

# TOWARDS GRADUATE WORK IN WOMEN'S STUDIES

Jo Vellacott

*Il y a quinze ans déjà des femmes dans nombreuses universités canadiennes ont commencé à élaborer et à mettre en place d'abord des cours ensuite des programmes en études de la femme. L'ambiance d'aujourd'hui est peut-être encore moins propice qu'hier, mais en dépit de cela les programmes se développent et nous envisageons maintenant le travail au niveau de la maîtrise.*

*A partir d'une expérience vraiment limitée, nous allons poser ici des questions (pas des réponses) au sujet des études avancées en études de la femme – le besoin, les objectifs, les ressources, et plusieurs formats variables que de tels programmes pourraient adopter.*

When I was asked to write on this topic, it was more by virtue of my position in a women's studies institute – Simone de Beauvoir – than by virtue of the extent of our existing graduate programme at Concordia University. Because I think we are potentially exceptionally fortunate in having such a centre, I shall be talking about the particular kind of programme at the Master's level that I would like to see developed, given a strong undergraduate centre with a core faculty.

I must stress that I speak from a limited experience. Simply put, we do not yet have a Master's in Women's Studies at Concordia. But we do have a number of students who are, in effect, taking their Master's in Women's Studies by making use of a provision for a Special Individual Programme at this level; under this provision a student who can demonstrate that s/he knows what s/he wants to do and that it does not fit exactly into any one existing category or discipline, and who can find faculty from several disciplines to work with, can design her or his own programme. A supportive Dean of Graduate Studies has been of great help in making this work well.

Partly because of our undergraduate programme, partly because we have this existing opportunity, we get a constant flow of enquiries. Many do not, in fact, come to fruition, for a variety of reasons, which I do not need to go into here. But

these enquiries, as well as the ones that do continue into the programme, give me something of a pool from which to draw my impressions of the need for, and nature of, a possible programme.

That there is an extensive demand from students is beyond dispute. But student demand may not be the only criterion of the need for an extended graduate programme. A second factor is career opportunity, currently hard to assess in any field; clearly we all hope that there is and will be an increasing market for the expertise of women's studies graduates in business, industry, the professions and all levels of government. When I am at my most optimistic, and believe that we can continue the advances of the past few years, I am sure that this is so. But these may not be the important roles to be filled by our women graduates; in any event, the women's cause can only benefit by the existence of a body of conscious and qualified women.

Within the universities, I am sure we are all determined to hang on to what we have gained and to continue our expansion. To do this in women's studies, we must recognize that, right now, we should be educating our replacements. Very few of us teaching in women's studies core programmes have degrees in women's studies – they did not exist when we went to school. But soon there will be an expectation of this kind of interdisciplinary specialization; and if we don't get busy and offer graduate programmes in Canada, we will once more be importing our faculty from the United States and elsewhere. Although there is an important international component, and should be a strong intercultural component to women's studies, it is nevertheless true that the study starts with women's experience, starts where the students are, and Canadian women have a Canadian experience.

The nature of the demand for graduate opportunities is perhaps even more exciting than its extent. The fact that in my present job I sit in a women's studies institute wearing the label "Women's Studies Professor" rather than a disciplinary label

probably means that a far wider range of proposals is brought to me than I would ever hear about if I were located in a history/English/sociology/classics department. The diversity promises a real challenge for all of us for the future, and indeed even in the present. We have had, have now, or shortly expect to have in the special individual programme, students combining the women's studies angle with any one or more of the following components: film studies, fine arts, literature in English, literature in French, history, communications studies, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, classics, and translation. Enquiries come from a still wider range: applied social science, anthropology, education, peace studies, health sciences, religion, Spanish literature, economics, with nibbles even from engineering and commerce.

Running through all this diversity, I am also struck by the authentic women's studies thread present in every proposal: the feminist theoretical framework which the students are hoping to develop.

One of the goals these observations lead me to see as important is that of providing a place where students can work on feminist topics in a feminist, as against a masculinist, environment; where, too, interdisciplinarity will be part of the climate, and where the common element in the work of those studying in so many diverse fields will be explored together. When I say "a place," I mean it literally, however utopian it may seem for the present; the value is great of having a physical location for a women's studies programme (graduate or undergraduate), and not having it scattered between departments, or existing as a marginally welcome guest within a traditional department. (Guests, in any case, are not expected to stay for ever.) There may, of course, be situations where the relationship is a fully satisfactory one; the main point I am making is that, ideally, there needs to be almost daily opportunity for students and faculty to meet informally, across disciplines and outside class. I won't go for Leacock's smoking room, but what about a reading room and some coffee?

Important as is a place to stand, other resources are obviously essential. There must be adequate faculty within the women's studies department, and a substantial amount of support must come from faculty in other departments. At the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, for our undergraduate programme (and of course for our technically non-existent graduate programme as well), we have a very small full-time faculty (in fact, at the time of writing, I am she), and we have also a cross-appointed sessional instructor. We have a system of "fellows" – members of other departments who take an interest in the women's studies programme and the Institute's other activities. Some, but not all, of these give courses recognized for credit in our programme. The Principal and the Associate Principal both hold part-time positions in the Institute and are tenured in their own departments. For adequate support for a graduate programme, more full-time faculty would be needed within the Institute, and this network would have to be widened and deepened; already, students in the special programme not infrequently make contacts for us.

What I have said must already suggest the kind of programme which might meet the needs as I see them. I should say that I do not at all think of this as the only model – it just is one that I should personally like to see, and that I would like comments on, recognizing the limitations of my experience and the fact that it has been acquired in the extraordinary multicultural and bi-

lingual community of Montreal. I choose here to ignore the eternal tension between what is most to be desired and what can hope to gain acceptance within the larger institution, not because I do not know how real this tension is, but because it is quite outside the scope of so short a paper, and has political and financial components which will vary from place to place.

For the programme itself: one of the first qualities I would hope to see designed into it would be flexibility. By this I mean, first, that there should be an immense width of subject matter open to students, limited only by their need to find the appropriate persons to work with them. Secondly, the flexibility should extend to methodology. Women's studies should not be afraid to be innovative; if possible, alternatives to a straightforward thesis might be allowed, so that women could use project work, a service internship, a spell of political action, the writing of a play or the making of a film, for example, with a report where appropriate, in place of the traditional requirement. Care must be taken to build in opportunity for theoretical analysis. There might be many or few who would choose this route, but valuable in itself, the option would also contribute to my third requirement: that is, that account be taken of the circumstances in which many women students find themselves. We must listen to our own voices as we academically analyse the poverty of the female sex, the high proportion of female single parents, and

so on. Analysis has not so far led to a cure; meanwhile we must try to build in provision for delays, for part-time study, for the blood, sweat and tears of women's lives, which may at times make an impossible dream out of something like the setting aside of four clear summer months for the writing of a thesis. It makes little sense to see students fail to reach the high standards of which they are capable because of arbitrarily imposed time pressures and irrelevant criteria.

My fourth good brings me back to the course content, and provides some counterbalance to the wide diversity of which we have spoken. I see a need for a solid core programme in feminist studies, obligatory for all women's studies graduate students. This could ensure a theoretical framework, a critical basis to apply to the varied disciplinary work undertaken, a firm knowledge of feminist writings, some interdisciplinary understanding, and some familiarity with feminist research resources in many different areas. Last, but far from least, students would explore together the feminist dimension of their work, identifying the common element across the boundaries of the subject areas into which the other parts of their work would be taking them, individually.

It goes without saying that rigorous standards of scholarship and research should be maintained – rigorous, but not necessarily bound by tradition. The new material which is the subject matter of women's studies demands the development of new methods for its exploration.

In conclusion, either the momentum of the women's movement will continue, or we shall slip back from what gains we have made. A corps of well-qualified women and, one hopes, some men, with a clear understanding of the issues, and working in a variety of fields, may be the best insurance for continued advance. But the programme should more than provide the much-needed opportunity for advanced degrees in women's studies: it could provide the intellectual climate for ground-breaking research.

*Jo Vellacott is Women's Studies Professor at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Concordia University, Montreal.*



Jo Vellacott (right)