

# Women's Studies: An Inclusive Concept for an Inclusive Field

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## Les Etudes de la femme—concept global

Dans cet article, l'auteur définit les études de la femme comme étant une combinaison de cours académiques, de programmes communautaires et de mesures positives. Chaque élément se préoccupe de conscientisation, de l'accumulation des connaissances et de changement social. La force des études de la femme réside dans sa faculté de tout inclure — la théorie avec le vécu. A partir de cette méthodologie inclusive, les femmes, en tant que groupe, peuvent se concentrer sur les développements qui sont aptes à influencer leur devenir.

### Introduction

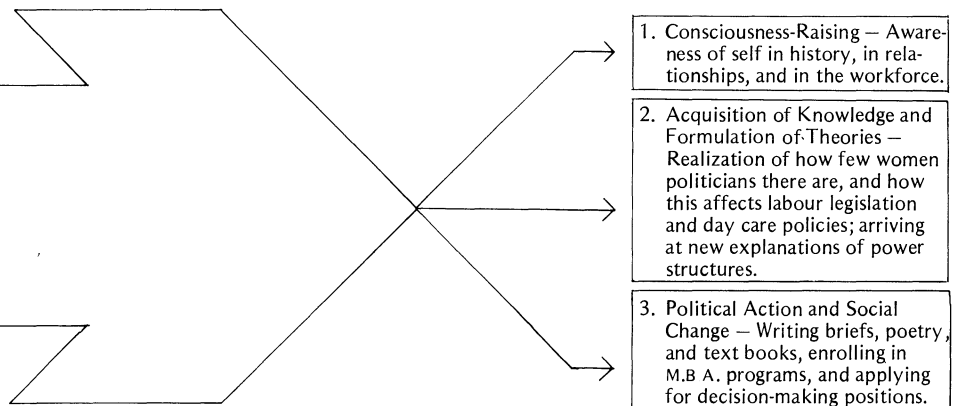
Women's Studies is about social change; that must be seen as its final goal. Women's Studies, in the broadest sense of the term, includes any organized learning experience which enables women to alter the unequal distribution of power between the sexes. Although it is an academic-sounding term, it is not an academic field in the traditional sense. In fact, it represents a new way of integrating material which challenges the barriers constructed by conventional scholastic structures. The content of courses and programs in Women's Studies refuses to fit neatly into existing disciplines. The teaching method necessarily unites the subjective and the objective, the experiential and the theoretical. It is this inclusiveness which gives Women's Studies its strength and its power. As we gather information, raise awareness, and gain recognition it becomes obvious that these Studies pull together educational processes for women from all backgrounds and of all ages.

- A. Academic Courses
- B. Community Programming
- C. Affirmative Action

Women's Studies, with its roots in the feminism of the Sixties, is developing alongside the Women's Movement and reflects both the uniqueness and the complexities of the movement itself. The Women's Movement has developed through a process of social change in which the diverse nature of the issues, the changing leadership, and the unorthodox method of co-operation and communication have allowed a rich variety of talented people to contribute. And the areas of education which fit under Women's Studies do the same. We must preserve this uniqueness and understand the complexity.

This article defines Women's Studies as an 'umbrella' concept incorporating *academic courses*, *community programming*, and *affirmative action*. These are directed toward women as students, as members of the society, and as workers. They are all new in both form and content, and there is no blueprint for their action or organization. Even within each category, there is no single model. But, although the structures and the politics vary from one program to another, they are mutually supportive in forming a solid basis for change. And they fit under the overall heading of Women's Studies because within all three areas (academic courses, community programming, and affirmative action), three essential processes occur: *consciousness-raising*; *acquisition of knowledge and formulation of theories*; *political action and social change*.

The following diagram illustrates the relationships that link these three areas of study and these three processes together.



### *From Consciousness-Raising to Social Change*

How do these processes come together? They interrelate in the following way. Consciousness-raising occurs when women share their life experiences and conditions and thus become aware of the common ground of their existence. As a woman expresses or describes an event to another, her own understanding of that event becomes clearer. What had been perceived as an isolated incident in the life of one woman becomes one of many such incidents in the lives of all women. The shame, guilt, and competitiveness that had previously kept women apart now binds them into a sisterhood.

When women learn to speak out it is a crucial step on the road to liberation. And this is not only because we are at last acquiring a voice, but because facts are surfacing that can be communicated, collated, analysed, and transformed into banks of resource material. With this information we are formulating new theories which explain the behaviour and situations of women and men. In consciousness-raising groups, women also experience a new form of organization, different from those to which they are accustomed. These groups are more organic and less structured, and are extremely effective. All this knowledge becomes a powerful agent for political action when used to reshape the lives of women and the society in which they live. And changes in our personal and social lives lead to consciousness-raising at an even higher level. The entire process of acquisition of more knowledge and organization for more social and political action occurs again. These processes are interlocking, spiralling, and on-going.

Two specific experiences described in the literature on women further illustrate this relationship between consciousness-raising and social change. The first refers to a study entitled *Housewives in Women's Liberation: Social Change as Role Making*, by Marylee Stephenson.<sup>1</sup> In this study a number of housewives in an early Women's Liberation Movement group in Vancouver, B.C., came together because as individuals they felt that they had failed to live up to the expectations society had of them as housewives. After their meeting each woman realized that her problem was not unique; other women were just as confused and frustrated. From the support of the group, the women were able to re-evaluate their expectations of themselves and of their roles within the family. Many began to cut out blocks of time for themselves, then insisted on sharing of household duties, and in this way their patterns of interaction with their children altered, especially in relation to sex-role behaviour. The significance of individual women making changes within their own families must not be underestimated. It could change the entire structure of family as we know it, and the structure of society. As a result of this group, the women acquired the awareness, the skills, and the confidence to support a new view of their roles as housewives. All these conditions are necessary to bring about social change.

The second example comes from a book entitled *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*, by New York Radical Feminists.<sup>2</sup> Women discovered in consciousness-raising sessions that rape, or some form of sexual assault, had been a part of almost every woman's experience. They concluded, therefore, that this type of oppression was not personal, but political — a part of the overall oppression of women. Their next step was to hold a public Speak-Out on rape and then a Conference. In order to present papers, members of the organizing committee conducted research on rape. This led to the realization that an understanding of this social — not personal — problem depended upon an analysis of the power structures of such male-dominated institutions as education, law, medicine, psychiatry, films, and the media. What emerged from the Conference were proposals for law reform, opening of rape crisis centres, and formation of self-defence courses. This is political action.

The following analysis shows how this same interconnected process leading to social change occurs in each of the areas of Women's Studies — within academic courses, community programs, and affirmative action.

#### *A. Academic Courses*

Both the teaching/learning process and the curriculum content of academic courses in Women's Studies challenge the authority of traditional bodies of knowledge. In her article entitled 'Women and the Power to Change', Florence Howe points out that the academic courses in Women's Studies provide the strategy for social change because they build on 'the social realities of particular lives' in order to develop 'consciousness about one's life in contrast or comparison to the norms that prevail'.<sup>3</sup> In order to investigate or establish any body of knowledge, e.g., history or psychology, one must have this initial awareness of one's own life and experiences. For instance, in order to understand Freud, we must realize that our experience is the experience of all women, with the result that much of Freudian theory can be debunked.

Barbara Bellow Watson, in her preface entitled 'The Proper Study', suggests that one function of Women's Studies courses is to shed new light on the 'distortions and omissions' about women found in the traditional curriculum, and consequently to enable women to know themselves better. Because the study of the individual and of society are inseparable, this knowledge will lead not only to self-realization on the part of individual women, but to a clearer understanding of society. 'Every time we correct a misconception about women, we correct a misconception about society. Every time we correct a historical or psychological conclusion, we also correct, implicitly or explicitly, the method that led to that conclusion.'<sup>4</sup>

An experience that stays with me occurred when I was teaching a course on Women in Society. At the end of the term a young woman said, 'Taking this course has altered my life.' And a woman who knows that her life has been changed by one fifteen-week course cannot keep that change to herself. She will gradually bring about changes in her own family. She will work toward changes in her community, creating more and better day care, getting more women elected to political office, or improving laws on rape and labour legislation. In fact, continuing contact with students from this course demonstrates that many of them have become involved in some aspect of change for women.

#### *B. Community Programming*

One analysis of the effects of community programming can be found in the report, *Learning Opportunities for Women in Canada: Perceptions of Educators*, prepared by Janet Willis.<sup>5</sup> It is based on the results of a cross-Canada questionnaire sent to people involved in community education for women. It clearly demonstrates the overall importance of the various courses, workshops, and seminars offered to women. Whether they come from educational institutions, government, or social agencies, such programs lead to consciousness-raising, accumulation of knowledge and political action.

According to this research some of the effects of these programs on the participants were: enhanced self-image and more self-confidence; greater sense of competence and power to make decisions; improved physical and mental health and the conviction that women can begin solving their own problems. As a result of these changes in attitude some of the women entered the workforce or full time educational programs; some organized day-care centres and library discussion groups while others went into political offices on local school boards or city councils.

These programs also have an impact on the host agency or institution. A corollary to successful implementation of programming for women is the change in attitudes of staff and faculty, and of administration. People became more supportive towards future programming for women. The Report states that in some cases the institutional policies were changed when it was recognized that thirty- to fifty-year-old women are potential students for daytime programs. The administrators of the institutions involved also realized that these women students need special services and scheduling of classes at appropriate times. And this realization must lead to structural changes to accommodate this new group of students.

### C. Affirmative Action

The third area to be included as part of Women's Studies is affirmative action. This is a total program of education and change within an institution or organization that has as its goal the elimination of barriers preventing women from reaching their potential in the workforce. The first two steps in any successful affirmative-action program must be commitment on the part of top management, and research to determine where women are in the organization. The third and crucial step is the establishment of a comprehensive educational program to change the attitudes of women and men in the organization, and to teach women the necessary skills to achieve greater job mobility and control over their careers.

In order to do this it is necessary to provide small group workshops for the women employees. These are at a 'grass-roots' level and provide opportunity for consciousness-raising and the acquisition of specific skills, as well as general knowledge about women's status and potential. Effective speaking, career planning, power analysis and assertiveness training, all require skills that most women never think about — never mind put into practice. Workshops of this type are educational and point out the need for women to catch up on the skills, and change the attitudes that were acquired while they were 'growing up female'.

Affirmative action programs focus on the need for all members of the workforce to reassess their definitions of masculinity and femininity in relation to positions of power and status. For instance, a woman who is competent and knowledgeable in her field should become a top executive, and

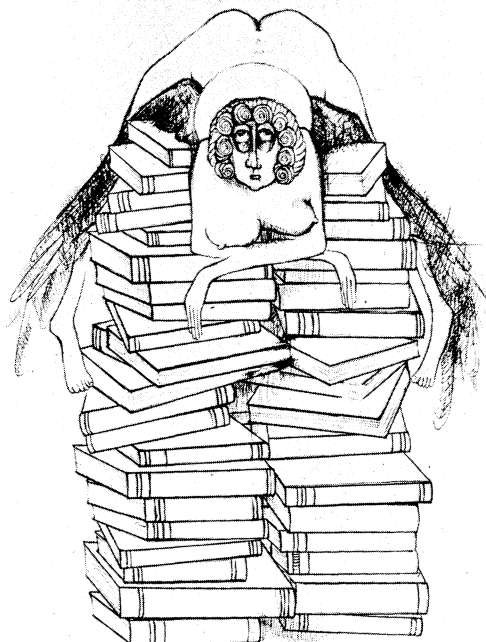
men who work for her should not feel threatened just because she is a woman. Her expertise should be judged, not her sex.

This view of affirmative action underlines the similarity between women learning to appreciate their experiences through the study of an academic course on 'Women in Literature' and women learning in an affirmative-action workshop. The study of women and the law is equally appropriate to academic courses, community programming, and affirmative action. This is why affirmative-action programming should be seen as a basic part of Women's Studies. As in the areas of academic courses and community programming it provides an opportunity for women to experience consciousness-raising, to acquire knowledge and a new understanding of behaviour, and to act politically for social change.

The philosophy behind this article was in fact thrashed out during the initial editorial-board meetings while we were all formulating the How and the Why of this journal. The editorial-board members of the journal all work in one or more of these three areas of Women's Studies. We want to help to break down the barriers between the education of women in the classroom, in the community, and in the workforce. We believe this will unite women and give them power. By raising consciousness, by sharing knowledge, we will help each other to understand why we have been in a dependent and powerless state. In doing so we will create a structure and a process so conducive to political action and social change, that there will be no turning back. This is what we mean by Women's Studies and this is why this journal is published.

### References

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