

# Women

## New perspective of their place in history

By MARGARET REGAN  
Express education writer

In the late 1960s, with the first rumblings of what feminists often call the "second wave" of the women's movement, some educators began to take a second look at their traditional university courses.

What they saw was history that ignored women's lives, psychology that defined rigid sex roles as the norm, literary criticism that avoided the work of women writers, anthropology tainted by western ideas of what men and women ought to do with their lives, and even zoological studies interpreting the animal kingdom in terms of male supremacy.

"When we talk about the liberal arts, we're really talking about male studies," says Dr. Susan Basow, associate professor of psychology at Lafayette College. "For example, in psychology, woman are often not subjects in experiments. Yet generalizations are made about humans."

"In history, the focus is on men's lives. Women's contributions to art are devalued. In science take the example of Nobel Laureate Barbara McClintock. Her work was just recognized after all these years."

The new consciousness of the male bias in their university training had the force of revelation for many scholars. How many assumptions, how many facts, would turn out to be just prejudices of a culture that devalued women? Hardly any field remained untouched as art historians, biologists, historians and English professors, with all the ardor of converts, rushed to ask new questions.

What happened puts one in mind of a familiar optical illusion. You look at a simple drawing of what seems to be a symmetrical vase, wide at the top, narrowing to a decorative stem. But if you stare fixedly at the drawing, your eyes suddenly change their focus and an entirely new image emerges. The vase disappears entirely, and in its place are profiles of two women's faces.

In psychology, rigid ideas of masculinity and femininity, sanctified by Freud, gave way to the discovery that it is society, not nature or biology, that delineates gender roles.

"We study the origin of sex roles and we conclude that there are very few sex differences," Basow says of her course "The Psychology of Sex Roles." "We ask: How does each individual



Lafayette College now offers four women's studies courses in four different departments: history, English, anthropology and sociology, and psychology. Gathered

for a recent interdisciplinary class at the college are, from left, professors Maryann Valiulis, Susan Basow, Lynn Van Dyke and Stacey Schlauf.

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learn sex roles today? It's through social institutions, through the media, at school. And what are the effects of sex roles, on the individual in terms of mental health and behaviors, on relationships and on society?"

In communications, says Dr. Susan Davis, a folklorist teaching in the Communications Department at the University of California at San Diego, "there's a really strong interest in mass media studies, in imagery and stereotypes. There's a concern with the fact that women seem to be portrayed in stereotyped and stylized ways, in music, television, movies and advertising."

"There's a lot of research across a number of areas: How images of women are made, what they mean and how people understand them. The questions are: What's the content of mass media and what does it mean? And, how are women making new imagery about women?"

Women's history, Davis added, has a pivotal role.

"There's a women's history explosion," she said. "I'm not sure

that the history thing isn't pushing everything else (research in other disciplines) along. We're learning that women's experience is socially shaped. There is this new understanding that women have a history."

Dr. Maryann Valiulis, assistant professor of history at Lafayette College agrees.

"Women have a right to their own history," she said. "For so long traditional history has been political history — men's history. Now social history gets away from the elites and focuses on the majority of people. You ask different questions."

Professors teaching the new women's studies courses have an intensity of purpose, what one professor calls a "sense of mission," about the information they are sharing with their students.

Dr. Diane Allington, assistant professor in psychology at Centenary College, Hackettstown, teaches a course called "The Psychology of Women."

"Something I always tell my students is that the history of women is written in invisible ink," she says. "For the future,

to make sure that we manage to hold onto the gains of the recent women's movement, it's important that as many of us as possible know something about women so we don't become complacent."

"My concern is that the changes of the last 20 years or so may be more superficial and transient than we realize. If we're not careful we may lose it."

Many professors speak of the need for "compensation" — intensive study about women to make up for all the years when academic research ignored or belittled their lives.

Dr. Lynn Van Dyke, an assistant professor in Lafayette's English Department says, "women's studies are important because women's experience is half the human experience, and it's regarded as marginal. There's a kind of compensation going on."

Her colleague, Dr. Stacey Schlauf, an assistant professor of languages, teaches Spanish and Latin American literature, but she has also taught women's studies. Before coming to Lafayette,

she helped found a women's studies curriculum at Hunter College in New York City.

"There's a compensatory aspect of women's studies. That's not the only aspect, but it's important," Schlauf says. "We've been exposed only to a patriarchal world view. I try to give students some understanding of the institutions that have formed us, and try to put women in the center of experience. Men have assumed their perspective was only one."

"Women are half of humankind that have been essentially ignored. We live with sexism daily — women's studies speak directly to people's lives, and provide an intellectual framework for understanding that. It's very different from other disciplines. There is perhaps some parallel with black studies, in the sense of mission."

Some critics of the new women's studies denounce the fact that its professors advocate a political agenda, most of whom readily admit they are feminists seeking to change social institutions.

"Women's studies are accused of this as though other courses don't have values," Basow responded. "At least in women's studies the values are clear and out front. Other courses have implicit values that we don't talk about. Not talking about ways of change is a value in itself."

"There is an activist component, but that's certainly not a requirement for success in the courses. It's more a way of seeing the way the world is. It's not just passive learning — it's taking information and making it personal."

Van Dyke agrees that women's studies is different from the usual academic offerings but she points out that it is an intellectually rigorous discipline, something critics sometimes forget.

"In women's studies, the professors have to have experience in many fields," she said. "You must first be an expert in the traditional scholarship in many disciplines, and then go on beyond that."

Students also react to the material differently than they do in other types of courses, the professors report. Many college students, most of them in their late teens and early 20s, start the course believing that the work of the women's movement is over.

"But they come away from the course with the idea of how pervasive sex roles are," Basow said.

Since the courses are electives, professors usually find that the students who sign up are those who are more skeptical of traditional assumptions and more aware of sex discrimination.

"Anyone who takes an upper-level course in sex roles is already interested," says Dr. Susan Niles, assistant professor of anthropology at Lafayette, who teaches a class called "Sex and Gender: A Cross-Cultural Perspective."

"But we don't just get people of a particular frame of mind by any stretch of the imagination!"

Schlauf added: "They are surprised at the extent to which inequality exists. And when they're confronted with the mass of evidence, they sometimes get very depressed. The knowledge implies a sense of responsibility, which means you have to do something about it. And that's hard to do."

"But I always get the comment, 'This changed my life.' I never get that comment from any other course I teach."

## Colleges offering feminist programs

By the early 1970s, college and university catalogues began to list new women's studies courses, with titles like "Women's History" and "Literary Women" and "Psychology of Women."

The Feminist Press, of Old Westbury, N.Y., publishes a quarterly called Women's Studies Newsletter, which keeps tabs on the number of women's studies programs offered either as a major or a minor at institutions of higher education around the country.

"We see an increase every year," reports Maxine McCants, vice president and co-director of the Feminist Press. "The 1982 count was about 450. In 1981 there were 350. What that means is there is a definite program to enter, that students take it as a major or minor, or just a concentration."

McCants added that the figure goes much higher if you count all the individual courses in women's studies. These courses are typically found in English, history, psychology or sociology departments.

Many colleges locally offer women's studies courses.

• Lafayette College, Easton, will begin an interdisciplinary "Introduction to Women's Studies" course next semester. The course will be offered once each year from now on.

Other courses already offered are "Women's History," "Literary Women" and "Sex and Gender: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," an anthropology course. Occasionally, the English composition course for freshmen focuses on "Woman as Hero." This semester there was an evening non-credit course, open to the community, called "Images of Women in the '80s."

• Lehigh University is the only local institution with a women's



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Dr. Lynn Van Dyke focuses on "Woman as Hero" in a freshman composition course at Lafayette. She also is preparing a course called "Literary Women" for next semester.

studies minor. It is interdisciplinary, which means that students take courses about women in many departments of the university.

• An administrative committee at East Stroudsburg University, East Stroudsburg, is considering a proposal for a women's studies concentration. The university now offers courses on women in the departments of history, sociology, psychology, English and health and physical education. There is also a Women's Center that gives non-credit seminars and provides support groups and counseling to students and community members.

• Centenary College, Hackettstown, offers two courses, "Women in Literature" in the English Department and "The Psychology of Women."

• Muhlenberg College, Allentown, has "Women in Literature" in the English department and "Changing Sex Roles" in sociology.

• Cedar Crest College, Allentown, offers several courses. "An Inquiry of W.O.M.A.N." in the philosophy and religion department;

"Feminist Politics" and "Women and the Law" in the political science and economics department; and "The Feminine Experience," an interdisciplinary course offered jointly by the sociology and anthropology department and the psychology department.

The college also has a woman's center that offers non-credit courses in such diverse subjects as assertiveness training, parenting and nuclear disarmament, as well as a Management Institute for women in business.

• Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales, Center Valley, offers two interdisciplinary courses in the English department, "Evolving Concepts of Female Awareness and Identity" and "Women and Work." All freshmen must take an interdisciplinary course called "Work" that includes a section on "Women and Work in American Life."

• Representatives of Northampton County Area Community College and Moravian College reported that no courses in women's studies are now being offered.

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## Lafayette is designing interdisciplinary course

Lafayette College now offers four women's studies courses in four different departments: history, English, anthropology and sociology, and psychology.

A look at the courses gives some idea of the kind of work being done today in women's studies.

• **History:** Dr. Maryann Valiulis teaches "Women's History" every other year, alternating with Dr. Ellen Hurwitz.

In a way, the new emphasis on women's history coincides with a trend throughout the field of history to study the lives of many people, Valiulis said, instead of concentrating on political and economic elites.

Valiulis' course this year covers the period from the Industrial Revolution to the present day, and includes Europe, the British Isles and the United States.

"We cover the changing definitions of what it means to be a woman," she said. "How they saw themselves and how society saw them, what was their 'proper role' and what they were actually doing."

"When society needs them, women take on a more public role, for example, during the American revolution women ran the farms. In pre-industrial society, women always worked. There was not a distinction between the home and society. In colonial history, women were not called passive or weak."

Colonial women had an important economic function, producing cloth, household goods and much of the food for the nation. The Industrial Revolution changed that, putting lower-class women into factories as underpaid workers and middle-class women into their homes as consumers.

"Society's definition of what it meant to be a woman changed from strong to weak, from active to passive," Valiulis said.

Among the books her students read are: "Daughters of Time" by Mary Kinnear; "Womanhood in America" by Mary P. Ryan; "The Majority Finds Its Past" by Gerda Lerner; "Becoming Visible: Women in European History" edited by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz; and "A Room of One's Own" by Virginia Woolf.

• **Literature:** Dr. Lynn Van Dyke has focused on "Woman as Hero" in a freshman composition course, and she is preparing a course called "Literary Women" for next semester.

"There are two different ways you can teach a course like that," she said. "One is images of women in literature by men and by women. The conclusions most people reach is that women play the role of the 'other.' She is not in the central point of view or the central character in the books that are considered the great works of western literature. Woman is usually a secondary character who helps or who hinders a man along his way."

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Dr. Maryann Valiulis  
assistant professor of history,  
Lafayette College

"The other is to study works by women, and look at how women's position as an outsider has influenced the way they write. There are certain themes and styles in women writers. There's also a female tradition. Among writers, the influence usually goes from male to male, from male to female, or from female to female."

"In so far as there is a female tradition, it is not biologically determined. It's culturally determined. It's available to women to use it, but they don't have to use it."

Van Dyke finds her students excited by what they read.

"They feel like they're discovering something. They can do original research — many areas have not been explored at all. That's not true in most literature classes."

For the "Literary Women" class next semester, Van Dyke has chosen novels of self-discovery as the theme.

Those works are: "Emma" by Jane Austen, "The Awakening" by Kate Chopin, "Member of the Wedding" by Carson McCullers, "Daughters of the Earth" by Agnes Smedley, "Surfacing" by Margaret Atwood and "Sula" by Toni Morrison.

• **Anthropology:** Dr. Susan Niles teaches "Sex and Gender: A Cross-Cultural Perspective" every spring.

"I try to look at sex roles, (asking) what might be common, what might not be common, what are the cultural universals. We look at biology, economics, social structure, cosmology and psychology."

"We use case studies to examine cultures. We focus on some African tribes, and on a South American Indian tribe, the Sharanahua, where women do the agricultural work. We look at Shi'ite Moslems in Iraq, and look at sex roles in rural Spanish society, all the time drawing parallels with our own experience."

"The way we try to understand our own culture is to try to understand other cultures. We look at things in a spiral, from things that are very different, to things that are very similar."

Niles called her course "very traditional."

"Anthropologists tend to look at the world this

Please see COURSES, page A11