

Formation and Development of Women's Studies in the United States

In 1969, the number of courses in women's studies given in the United States were less than 100. Within two years (1971), the number rose to 610, then to 2000 in 1973, 5000 in 1975, the Woman's year. In 1976, the number of universities offering the Women's Studies program grew to between 250 and 300.

In order to understand the causes of the rapid development achieved by these studies within a very short period, we should recall the student power erupting in the 1960's that brought about the disruption of the oppressive atmosphere created by McCarthianism and its encroachment upon many universities in the States. "Arising from the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, the students protested against cooperation by universities in the war. They criticized the contents of the courses given at universities by saying that they could not give any proper answer to the problems students were confronting. Meanwhile, the Black Power Movement came to shed light on the black people's history and requested that black studies programs be set up at universities."

Women's studies were born at a time when the university reform movement and the women's liberation movement coincided. During the fifties, the slogan, "Woman's happiness lies in the homes" contributed to reduce the number of women in universities; the average marriage age of American women became younger than 20. Around 1955, 60% of the female students dropped out of universities in order to marry. The result was that more frustration and alienation came to be felt among women confined to the role of housewife. An increase was noticed in the number of female neurotics. In the late sixties, a number of radical women's liberation movement organizations were formed; their activity spread into university campuses where a campaign was organized for the elimination of sexism at universities and the creation of women's studies courses. The aim of these courses was to shed light on women's history which had been slighted by men historians.

At Cornell University, some male students took the women's Studies courses in 1971. Their number everywhere is increasing year by year. Since 1972, magazines dealing exclusively with women's studies have made their appearance; they are getting increasing circulation. In the early seventies, the Federal Government of the United States, undertook a series of law revisions to eliminate sex discrimination; one of them was the "Sex Discrimination in Education Prohibition Act" of 1972.

In 1976, the National Women's Studies Association was formed. It had its first convention at San Jose State University, with about 600 representatives attending from all over the United States.

The functions of women's studies may be condensed into the following:

First, to help female students reform their consciousness, i.e. realize clearly their own social position and liberate themselves from existing fixed ideas about women.

Second, to encourage research on women and shed more light on the roles played by women in past and present society.

Third, to seek modification of stereotypes of women's roles established by historians, and to revise biological determinism concerning women's psychological properties.

Finally, women's studies by no means intend to create "men-like women." They aim at effecting social change which would truly improve women's status and fashion a society where both men and women could live in a more humane way.

Condensed from an article on this topic by Kazuko Tanaka, which appeared in "A report on the activities of the Center for Women's Studies, Tokyo Woman's Christian University, Tokyo, Japan, 1978.)

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