

# Out of the Margins by Jane Aaron and Sylvia Walby, eds.

Reviewed by Rose Ghurayyib

**There** is an Arabic proverb which says "one candle can shine over two or even ten (people)." The candle in this proverb represents the male sex, whose presence can illuminate two or even ten females and whose absence means complete darkness.

The patriarchal system, which supposedly started eight thousand years ago, gave men complete priority over women. Only men could enjoy freedom, even when they were not worthy of it; while women, even those who enjoyed a high social status, wealth, education and other worldly favors, had and still have to submit to a male guardian, i.e. a father, a brother, a husband or a son. Manhood has always been a blessing, though the male might be a worthless fellow, while womanhood is viewed as a curse, though the woman might possess the most rare qualities of body and mind.

The book "Out of the Margins: Women's Studies in the Nineties<sup>(1)</sup>", tells the emergence of the women's liberation Movement, followed by that of Women's Studies as a major growth area for higher education in the 70s and the 80s. Its aim has been to revolutionize modern education by introducing and emphasizing a woman's view of the world.

This book deals mainly with the state of women's studies in general and in Britain in particular, where it was produced with the cooperation of a group of feminists and women's studies teachers and researchers.

**What is Women's Studies?** (2) It is a recent discipline which developed during the last two decades as a corollary to the Women's Liberation Movement, of which it also forms the backbone or essential part. It started at a university level in the United States, spread into Europe and has invaded two associated but distinct areas of education: adult education and access. Access courses are the most recent development in attempts to attract adult students into higher education without the standard entrance requirements.

The contents of Access courses include humanities, social science and computing in addition to areas such as women's history and women's health. They reach out to the working class and black women.

**Aims of the Women's Studies defined:** Virginia Woolf, in a "Room of One's Own," suddenly realizes the importance of social power involved in a sudden moment of consciousness, when from being the natural inheritor of civilization, she becomes, on the

contrary, outside of it, alien and critical (Woolf, 1929). Hence, Women's Studies try to examine the factor behind woman's alienation and the critical attitude toward civilization, while seeking the ways to eliminate those factors.

**The most important objectives of Women's Studies:**

1. To review sharing experiences; Examine the experience of women, particularly their experience of oppression; try to explain differences and similarities, utilize alternative perspectives based on women's experience and feminist theory. Knowledge gained from experience is the distinguishing feature of an integrated approach to the study of women by women.
2. To analyze government social politics, the law and the media concerning sexual harassment, equal opportunities, regulation of women's sexuality, mental health, physical and sexual value or pornography.
3. To be adventurous in our search for appropriate methodologies to use with students; accepting the student as co-researcher, whose findings can become original contributions.



4. To draw upon other disciplines and extending the boundaries of our knowledge as teachers. We need to work with women from other disciplines not only in the design of our courses but through joint teaching; to familiarize ourselves with them and engage in time-based workshops and symposia.

5. Our methods of assessment should reflect the learning situations which our students encounter. Learn appropriate methods for evaluating cooperative projects, student research, the value of each student's skills, and to regard ourselves as participants in the learning process alongside our students.(p.41-48)

#### Why women's studies should be maintained?

1. Because women are still paid three quarters of the wages of men and are still largely excluded from political power.

2. Because W.S<sup>(3)</sup> allows women a space in the academy, a space in schools and paid work uninterrupted by domestic duties.

3. Men learn patterns of behavior designed to maximize chances of promotion while women are deprived of this training.

4. W.S. challenges the dominant culture. It is against categorization, against sexual discrimination, against class and race differentiation. It arouses consciousness of the structured inequalities of advanced capitalist society. It considers racism as "a process of systematic oppression directed toward people who are defined as inferior, usually in pseudo-biological terms such as skin color." The term refers to much more than skin color. It refers to a shared experience

of racism through which oppressed people join together and interpret politically.

5. The slogan of the Women's Liberation Movement is "The personal is the political". It points out the necessity of women's involvement in politics. Women's Studies demands that this slogan be extended into a bigger phrase "The personal is the intellectual", which means changing the lives of real women by improving the political, socio-economic and psychological status of women worldwide.

#### Women's Claims

1. Promotion of a feminist perspective in all teaching and research.

2. Promotion of Women's Studies in higher education.

3. Equal representation of women in education at every level of hierarchy.

4. Establishment of a feminist lexicon from the basis of a databank of terminology from feminist teachings.

5. Full use of existent European Community structures and projects from Women's Studies.

6. Democratic pedagogy in a non-libertarian institution.

The social advantages of mixed schooling are far outweighed by the academic disadvantages for girls. Mixed schools actually reduced the chances of women teachers holding senior and powerful positions. Women are very under-represented within the domain of governance and authority. Often the total absence of

women is, for example, in engineering, land surveying and technology.

"An education that is to respond to the needs of women must make available the values of academic work but also must, quite deliberately, put these values at risk in the context of feminism." (p.52)

#### International dimensions of w.s.

In the United States of America, there are more than 30,000 "Women's Studies" courses and close to 600 programmes including an increasing number of MA and Ph.D. programmes and over 150 research centers.

This large national movement insists on becoming international, on continuities and communalities. Hence, they use such slogans as "Sisterhood is Global," "Sisterhood is Powerful," and follow guidelines such as: enlarging our framework, listening to women from other countries like India, Egypt, etc . . . , recognizing the numbing effect of technology and looking for communalities instead of differences.

The movement takes special interest in studying women's exploitation, particularly in Third World countries: sex determination, pornography, dowry, suttee (the custom of Hindu widow willingly cremating herself), sexual abuse, rape, prostitution, with the aim of enlightening people regarding the harmfulness of these practices and the ways to eliminate them.

In Britain, Women's Studies is a challenge to the status quo, a road to change. Why? Because British conservatism has stood against W.S.

# OUT OF THE MARGINS

*Women's Studies in the Nineties*



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 The Falmer Press



expansion and used discrimination against women in all areas of life. Only sixteen percent of university lecturers are women and a mere three percent of professors. Polytechnics are more responsive to new developments. The representation of women drops as you go up the hierarchy. Only fifteen percent of the population have any higher education, one of the lowest in Europe.

"Women's Movement" is a fighting force against all forms of discrimination. It brings together women of every class, race and sexuality.

Academic institutions in England are concerned with reproducing a patriarchal elite to take over positions of power. Women's Studies courses do however challenge this elite from the margins of the academic world, and courses are expanding both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Women's Studies challenge the unrepresentative nature of higher educational institutions. It challenges the academic criteria by which power is maintained as well as the separation between private and public. If women have to obtain equal opportunities, men will have to step out of their ivory towers and take on equal responsibilities for housework and child care. The separation between housework and outside work will have to be broken down.

Immense forces in the British universities are against women's or feminist renaissance. The Equal Opportunity Unit, that was set up to implement the policy drawn up by feminists, has been disbanded. The Women's Studies Unit can only concentrate on courses. It has been transferred to within a faculty. Yet, important steps have been taken towards the provision of a different

kind of education. It is now possible to specialize in Women's Studies, for feminist theory is no longer dismissed as nonsense, the degree of programme has attracted a large number of applicants. In Britain, there are now eighteen institutions of higher education where W.S. is offered; they include universities, colleges and polytechnics. There are informal groups not necessarily connected to the academy, but whose work results in publications on activities related to Women's Studies. Feminist publishers are flourishing and feminist writers are promoted nationally.

## W.S. in continental Europe

In France, lively feminist research is being carried out in four major cities.

In Holland, W.S. is taking root with 200 feminist researchers and 13 professors of Women's Studies.

In Belgium, "Les Cahiers du Griff" a French language feminist journal, is based in Brussels, where women's lobby is far stronger than at Westminster, England.

In Denmark, women's research centers exist in all of Denmark's five universities.

In Italy, most of the W.S. centers are outside the university.

In Spain, major funding has been allocated to women's Studies.

In Germany, feminist research is well established.

Greek feminists are struggling to create a base.

There is no Women's Liberation

Movement in Portugal.

## Concluding Remarks

1. The provision of Women's Studies courses is an opportunity to make women visible, to challenge the way disciplines have excluded a feminist perspective and deprived women from the management of institutions and curricula.

2. Women's Studies and Feminist Research have similar areas of strength: sociology and the humanities; the same areas of weakness: research in science and technology.

3. Women's Studies reflect women's desire to share information and developing collaborative work. How far have they succeeded in realizing their wish?

4. All we have in common are the differences between theory and practice, North versus South, academic versus political, divided by national concerns and by language.

5. The political climate in the 80s carries an enormous problem: lack of adequate resources and of government support.

The best remains relative. Feminists are not satisfied. An important criterion is to fit in with the present dominant elite •

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(1) **Out of the Margins Women's Studies in the Nineties.** Jane Aaron and Sylvia Walby, eds. 1991, New York: The Palmer Press.

(2) The term women's studies is used as a singular word throughout the book.

(3) W.S. stands for Women's Studies