

SO YOU WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD?

Women's studies is alive and well, taught in every corner of the globe (increasingly on the Internet, too) and spilling out of classrooms and into activism. *Ms.* asked nine women's studies scholars to reflect on the burgeoning field and how it is transforming students, universities, communities and feminism itself.

BY MICHELE TRACY BERGER

WHAT DO A CIVIL RIGHTS lawyer, project coordinator at a breast cancer nonprofit, taxicab workers' organizer, field representative for a state legislator, biofuel entrepreneur, research analyst for HIV/AIDS policy, sexual-assault-victims' advocate and a male basketball player have to do with women's studies?

They each were educated in the field, and their choice of study and work speak to how the discipline—now celebrating more than 40 years as part of the higher-education curriculum—spills beyond classroom borders to effect real-world change.

Take Rebecca Mann, who became involved with NOW while doing an undergraduate minor in women's studies, and went on to earn her master's in women's and gender studies at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Post-graduation she worked for an international women's reproductive-health advocacy group and directed outreach for the LGBT group Equality North Carolina. Currently a consultant to smaller nonprofits, Mann believes that the challenges she faced as a campus activist, along with her women's studies courses, prepared her for community organizing in her postgraduate life.

How about Bhairavi Desai? She majored in women's studies at Rutgers University and then cofounded the New York Taxi Workers Alliance in 1998 to improve working conditions in the taxi industry. Like many graduates, she found that women's studies opened up unexpected life opportunities and meaningful ways to combat inequality.

Or Pamela O'Leary. She earned a master's in applied women's studies at Claremont Graduate University and

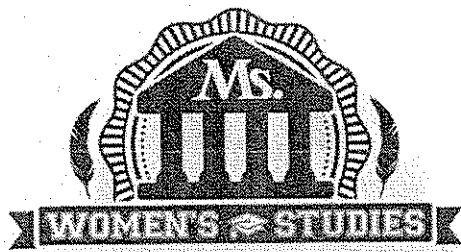
then worked for Rep. Carolyn Maloney. She's now executive director of the Public Leadership Education Network in Washington, D.C., which prepares women for public policy careers.

And have you read about college basketball star D.J. Gay? He made news not only for being a great point guard for San Diego State University but also for majoring in women's studies. Like so many others, Gay found his introduction to women's studies course to be transformative and eye-opening. That's because such courses provide students with a critical lens to view the world, and most feature a collaborative learning component that encourages them to take ownership of their education.

Gay also represents a growing trend in women's studies: men declaring it as their major or minor, perhaps because they've been raised in egalitarian households with parents who identify as feminist. They may enter women's studies classrooms to understand their role in society or, if they're queer men, to find a safe and engaging place to research and discuss issues of sexuality.

The first women's studies department was created in 1970 at Gay's alma mater, San Diego State, arriving on the heels of multiple social justice movements in which students and faculty were actively challenging the status quo of race and gender on their predominantly white male campuses. Feminist activism forced new questions about academic study, and students and instructors brought such topics as domestic violence, the feminization of poverty, and women's health to the classroom. Courses about feminist theory and women's roles in history multiplied, and the first women's studies professors served as pioneers by mapping the readings and perspectives.

Now, more than 40 years later, women's studies has a lot to crow about. More than any other discipline, it values the



interplay between scholarship, theory and activism, creating a new type of college student—and teacher—who is civically engaged, globally competent, self-reflective and dexterous in many disciplines. Women's studies graduates tend to pursue work that overlaps with their interest in advocacy, and they're thriving in diverse career fields, from the health professions to entrepreneurship. Women's studies teaches them that they can change the world—and they often do.

If you're unfamiliar with the field, you may wonder how learning about gender and health in Africa, studying popular-culture images of masculinity in the 20th century or learning about power and privilege all fit together. The simple answer is that women's studies is interdisciplinary, so gender, sexuality and other social identities are examined by looking at various cultures and historical periods and by employing diverse methods of inquiry.

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Women's studies began with an eye toward challenging what each of the academic disciplines took as common knowledge about human experience—demonstrating, through research and theory, that much of their knowledge base was biased and omitted female experiences. It also sought to challenge the oppression of women. And unlike most academic fields, which shy away from activism, women's studies acknowledges its deep social-justice roots. The scholarship and ideas developed and taught in women's studies classrooms inform the women's movement (as well as other social movements), and women's studies majors often participate in feminist actions. This on-the-ground engagement feeds back to questions that scholars pursue.

Forty years on, there is now more scholarly attention in women's studies to issues of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and ability as a way to understand the complexity of women's and men's lives—hence the inclusion of gender and sexuality in the titles of many departments and programs. This intellectual diversity has spurred the growth of other fields as well:

queer studies, peace studies, men's studies and more.

Also, women's studies scholarship is increasingly international and transnational in scope, as research considers power and difference across borders and through global processes. Topics in this realm can range from studying the relationship between transnational sex work and tourism to how global feminist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) solve policy challenges.

The breadth of women's studies scholarship these days, and its commitment to looking at different forms of interlocking oppressions, is evident at the well-attended National Women's Studies Association's (NWSA) annual conference. NWSA, the professional organization formed in 1977, has signaled to the academic community that women's studies is not a fad but here to stay. And, just as the field transforms, so does the association (see Page 42).

No one could have predicted the far-reaching impact of women's studies. These days, women's studies courses are offered at more than 700 institutions of higher learning, with women's studies ranking among the fastest-growing majors in the nation. It also flourishes beyond U.S. borders, with robust women's studies programs in every corner of the world (see Page 41).

The emphasis on critical thinking, translating learning into practice, and interdisciplinary training defines women's studies in undergraduate education. Students in the field are uniquely self-reflective, invested in their communities and in making a positive impact in the world. This "civic engagement" (see Page 44) isn't a traditional fix-the-world approach, though; women's studies asks students



Prominent feminist scholars at 2011 NWSA annual meeting, left to right: (front row) Bonnie Thornton Dill, Nikol Alexander-Floyd; (second row) Gina Dent, Abena Busia, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Angela Y. Davis, Lailah Farah; (third row) Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Betty Schmitz, Liza Fiol-Matta; (fourth row) Yi-Chun Tricia Lin, Vivien Ng

Hot Topics in Women's Studies



Where else but in women's studies would students get to take a class called "Politicizing Beyoncé," as occurred earlier this year at Rutgers University in New Jersey?

Rutgers' women's and gender studies department also offered such courses as "Gender and Human Rights" and "The Color of AIDS: The Politics of Race During the AIDS Crisis," but the Beyoncé one incited public conversations about college courses "lacking" intellectual rigor.

To appreciate the sexist and racist undertones of such arguments—an appreciation that any student who has ever taken a women's studies course would most certainly have—we would need to imagine reaction to a course in another department that used a pop-culture theme. Say, if a chemistry department offered "CSI: The Chemistry Behind Forensics," or if a business department listed "Mark Zuckerberg and Start-Up Culture." Would the intellectual rigor of such courses be questioned as was the one that dared take seriously a black woman pop icon and placed her in a context of black women's musical and intellectual traditions?

What makes women's studies courses so unique, intellectually enriching and appealing to diverse students is that, more than any other academic discipline, it places at the center of learning not just women but marginal groups of all persuasions (the poor, people of color, sexual minorities, immigrant communities, etc.). By taking seriously the lives and struggles of those deemed "not culturally important," women's studies encourages students to critically rethink the values they've been taught and that societal institutions justify.

This is often done through courses that draw on students' everyday experiences—from their exposure to media and pop culture (such as Arizona State University's "Sex and the City" class) to the social and cultural impact of technology (such as Southern Connecticut State University's "Women, Community, Technology"). This is also done through activism and internship opportunities (see Page 44).

More than anything, women's studies invites students to ground intellectual inquiries in political realities. It is why, when students graduate from such programs, they inevitably bring to their professions and personal lives a commitment to social transformation. Whether they have taken a course in environmental justice and sustainability, feminist religious thought, gender violence, constructed masculinities, poverty and public policy—or even "Politicizing Beyoncé"—they inculcate a passion to view their world differently and to change it.

—JANELL HOBSON

Women's Studies Brings Global Change



Twelve years ago, in an all-woman undergraduate women's studies class I was teaching at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago, I led a module on sexuality in which many students confessed they would not know how to navigate a threatening sexual encounter. These were young women who had been groomed to be "good girls"; they had never heard their voices reverberate in a public space without fear of recrimination, and they certainly didn't know how to loudly say "no!" So I asked each to shout out, one by one, "NO!" This was cathartic, challenging the idea that to be good means to be silent. We all experienced the collective power of *no*.

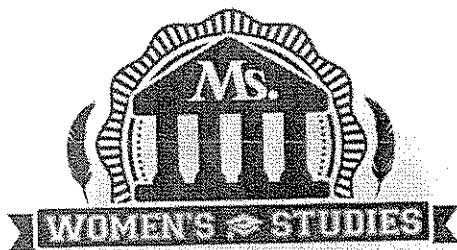
Women's studies programs outside of the United States, particularly within the African diaspora over the past two decades, have empowered women to say "no"—to discriminatory legislation, to social exclusion, to women's secondary positions in social and economic policy and to the daily acts of marginalization that are often excused as "culture." There are few parts of the globe that have not been touched by the exponential growth of women's studies: There are programs in about 65 countries, including Uganda, Lebanon and South Korea.

Within many countries in the global South, there have been close ties between academic women's studies and feminist activism, the latter pre-dating—and often supporting—the academic programs. Alongside the growth of women's studies has been a groundswell of legislative change, and although not always a united front, there has been some synergy among feminist academics, the women's movement and the state.

In Trinidad and Tobago, for example, the Domestic Violence Act was passed in 1991—two years before my alma mater, the University of the West Indies, established the Centre for Gender and Development Studies. Similarly, legislative activism provided land rights for women in Uganda around the same time that the Makerere University School of Women's and Gender Studies began in 1991.

The growth of women's studies and the women's movement internationally has been critical in reminding state leaders that half of their countries' citizens are women. Women's studies has allowed women to say "yes" to so much in their lives, but I still believe one of its major contributions has come from teaching women the power of saying "no!" to injustice.

—MICHELLE V. ROWLEY



to think about their own motivation to “do good” and to understand the historical and cultural specifics of the project they are undertaking—whether they’re working with a Cambodian NGO on a gender and sustainability project or staffing a rape-crisis-center hotline.

Recent research (by myself and Cheryl Radloff) reveals that 72 percent of women’s and gender studies students, in a survey of more than 900 graduates, were active in various or-

ganizations during their undergraduate careers—suggesting an incredible drive by students in the field to connect theory to lived experience. Such activism in local, state, national and global organizations helps shape life-long commitments to social justice and provides tools for leadership roles after graduation. Indeed, women’s studies graduates often seek employment in positions with a direct connection to gender issues, such as organizing for reproductive rights or working to empower victims of domestic violence. Others may take women’s studies training into innovative new professional arenas that are not necessarily gender specific.

Want to be a part of this educational vanguard? Want to talk with other women’s studies learners and educators about the role of gender in the Arab Spring uprisings, or the rise of Slut-Walks as a way to protest sexual violence and inequality, or the impact of health-care reform on women? You can, even if you’re long graduated from college (see Page 43). Women’s studies classes can now be accessed online anywhere and by anyone, not just enrolled undergraduates. The recent explosion of online learning is transforming how women’s studies is delivered and who receives it, and the shift creates opportunities for diverse, intergenerational educational communities.

Older and Wiser: The Transformation of NWSA



Forget the Botox and the plastic surgery: Growing older has never looked better for the field of women’s studies and for the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA).

Women’s studies grew out of the civil rights, student and women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and ’70s. Its earliest practitioners determined to include women’s experiences, voices and scholarship in university curricula. That vision was often met with resistance. Some of the field’s founders recall organizing planning meetings in the basement and women’s restrooms on campus because they were refused regular meeting space.

From those modest beginnings, women’s studies has become firmly entrenched and far-reaching. Fifteen universities now offer Ph.D.s, more than 40 offer master’s degrees and more than 650 offer undergraduate majors or minors. Women’s studies courses, and some degree programs, are now offered online as well, while feminist scholars at U.S. universities regularly partner with their global counterparts to address gender issues.

More than ever, the NWSA captures and reflects the ever-evolving vibrancy of the scholarship—profoundly critical, creative, transnational and intersectional. As it celebrates its 35th anniversary this year, the association, along with the field, has never been stronger, with more than 2,000 individual and institutional members worldwide. It hosts the only conference in the U.S. dedicated exclusively to the latest feminist scholarship, attracting more than 1,500 attendees, who can choose from more than 300 sessions on topics ranging from Middle Eastern feminisms to the Occupy Wall Street movement to the popularity of the *Twilight* saga.

To be sure, the organization’s future did not always look so bright. Women of color staged walkouts in its early decades to protest racism within NWSA and the field. Membership dropped sharply each time, and for a long while NWSA survived on a shoestring budget with volunteer leaders. But in its fourth decade, even as members continued to reference the walkouts, the leadership—now including a full-time executive director—initiated a visionary plan for the organization, made possible by a Ford Foundation grant. We now witness a re-energized NWSA with a growing membership, centered on cutting-edge feminist scholarships, conducted in dynamic, invigorating and, yes, often difficult dialogues.

In practice, NWSA’s leadership made a commitment to making scholarship by women of color central within its programs and services. The NWSA Women of Color Leadership Project for junior women faculty takes place at the annual conference, drawing as many as 40 participants, while scholar-activists such as Angela Y. Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have each delivered recent conference keynote addresses.

Other once-marginalized groups are moving up front at NWSA as well. At the upcoming 2012 conference in Oakland, Calif., for example, the Women of Color, Lesbian and Transgender Caucuses are collaborating on a program to discuss transforming the privileges of masculinity, gender and race into racial and gender justice.

Yes, we’re older and wiser. We like what we see in the mirror these days, and we can only imagine what the next 35 years might bring.

—ALLISON KIMMICH AND YI-CHUN TRICIA LIN

Despite the challenging economic times, the tremendous growth in women's studies and its burgeoning status and value in the overall college experience has secured its place within higher education. Being student-centered, putting theory into practice and encouraging a wide variety of perspectives and approaches are both its legacy and its path forward, and these principles—forged by women's studies pioneers—are increasingly mainstreamed as integral to the mission of universities.

During a 40-year symbiotic history, both feminism and women's studies have grown, adapted and changed. Neither entity can exist or reach its full potential without the other. Feminist activism must continue to challenge the contours of inequality shaping women's lives. And women's studies scholars must continue to teach students the skills that will embolden them to transform the world and conduct research that matters in the lives of women and men around the world. ■



Women's studies ranks among the fastest-growing majors in the nation.

Getting in Line with Online Ed



Women's studies can be found in classrooms all over the world these days, but also in a worldwide virtual classroom: the Internet.

Using engaging technology and content, online students have access to a wide range of courses no matter where they live. And you don't have to be a full-time student or even college-age: Online courses serve traditional university students, working students, returning students, out-of-state students and those who want to stay current with feminism no matter what their age or academic background. Like in-the-classroom study, online courses teach critical thinking and provide ideas and opportunities for creating feminist change at a local or even global level.

It is no surprise that students are attracted to these home-based courses, whether it's because they're easily accessible, or allow more flexibility within a busy work life, or allow students to work at their own pace. The number of online students in all fields of study is on the rise: According to the 2010 Sloan Survey of Online Learning, online college education increased its enrollment 21 percent from 2009–2010, with one-third of all college students taking at least one online course.

Online education may even provide a more effective learning experience for some students. For example, the large classroom lecture hall can be intimidating to some; when we are discussing a controversial or sensitive topic,

they can be reluctant to speak out, fearing that they don't know the right answer and will be embarrassed. The relative anonymity of online courses makes some students feel more secure and better able to engage in critical feminist discussions.

Here in the women and gender studies program at Arizona State University, we have seen our online offerings triple over the past two years, with some of our most popular classes now enrolling more than 400 students per section. Similarly, Oregon State University, according to women's studies instructor Kryn Freehling-Burton, has more than doubled the number of its online classes over the past two years. OSU began offering an online women's studies major in 2010, plus most of its online classes meet some sort of core requirement, "so we reach many more students than just our majors and minors," says Freehling-Burton.

If this sounds exciting to you, you're just keystrokes away from joining a class on gender, science and technology; or Muslim women; or weight and body image; or critical race studies; or even a course I teach, "Sex & the City," in which we examine the changing representations of women and sexuality in popular culture. You're sure to find something that will reflect your current feminist interests, stimulate new ones or let you catch up on what you have been missing.

—MICHELLE MCGIBBNEY VLAHOULIS



Taking Women's Studies to the Streets



Last fall, at Smith College in Northampton, Mass., students in Professor Elisabeth Armstrong's women's studies course "Women, Money and Transnational Social Movements" focused on the financial and housing crises. But rather than just writing papers on the topic, the students ventured out to nearby Springfield and worked with tenants and former homeowners. They joined vigils at houses due to be served eviction papers, visited houses advertised as foreclosed and even went to court with families fighting eviction. They researched and mapped how foreclosure patterns related to homeowners' nationality, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and family structure. Some created radio spots or worked on zines to spread the word about the anti-eviction group Project No One Leaves. The students even joined a rally in support of two groundbreaking city ordinances to protect tenants and homeowners.

Armstrong's course is an example of "civic engagement"—increasingly popular on college campuses today. Women's studies, with its activist roots and central focus on social justice, is at the forefront of this trend.

While some think of civic engagement as "giving time" or "doing good," it's much more than that, according to a recent report cosponsored by the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA).

The report shows that in women's studies, civic engagement focuses on difference, power and privilege—examining global connections to local issues and relating sexism to other forms of oppression, such as racism and classism. Armstrong's students learned to take economics into their own hands, not leave it to the "experts," because

economics is integral to feminist politics. Civic engagement pushed them, says Armstrong, to "actively incorporate theoretical ideas and more abstract concepts into the messy reality of daily life."

Such civic engagement can make a concrete difference in communities. Students of Professor Rachel Williams at the University of Iowa collaborated with incarcerated women at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women, researching their needs online and in the library while the incarcerated women themselves did field research with their peers. The two groups then synthesized their results and presented their work at a conference they organized with local health-care and social workers. The result: improved health care for the incarcerated women, plus a new feminist curriculum in the prison on healthy relationships. The experience challenged the college students' stereotypes of incarcerated women, taught them experientially about the devastating impact of the prison-industrial complex on women and children and enabled them to see how their work could create real and lasting social change.

According to the NWSA report, civic engagement in women's studies teaches students to "enter communities with humility as well as an openness to learning and personal transformation." Says report author Catherine Orr, professor of women's and gender studies at Beloit College in Wisconsin, "Women's studies has key lessons to offer about fostering civic engagement that will deepen student learning, contribute respectfully to communities and produce lifelong civic leaders."

—CARRIE BAKER AND BONNIE THORNTON DILL



Just over 40 years ago, women's studies did not yet exist as an academic field; these days, nearly all higher education institutions offer undergraduates the chance to take classes focused on the roles and struggles of women throughout the world. This growth could not have happened without private philanthropy as well as public support. But now, as philanthropic dollars are being diverted to other higher-education needs, women's studies faces new funding challenges. Fortunately, there are lessons to be learned from the past efforts of determined individual donors to sustain the scholarship and teaching that provides an intellectual foundation for advancing gender equity.

As early as the 1920s, a group of academic women and their male allies realized that women faced discrimination in faculty hiring in large public and private research universities. Their solution was to create endowed chairs exclusively for women faculty, stipulating that the salaries and terms of employment had to be identical to those of faculty men.

Decades later, women donors and male allies stepped up again to establish endowed chairs specifically for women's studies. For example, in 1980 Brown University reconceived its Nancy Duke Lewis Chair—established in 1967 for women faculty—to support scholarship in women and gender studies. In 1983, the University of Oregon received an endowment of \$3.5 million to fund The Center for the Study of Women in Society. And in 1984, a publicly

supported/privately funded partnership at Douglass College of Rutgers University created the Blanche, Edith and Irving Laurie New Jersey Chair in Women's Studies. Even though state funds supporting the Laurie Chair have been eliminated, the private endowment ensures the presence of visiting feminist scholars.

This long-term funding approach got a boost in 2000 when Duke University received \$3 million from Lisa Yun Lee and her husband, Marc Ewing, to endow a professorship and five fellowships in women's studies. To this day, the Duke gift remains the largest single donation to support women's studies in a private university.

Endowing chairs, centers and programs ensures a permanent institutional presence for women's studies, especially in perilous budgetary times. Individuals able to give major sums will make a huge difference, but so, too, do smaller donors, because university leaders are influenced by the sheer number of donors committed to a program or faculty. (Many women's studies departments have mechanisms for accepting direct donations for fellowships, public lectures and the like.) The good news is that women are increasingly moving into the forefront of philanthropy as individual donors, in a position to put their funding where it can do the most good for the greatest number of other women.

—ALISON R. BERNSTEIN

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