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# Women's-Gender-Sexuality-Feminist Studies: The Politics of Departmental Naming

As universities and colleges commemorate the founding of departments and programs dedicated to the study of women, gender, sexuality, and feminism, these celebratory moments have also been a time to reflect on the many years of struggle and solidarity that led to the establishment of dedicated spaces within existing institutions. As we consider this long history, we must also contend with the ways in which the field has changed and how the names of departments and programs mark that evolution.

One marker of our evolution has been in the curricular focus of departments and programs and theoretical conceptualization of the field. Most Women's and Women Studies programs have since changed their names to some variation of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies as a way to signal those changes. While each of these department name changes may seem necessary from today's vantage point, in truth, they are emblematic of questions and debates that still resonate in the field today.

At the time that many units were founded, even the idea of creating spaces for women within the patriarchal structures of the traditional academy was a radical act. In 1970, the year that the [San Diego State University's Women's Studies program was started](#), which is considered the first US Women Studies program, universities such as Johns Hopkins, Brown, and Duke were still denying entrance to women students. Having an entire field of study dedicated to women, especially amid ongoing fights for child care centers, family leave, pay equity, access to abortion, and a host of other feminist issues, provided a locale for opponents to target. Many departments were born directly from such activist struggles that spilled well beyond campus. Rather than seeing themselves in the mold of traditional disciplines, some opted for structures that included community members and faculty across fields who helped shape and teach curriculum.<sup>[1]</sup>

While these programs were unfolding, one key issue emerged: What to call these new spaces? Campuses had been central to the evolution of the "women's movement" and the term was gaining traction in the popular press. The publication of seminal texts such as Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) brought white feminism into the mainstream. Recounting the founding of University of Washington Seattle's department, Shirley Yee notes, "its founders were adamant about naming it 'Women' Studies and avoiding the possessive, reasoning that the subject matter was about women but not owned by them" (Bach 2015). Others adopted Women's Studies (with the apostrophe) and soon programs across the world were using similar nomenclature as the field began to establish itself. With a curricular focus on women's historical erasures and ongoing exclusions from the public sphere, Women's Studies became the name of choice for the new constellations emerging on campuses.

In the same period, however, women of color feminists pushed back against the whiteness and middle-classness of the women's movement. Maxine Williams and Pamela Newman's [\*Black Women's Liberation\*](#) (1970) pushed for a stronger race and class analysis in the movement and burgeoning scholarship. The Combahee River Collective's Statement (1974) and Audre Lorde's (1984) *Sister Outsider* articulated an intersectional vision of feminism that went beyond focusing on gender as the primary source of oppression. Debates grew about how, exactly, "Women's Studies" was defined? Who were the "women" at the heart of the field? Where did lesbians, women of color, working class women, and other non-white, non-heterosexual, non-middle-class women fit in?

These debates emerged as programs were proliferating through the 1970s and 1980s. Not only were programs being created, but they were becoming legitimated in the structures of the academy. By the 1990s, universities and colleges began converting programs to departments, offering dedicated faculty lines, creating graduate training opportunities, and creating new centers of knowledge production across units. As a field marked by contestation since its inception, Women's Studies also faced an identity crisis as it grew—was Women's Studies a discipline in the traditional sense, or was it a chance to rethink how knowledge has been constructed and organized?<sup>[2]</sup> Wendy Brown's (1997) infamous essay on whether or not Women's Studies should remain a separate space launched a series of heated conversations over where the field was headed next—and whether it should exist at all.

Amid these debates, another set of deeper questions emerged: Was "women" really the center of the field or did other markers, such as gender, sexuality, or even difference, power, or identity better capture the lasting contributions of feminist scholarship?<sup>[3]</sup> As Alice Ginsberg has noted, the move toward "gender" over or in conjunction with "women" was born of the recognition that "we need to be paying attention to the relationships between men and women rather than focusing predominantly on women's experiences and knowledge itself" (2008, 28). Moreover, as research on sexuality and gender grew central to the field, scholars began to raise concerns over the exclusions created by maintaining a cis-gendered and presumptive focus on women or the attempts to disaggregate LGBTQ studies from Women's Studies.<sup>[4]</sup>

I began my own journey in Women's Studies as many of these debates were rupturing. I graduated with a B.A. from Emory University's Women's Studies program (now the department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies), which went through its own battle for departmental status while I was an undergraduate there. Soon after, I joined the University of Washington Seattle's Women Studies department. In the time that I worked on my doctorate at UWS, the department worked through its own name change. Defenders of retaining a focus on "women" pushed back by arguing that dropping "women" could depoliticize the important work that Women's Studies has done to center women's experiences. The argument being that if patriarchy exists, so too must spaces that explicitly push against it. Therefore, Women Studies must remain relevant, named, and present. Others made the case that using "gender" as a central analytic did not necessarily translate into feminist scholarship or teaching.<sup>[5]</sup>

After going through an exhaustive process that involved students, faculty, community members, and alumni, the department was renamed Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies, with a doctoral degree in Feminist Studies. After accepting a tenure-track position at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, I again found myself in the midst of a name change—this time from Gender and Women’s Studies to Gender, Women’s and Sexuality Studies. In both cases, students and faculty felt that it was important to explicitly recognize sexuality and gender as key organizing concepts in the field and to move beyond women’s experiences in the naming of the department.

Today, there is certainly more consensus on the importance of aligning departmental naming<sup>[6]</sup> with the complexities and evolving understanding of gender, racial, class, ability, and other axes of difference and power that structure our social and political lives. However, the debates are far from settled and as the field evolves, how we communicate, imagine, and name our scholarship will continue to shift as well.

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1. There are many sources that speak about these early years. An oft cited one is *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony from 30 Founding Mothers*, edited by Florence Howe (2000). *The Politics of Women's Studies* includes testimonies from founders of many of the programs represented in this collection, including Beverly-Guy Sheftall. See also [Shayne and Guzman's Annotated Bibliography](#) essay in this collection for more sources about the history and evolution of GWSS. [↵](#)
2. See *Women's Studies for the Future: Foundations, Interrogations, Politics*, edited by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Agatha Beins (2005) for some of these discussions. [↵](#)
3. See Wiegman, Robyn. 2002. "The Progress of Gender: Whither "Women"?" In *Women's Studies on its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*, ed. Robyn Weigman, 106-140. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. [↵](#)
4. See Joseph, Miranda. 2002. "Analogy and Complicity: Women's Studies, Lesbian/Gay Studies, and Capitalism." In *Women's Studies on its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*, ed. Robyn Weigman, 267-292. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. [↵](#)
5. See also the essay by Russell, Loftin, and Shayne in this collection about the founding of SDSU's Women's Studies program where they too discuss the naming issue. [↵](#)
6. If you look through the thirty-three departments/programs represented by the authors of this collection—that is, where we teach and where we earned our GWSS degrees—you will see a cross-section of names mostly combining Gender, Women, Sexuality Studies; very few remain only "Women's Studies."