

CHANGING LIVES

Changing Lives

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Foreword © 1995 by Florence Howe

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The Committee on Women's Studies in Asia which was

formed to coordinate work on this volume brought to fruition the dream of colleagues in Asia and the United States. Each member has given unstintingly of her time and the outcome is the result of voluntary efforts of all the scholars involved. The institutions: Tokyo Woman's Christian University; The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi; Women's Resource and Research Center, Quezon City, the Philippines; St Scholastica's College, Manila; Ewha Women's University, Seoul, Korea; National Taiwan University, Taipei; Satya Wacana University, Salatiga, Indonesia; Ochanomizu University, Tokyo; Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, USA and the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia—cooperated with their faculty to make this work possible. We thank them.

Early on in the project a distribution of responsibilities was made: Malavika Karlekar and Barbara Lazarus worked on and edited *Women's Studies, Women's Lives*. Manorama Barnabas, Fanny Cheung, Lucia Pavia Ticzon and Yasuko Murmatsu are writing and editing a second volume, *A Resource Guide for Women's Studies*. As Chairperson of the editorial team, Yasuko Muramatsu has been deeply involved in the whole project. We appreciate each other's contributions and are thankful for the opportunity and the challenge of working well together over these last years.

Manorama Barnabas
January 1994

Publisher's note: *The editors and publishers regret not being able to individually acknowledge the photographers whose pictures we carry here. While every attempt has been made to trace them, sometimes this has not been possible, particularly with family photographs. For this, our apologies.*

Foreword



As a publisher over the past twenty-four years, I have rarely written a foreword to one of our own books. But I felt compelled to write this one for two reasons, one professional, one personal—as though we could separate those two aspects of our lives. But I will try to be clear about what I mean, and begin with the professional.

In the spring of 1990, a small group of Philippine women visited me at The Feminist Press. We held a seminar, with several Press staff joining us in the library. Together the two groups talked about their work. We described our activist origins, the research we did in the 1970s, the inservice teaching to stimulate school systems, and the international publishing that began in the 1980s. They described their activist work and their involvement in women's studies, both research and teaching. They also described a five-year women's studies project in the region that might soon be ready for publication.

In addition, one of the two books they described is the volume by the Committee on Women's Studies in Asia you have opened: the story of women's studies in Asia, as told through various generations of pioneers from eleven different countries. I said I was eager to read the books they might publish.

Several days later, we met again at Hunter College where the Fourth Interdisciplinary Congress on Research on Women had begun. They asked me to meet with them that afternoon, and in a small space in one of the lounges, they proposed that The Feminist Press become the publisher of their women's studies regional project. "Oh, no," I said, trying to keep the conversation light, "I'm very flattered, but you can't have an American imperialist publisher." "No, no," Lucia Pavia Ticzon

replied, speaking for the group, “We’ve thought about it, and we’ve decided that you’re *international*, not American.” We went round this conversation several times, until I could no longer manage the joking tone in the midst of tears. They were in earnest about The Feminist Press as an international institution. “Why don’t you publish it yourselves?” I took a deep breath. “Why not establish a publishing arm?—you do everything else.” They explained that they had no time for publishing now, and no expertise. Perhaps in the future. But the offer held. I said I’d be delighted to *co-publish*, but I thought that they ought to have an Asian publisher, and I suggested Kali for Women in India.

And that is, of course, what eventually the Committee chose to do.

The personal story begins when I read the manuscript of this book in 1994, for more than twenty-five years ago, I was one of a group of U.S. “pioneers” *changing lives*. Again and again, in the thirteen memoirs in this volume, I recognized my own experience, for I too, like so many in the West, had come to women’s studies through personal encounters with the men in my life, and through intellectual discoveries affecting my professional life. I am by nature and nurture a crusty, tough, street-reared person, not easily brought to tears. But again, I found my eyes filling despite myself as I read essay after essay. I remembered what it was like to be shocked by colleagues who, allegedly for your own good, told you not to “waste your time” on the narrow subject of women, certainly not on poor women, or women in some kind of trouble.

As I read about the husbands and children who needed to be told by fearful women that family work had to be shared among all of them, not pressed as a second and third job on mother, I remembered my own timid rebellion about the laundry. And I remembered all the days of my youth when I had to pick up my father’s and brother’s clothes where they had dropped them on the floor and carry them to the bathroom hamper. My mother believed that men were totally exempt from household labor, and my young cries of “unfair” fell on deaf ears.

Why are these life stories important to an American and Canadian audience now both generations older and younger than the Asian “pioneer” writers? For “pioneer” women of my generation, the stories will help us remember our own changing lives, and perhaps suggest that we tell our own stories for daughters and sons and granddaughters and grandsons and

those who will follow them. For “pioneer” women of the two following generations, these stories will make palpable the experiences privileged academic women share, despite profound cultural differences. It may also—and here I am being idealistically hopeful—remind the several “pioneer” generations in the West that in Asia, women’s studies “pioneers” have not broken the connection between themselves and the least privileged women of their countries. Perhaps it is too optimistic to expect one book to make a difference, but for women’s studies pioneers the world over, books have been lifelines. *Changing Lives* will remind all of us outside Asia that experiences shared and relayed through women’s studies worldwide can indeed cross cultural borders to produce unforeseen, positive, and permanent changes in critical consciousness.

Florence Howe

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Introduction



Why was I born a member of the female sex? . . . had I been a boy, and had news of my mother's condition, then no matter where I had been, like a bird I would have flown to her side. What am I to do now! I am a caged bird.

Rassundari Debi, India, 1868¹

I don't want to be identified as a bonsai or a wild tree. I don't want to be sentenced to my present form of existence. As a human subject, I am expressing continuously the life that flows through me. I have limited control over what flows through me. But I have ample space to grasp its meaning, to learn, unlearn and relearn. Beyond my present form of existence, the world is wide open and free. Nobody, no boundaries can imprison my consciousness.

Thanh-Dam Truong, Vietnam, 1990²

Women's studies, women's lives

A decade and a half after the International Women's Year is not too early for some enquiry and introspection into what, for lack of a better phrase, have been the gains and losses. This volume attempts to do so through the stories of women who have responded variously to a challenging phase in contemporary history. These stories speak of individual experiences, anxieties and solutions. A common thread running through all is an awareness that, for each essayist, life changed after she began teaching and researching about women. While a few, more than others, may have some questions regarding the future and direction of women's studies, or its status in academia,

each knows that her perceptions, expectations and priorities are very different today from what they were when she started out.

By questioning existing structures, whether within the home or outside, women's studies has provided its practitioners with a distinctive way of looking at the world. It is not important whether they continue to work in the field or not. What is relevant is that wherever they are and will be, their view will be one borne of a range of experiences during a vital period of their lives. For when the personal and that which does not directly affect one find affinity, the outcome is bound to be an almost irreversible change in perceptions and expectations. This, perhaps more than any other transient success, is what remains, a much valued gain for those who have cared to search. Many of the essayists speak not only of their own personal lives, but also comment at length on women's studies and where it has brought them intellectually. For women's studies entered the world of academia at a crucial moment and has helped in the process of expanding methodologies and bases of enquiry; above all, it has provided the individual researcher with a new confidence.

The move towards a re-evaluation of established methodologies and theoretical premises³ helps to contextualize women's studies in a wider intellectual framework. The development of a discourse on women in the academy appears inextricably connected to the development of the women's movement. Indeed, some believe that women's studies is a response to the need to provide the women's movement with a theoretical foundation.⁴ All of this, however, sounds a bit like putting the proverbial cart before the horse: in the first instance, we need to establish what we mean by women's studies.

Definitions of new disciplines are often many and at times contradictory, if not confusing. Put simply, women's studies which was talked of as an area of research, teaching and action only after 1975, the International Women's Year, concentrates on gender as a category of analysis in the same manner that caste, religion, class, and status groups have so far been used by social scientists.⁵ It is now generally accepted that while "sex" refers to physiological distinctions, gender is "a cultural construct, a set of learned behaviour patterns."⁶ Women's studies emphasizes that a focus on gender as a category of analysis means that it now becomes an important indicator within

studies where the focus may be on other variables. Thus, in order to provide a complete picture of peasant uprisings or of a tribal or "native" community there is a need to look not only at class and ethnic factors, but also at gender as a significant variable. In emphasizing the need for social scientists to be gender-sensitive, women's studies is staking a claim to restructure entire knowledge systems and social science methodologies.⁷

Again, there is an important body of opinion which believes that incorporation into existing disciplines as courses or papers may be preferable to marginalization (some call it ghettoization) as a relatively new, independent area of study. These debates, which were initiated some years ago,⁸ raise important questions not only about the status of women's studies but also about the identity of those interested in this growing area. To put it simply, women's studies scholars—and certainly those represented in this volume—are those who have established themselves in various disciplines prior to their interest in women's studies. The very nature of the area lends itself to interdisciplinary methodology, analysis, and networking. Ideally, to work across disciplines, a researcher needs to be familiar with more than one subject. This is not always possible particularly as academic requirements stress specialization in a single area.⁹ Nonetheless, in sociology and social anthropology—for instance, economic anthropology, political sociology, sociologies of religion, education, medicine, and so on—stretch across disciplines; similar exercises increasingly characterize women's studies as scholars look to new data sources and methodologies to enrich their area of work. It is possible of course that in the process researchers may be open to criticism from purists in various parent disciplines. However, this is a risk worth taking as research across disciplines often results in investigations into hitherto neglected areas and the emergence of new perspectives. Essential for interdisciplinary research is the use of a range of methodologies, many of which are relatively new. These are some of the challenges which the women's studies scholar has to recognize and take on.

Is women's studies different from a range of earlier studies that have focused on women? Can studies in the social sciences prior to 1975, which deal with the status of women, their employment, education, multiple roles, patterns of marriage, and so on, also be regarded as work in women's studies? One answer to these questions would be that if such studies do not envisage women as an oppressed category, they do not fall

within the ambit of this new area of work. This answer can be countered by a further question: Is it necessary to have a prior belief in the existence of subjugation, oppression, and discrimination for work on gender to qualify as women's studies? Or is it important to read, study, and analyze a problem in accordance with the norms of certain rigorous theoretical and research methods and then come to conclusions based on relevant findings? But are these two approaches mutually exclusive? Is it not time to acknowledge that no activity can be free from the intellectual, social, and ethical baggage of the teacher, the learner, the reader? That commitment to a cause and intellectual rigor can go together? A related question asks whether women's studies belongs to academia alone the way, for instance, quantum physics does? Or can it also justifiably imply action, intervention, and consciousness-raising in the interests of justice and equity? If these are broadly defined to include a conscientious teacher's or researcher's committed handling of the subject matter and students, then most would agree that women's studies, like some facets of other social science disciplines, involves action. Here action and intervention imply the teacher's ability to influence the thinking of her or his students as well as of the impact of research findings on policy formulation and administrative strategies. In other words, women's studies further restates a belief that knowledge creation has to reflect perceptions of the real world with all its warts and blemishes.

An approach on which there is less agreement is one which defines action as working for structural change. Here the external agent acts as a catalyst. That this agent may be a researcher is evident from the increasing popularity of the participatory research method. Maintaining that "actors in the situation are not merely objects of someone else's study but are actively influencing the process of knowledge generation and elaboration," participatory research challenges notions of objectivity, neutrality, and value-free judgements.¹⁰ The situation thus represented is the product of the collaborative processes of researcher and respondent.¹¹ Participatory research has been used effectively, for instance, in women's studies,¹² the sociology of education,¹³ and the study of movements and grassroots organization.¹⁴ We already know that critiques of existing methods, frameworks, and viewpoints are being questioned, and not only by those in women's studies. The limitations of an approach that speaks of objective distance,