Women's Studies in Australian higher education: Introduction and brief history

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What is Women's Studies? What are its origins and development in Australian higher education? How is it currently organised? What are its current intellectual preoccupations and where do future research foci lie? These are the crucial questions that arise when attempting to interpret and evaluate the various articles collected for this issue of Australian Universities' Review. Address these questions.

Definitions

Women's Studies is the analysis of the conditions of women rather than a set of political conclusions about them. This analysis is now called feminism. There are many kinds of feminist analysis ranging from social, radical, socialist and Marxist feminism to ecofeminism and the many forms of postmodern feminism. They all share the belief that women's status is a social matter rather than a natural condition, and that this status can be changed. Their differences lie in the ways in which they see women's status changed. Feminist analysis is thus authoritarian and critical.

Women's Studies as a 'transdisciplinary field of knowledge and inquiry which focuses upon the position of women, but extends to the whole social structure' (Maguire 1982:167). Judith Allen pursues these definitions in her article in this issue.

As Susan Sheridan's thesis is often used as an umbrella term to cover a wide range of research and teaching on women and gender and that it is a distinct and relatively new feminist research and teaching institution is located in higher education but which has some degree of independence from particular disciplines and vocational courses (Sheridan 1982:7).

Origins and Development


Phase One 1973-1982: revolutionary feminism versus liberal feminism

The first Women's Studies topics offered in Australian universities came as a result of agitation from university students and staff in the 1970s. The first move was to establish a Women's Liberation movement which sought to challenge the hegemony of patriarchal course structures and content. This happened in two ways: by offering a 'Women and...' topic that challenged the discipline within existing structures; and by offering Women's Studies as a new interdisciplinary topic. The first direction began in 1972 when Beverly Kingston began teaching women's topics in Sociology at the University of New South Wales. Since she could find no published primary source material to suit her teaching strategy, Kingston began a project to recover women's past in Australia. Her monograph My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann (1975) and her book of documents, Women and Education (1977), were the results of these efforts. They led to the first challenges to the patriarchal nationalism of Australian historiography. Now there are several Women's and History topics offered in Australian universities, to which have been added a range of other 'Women' and 'topics as diverse as Women and Geography, Women and Politics, Women and Biological Science and Women and Literature. These topics have usually provided the first introduction to feminist perspectives in a traditional disciplinary framework.

The second direction came in 1973 when Jean Curthoys was appointed as a tutor in the Philosophy Discipline at Flinders University to offer the first Women's Studies topic. Susan Sheridan considers that this topic pursued the radical educational goals of student group self-management and self-assessment, believing that these were crucial for the development of women's confidence and solidarity. The curriculum of its foundation course was not discipline-based but was rather a classic of the kind of integrated feminist work that shapes itself around the women's liberation movement's concerns with the nature of oppression and the conditions for liberation. The course had marginal - indeed precarious - status at the university, being dependent on one department's acting as a kind of part-time teaching body and agreeing to appoint a philosophy tutor who would also be qualified to convene Women's Studies. But it was marginal in a more purposeful and deliberate way, too, in that participants wanted the course to remain on the edge of the university in order better to provoke women from outside the academic community (Sheridan 1982:7).

The first direction I have called 'women's studies (small s) or liberal feminism and the second, Women's Studies (big S) or revolutionary feminism. Women's Studies (small s) can be defined as a topic that is an integral part of an undergraduate course, as a subject for majors that would develop in the 1980s. The first was easier to argue for within existing academic structures and by 1982 nearly all Australian universities offered at least one Women and... topic. But the second direction produced the most interesting courses of all. Three new courses in Women's Studies were established in 1974 and Freda, established in Brisbane in 1975. In 1976 for example Refrigerator Girls ceased to call itself a Women's Studies journal, in order to dissociate (itself from university courses which it described as "conservative in methodology and reaction in content"). The few courses that did survive indicated how high were the expectations...of women's studies as a revolutionary force for change' (Sheridan 1982:7).

Indeed, Robyn Rowland recalls that in this period: "The original aims of feminism within the academy were: to find, reclaim, and rename ourselves; to consider all issues and knowledge with women as the centre; to explore knowledge and the unconscious, to understand power and its relation to gender; to search for the origins of women's subjugation and to develop strategies for changing that oppression. Women's studies itself marks such a strategy. Women's studies was intended to empower individual women, while making themselves visible to the rest of the academy in new departures. The group was also intended to empower students with a love of knowledge (Rowland 1987:520)."

It soon became apparent that these strategies struck at the heart of the patriarchal culture entrenched in the Australian university system. Some big Women's studies topics were only offered after considerable argument had been waged. One such topic was Women and the Family, a separate department, as that one could only offer a Women's Studies topic. At the Australian National University in the following year, the students "mounted... an "education campaign" during which they were advised to withdraw the item demanding interuela women's studies course" (Maguire 1983:164). This led to the appointment of Ian Curthoys as a temporary lecturer in Women's Studies in 1976. As a result the first Women's Studies major in the Bachelor of Arts program in any Australian university. In the same year, after strong intervention by the Department of Women's Advancement, the Master of Social Education, the Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Women's Studies) was offered. The first Women's Studies major in Australia was conferred in 1981. The Women's Studies major at the South Australia. A Graduate Diploma in Women's Studies was also established at the State College of Victoria. In other universities, such as Griffith, La Trobe, Macquarie, Murdoch, Queensland and Tasmania, Women's Studies topics, both big and small, 'could have had an easier generation (Maguire 1983:164). But they were usually taught on top of existing loads and many tutors were expected in taking on full lecturing programs up to 20 hours per week in some cases.

Conference

The first Women's Studies conference conference was organised by Sue Bellamy and others at Macquarie University in 1978. In keeping with the general aim of taking feminism outside of the universities, the Women and Labour Conference encouraged women from all walks of life to participate and many of the participants came from the women's movement. The conference were collected in a major publication (Windschuttle 1980). Three further Women and Labour conferences took place in 1980 and 1981. The latter conference was itself a collaborative effort and two further books of conference papers were published. These conferences and their publications helped to raise the consciousness of Australian women about the need for Women's Studies programs in tertiary education institutions than any other means.

Research

International Women's Year in 1975 was the starting point for the publication of research in Women's Studies in Australia. Between 1975 and 1985, at least three collections of documents and at least three major bibliographies of published and unpublished source material appeared, compiled by at least four leading scholars. In 1982, Monique Baran published her Women and Reproduction and a number of volumes of collected articles. Most publications were collections of articles on topics like 'Women and History', 'Women and Politics', 'Women and Literature' and 'Women and Sociology'. Nearly published a range of research articles written by women with interests in the intersection of race, class and gender. This phase ended with the publication of international Women's Year in 1980. In Men and Women: a single strand approach to meet a multicoloured patriarchal approach (Grieve and Grahame 1981) Australian book publishers noted the extraordinary sales of all these texts and predicted that Women's Studies would be the academic publishing boom of the 1980s."

Student Profile

This phase of Women's Studies coincided with the abolition of the National Women's Year, which led to a marked decrease in the number of courses offered. Many institutions attempted to bring new life to the topic by increasing the number of courses offered. In some cases, this led to the establishment of new departments or programs within larger departments.
1984 the Women's Studies section of ANZAS in Canberra, organised by Desley Deacon and Marni Simms, was mainly the work of Ruth Arons, a graduate of the Australian National University (ANU) who had never studied women's studies. Her project was to bring the New Zealand Congress of the International Women's Year to Canberra. At the congress, held at Macquarie University, Robyn Rowland and Susan Maguire contributed to a range of panels on New Reproductive Technologies and Women's Studies. The work was done by women's studies academics, Women's Studies had arrived.

The project had been prompted by the emergence of Women's Studies as a transdisciplinary enterprise which endeavoured to transcend the specific range of disciplines. These papers were begun in 1981, before the development of techniques and procedures according to their usefulness in pursuing the research and teaching of women's studies. As Judith Allen argues in her article in this issue, "Women's Studies ceased to be used as a means to serve the women's movement. Rather it became recognised as a field of study in its own right."

A further sign of intellectual maturity came in 1985 at the Women's and Labour Conference at the University of Sydney. The published papers represented the critical self-reflection that was evident in the early 1980s. They focused on specific issues like feminism, women's history, and feminist methodology. The conference also featured a women's studies forum, which was attended by a record number of delegates.

Research Between 1981 and 1988 nearly 200 research publications in Women's Studies in Australia were published. This is a reflection of the growth in the field, as well as the increasing visibility of feminist theory. The papers reviewed in the Anzac 1988 conference, published in the Australian Women's Studies Association's newsletter, were the first to include contributions from Australian and overseas feminist scholars. The annual conference of the Australian Women's Studies Association began in 1986 as a way to promote research and networking among feminist scholars.

The council was restructured in 1988 to focus on three areas: research, education, and community development. The conference continues to be held annually and is an important event for feminist scholars and activists in Australia and beyond.
Substitute, which must provide all the things that undergraduate students and applicants envisioned; such as a shoulder to cry on, someone to turn to, and the provision of study and work conditions that no Australian university could ever contemplate at present. To the present writer, this becomes one without limits. Women's Studies addresses feminist ideas and research that relate to their workplace (Schaffer and Thiele).

Relationship of Women's Studies to the non-academic world.

Throughout the seventies the strength and resilience of Women's Studies came from the non-degree academicians, and from those close to the university's women's health and women's refuge movement and with the feminists in the bureaucracy. No more feminist work has been put into one without effort. Women's Studies are to be conducted in Women's Studies. The same applies to an increasing number of women of professional status in all political parties. Women's Studies relies on its survival with those continuing links. Most women's studies programs make strong use of feminists in these areas by inviting them to give guest lectures, to jointly supervise research students and to jointly sponsor research projects. An example of this preoccupation with the non-academic world is found in the subtitle of the third AWA conference in Brisbane in November, 'Policy, Politics and Research'.

Research.

The major areas of research in Women's Studies in Australia are in public sector feminism, feminist history, cultural studies, post modernist theory and the politics of difference, the relationship between gender, race and nationalism, women's health and sex reassignment. All of this work has played Women's Studies in Australia firmly in the international feminist arena. While neither of the feminist research directories published in 1985 has survived, Women's Studies as a dedicated area of research now has its own category number in the Australian Research Council lists. All of these areas of research have a common theme: the construction of feminist research or research in Women's Studies has found its way into print, largely because more research as practitioners we might argue ourselves are acutely conscious of a need for solidarity in the face of cost cutting institutional politics and practices.

Expansions and Contractions in Women's Studies.

The first articles in Women's Studies were published by Judith Allen at Griffith University in 1980. Her article in this issue, based on her keynote address to the second AWA conference in Melbourne in 1990, identifies and discusses the major issues confronting Women's Studies in the 1990s. Chaps in other articles like Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology, Education, Law and Literature, have been recently been filled by feminists who have encouraged the development of Women's Studies topics and programs. Some of these topics originate in the 'women's...' topics in their own disciplines in the 1970s and 1980s.

It would be cheating to say that Women's Studies is expanding. The establishment of a professional association, the appointment of more senior female staff, the consolidation of programs, the possibilities for new opportunities with the formation of feminist networks, Women's Studies into different terrain. Yet the programs at ANU have been cost back and the data base of Women's Studies programs has florescented. In another article in this issue, Dorothy Brown and Jill Julian-Matthews provide a salutary account of the fortunes of the Women's Studies program at ANU to remind us that the problems of consolidation that were conspicuous in the first and sex phases are still with us. In another hard hitting piece, Deborah Chambers and Christine Wiesche show how women's research centres are established in new universities in the post-Dawkins era and how they are expected to survive with almost no funding.

Conclusion.

Nearly twenty years after the first topic offering, Women's Studies has become an established intellectual field which has a formidable record of teaching and research and has informed and enriched the traditional discipline. It has both remained on the margins and moved mainstream academic practice. The articles in this issue show how political, intellectual and industrial concerns have coherently intersected in the struggle to provide coherent programs and show how the slogans 'the personal is political' is still as prevalent in 1991 as it was in 1972. None of the authors of the discourses in this issue are unaware of the tough times ahead.

Notes.

1. I would like to thank Susan McGrew, Susan Sheridan and Roy Slimon for their earlier versions of this paper.

2. John Larmar, class leader of Allan and Uwin Australia, contacted a number of Women's Studies researchers for their first books between 1991 and 1992.

3. At the second AWA conference in Melbourne in September 1990, some programs completed at least the institutional facilities and the high cost of registration. Yet the conference had a cheaper registration than the year before and was for the cheaper registration of the last conference in 1989.

4. Women's Studies are a dedicated area of research.

References.

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