

A Decade of Women's Studies

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On présente ici une vue d'ensemble de la façon dont les études de la femme ont fait leur apparition durant la dernière décennie, et on parle de la direction possible que prendra cette discipline.

A questionnaire was sent to contacts in secondary schools, community colleges, universities and women's centres across Canada, designed to elicit specific information about Women's Studies courses. The response was gratifying, and not only because of the respondents' generosity and willingness to share. The personal way in which the comments were phrased made it clear that behind the mass of statistics and course descriptions lay a profound commitment to Women's Studies. I am deeply grateful to everyone who answered. I want to emphasize that this subject deserves a much more detailed study. It is clear from even such a limited survey as this that an extensive body of material is available which cannot be adequately dealt with here.

Women's Studies were almost non-existent in 1970. Most of the responses to the query 'Where were we ten years

ago?', indicated little or no structured Women's Studies courses and few resources, although in some places informally organized groups of women faculty members and students were beginning to meet. One of the few courses available in the early Seventies was in women's history, organized by Jill Conway and Natalie Davis at the University of Toronto. They were able to find a remarkable amount of older literature by and about women. A considerable amount of material that threw light on the work and lives of women through the ages was available, although many of the historical studies were unsophisticated and uncritical. At Sir George Williams (now Concordia University) Greta Nemiroff and Christine Allen were beginning to formulate what was to become the introductory course to the Women's Studies program there—'Women's Identity and Image: Historical Perspectives' and 'Contemporary Issues.' Resources were few 'except for de Beauvoir, Friedan, Horney and Rossi and some novels with a feminist theme.' They managed by xeroxing, scrounging, cutting and pasting. Respondents who teach in schools of social work report that in 1970 there were no Women's Studies programs and only 'sexist curricula and methodology.' Courses surfaced in some secondary schools in 1973-74. Teachers credit 'energy that had been simmering for years,' perhaps because some high school teachers, educated during the idealistic Sixties, were ready to question and challenge the system.

Questioning is the theme common to many of the responses: questioning oppression, questioning how 'comprehensive' disciplines such as anthropology and history could lack (as they did) any concrete analysis of women's place in a culture. At the same time a sense of fragmentation and uncertainty are evident in the replies. Curricula grew haphazardly as individual women put together courses based on their own interests. Various action committees proposed programs and individual women experienced anger and traumatic experiences. The teachers report that feelings of uncertainty prevailed and energy that should have been channelled into concentrating on 'legitimate and logical premises' was used in fighting merely for survival.

The opposition to these early initiatives ranged from virtually none to considerable. A common criticism was the unwillingness to give the courses academic credibility because their focus was often on creativity, feelings and consciousness-raising. Courses were described as being

'just rap sessions' and it was claimed that 'the study of man includes women' and therefore there was no need for special courses. It was predicted that such courses would all be 'politically oriented.' The academic credibility issue was one of the rationales given for cross appointments; that is, such arrangements would increase academic credibility and also 'the person would have somewhere to go if (when) Women's Studies ceased to exist.'

In addition to the basic feminist texts there have been many important resources—the overwhelming one, the willingness of women to expend enormous amounts of time and effort to develop courses. Many of the courses began as non-credit courses—non-credit because they were not 'legitimate' in the eyes of the patriarchal structure. However, the communication and awareness generated by the early courses strengthened the later studies. This happened via conferences where women from across Canada met and encouraged each other and exchanged ideas and course outlines with a generosity that has never been evident in male academics. In addition, there are an increasing number of Canadian texts and scholarly publications—including journals—that are devoted entirely to the discipline of Women's Studies.

The formation of women's caucuses on campuses helped women to identify each other as they worked to get Women's Studies accredited. Many women spoke of the important influence of speakers such as Germaine Greer and Robin Morgan and of the credibility gained by the setting up of campus lecture series focussing on feminist speakers and issues.

Changes were made in programs over the years, mainly in response to student evaluation and changing staff interests. Respondents pointed out the growing interests of male students. Earlier difficulties in the development of graduate courses in English departments (caused by an underdeveloped critique of Canadian literature) have now diminished. In fact Canada is unique in having such a strong group of fine women writers. No Canadian literature course can ignore Laurence, Atwood, Munro, Engel, not to mention the Quebec writers.

Teacher respondents said that few of them changed their course material to accommodate initial criticism. Rather they 'concentrated on making the proposal (and the course) solid and academically defensible,' and then went on to defend it. In response to the question of growth pattern and attitudinal change they noted a return to conservatism. Recently, students

'seem to want information rather than analysis.' While interest in Women's Studies has increased, few courses have been added, leading to staffing problems. Some women feel they were more optimistic in earlier days about the future of Women's Studies and the changes that could be effected. They reported problems in trying to obtain consensus about the aims and objectives of the courses; along with this were different ideas about priorities. It was stated many times that in attempting to clarify a feminine perspective women have come to value each other's support and honest criticism. Starting a new discipline without guidelines, resources or academic backing tests the stamina, intelligence and guts of those involved. That women have established Women's Studies as an *accepted* area of study is 'some cause for optimism—I suppose.'

Respondents' opinions on whether student awareness has increased were mixed. On the positive side:

A significant number of women who are single-a-second time are not satisfied to go into low paying jobs. They are making efforts to complete bachelors or graduate degrees in order to qualify for more challenging, higher salaried positions.

A significant number of married women are pursuing further studies either concurrently with teaching activities or in preparation for re-entry into the profession.

A greater number of undergraduate women students are entering teaching education programs after one or more years of experience in some other part of the work force. Their awareness of the status of women has been enhanced by their perceptions of opportunity and relative pay accorded them in industry and business.

Six or seven years ago one had to give lengthy explanations about 'why Women's Studies.' Not now—people are aware of what they want. Now it is not shocking and controversial to re-examine studies of non-human primates and see that a male-focussed observation system has given us a limited impression of some species. Now it is 'main stream' to consider the role of women in ritual, subsistence patterns, etc. This has spilled over into regular classes as well.

On the other hand:

I notice a disturbing complacency—tendency for students to say 'things used to be problematic but they've

changed rapidly and now things are OK,' or 'your generation had problems but ours is fine.' Further discussion makes it clear that these same students are not particularly aware of issues and their own experiences are not really very much different from mine.

There have been cutbacks in support for Women's Studies in many places, reflecting current economic restrictions. Sometimes these courses are seen as frills and are the first to go. More often they have suffered equally with other courses. The results have been curtailment of programs and community out-reach initiatives. This is particularly distressing because of growing interest in women's courses, especially in the area of continuing education. There is a need to respond to women returning to school and concern was expressed that in the future they may well be taught by men who are not sensitive to the problems that women face.

Where do we go from here and what do we hope for? Dozens of strategies for the future were suggested. Opinion was divided on whether we should work to integrate Women's Studies into all disciplines. Some see this as desirable, others fear being co-opted and believe that Women's Studies must be protected as a separate discipline. There is also disagreement about consciousness-raising—some feel it is still necessary, others that it is more important to move toward more rigorous feminist research, writing and teaching. In these areas the following propositions were made:

- Encourage innovative techniques such as history of material culture, family history, oral history.
- Encourage the production of more good theses, articles and books (we may have to write them ourselves!)
- Bombard publishers so that good textbooks will begin to devote adequate space to Women's Studies topics.
- Develop topical, issue-oriented courses with a feminist approach, being aware of the dilemma confronting women when they must choose between offering a course and concentrating on their own research. In other words can we, or should we, resist the temptation to 'help out'?
- Exert pressure on male colleagues to integrate *women's* issues into their courses and conferences.

- Boycott sexist texts and criticize sexist scholarship and teaching patiently and firmly wherever we find them.

Affirmative action is seen by many as an important facet of Women's Studies.

- We should work toward a goal of 50 per cent women teaching history and related subjects in universities, colleges and schools.
- We must encourage women graduate students.
- We must hold onto the ground we have and guard against cutbacks.

It was noted that some of these strategies may occasionally mean supporting work and people about which we have some doubts, but the point is to support a variety of people and approaches in order to encourage debate and controversy. This controversy, however, should not be allowed to suppress potentially useful or interesting work. Nor should minor doubts about people's competence be a concern, because women scholars who have been out of the mainstream often start off with a relatively poor background or training. We have to encourage them to improve their skills. Communication among us all needs to be expanded and more conferences should be held to increase the network of information. An inexpensive who's who in women's organizations, universities, business and clubs was suggested. More contact with women in the community is needed and several women urged that we should guard against attempts to purge people in the Women's Movement who do not fit into the predominant political mode.

It's all too apparent that there is lots to do and some of us wonder whether we can sustain the effort needed to make permanent changes in curricula and public attitudes, given the male-dominated power structure in all educational institutions. On the other hand, we have come a long way since 1970 and one thing is clear—we now have a solid base of textual material that cannot be obliterated. We do have the energy and the will to share and encourage each other, and to see each other as individuals worthy of respect. One woman expressed it well for all of us:

We must not give up or our granddaughters will think they are discovering Women's Studies in 2040 AD.