

Women's Studies in Ewha Woman's University

Women's liberation movement takes form in various cultural activities: clubs, research centers, conferences, papers, magazines and other mass media. These activities crystallize in what are called "Women's Studies," a series of courses at the university level, given in universities of the United States since the beginning of the 1970's i.e. since the start of woman's lib in America.

These studies made rapid progress in the States and found quick response in other parts of the world. The idea was adopted at various Asiatic universities in India, Korea and Japan. Plans were made for including women's studies in their programs. Probably the most successful step toward the realization of this project was made by Ewha University in Seoul, South Korea.

Ewha University is considered the largest women's university in the world. Founded in 1886 by an American Methodist missionary, it developed from a tiny girls' school into a women's college in 1910 and, in spite of the Korean war of 1950, it continued its development until it became a university with 8000 women students, 10 colleges and fifty departments, granting master's and doctoral degrees in history, medicine, pharmacy, politics, art, and literature. This rapid development prepared it to start in 1976 a "women's studies" program under the direction of the Korean Women's Institute. It was a pilot project which, in many ways, caused a reevaluation of some fundamental issues: "How to bring the women's movement back to university students; how to translate the Women's Studies paradigm to Korean culture; how to confront problems of personal change in student consciousness-raising; and a questioning of the basic assumptions about the old women's liberation."

A study group was formed, consisting of an ad hoc 20-member committee of men and women recruited from the various disciplines (psychology, biology, theology, education, literature, history, political science and sociology). Its aim was to develop a core resource group, an interdisciplinary teaching-research team which would work towards developing the first Women's Studies' course. Then a 3-credit course was established, given in the form of lectures to under-graduates for one semester with no prerequisites.

The project involved some innovations. The method of interdisciplinary teaching was a relatively new idea at the University. Another innovation was the use of discussion groups. The 150 students taking the course were divided into 5 different discussion groups, each with a graduate student as discussion group leader. Another experiment was used to encourage students' active participation in the course. A series of "assignments in life experience," to be recorded in student journals, replaced the conventional reading or research paper assignments. For example, one assignment was to "observe one day of advertisements or drama on television, record the images of women versus those of men as portrayed in the mass media" or

"interview 2 working girls, one factory girl and one Ewha graduate."

After major outlines of the course objectives, organization and requirements were completed, there remained the task of designing course content. Basic research began by reviewing the women's studies program in the United States. Members of the project team considered about 80 programs and 400 course syllabi and submitted course proposals. After careful analysis a "14-week Semester Course I" syllabus was designed, to be followed by a revised Women's Studies Course II; both will be turned over to the University to become part of the routine curriculum. In preparation for this, the Women's Studies steering committee carefully evaluated its initial results through a series of questionnaires monitoring lectures, discussion groups, and, finally, workshops.

The results of the questionnaire indicated a high rate of success in changing attitudes and teaching about Korean women's problems. The overall rating of the discussion groups on the questionnaire was not high, due to the fact that students found it difficult to work in discussion groups. On the other hand, the quality of the discussion group leaders was rated "very successful" by the steering committee members. The "life experience" assignments, which replaced conventional homework, were evaluated by the workshop as "useful." Their frequency was considered advisable. This technique, together with the discussion groups, were most experimental and set a precedent at Ewha University.

Conclusion:

The main concern in a women's studies program is not women's education, nor is it mere information on women's history or psychology. "Women's Studies program should be a consciousness-raising activity and must therefore be highly experimental-psychological in its methods and personal in its form and content. A successful course will not only inform, it will provide a basis for change in attitudes and values; it will raise many more questions than it can ever answer. Furthermore, for consciousness raising to become a basis of action, theories and content must be culturally translated. Issues which are peripheral in Western society may be vital in Asian cultures: women's identity and nationalism, sex segregation (its problems and advantages), arranged versus love marriages, religion and sexual morality. Whether the discipline is history, biology or literature, a great deal of study of new and abundant theories will have to be done."

(Partly condensed from a lecture by Soon Young S. Yoon, visiting assistant professor of anthropology and research associate, Korean Women's Institute, presented at the Asian Women's Scholars' Seminar - May 1978)