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Gender issues in French geography

Les questions de genre dans la géographie française

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Gender issues in French geography

Les questions de genre dans la géographie française

Dominique Creton

Introduction

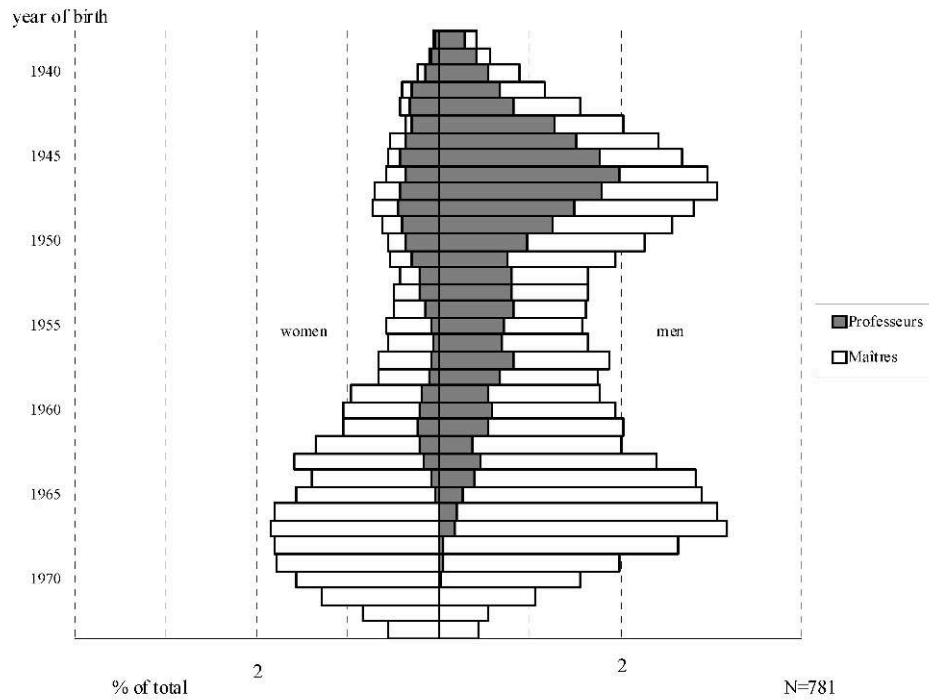
- 1 In recent years, French geographers have begun to take gender and women's issues into account. With few exceptions¹ this development has been noticeable for less than a decade, though the work is slowly becoming visible within the discipline, attested to by a few publications, the organization of a conference on geographical perspectives on gender, space, and development in Lyon in 2004², and seminars³. This geographic work remains highly invisible outside the discipline. Indeed, at the conference on "Teaching Gender Issues in History and Geography" held in Paris in 2004, a brief paper on geography in higher education noted the scarcity of publications taking women (more frequently "the woman") into account and the invisibility of women in geographical production, apart from some specific demo-geographic research. This report seemed to reflect the situation more of the 1990s, however, when publications were actually less numerous than in the previous decade. More recently, a publication on the state of the art in French gender studies omitted discussion of geography and included no geographers (Maruani, 2005). Nevertheless, geographers would be wise to reflect on contemporary debates in French society and public policy many of which involve spatial relations. Among these are issues of the implications of globalisation, development and the related positions of women as migrants and in the labour force, international networks and prostitution, social policies related to the intersections of work, family and the provision of services, and cultural practices.
- 2 In this paper I examine the evolution of gender/women's issues within French geography in relation to changing scientific and socio-political, national and international contexts since the 1970s. I then take up the representation of women and men as geographers in French universities, looking at sex, generation, and status, considering that this may have influenced attention to gender or contributed to

conservatism of approaches. Finally, I present an accounting of recent publications that have included attention to gender in order to estimate present tendencies in the field.

A changing pattern in a changing context

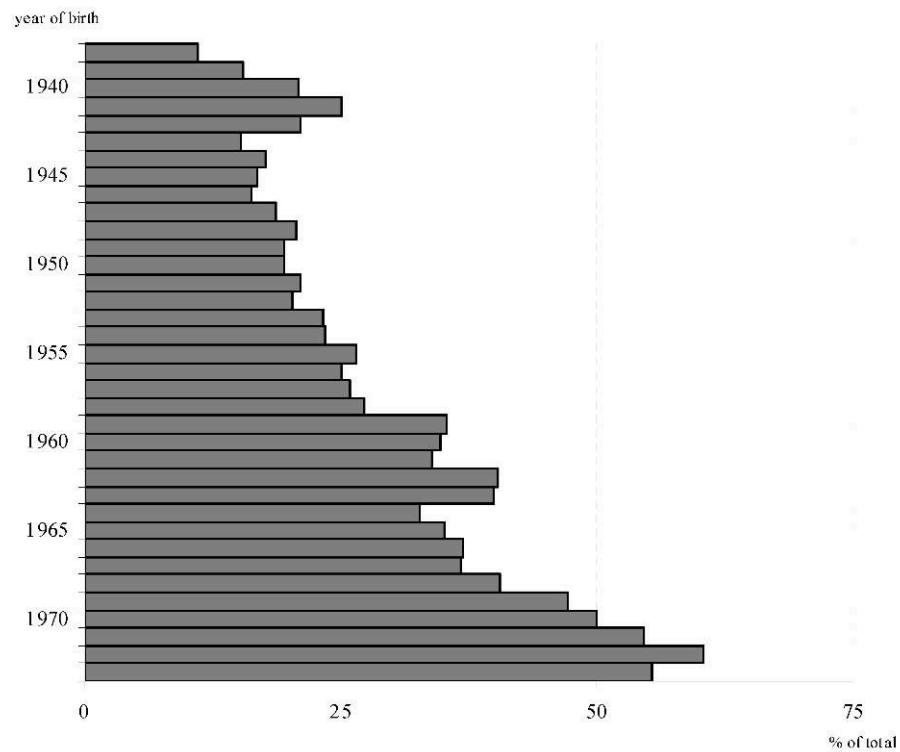
- 3 The belated development of gender issues in French geography appears to reflect some specific aspects of the context such as the French emphasis on the universalism of a neutral – therefore male? – individual⁴, and the structuring and evolution of geographical institutions, such as the importance of the *concours d'enseignement*⁵ and changes in recruitment in the 1970s and 1980s as discussed below. In addition, geography has emphasised some fields of research such as quantitative or cultural geography and neglected social geography in particular. There has also been a reluctance to engage with words and questions such as “mainstreaming” that are considered to be importations, for example, from Anglo-American geography.
- 4 As for recent changes, several explanations such as the following may be proposed :
 - an increasing emphasis being placed on actors (*les acteurs*) in current geographical research;
 - more participation by geographers in multidisciplinary and international research teams;
 - changing socio-political contexts, including the influence of European Union policies such as attention to mainstreaming of gender in public policies, the changes in French laws relating to parity in politics, the implementation of interdisciplinary equality groups in universities, and debates on the feminisation of names;
 - the incentives given by international research funding, particularly from the European Union, which has been especially important in the last few years when financial questions have assumed more importance;
 - more participation by French geographers working in the field of gender/women’s studies in interdisciplinary meetings, seminars, and conferences and networking among women geographers in universities.
- 5 Because research on gender is mostly carried out by women, it is interesting to look at the representation of both women and men in French geography. I therefore offer a quantitative study⁶ of the population of geographers⁷ and a brief insight into the institution. The unbalanced shape of the pyramid (Figure 1) highlights some aspects of the structure of the population of geographers lecturing and researching in universities⁸. It is unbalanced in terms of generation of birth. The strong reduction in the size of the generations born in the 1950s compared to the previous one shows the slowing down and/or cessation of recruitment in the late 1970s-1980s. Younger generations have joined the university staff in greater numbers in the 1990s, though growth has again slowed in recent years. The representation is also unbalanced in terms of sex. Although the feminisation of the population of geographers is a long-term tendency, it has not been a straightforward one (Figure 2). The 1950s generation appears not only smaller but also more masculine than the preceding ones. Geographers seem to have followed the general pattern that recruiting fewer persons also means recruiting smaller proportions of women.

Figure 1. Geographers in French universities (“Professeurs” and “Maîtres de conférences”) by sex and age (2004).



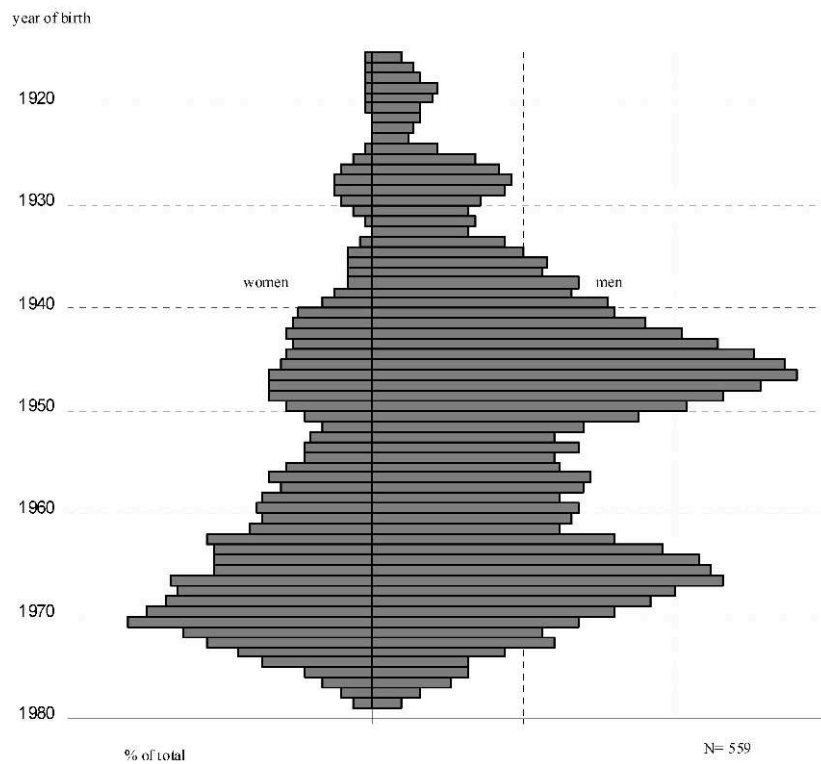
Source : Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche (MENESR)

Figure 2. Proportion of women among geographers in universities (2004).

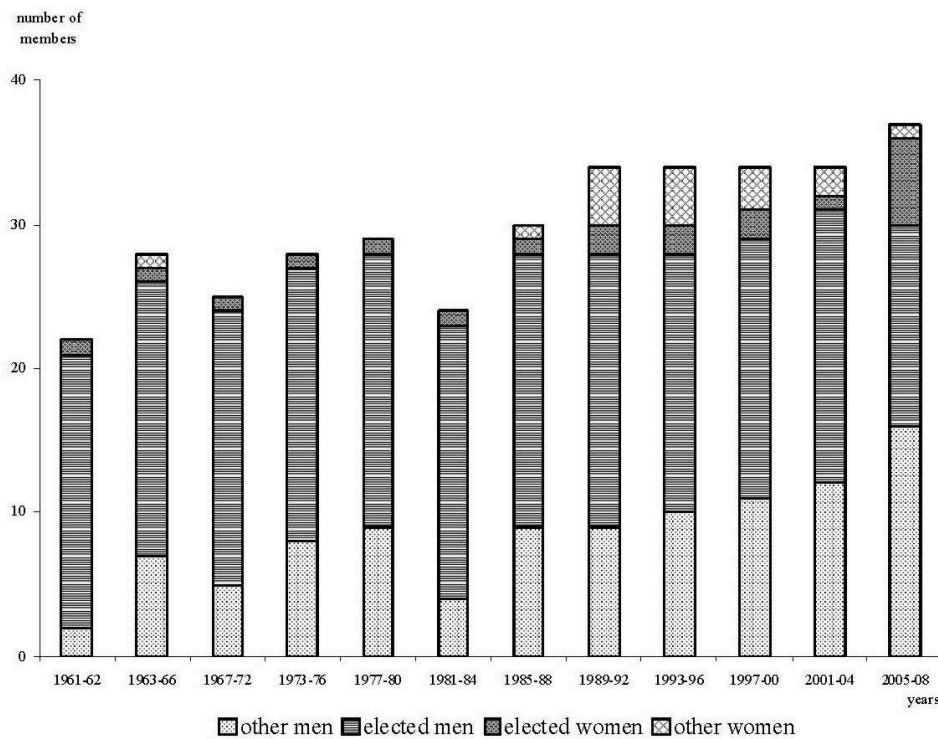


Source : Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche (MENESR)

- 6 The unbalanced distribution by status is partly as expected: professors are more numerous in older generations. More interesting is the sex-ratio by status and generation. The feminisation of younger generations has “favoured” the lower status category. In blunt terms, access to the professorship has been easier for men born since the early 1950s than for women from the same generations. It must be noted, however, that the prerequisites for applying for a professorship position changed during the 1990s, the former *Thèse d’Etat* being replaced by the *Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches* (HDR). The *Thèse d’Etat* was to be a new research project which could only be started after a few years of lectureship and could be organised in accordance with one’s personal and professional life. The HDR consists of a written and oral presentation of one’s personal involvement and production in research during a period of time which can begin from the day one becomes *Maître de Conférences*. Qualitative data would help to understand what seems to be a gender bias.
- 7 A further insight into the question of possible changes in the status of men and women in academic geography can be gained by examining the place of women and men in the *Comité National Français de Géographie* (CNFG), which represents France in the International Geographical Union. In November 2005, the CNFG welcomed its first female President, Yvette Veyret. The General Secretary of the CNFG, when presenting the results of the election of the Council and the Board⁹ stressed the rejuvenation and feminisation of the members. These tendencies are confirmed by some evidence such as the age pyramid and the results of recent elections (Figures 3 and 4). When looking at non-elected members (that is, members by rights and co-opted members¹⁰), the prospects of feminisation seem less likely. Nevertheless, that female geographers hold positions of responsibility is evident. They are active in the various Commissions and, indeed, are over-represented as Presidents and Vice-Presidents¹¹ (Table 1).

Figure 3. Members of the CNFG by age and sex (2006).

Source : Comité National Français de Géographie (CNFG website)

Figure 4. Composition of the Council of the French National Comity of Geography(1961-2005).

Source : Comité National Français de Géographie (CNFG website)

Table 1. Number and percentage of women in the composition of the Comité National Français de Géographie (2006).

	2006	Total	%
Board	<i>Elected board</i>	7	42
Council	<i>Elected council</i>	20	30
	<i>Non-elected council</i>	17	6
Commissions ⁽¹⁾	<i>Presidents</i>	22	36
	<i>Vice-presidents</i>	21	49
	<i>Members</i>	559	29

Source : Comité National Français de Géographie (CNFG website)

⁽¹⁾ **24 COMMISSIONS IN 2006. NO COMMISSION ON GENDER AND GEOGRAPHY HAS YET BEEN ASKED FOR, BUT THE REQUEST FOR A COMMISSION ON SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY WAS REJECTED A FEW YEARS Ago.**

Directions of research

- 8 An analysis of doctoral theses and of recent publications including gender or women's issues gives an indication of trends in authorship, themes and geographical areas of research. Table 2 that identifies registered doctoral theses in geography, urbanism and planning¹² which have gender or woman/women as key words or in the title demonstrates that there has been an obvious increase in numbers over time. Though the majority are by women, there has been an increase in the number by men. Additionally, some shift in the location of their production is evident in recent years with increasing representation of provincial in addition to Paris-based authors, as well as shift from "women" to "gender" issues. When we turn to journal articles, it is evident that special thematic issues of journals have been very important in accounting for the publications on gender. Notable are special issues of *Espace*, *Populations*, *Sociétés* (Creton, 2002, 2004), of *Montagnes Méditerranéennes* (Louargant, 2004) and of *Géographie et Cultures* (Barthe & Hancock, 2006). A bibliographical analysis of 77 articles appearing since 2000, mostly published in the above journal issues¹³, again shows women to be principal authors, though one-third have a male author alone or with others. In some of these issues, authors from outside France make up a significant number of contributors¹⁴ but of the 55 authors (or groups of authors) residing in France, two-thirds are based outside the Paris region, illustrating the dispersal of interests in women-gender.

Table 2. Evolution of the number of doctoral theses on gender/women (1982-2006).

	<i>Sex of Author</i>			<i>Location</i>		<i>Key-word of reference</i>	
	female	male	unkn.	Paris	province	women	gender
1982-89	5	1		3	3	6	

1990-99	12		1	8	5	13	
1982-99	17	1	1	11	8	19	
2000-06	23	6	1	11	19	20	10
<i>Total</i>	40	7	2	22	27	39	10

Source : Fichier Central des Thèses (Nanterre) updated by D. Creton

- 9 When the geographical distribution of regions of study in theses and articles are compared (Table 3) we note differences in foci. Whereas a little more than half the theses deal with Africa, France is the most important site for research reported in journal articles. The African orientation of theses is a post-colonial outcome of the former French political hegemony in some parts of the region; it is also attested by the African origin of a large proportion of doctoral students, who also leave university after the completion of their doctoral degree. As for key-words, authors of journal articles use a wider range of words in the field of gender than the doctoral students do : 17 of them refer to “women” solely, 52 to “gender”, three to “men/and women”, two to “homosexuality” and “masculinity” and three to “sex” and “sexuality”. It is also the case that the question of words generates debates among French geographers and there are some resistances to the use of “gender” both inside and outside the field of gender/women/sex.

Table 3. Number and percentage (1982-2006).

	<i>Doctorates</i>	%	<i>Articles</i>	%
<i>France</i>	8	20	30	46
<i>Europe</i>	3	8	15	23
<i>Africa</i>	20	51	9	14
<i>India/Iran</i>	5	13	6	9
<i>Others</i>	3	8	5	8
<i>Total</i>	39	100	65	100
<i>No location</i>	10		12	
<i>Total</i>	49		77	

Source : <http://www.fct.u-paris1.fr/>

- 10 Tables 4 and 5 report the thematic emphases in doctoral theses and recently published articles. They show a fairly wide range of topics, with orientation to urban life and the city and labour markets common in both categories, and rural, environment, and development themes more common in the theses, possibly related to the greater

proportion of theses on African locations. Other characteristics of the research are that interdisciplinary and international studies appear to have contributed to the introduction of gender into geography, for example, in the development and migration studies; additionally, public policies are increasingly the focus of research, particularly of the studies that look at the intersections of domestic and paid work, of the private and public spheres, and of the connections between work/mobility and migration.

Table 4. Doctoral theses by thematic groups in absolute number and percentage (1982-2006).

<i>Thematic group</i>	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Doctoral theses</i>	<i>%</i>
urban life and the city		14	29
labour market, activities	poverty, violence, insertion of migrants, image, mobility	12	24
rurality, environment, development	migration, family economics, tourism, sport, economic behaviour	14	29
population, health	sustainable development, globalisation, agriculture, policies		
sexuality, masculinity	sexual discrimination, family, fertility, social innovation, gays	8	16
		1	2
<i>Total</i>		49	100

SOURCE : TYPOLOGY AFTER M.D. GARCIA-RAMON (1997), SEE TEXT FOR SOURCES

Table 5. Articles/papers by thematic groups in absolute number and percentage (1982-2006).

<i>Thematic group</i>	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Articles</i>	<i>%</i>
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theory and methodology		16	21
urban life and the city		29	38
	definitions, concepts, epistemology, synthesis		
	public space, temporality, poverty, violence, insertion of migrants, representation, image, mobility, gentrification, access, visibility, public policy		
	mobility, tourism, employment		
labour market, activities	planning, public policy land use, agriculture	9	12
rurality, environment, development	maternity, education, sexual discrimination, young people	10	13
population, health	nudity, homosexuality, gays	6	8
sexuality, masculinity, body		7	9
<i>Total</i>		77	100

SOURCE : TYPOLOGY AFTER M.D. GARCIA-RAMON (1997), SEE TEXT FOR SOURCES

Conclusion

- 11 Attention to gender issues develops in specific contexts. Until recently, the context of French geography does not seem to have been a very favorable one for such work. The increasing representation of women among French geographers in recent generations is likely a key factor prompting the increased attention to women/gender studies. Additionally, when international factors began to play a more important role in terms of networks, scientific exchanges, public policies, and funding, then we see a growth in gender studies. From that perspective, we might ask if the change is an opportunistic and trendy phenomenon or represents a genuine and sustainable movement. Still, the analysis of recent publications shows a diversity of interests on gender/women/ sex and a commitment to setting these issues within the scientific scope of French geography, contributing to debates about renewing the discipline¹⁵.
- 12 What of the future ? French geographers working on gender still have to gain visibility inside and outside the discipline nationally and internationally. To do so will require not only an expansion of teaching and research but also organisational development

including the formation of a network and communications such as a listserv and website. It means diffusing our knowledge to other geographers at conferences or through specific publications, and to students through courses and seminars that are currently being developed rather informally. French geographers wishing to advance attention to gender will need the support of the international community of gender geographers and to have a sustained will to contribute to contemporary developments in the field of gender.

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NOTES

1. Jacqueline Coutras and Jeanne Fagnani have been working on gender since the 1970s. They are researchers at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, not in universities.
2. "Genre, territoire, développement : quels regards géographiques ?", March 25-26 at the University of Lyon.
3. A single presentation by a visiting speaker in master's level course, a few lectures included in an existing course, or an interdisciplinary seminar with sociologists or historians.
4. "Man/Men" frequently being used to refer to both men and women with no gender distinction.
5. Part of the training of future secondary school teachers has long been done in universities in order to prepare them for competitive examinations (*agrégation*, *CAPES*). It has contributed to the persistence of a rather traditional curriculum and made it difficult to introduce lecturing on "new" topics.
6. Figures 1 and 2 derive from unpublished data compiled by the MENESR (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche).
7. *Professeurs* and *maîtres de conférences* (both in permanent positions) make up around 90 % of lecturers in geography departments.
8. *Professeurs* (rank A) and *maîtres de conférences* (rank B) form between 80 and 90 per cent of geographers in universities.

9. The Board is an authority composed of a president, vice-presidents, a secretary and a treasurer and whose role is to represent the CNFG and to implement decisions voted by the Council.
 10. Members by right are former members of the Board but co-opted members may come from outside the academic world.
 11. It should be noted that some commissions do not have a president – or a vice president – at the moment ; the former being a sign of possible inactivity.
 12. Figures must be taken as estimates of trends as, unfortunately, the classification for doctoral theses does not distinguish geography from urbanism and planning. Nevertheless, there has been a growing overlap between the various disciplines in research. When looking at data on *Professeurs* and *Maîtres de Conférences*, urbanism and planning appear to be more male-dominated than geography.
 13. The remainder comes from the journals published by departments of geography.
 14. In the two thematic issues of *Espace, Populations, Sociétés*, authors from outside France account for almost half the contributors.
 15. See the conference of the *Groupe Dupont* in Avignon, June 2006 : <http://www.groupe-dupont.org/ColloqueGeopoint/Geopoint06/Resumes.htm> and the e-mail letter (for members only) of the *Association Française pour le Développement de la Géographie*, May 2006 : <http://www.afdg.org/spip/>
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ABSTRACTS

In recent years French geographers have undertaken research that either includes gender issues or focuses on questions of the geography of women. This is attested to by the publication of monographic issues of some journals as well as a colloquium held in 2004. The interest in gender and /or women is not new, but for a long time it remained barely visible and did not generate discussion within the discipline. This situation calls for an inquiry into the increased visibility of current research. How have developments been influenced by factors such as scientific, sociological, national and international contexts, and by the changing demographic make up of French geographers (by sex, generation, and status) ? The paper notes that attention to gender studies in French geography has largely been evident in relation to development, urban studies, migration and mobility, though gender geographers can also make important contributions to current debates on public policies, time geography, the impact of globalisation and urban violence.

Depuis quelques années, des géographes français(es) sont engagé(e)s dans des recherches intégrant des problématiques de genre ou s'intéressant à une géographie des femmes; ceci est attesté notamment par la publication de numéros thématiques dans des revues et par la tenue d'un colloque en 2004. Cet intérêt pour le genre et/ou les femmes n'est pas nouveau mais il est demeuré longtemps peu visible et n'a pas donné lieu à questionnement ou débat au sein de la discipline. Il convient de s'interroger sur la plus grande visibilité des travaux actuels au regard de l'évolution d'un certain nombre de paramètres que sont les divers contextes, scientifiques et socio-politiques, nationaux et internationaux, la structuration de la population des géographes français (génération, sexe et statut).

Si la diffusion des questions de genre s'est effectuée via les études/programmes de développement, les études urbaines et le domaine des migrations et des mobilités, les géographes

du genre contribuent aussi aux débats actuels sur les politiques publiques, les questions de temporalités, les impacts de la mondialisation, les violences urbaines.

INDEX

Mots-clés: genre, géographie française, géographes, épistémologie

Keywords: gender, French geography, geographers, epistemology

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