GUIDE TO

GRADUATE WORK IN

WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES


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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Introduction to Fourth Edition, Olivia C. Smith & Allison Kimmich, Executive Director, NWSA

Advice to Graduate Applicants from Women’s Studies Graduate Directors & Department Chairs

Essays

- *An Introduction to the Graduate Essays*, Olivia C. Smith, Editor
- *Encountering Women’s Studies*, Elora H. Chowdhury
- *Standing Alone: Disciplining Women’s Studies through Freestanding Graduate Programs*, Katherine Side
- *Finding the Program that’s Right for You*, Karen Kidd and Ande Spencer
- *Incorporating Women’s Studies into a Traditional Social Science Doctoral Program*, Kimala Price
- *Focusing on Fit: Finding the Right Graduate Program for You*, Brandy L. Simula
- *Seeking a Vocation: A Journey Beyond the Ivory Tower*, Katerine Rodriguez
- *Surprises: Maternity, Scholarship, and Politics in the Academy*, Pamela M. Rossi-Keen

About the Contributors

Program Listing

Institutions Listed Alphabetically

Appendices

- Programs by State
- Program by Degree(s) Offered
- Applicant Worksheet
Encountering Women’s Studies

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I came to Women’s Studies as an undergraduate international student in a small liberal arts college in the U.S. in the early 1990s, a time when the interdisciplinary discipline of women’s studies was attaining institutional recognition and debate and dialogue over what constitutes women’s studies research, scholarship, and praxis. Granted bachelor’s, master’s and finally the Ph.D. in women’s studies over fifteen years offered me an unique position to occupy the roles of the student (carving out a track suitable to my particular interests), the teacher (constructing multi- and inter-disciplinary courses that often challenged disciplinary boundaries, and genealogical approaches to Women’s Studies), the practitioner (using women’s studies lens and tools to interrogate and operationalize a scholar/activist agenda); the researcher (using inter-disciplinary methods to conduct field-work and produce new knowledge) and the subject of inquiry (what does one do with a women’s studies degree, and what are its potential and limits). Today, questioning the mettle of women’s studies is far from over.

This is a field that emerged and evolved within contestations, and coming of age in women’s studies for me has meant the same. At the outset I must note this conversation is located in a North American context and the contentions I refer to takes that location as a frame of reference. Writing from this vantage point for me means an acute awareness of the production process of the Third World feminist doing work on Bangladesh in the United States. Furthermore it brings to the fore encountering and confronting what Mary John (1997) has called the pre-determined trajectory of post-colonial subjects’ West-ward turn for higher education, garnering knowledge within the US academy, recognizing historical processes that attributes privileged status to that knowledge particularly in relation to the peripheral status of higher education in Third World countries, and interrogating the “native informant” category bestowed upon or self-promoted or actively negotiated by elite Third World migrant intellectuals.

Women’s studies is perhaps best defined as the academic site where explicit intersectional analysis, which means the privileging of gender as a unit of analysis in relation to other multiple axes of oppression including race, class and sexuality, occurs. Questions less frequently asked include how these dominant analytic categories of a U.S. – specific intersectionality translate in other national contexts, or configure women’s relationships to other women within the national context of U.S. What have been the terms of engagement of US Women’s Studies with Area Studies. How to mediate classroom discussions and course curriculum which relegate “theory” to the realm of the First World/Northern women who make forays into the realm of “activism/praxis/field experience” constituting the space of Women of Color/Third World women. What are the points of connection as well as disjunctures constituting relations between US born women of color and those from the global South. And, for that matter between elite women from the global South and those women they claim to represent. To what extent women’s studies pedagogy allows the self-reflexive interrogation of the largely pre-determined historically constituted differences that shape the relationship between who you are and what you can say or “choose” to study. All of these questions have led me to problematize and position my work and its accountability with consideration to multiple and discrepant audiences and communities in Bangladesh and the U.S. These questions inevitably have shaped my feminist consciousness and Women’s Studies research agenda.
The past decade has been an era of tremendous growth in the field. In the mid-1990s when I was applying to women's studies graduate programs, I could only choose between one of two free-standing Ph.D. programs. An interest in global feminisms, gender and development, and a career as scholar/activist narrowed the option to only one. Acceptance then to that sole suitable program meant strategic fashioning of one's dossier. It certainly helped to have had a bachelor's and a master's in women's studies, and some work experience in the "field" relevant to my research agenda. Moreover, identifying faculty mentors in the program I was applying to and demonstrating the ability to be independent and resourceful in shaping one's graduate career was key given the program I entered had no full-time women's studies faculty, nor funds to support graduate students beyond three years, nor opportunities to teach undergraduate courses, nor organized initiatives around professional development. Lack of resources for inter-disciplinary programs including Ethnic Studies, Area Studies and Women's Studies speaks generally of University Administrations' lack of investment in interdisciplinary programs despite paying lip-service to their importance. This is a reflection of the corporatization of Higher Education in the service of global capitalism (Mohanty, 2003). In this climate of shrinking support, women's studies faculty and graduate students, reaping few rewards, are left with the Herculean task of running programs with meagre resources or access; racialized and sexualized exploitation continue to grease the wheels of the academic machinery. Despite high achievement records of women's studies graduates, increasing visibility of women's studies research and praxis, and the importance of foregrounding gendered analyses for building just societies, such a move to deny programmatic support can only be described as a poverty of imagination, and disregard of ethical principles. Being a student in one such impoverished yet pioneering and high-achieving women's studies program has taught me to be much more than just a graduate student in the conventional sense; indeed it has driven home the very politicized space and nature of a women's studies education in an era where misogyny of the white male power structure of the academy still thrives.

Along the lines of training women's studies scholars, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a solid attention to inter-disciplinary methods. Because women's studies positions itself as oppositional to what is considered "legitimate" knowledge and is indeed a valid critique of much that is considered "knowledge," unwittingly there is a tendency in the field to be scornful of "master narratives." If inter-disciplinary feminist methods, among other things, mean borrowing research tools from a variety of disciplines to ask new questions, to foreground questions of hierarchical relations of power between researcher and subjects of research, to be critically conscious of one's own social location and how that influences the research agenda, process and product, the accountability of the researcher to the communities they write about - all of these questions need to be thoroughly engaged in the classroom to prepare students for responsible research and to anchor one's work. Absent a grounding in "master narratives," and relying entirely on interdisciplinary methods may offer breadth but not depth. I truly believe this is an area that scholars and teachers of women's studies must now turn their attention, and it would behoove students to demand attention to these questions as part of their graduate education. These questions have implications for those seeking tenure-track positions in disciplines or interdisciplinary programs.

In the mid 1990s, the job market tilted favorably toward the disciplinary trained gender scholar rather than the interdisciplinary women's studies scholar because the former could be hired as joint appointments. Recent years have witnessed the opening up and creation of tenure-track positions seeking full time appointment in women's studies of scholars trained in the field and even in tracks of "intersectionality" and global/transnational feminisms. I find particularly interesting the resolute grounding of intersectionality tracks in scholarship on Euro-America, and the transnational tracks beyond the geographic Euro-America. Hence, the continued divisions in conceptualizing the categories "women of color" and Third world feminism as well as the U.S. and the global. We must dislodge this division which hinges on the idea that the borders of the American nation are intact.
and obfuscates the confluence of the local and the global in the transnational (Eisenstein, 2004). These false divisions then limit in vision the urgent alliances that are possible across oppositional spaces literally Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies and Area/International studies. Having just come off the U.S. job market, I can vouch for my own marketability in transnational feminism-track as opposed to the woman of color-track albeit arguably the boundaries between these tracks are essentially fluid.

These divisions also influence the (re)production of women’s studies constituencies who will be divided along lines of color, nationality and citizenship. They lead to the reductionism of U.S. feminism as liberal and Western, and its imperialist erasure of the multiple forms of feminisms ‘elsewhere,’ and the interconnected struggles of women confronting multiple systems of power (Alexander, 2002). For example, in my “Women in Global Perspectives” course, the students who are the most enthusiastic endorsers are from new immigrant communities and international students. Even the most theoretically savvy North American women’s studies student has difficulty in deconstructing categories such as “Third World women” although they are quite adept in applying an intersectional lens to categories such as “Western/Hegemonic Feminisms” or US women of color. At the same time, when the subject of women ‘elsewhere’ is broached, there appears to be a peculiar collapsing of divisions among women in the U.S. so as to create a singular privileged First World woman in relation to her oppressed Third World counterpart.

Women’s studies pedagogy has championed the validation of personal experiences, mostly through a promotion of confessional statements, and journaling of personal reactions. I myself am a product of that pedagogy, about which I must add a cautionary note. Considered liberatory and validating of women’s experiences, this confessional model can also be stifling and counter-productive because it stands the risk of reinforcing ascribed categories and assumptions of the ‘other.’ While I do not doubt the importance of creating safe spaces to share experience and build alliance, I am extremely conscious of which students, voices, and experiences are privileged and which enunciations intelligible through these modes of learning given the U.S. specific frame of reference implicitly rooted in a liberal individualism. Hence, unless we are careful to simultaneously address systematic and global inequities, do we run the risk of de-intellectualizing and depoliticizing a field which is arguably still marginal within academe particularly when we – women’s studies scholars in the academy - are still evaluated (promotion and tenure) by institutional standards and criteria which devalue work (research, teaching, scholarship) that is not adequately intellectual.

As women’s studies graduate students and newly minted women’s studies Ph.D.s enter and position themselves within the academy, these are scattered issues they may confront. I do consider this a privileged position to enact social change, to further oppositional consciousness, to take apart false dichotomies, to forge unsuspecting alliances, conversations and dialogues. Through contestation, the field has emerged, and it is time to take ownership of that history as we continue our struggles toward more rigorous feminist solidarity.

Works Cited


