationships. Some of them last for a long time, over generations, and can be identified locally, nationally and globally. Long-lasting and systematic disparities, “durable inequalities”, influence human beings’ opportunities in life (Tilly, 2000). Structural distinctions influence us all and our choice of education and study-subjects, as well as, our choices in working life. Charles Tilly attributes the problem of “durable inequality” to socialization occurring from institutionalisations of the woman/man categories. This is done

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¹ Gender and Equality, Gender Ethnicity and other Power Relations, Unequal health, Political Anthropology, The Sky is the Limit (Commission education on gender in theory and praxis for women entrepreneurs in small enterprises on the countryside)
both deliberately and instinctively by inclusion, exclusion, adaptation and social control. The man/woman categories are causally related to dominance or subordination, which involves large and important differences in benefits related to gender (Ibid. p. 19-26).

Gender research is closely connected to feminist, anti-racism and sexual orientation movements. This approach deals with interpretations of discursive gender/race/sexual orientation representations and their significance for human relationships, by understanding the effect of power structures.2 In our opinion gender research is related to liberation, social justice and democracy by questioning patriarchal hegemonies and inequalities in society. Such a perspective on knowledge is a form of “activism” in the sense that it confronts questions related to foundations of teaching as well as who has the interpretive precedence. This is the perspective on knowledge we apply in the article. Central to understanding this focus is Bell Hooks’ work, Teaching to the Transgress (1994). According to her “education as a practice of freedom”:

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. (1994:21)

Activist knowledge entails a feminist view. Another work of importance for our theoretical perspective is Feminism without borders, by Chandra Mohanty (2003), in which she critically reflects on the role of a feminist hegemony and proposes “pedagogy of resistance”:

Creating resistance-cultures is about viewing academy as part of a larger socio-political arena were people from the third world are neutralised and dealt with in the name of liberal democracy. (2003:241).

When resistance-cultures are created they open up for new possibilities and new social views of central importance in order to develop criticism against the forms of repression and abuses we see in society today. Mohanty states that questions of knowledge, power and experience must be raised and reflected on, as contributions for pedagogic improvements. (Ibid)

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Teaching gender in the classrooms, in higher education, therefore entails a feminist vision aimed at integrating education as part of a knowledge project focussing on equality and democracy. The intention is not just to focus on the concept of gender in its cultural context, but also to strive to recognise gender’s various integrated social practices – in this case in teaching situations and working life.

What happens in a teaching situation is always unique. It specifically includes time/space situations, and the purpose of teaching gender in the classroom is to inspire for democratic dialogues. In general, classroom dialogue is based on the authoritarian role the teacher represents, but active gender pedagogy helps to break the silence in the lecture room and the traditional listening to authorities. In this case knowledge is created in the classroom by a two-way communication between teachers and students – the “pedagogic tool” is based on a “teaching and learning” situation. Conversing through “emancipatory dialogues” aim at fulfilling, scientifically, deeper meanings of individual experiences as well as increased understanding of mutual experiences that develop in the teaching context. These are important elements for critically understanding what knowledge creation involves - at least in social science - in the sense that knowledge is intimately related to the experienced reality.

Doing gender in the classroom, can be described as a process related to socio-cultural-emotional contact, and in practice related to personal/relational contact. We cannot ignore the fact that what teachers communicate (at least within areas of social science) does affect people. This involves difficult reflections in general because the interlocutors are students from different social classes, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations etc. Teaching, embodies sensitive dimensions, depending on how the subject matter is presented, especially when certain problem-formulations such as sexism and/or racism are treated. The conclusion is that “feminist teaching” is based on a vision of raising awareness, (M. Cuesta 2012) which includes “making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy (b. hooks 1994:39).³

From a wider perspective, students in the classroom are also citizens with civil rights. In the work Pedagogy of the oppressed Freire (1993) states that when teachers and students proceed

³ See also Chandra T. Mohanty (2003), for reflections connected to teaching in contexts of “colonisation / decolonisation”.
from their own experiences in dialogues, they contribute to an increased understanding, not only through their relationship to one another, but also to society in general. In other words, the contexts are very seldom simplified - but often deeply analysed and problematized.

The important thing, from the point of view of libertarian education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades. Because this view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program, but must search for this program dialogically with the people, it serves to introduce the pedagogy of the oppressed, in elaborating what the oppressed must participate in (ibid. 1993:105).

In a consciousness-raising process; narratives, autobiographical presentations and memory work, should be understood and reflected upon in context and as a result of an exchange of different experiences of awareness. From a feminist point of view, there is always a direct connection between the structural and people’s actions. Feminist teaching implemented as pedagogy strives at raising awareness, by helping students to confront the acceptance of “false awareness”. In some cases this means developing terms of ‘prejudices’ and in other cases ‘redeeming’ conceptions of each other.

**Method and material**

The starting point of this article is a feministic evaluative perspective and methodological practice, in which we combine reflections about theories on gender pedagogy and analysis about gender experiences in practice. We reflect on and ask questions about *gender awareness* and *gender acting* as well as who this benefits in relation to social justice.\(^4\) Feminism is the basis of *gender pedagogy*, which can be explained as a method for raising awareness aimed at making the classroom a democratic forum where everyone feels responsible and contributes to knowledge development and to transformations in society.\(^5\) It also includes reflexions on and ambitions for analysing different interrelated levels about: a) how power internalisation can be critically reflected on, b) how emancipation can be


\(^5\) See Bell Hooks (1994) and Chandra T. Mohanty (2003), for reflections connected to teaching in contexts of “colonisation / decolonisation”.

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achieved, c) how gender is performed by individuals as gender actors in society or by students in the classroom.

This study is inspired by what Dorothy Smith calls *Institutional Ethnography*, proposing an institutional ethnographic method which inquires designing of a map, by “locating a standpoint in an institutional order that provides guiding perspective from which that order will be explored.” In other words, by exploring “the local sites of people’s experience” connected to “extended social relations of ruling and economy and their intersections”.⁶ This type of knowledge implies research, discovering in particular “the social as it extends beyond experience”, and implementing various techniques of data collection, for example: individual interviews, fieldworks observations, textual analysis and what we include in this study – analysis of internet material.

Institutional ethnography in this study includes conceptualizing inequality regimes, for examining and analysing exposed situations and processes, by interventions that explain experiences and practices. This becomes a useful standpoint, for exploring an institutional setting, in which knowledge is produced, which tends to contribute to emancipation and social justice.

The material in focus is based on both formal and informal communication, i.e. course evaluations, our day to day teachers’ memories, questionnaires via e-mail, face to face dialogues with students, taking part of blogs and articles by former students and articles on their work for gender equality in media. Particularly, the collected data from questionnaires attended by alumni students who were asked to memorise and reflect on their gender studies, about how useful the knowledge was/is in connection to their everyday and working lives - as politician, lecturer, IT-manager, doctoral student etc. Our own voices, roles and work as teachers at these courses, and the evaluations of them are all part of this study.

We found that the majority of the answers given by students from courses given a couple of years ago but unfortunately their student email addresses in many cases were out of date so we had difficulties to reach all of them. Finally we received answers from 30 former students

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(after searching for about 200). The majority of the students were female; only three male students answered our questionnaire and contributed to the most significant part of the data.

The teaching situations evaluated were based on gender lectures and seminars. In these situations, issues of gender and equality were in focus and set the agenda. The content spread from central theories to other areas of focus that the students raised, often based on personal experiences and preferences and the seminars focused on interpretations and analysis. The lectures were based on theoretical standpoints and concepts but also developed dialogues over theoretic references and the empirical cases). The two-way communication has been an essential part of the knowledge development and in the next chapter the students’ voices and experiences on this are presented.

Experiences of gender pedagogy and doing gender in the classroom

A variety of institutional ethnography

The common aim of the evaluated courses was knowledge development and implementation of gender pedagogy and we here present how the former students remember, talk about and act according to this today.

We worked hard to involve the students in situations for analysing real situations and life experiences; text and film analysis; media analysis etc. and relate this to the courses’ focus of equality and democracy. Gender equality and democracy was a key focus in the courses and we worked consciously to avoid simplifying problems of distinctions by talking about homogeneous categories such as diversity, even when it comes to immigrants and sexuality etc.

Student reflection:

- I remember when we analysed a television drama series and received some questions about colonization. One question was about status and power. I think about that now and then – how we value an immigrant differently based on which country he or she comes from. (Erica)

- Reading the book ”Forbidden action” and taking part in the seminar gave a specific understanding of how provoking it obviously can be for some people that women (individually or as a collective) can manage on their own, without men. It was surprising, not necessarily because I did not know it before, but it was suddenly so clear to me after this item. (Martin)
- The studies of hegemonic masculinity were very interesting and gave me many insights. It gave me an aha-reaction on how complicated the gender-system is and further problematizations. We had good discussions and analysis together with the teachers and the whole course equipped me with good basic knowledge on gender and with tools for my work as a professional politician (Ingrid)

**The teachers’ viewpoints:**

Gender pedagogy entails stimulating emancipation and self-criticism, which in the courses in focus implied that we consciously acted to also involve the more silent, sceptic or unsure students to take up a definite stance and dare to raise their voices? The point of stimulating and encouraging everybody to raise their voices was to make sure that their understanding of theories and concepts like power-techniques, norms, roles, discrimination, injustice and democracy did not stay at an academic level but could be illustrated from and related to the students’ personal experiences.

**Student reflection:**

- The discussions we had in class and in minor groups opened many doors to new ways of looking at gender equality, on the shape of the society and on how we can change it for the best. (Anna)

- The studies gave me a wider understanding of the relation between individual and society and groups that are defined as outsiders in the norm-society (Carina)

- I started with an open mind and my eyes opened up, I learned new things all the time and came to look upon my environment with a new perspective. (Daniela)

- Multi culture was an important part of the course. (Fanny)

**Summary:** All respondents identified the courses they had taken and gave us stories of how they appreciated it and how they can use the gender-knowledge in everyday life and in working life. We were pleased to read this and saw that many of these students, even if they could not point out a specific moment, wrote that the entire course gave them a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of gender structure and power strategies and how they impact in terms of creating equal conditions for people. We are aware that students with negative experiences of the courses might not bother to answer our questionnaire. Some students pointed out that the discussions in seminar-groups were particularly valuable. As most teachers know students raise their voices in minor groups better than in front of the
whole class. We, the seminar leaders, worked consciously with the students’ active participation and tried to lead the discussions from the individual example/problem to the intellectual and theoretical understanding of it. We can say that when it comes to lectures we often work deductively because of the “atmosphere” in the classroom and in seminars we work inductively because of the many examples the students wanted to ventilate and try to understand.

**Stories of raised self-confidence and being gender-actors in working life...**

Some students describe their personal development and awareness concerning gender, equal rights and diversity and democracy matters as follow:

**Student reflection:**

- My self-confidence is much better since taking the course. Now I dare to say no to things I do not want to do and I have the courage to raise demands for example when talking to the bank. (Karen)

- I am not “the nice little girl” anymore – I now know that it’s much better to make my voice heard. People actually listen to me now. (Lisa)

- I work at a University where topics of gender, diversity and democracy are constantly on the agenda although I do not work with them explicitly. I developed a more analytic way of looking at things and have been able to decode certain behaviours at work for example when someone uses power-techniques against me or someone else. (Erica)

- I have developed knowledge and gender awareness that I try to use when interacting with children and not least with their parents in the gymnastic group I lead. (Anna)

- I wish for and seek another perspective on social work in which I can use my knowledge from the education. Today I appreciate the knowledge about power relationships, gender equality etc. in my work with people and in relationships with my colleges. (Carina)

Some students mentioned that they have developed a political awareness, and become gender-actors in society. In other words, these students’ gender practice not only influences their private lives but also that this type of knowledge applies to their professional lives. As we have already mentioned, we come in contact with these students by reading about them in the media or have read their academic work, which gave us the idea for this study.
- I use a lot of the knowledge in my life. For example, I have demanded that the Political Region uses gender-divided statistics to make the health and medical services more equal. I have also highlighted the question of violence in intimate relationships on the agenda. (Daniela)

- I have had a lot of use of my studies. As one of the leaders of the City Council I have a lot of power and meet power-structures every day. I have been very much helped by understanding and knowing about power-techniques, power-structures and the gender systems strata and manifestations. Equality, democracy and diversity are often problematized and I have good use of having theories to lean on, not only personal experiences. (Ingrid)

- I definitely received knowledge about gender, ethnicity and equality that set the tone for my dissertation and the topics that I teach today. I also have great use for the knowledge in private as well as in working life in order to discover, understand and tackle power structures of different kinds. (Berit)

- The education stimulated a “critical gaze” that has an essential importance for my picture of the world and perspective on society, groups and social relationships. Gender-awareness is a natural part of my doctoral studies. As a dramatist within amateur-theatre I try to make “gender-experiments” dealing with the fact that most of the members are female but most of the existing plays are dominated by male roles. You could continue to let girls play girls but let the female characters fill functions in the plot that are usually ascribed to male characters. Another way of dealing with this paradox is to make some of the characters more androgen. (Martin)

Analysis and conclusions

Inequalities are present everywhere – in all societies and at all levels. Some are long lasting and Tilly (2000) defines them as “durable inequalities” related to dominance and subordination. We understand our pedagogical aim and responsibility as teachers as intimate related to a consciousness-raising process, of course, directly related to the academic forms. But, in the sense that the classrooms can also be understood as working places, it becomes transparent that teaching is an opportunity to work against injustices in society. It also opens up possibilities to break normative patterns and implement a pedagogy that entails inclusion, awareness and empowerment according to learning as well as knowledge development, and consequently transforming the classroom into a democratic forum.

This article evaluates democracy and power issues and is based on reflections that former students inspired to concerning the impact gender knowledge have in a reflexive understanding of their own roles as “gender actors”, particularly in connection to working life. Being a “gender actor” doesn’t necessarily need to be understood as a consequence of a
process, it can be understood as a process in itself, which continues to develop. This implies that people integrate a critical view into their own social situations and development. In other words, the social construction of a given (gender) role often entails a positioning in terms of “changing value,” and in contrast to the ordinary norms.⁷

This article contains a deeper evaluation than the ordinary ones made after a university course is finished. According to the aim, we have been looking for the ways of how gender pedagogy can support students to be gender confident and conscious of possibilities to change gender patterns in the society. In practice we have presented the pedagogic tools used in the courses and self-reflexions and actions of the former students presented as narratives. Connected to this article, both parts/perspectives helped us to understand how the students were stimulated, and reached different levels of understanding: a) critical reflexions on power relations – structural perspective; b) on how emancipation can be constructed – process perspective; c) on how gender is performed by individuals/students in society/classrooms – individual perspective. We believe that the possibility of becoming a “gender actor” must include awareness of all three perspectives and how they are being interrelated: the context/ the tools/ the individual.

We state that the pedagogical tool used - two-way communication between teachers and students, and teaching in large and small groups help the individuals involved, in particularly the students, to be self-confident. The education and the teaching methods opened opportunities and allowed the students to reflect on and comprehend the different social contexts various students came from and the borders different contexts entail for everybody. The inclusionary view that this pedagogic (i.e. exchanging experiences) is based on not only includes agreements but also confrontations, in the sense that the communication between the students and between students and teachers can sometimes be of critical experiences (i.e. sexism or racism). But most importantly to highlight is that these meetings are realized by exchanging experiences, and as a part of the everyday – feelings are created which inspire to be gender actors, even outside the university. Both female and male students were supported in reflecting their roles as parts of structural oppression, not only as part of subordinated or superior categories but also as passive or/and active parts. This is an important matter because not everyone was aware of gender-issues when they started the courses. Sometimes the

students (as people in general) accept their given role based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability etc. in a fundamentalist way (as a result of difficulties to adopt other angles). Such situations are of central importance for the pedagogical process while the teacher must become an involved actor in the discussions. In such cases the students are often keen to discuss topics and examples that result in more in-depth communication and increased understanding.

The courses evaluated were based on gender lectures and seminars in which issues of gender and equality and the focus on social justices and democracy were in focus. The content spread from central theories addressed to examples from the everyday, which integrate personal experiences and preferences. The lectures were based on theoretical standpoints and concepts but also developed dialogues (over theoretic references and the empirical cases), and the seminars attend more specific cases. Gender pedagogy, according to the concept of this study deals with a *consciousness-raising process* by: breaking traditional “gender knowledge”, by inspiring new “gender strategies” and by questioning the acceptance of hegemonic values.\(^8\)

“Studying gender” in everyday teaching situations results in varying interactions and actions in which both teacher and students exchange shared experiences.

It is worth pointing out that studying gender in the classroom is part of a democratization process were implementing knowledge includes teaching at the universities as a part of working life. According to one of our informants:

> Children do not do as we say, children do as we do. If we are serious about real equality where women and men get the same salary for equal work adults must take responsibility and do it differently and do it right! (feministhalland.blogspot.se 2012.05.20)

Focusing on the former students’ narratives and actions, we conclude that the consciousness raising aim of the gender pedagogic means vitalizing them and helping them to integrate values connected to social justice and democracy. We state that the answers and actions from the most active students show that they have become aware that to be a citizen means active participation. In our opinion many of the former students (independent of their ideological positions) show that they act confidently and critically and are reflexive both as individuals and members of society.

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References


**Blogs**

(suzanneakerlund.blogspot.se)

(feministhalland.blogspot.se)

(vmariajohansson.wordpress.com/)
Questions via e-mail to alumni students about their experiences of courses at Halmstad University that were based on gender and diversity perspective.

Write your answers under the questions.

1. What course did you study?

2. What is your highest degree?

3. Describe your profession, your tasks, any political or non-profit assignments or anything else that you think may be of relevance for this study:

4. The courses included studies on gender, diversity, equality and democracy. Did you develop knowledge about this that you can use today in our professional life? Do you have any examples of this that you can describe shortly?

5. Do you remember any specific occasion or moment during your studies on the above-mentioned course that has been of a specific importance to you concerning your perspective on people and equality among people everywhere?

6. Would you like to tell us anything else that you think might be useful for our study?

Thank you for taking part in this study!