



## Women's Studies

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Women's studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that had its origins in first-wave feminism in the 1960s. The earliest integrated programs at major universities began around 1970, though a few courses that could be considered women's studies courses were offered at colleges and universities before then.

Women's studies experienced tremendous growth during the last quarter of the twentieth century, growing from a few programs at elite or progressive universities to hundreds of programs across the United States and the world at every conceivable type of academic institution. Concurrent with the growth of women's studies programs was an explosion of research and scholarship on women and gender, which helped give the new discipline academic legitimacy.

The legitimization and institutionalization of women's studies was one of the most important developments in the academy during the final decades of the twentieth century.

### **Establishing the Discipline**

The first women's studies faculty had to create a new discipline: they had to write their own textbooks, compile reading lists, develop new curricula, and establish new journals. Their courses provided the first opportunity for women's lives and experiences to be studied seriously in higher education from a gender-sensitive perspective.

Additionally, faculty drew on a new pedagogy that was participatory and personal, which later came to be known as feminist pedagogy. At many of the colleges and universities that were newly coeducational during the 1970s, women's studies was developed as part of the process of incorporating women into the campus communities.

These new courses offered faculty and students the opportunity to conduct in-depth scholarly work on subjects that had previously not been a part of the college curriculum, or were at the margins of more traditional disciplines, such as domestic violence, women's roles in historical periods, and women's literature.

Moreover, given its origins in the women's movement, women's studies was from its beginnings activist in its orientation, as much committed to transforming women's roles in the world as simply to understanding such roles. Its goal was not "disinterested" academic inquiry, but the ending of oppression against women.

Indeed, women's studies' relationship to the women's movement was crucial in establishing and developing the field. The women's movement helped pressure colleges and universities to establish women's studies programs and helped establish the study of women as a worthy endeavor.

According to the National Women's Studies Association, the United States organization linking women's studies scholars, faculty, and departments, women's studies "has, at its best, shared a vision of a world free

from sexism and racism. Freedom from sexism by necessity must include a commitment to freedom from national chauvinism, class and ethnic bias; anti-Semitism, as directed against both Arabs and Jews; ageism; heterosexual bias--from all ideologies and institutions that have consciously or unconsciously oppressed and exploited some for the advantage of others."

However, hundreds of colleges and universities across the United States and around the world now have programs in women's studies, and not all of them live up to these ideals.

Some women's studies programs serve as umbrellas for other academic areas, including the study of gender and sexuality more broadly. A recent trend is for women's studies to be included as part of larger programs in gender studies; these larger programs may house men's studies, queer studies, and sexuality programs, as well as women's studies.

Some women's studies programs offer undergraduate and graduate degrees. Others offer minors or certificates rather than degrees. Often women's studies faculty members hold joint appointments in women's studies and in more traditional fields, such as history, English, art history, sociology, and psychology.

### **Scholarly Issues in Women's Studies**

Even when glbtq experiences are a part of women's studies research and teaching, they are not usually the major focus. Among significant topics of research in the field are the lives of women, both individuals with ordinary lives in historical periods and those who made outstanding contributions to some field of life; women's psychology, including learning styles and emotions; intersections between gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability; the role of women in science and religion, and how feminist perspectives can change inquiry in these areas; women's writing and art throughout history; social scientific study of family, housework, and gender inequality; activism and social change; and women's health.

Theoretical development is also a part of women's studies. Women's studies scholars interrogate popular theoretical perspectives such as Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Marxism, Afro-centrism, materialism, and post colonialism to bring a feminist and/or female-centered approach to these theories.

Researchers have also developed feminist methodologies for women's studies scholarly inquiry. These new methodological approaches often involve a heightened concern with ethics and coercion; a focus on the researcher's own place in the research; careful understanding of both the scholarly and policy implications of the findings; and the cultivation of a relationship of alliance between observer and subject, rather than the more authoritarian one common in some disciplines.

### **What Do Students Do with a Degree in Women's Studies?**

Like many major and degree programs in the liberal arts, women's studies claims to prepare its graduates for a wide variety of fields, including work in not-for-profit agencies, law, policy research, education, psychotherapy, and academia. Women's studies students, like graduates of women's colleges, are also often more prepared to work in fields in which women are underrepresented, such as running for elected office or working in scientific research laboratories.

The tenuous links between women's studies and any specific career is a problem for women's studies, as it is for other liberal arts fields. Recognition of this problem has led departments to increase the focus on internships and work experiences as part of the major, which is intended to increase the marketability of women's studies graduates.

### **Lesbians and Women's Studies**

Lesbians were very much involved in all aspects of first-wave feminism, including the foundation of women's studies. But, as in much of the feminist movement as a whole, lesbians have faced marginalization and exclusion from the focus of teaching and research.

Women's studies was stereotyped during its early years (and still often is stereotyped) as a field dominated by lesbian separatist man-haters. In a defensive reaction, the more mainstream core of academics in the discipline worked against these stereotypes to legitimize the place of the discipline within the curriculum. The consequences of this concern with legitimacy were that many women's studies scholars, especially in the early years, focused their attention on specifically heterosexual issues, and few early women's studies courses took the existence or the experience of lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered women seriously.

Despite the prominence of often closeted lesbian scholars within the field, and some major achievements such as the scholarship on lesbian lives and issues published in women's studies journals, all too often the field itself, especially in its early years, was determinedly heterosexist. Lesbian scholars repeatedly challenged the discipline to greater openness and inclusivity.

With the emergence of queer studies, however, lesbians began demanding their space within women's studies. Most women's studies departments today do offer some courses or parts of courses dealing with lesbian experiences, and some even offer concentrations in lesbian or queer studies.

Other institutions have chosen to keep women's studies a heterosexual field, either by placing the study of lesbian experience within the purview of queer studies departments or by not permitting any space to study lesbian experience at all. (This last state of affairs is particularly common at religiously affiliated colleges and universities and in public colleges and universities in conservative areas.)

### **Men and Women's Studies**

As women's studies has become more mainstream, some male students have begun to enroll in courses and programs in the discipline. Among these are gay men, particularly on campuses where queer studies does not exist. On such campuses, women's studies courses may be the only ones with any content relating to the history and theory of sexuality.

The presence of male students in women's studies courses has created its own set of conflicts within the discipline. Some women's studies faculty have argued that women's studies in particular needs to be taught in single-sex classrooms because of male students' inherent tendency to dominate classroom discussion.

This argument is similar to that which has traditionally been made for single-sex education in general, but it is important to remember that women's studies emerged in historically coeducational public universities and newly coeducational private colleges, where single-sex education was not generally an option, and women took advantage of women's studies courses to give themselves a safe space.

On the other hand, many women's studies departments have welcomed male students as well as male students, recognizing that the study of female experience cannot be isolated from the study of gender in general. Some women's studies programs have even offered courses tailored to their male students' interests, such as courses focusing on gay male experience.

### **Bisexual and Transgender Experiences in Women's Studies**

Bisexual women and transgendered individuals occupy an even more marginal position in women's studies than lesbians and gay men do.

The presence of bisexual experiences in the curriculum and bisexual students in the classroom should force homosexuals and heterosexuals alike to confront their own ideas about the nature of sexual orientation.

Unfortunately, however, the bisexual experience is rarely taken seriously by women's studies. In some departments and programs, bisexuality is included in courses focusing on the lesbian experience, but rarely and more often as an afterthought than as a significant phenomenon worthy of in-depth study in its own right.

Transgendered individuals who were born female but identify as male face much the same marginalization as male students in some women's studies courses, except that some feminists view this group as traitors to womanhood and thus actively discount their experience as women.

Individuals born male who identify as female are sometimes seen as "fake women" within women's studies.

Both transgendered groups find their own experiences reflected within the women's studies curriculum only in the most progressive of departments. Even in these departments, it often takes significant pressure--from students or concerned faculty--for courses to explore transgendered experiences and issues.

### **Contemporary and Future Issues in Women's Studies**

The discipline of women's studies is still struggling with ways of incorporating the experiences of all women into its area of study. Not only are lesbians, bisexual women, and transgendered people still marginalized within the field, but also women of color, poor and working class women, and women with disabilities.

Women's studies' roots in first-wave feminism probably account for its focus on white, heterosexual, middle-class women. As women's studies and feminism more generally realize the need to be inclusive, the very category of "woman" faces continual redefinition.

The inclusion of transgendered experiences into women's studies will, likely, be the greatest impetus for refining the definition of "woman."

However, inasmuch as women's studies is heavily reliant on post-modern theory, which is a branch of social theory that challenges the notion of an objective understanding of reality apart from authority structures, the continual re-interpretation of the field of women's studies is in a sense built into the field itself. Significantly, post-modern feminist theory challenges the idea that there is a single way to define "woman." This insight is likely to help shape women's studies into a more inclusive discipline.

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