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Keywords

women's studies, gender studies, academic, scholarship, violence against women, women's liberation, sexual liberal, movement, failure

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**ACADEMIC WOMEN'S STUDIES:
AN INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE FOR SCHOLARSHIP
ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

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KEYWORDS

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This article was my contribution to the panel "How Academic Women's Studies Has Contributed to the Acceptance of Transgenderism and Gender Identity Ideology" at the 2023 Women's Declaration International (WDI)-USA National Convention in San Francisco, Sep 15-17, 2023.

I AM GOING TO TALK about how academic women's studies has been a failure for scholarship on violence against women and how it has contributed to the institutionalization of transgenderism in universities.

I was an instructor, lecturer, and professor in women's studies for 35 years at Penn State University, the University of Bradford in England, and the University of Rhode Island (from 1987 to 2022).

Women's studies was supposed to be the academic arm of the women's movement for research, scholarship, and teaching (Bowles & Klein, 1983; Hunter College Women's Studies Collective, 1983). Its goal was to uncover women's history, study women's multitude of accomplishments, analyze why women and girls were globally consigned to second-class citizenship, and learn how to create social change to bring about equality for women. We based our work on the concepts that knowledge is political—and it is, and the personal is political—and it is.

So how did women's studies come to its present state where it supports men's rights to say they are women, supports the medical and social destruction of young people's identities and bodies, and participates in the erasure of women as a category?

I came to women's studies from a background of work at a local rape crisis center and battered women's shelter. I was a volunteer and member of the board of directors at the Women's Resource Center in State College, Pennsylvania, for ten years. While working with victims and survivors of violence, I witnessed the harm of battering to women and children and its destruction of families. I witnessed the harm and often

lifelong damage caused by sexual abuse and violence. And I learned that 95% of the perpetrators were men. That's where my feminist analysis was formed, and I carried it forward in all my work. I was never a liberal scholar. I was a community activist against violence against women with a Ph.D. and an academic job.

I naively assumed that academic women's studies followed the same feminist views and analysis of abuse and exploitation that were formed in the crucibles of community centers whose work was the rescue and protection of women and children.

My introduction to the harsh truth that liberal women sided with liberal men on pornography came when I attended the 1987 women's liberation conference at New York University Law School, *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism* (Women Against Pornography Records, 1987). Up to that point, I innocently assumed that the women around me in the women's studies program at Penn State University agreed with my view of feminism. When I returned from this conference, I described it to a colleague. She replied, "I hope the opposition was there." Then, I knew who my "colleagues" were. From that day forward, I learned to be cautious about who I spoke to about my work and my views. Which is not to say I changed those views. I have never modified my views that all forms of violence and exploitation are harmful. I just wised up that most people in women's studies were not opposed to pornography or prostitution and that, for most of them, battering and rape were uncomfortable topics.

At the national level, women's studies seldom focused on violence against women. There were 10 NWSA national conferences¹ before there was a plenary on violence against women. And I'm told that a few women had to pressure the organizers to have it (Personal Communication, 1994).

In the late 1980s, Andrea Dworkin declared that women's studies was dead as a home for scholarship for the liberation of women. She was right. Whatever potential it had, from the beginning, women's studies had little to do with the women's liberation movement and eventually emerged as an opponent to what the movement stood for. That observation put me on notice of what my journey in women's studies would be like for the next 30-some years.

In women's studies, on almost any controversial topic, especially those involving sexual violence and exploitation, women's studies women followed the views of liberal, leftist, and gay men. Radical feminists and their theories became anathema in universities.

Of course, some scholars in women's studies programs did important early radical feminist work, such as Janice Raymond (University of Massachusetts-Amherst, USA), Renate Klein (Deakin University, Australia), Maria Mies (University of Applied Sciences in Cologne, Germany), and Jalna Hanmer (University of Bradford, UK). However, as I made this list, I realized that many of the best radical feminist scholars in universities were never in women's studies.

In the 1980s, radical feminists introduced an excellent term to describe people who defended pornography, prostitution, and allowing adults to have sex with children. They named them "sexual liberals." They had liberal attitudes with no boundaries or limits on sexual behavior or activity. The term still has value as we advocate for the rights of women and children to be free of violence and exploitation.

¹ The National Women's Studies Association, founded in 1977, held its first conference in 1982.

The next phase of sexual liberalism involved the transformation of violence into sex, starting with the introduction of sadomasochism. Increasingly, the more violent and “transgressive” an act was, the better. The transgender movement has introduced even more extreme ways to violate boundaries and bodies. The faculty in women’s studies never discussed these topics, and if they ever came up, they turned away quickly in fear or discomfort. They never criticized any sexual liberal views. They passively accepted them. Their syllabi rarely had more than one lecture on violence against women, and it was treated superficially.

The introduction of postmodernism was broadly accepted in women’s studies programs, although I heard a lot of grumbling about how difficult it was. But there was no criticism or acknowledgment of it for undermining important principles that women’s studies should stand for. Nor was there any criticism that it enabled further intrusion of sexual liberal ideas into women’s studies scholarship. There is a hilarious play by radical feminist playwright Carolyn Gage about the founding of postmodernism (Gage, 2010). Gage proposes that the introduction of postmodernism allowed pedophiles to coopt academia.

When I joined the women’s studies program at the University of Rhode Island (URI) in 1996, some serious scholars did important work. Some women strongly allied themselves with the ACLU and defended pornography. Over time, the serious scholars retired. Increasingly, they were replaced by instructors with weak feminist backgrounds, especially community activism, and almost no knowledge of the history of women’s studies. I called them “*Ms. magazine*” scholars because their feminist knowledge didn’t seem any deeper than what they could get from reading *Ms.* They were traditional scholars from mostly liberal arts disciplines who had done a dissertation on a topic onto which they had tacked “gender.” An example: In a faculty meeting, I said that students didn’t know much about feminist theory, and a women’s studies instructor popped up and asked, “Well, there’s literary theory and film theory—what else is there?”

One indication of some faculty members’ politics was their desire to recruit men for women’s studies. This occurred at Penn State and the University of Rhode Island. (At the University of Bradford in the UK, separatism was practiced. While handling it diplomatically, Jalna Hanmer didn’t allow men in women’s studies.) At Penn State and URI, a heterosexual woman aimed to have more men in women’s studies. The reason was always vague, but it had to do with doing “more.” Women’s studies could do “more” if men were involved. At the University of Rhode Island, Jody Lisberger, a strong advocate for a shift from women’s studies to gender studies, gave lectures in which she opposed “the binary”—while holding up two index fingers to indicate “the binary.” She lobbied for recruiting men students and faculty into women’s studies. She promoted “gender studies,” arguing that with more male students and men in the department, there would be a shift from women to gender—and we could do “more.” She relentlessly promoted the “new idea of gender”—walking into my office and stopping me in the hallway—until I moved my office to another building on campus.

Andrea Dworkin said: “Feminism requires precisely what misogyny destroys in women; unimpeachable bravely in confronting male power.” Increasingly, the women’s studies faculty was comprised of personally weak people. When I talked to them, they’d tell me how afraid they were: Afraid of students not giving them good evaluations, afraid of not getting rehired for the next year, afraid of not getting tenure, afraid of what their colleagues in their home departments would think. Some of these things were and are of serious concern, but always being afraid seemed to define who they were.

When I published an essay (2021) in which I compared the idea of transgender to Q-Anon and a cry went up to discipline and fire me, my colleagues scurried as fast as they could to sign a public letter denouncing me. They feared that if they didn't criticize me and defend everything trans, they would be condemned for not doing so. And yet, so typical, that's not what they said privately. The head of women's studies, Rosaria Pisa, spoke to me about transgenderism privately just weeks before. She shrugged, shook her head, and said dismissively, "I don't get it. I don't know what it's about." Of course, she didn't say that publicly. She passively went along with faculty and students in denouncing me. And I should mention the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Jen Riley, a women's studies faculty member. She timidly explained that she had to write a press release denouncing me to appease the protesting students and faculty.

Before this incident, there were several campaigns to force me out of the Carlson Endowed Chair I had held since 1996 when I was hired. Once, a Member of the European Parliament wrote a letter to the university president asking him to suppress my work. She opposed my lectures in European countries against the legalization of prostitution. The lawyer for URI (the University of Rhode Island) tried to force me to delete one of my essays from my academic website. There was an effort by colleagues and the administration to deny me a promotion. There was manipulation to keep me from teaching core courses, particularly feminist theory, to prevent me from presenting radical feminist ideas to students. My colleagues called for the administration to stop me from submitting grant proposals because I was too successful in getting grants and traveling. There was even a plot by retired women's studies faculty, particularly Mary Ellen Reilly, with the provost, Beverly Swan, and the vice president for advancement and marketing, Robert "Bob" Beagle, to force me out of the endowed chair.

I believe all of these efforts to hinder my work were because they didn't like my radical feminist research, teaching, and advocacy. A union representative told me that one of the reasons the provost, Donald DeHayes, was blocking my promotion was because: "He doesn't like your work."

However, I want to make one thing clear: I was not a victim! Never did they successfully humiliate me. Never did they intimidate me. Never did they make me afraid. Not once did I change my views or soften my opinions. And, most importantly, I won every skirmish!

So, given women's studies history of advocacy for or the silence in the face of sexual liberal politics, it was a natural progression for the academic institution of women's studies to follow the men to accept and then promote transgenderism or gender identity ideology passively.

Decades ago, in her groundbreaking feminist classic, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), Judith Lewis Herman wrote about the ebb and flow of social and political movements. Movements wain when people forget and become lazy in resisting perpetrators—or even side with them. The weakness of the women's movement and the collaboration of academic women's studies has enabled the transgender movement to gain ground and hurt many people. However, this conference proves the women's liberation movement is alive. We will regroup and resist the corruption and defense of exploitation and violence. And I'm sure there will be a renewed women's liberation movement. We will be victorious in reclaiming our rights because we speak the truth, and the truth is powerful.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Donna M. Hughes, Ph.D., is a radical feminist. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*. She held the Eleanor M. and Oscar M. Carlson Endowed Chair in Women's Studies for 26 years. She has personal experience with sexual abuse and exploitation as a child, career-length hostility in universities to her anti-prostitution and anti-pornography advocacy, and a university-wide attempt to "cancel" her for writing about the transgender movement. She developed the concept of "the demand" as the root cause of prostitution and advocated for prostitution to be treated as a form of violence and a women's rights violation. She has done research, lecturing, and advocacy in the United States and many countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

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