

## **The Numbers Question in Feminism: Bridging the Disciplinary Divide**

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In recent years critical demographers have often sounded clarion calls for integrating feminist perspectives in demographic research. This paper is an attempt at moving beyond these exhortations to reflecting on strategies for moving the field forward in a direction that builds on the potential synergies between feminists working within demographic traditions and those working in adjacent disciplines, and to making our work more relevant to feminist scholarship and political activism in general.

One of the most striking developments of the past decade is an increased distance between scholars working within women's studies programs and publishing in such journals as *Signs* and *Feminist Studies* and those working within more empirically grounded disciplines like sociology and demography. We argue that much of this distance can be attributed to a move away from "numbers" in women's studies. This is exacerbated by the inability of demographers to make their work relevant to feminists from other disciplines.

In many ways this is a surprising disjunction. Given the importance of integrating research and political activism, one might assume that feminist scholarship would attempt to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house and rely on empirical data to demand the abolition of social inequality. Instead, feminists, particularly those working with the academic disciplines, have retreated from the use of statistics as evident from the virtual disappearance of empirical articles from feminist journals and the omission of statistical training from women's studies programs.

This retreat from numbers can be attributed to both push and pull factors. The push came from the obliviousness of statistically based fields like demography to the assumptions underlying their statistical models. The pull came from important developments in interpretive approaches outside of feminist scholarship, including postmodernist approaches. A combination of these forces has led a retreat of feminist scholarship from fields historically dominated by feminist empiricism to fields dominated by interpretive approaches.

While the infusion of interpretive approaches has strengthened feminist scholarship by introducing divergent voices and recognizing the role of power in shaping research, it has come at an enormous cost. The costs are sometimes obvious and sometimes hidden. For example, it has led to decline in feminist scholarship around domains associated with the material conditions of women's lives leaving this void to be filled by mainstream demographers, sociologists and economists who rarely engage in critical reflection of their own assumptions.

Co-authored by feminist scholars in demography, sociology, and anthropology, this paper describes the developments in demography and women's studies that led to this disjunction. It suggests ways in which fields like demography might increase their relevance to feminist studies as well as ways in which feminist scholarship might broaden itself to regain the lost ground.

