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## WOMEN'S STUDIES TODAY: AN ASSESSMENT

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Women's studies continues to flourish in the United States despite those predictors of doom who viewed it as a passing "fad," a clear choice in times of budget cuts, or surely the next to be hurt by declining enrollments. Moreover, it has survived and even been enriched by the political tensions from which it originated and within which it continues to exist. The balancing act upon which its survival has depended is symbolized by the way women's studies program directors, too readily viewed as radicals on their campuses, are too readily dismissed as the academic elite by radicals at the National Women's Studies Association conferences. Women's studies has always been too radical for some and not radical enough for others.

At conferences of the National Women's Studies Association, the atmosphere and programming are both scholarly and political. At the 1984 NWSA conference at Rutgers University, I found myself immersed in a democratic environment where the rights and interests of all groups--handicapped, lesbian, elderly, poor, black, ethnic, third world, and even the middleclass, heterosexual majority--were actively recognized and, to some extent, dealt with. The results are not yet perfect, but at least people are committed to the ideal of equality and struggling to achieve it. A great deal has been accomplished both in the scholarship produced, which is based upon this egalitarian philosophy, and the human relationships. Probably for that reason, tensions among the various groups were distinctly down, compared to four or five years ago, and coalition was a

key word being used even by the more militant women. Scholars spoke of the impact this truly democratic world view would have upon both theory and methodology. Increasingly, such scholars describe women's studies as a discipline with not only its own body of interdisciplinary scholarship but also its own philosophy, pedagogy, and inclusive perspective.

There are approximately four hundred fifty women's studies programs, sixty faculty and curriculum development projects, and forty research centers currently focusing on women in the United States. Significant advances have been made in transforming the curriculum to include the new scholarship on women with the help of grants awarded to such institutions as Wheaton College, the University of Arizona, Montana State University, the University of Maine at Orono, and Yale University. This recent emphasis upon integrating the new scholarship has provoked what is known as the "autonomy/integration debate." Many women's studies scholars are questioning the wisdom of diverting so much energy and funding away from the development of autonomous women's studies programs. They fear that integrationist efforts will be too accepting of existing structures and definitions of knowledge<sup>1</sup> and that this acceptance will impede true progress in redefining and reconceptualizing. According to Johnella Butler, the term mainstreaming, commonly used to describe attempts to integrate, "implies that nothing is wrong with what exists that additions or inclusion and minor revision will not correct."<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging the danger in suggesting that the traditional curriculum should be viewed as the "mainstream," two leading consultants for integration projects, Peggy McIntosh and Elizabeth Minnich, recently recommended dropping that word. They favor the concept of "many streams of knowledge and culture." Both emphasize that women's studies programs must be strong to ensure excellence in faculty development. McIntosh and Minnich clarify that we must think in terms of both/and, not either/or--both development of strong, autonomous

women's studies programs *and* increased faculty and curriculum development, because the two are interdependent.<sup>3</sup>

The field of women's studies continues to be richly multifaceted and to expand in new directions. Currently, the three areas of greatest development are probably black women's studies, "feminist science," and feminism as it relates to war and peace. There is also increased focus upon the "hidden curriculum," that is, what is subtly taught through the many ways in which both male and female teachers discriminate against female students in the classroom. At several institutions, women's studies is concentrating on the development of graduate courses and programs, such as a graduate minor at the University of Indiana-Bloomington, a graduate certificate and M.A. emphasis at Old Dominion University, and a Ph.D. program focusing on women's history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Most exciting in recent years is the recognition that the new knowledge accumulated and the new questions raised lead us to a new world view and to new truths. Women's studies scholars of all kinds, not just philosophers, are taking an interest in epistemology. This concern reinforces the growing desire to see women's studies as a new discipline. In the words of Deborah Rosenfelt: "much of the knowledge and ideas about women and gender that has emerged in the past decade is beginning to order itself into new groupings and categories, an order that has increasingly little reference to other disciplines' subjects and increasingly greater reference to other knowledge and ideas about women and gender."<sup>4</sup> Even in the area of curriculum reform, how radical the change must be becomes increasingly obvious. Peggy McIntosh has articulated in these terms the five stages of awareness in faculty members transforming history courses: 1. Womanless history; 2. Women *in* history; 3. Women as a problem, anomaly, or absence in history; 4. Women *as* history; 5. History redefined and reconstructed to include us all.<sup>5</sup>

Women's studies is by now quite global in its perspective, and it has been increasingly inclusive of different groups

in its research and publications. It is surprising, therefore, to realize how slowly women's studies is moving into pre-K through twelve education. Too few materials for pre-K through twelve levels have been forthcoming. This is perhaps because of the schools' fears concerning conservative impulses in their communities and because of rigidly prescribed public school curricula. It may also stem from the fact that schools of education tend to emphasize methods rather than content to be taught. The need to expand in this pre-K through twelve direction, however, has been recognized; an entire day's programming at the 1984 NWSA conference focused upon this concern.

In short, women's studies continues today to deepen and expand its scope, largely in response to the political demand that it be truly democratic and inclusive of *all* women and of females of all ages. This political pressure, rooted in the fact that women are to be found in all categories of the oppressed, has meant that those gathering and articulating the lost facts and those creating the new theories based upon those facts are participating in nothing less than an epistemological revolution. As Peggy McIntosh has pointed out, our ultimate goal is an "inclusive curriculum," and such a curriculum "stands to benefit, and to change, men as well as women." Her central insight is highly important: "The time is past for the objection that women's studies is political. All curricula are political. A curriculum which leaves women out is highly politicized. Which *forms* of curricular politics (pre-K through twelve schools and) the colleges and universities will choose is now the question."<sup>6</sup>

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Notes

1. Peggy McIntosh and Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, "Varieties of Women's Studies," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 7, No. 3 (1984), 139.

2. Johnnella Butler, "Minority Studies: Do We Want to Kill a Dream?" *Women's Studies International Forum*, 7, No. 3 (1984), 136.
3. McIntosh and Minnich, p. 144.
4. Deborah Rosenfelt, "What Women's Studies Programs Do that Mainstreaming Can't," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 7, No. 3 (1984), 171.
5. Peggy McIntosh, "The Study of Women: Processes of Personal and Curricular Revision," *The Forum for Liberal Education*, 6, No. 5 (April 1984), 3.
6. McIntosh, "The Study of Women," p. 4.