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For Scholars of Women's Studies, It's Been a Dangerous Year

By *Emma Kerr* | FEBRUARY 11, 2018

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Nat Stein, Colorado Springs Independent

Stephany Rose, director of women's and ethnic studies at the U. of Colorado at Colorado Springs, speaks at a DACA rally in September 2017. Programs like hers raise fears, she says, because they're "looked at as the ground zero for how women are shifting."

Janet Badia has a poster outside her office at Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne.

It's a cartoon with two panels. On the left, a woman who's pregnant is surrounded by onlookers discouraging her from having an abortion and saying they'll do anything to protect her unborn child. The other panel shows a woman with a toddler being yelled at by the same people. "Get a job, moocher!" they shout. "I hope your tramp mom doesn't want food stamps to feed you!"

Badia, a professor of women's studies, laughs as she recalls how the poster keeps getting ripped off the wall. "I've probably had to put that one back up five or six times so far," she says.

Torn-down posters are just one of the more visible ways that women's-studies professors' lives have changed since November 8, 2016. For many of them, that date was supposed to mark the night the United States elected its first female president. Instead, voters chose a man who once bragged about sexually assaulting women. Next, 2017 became the year of the "Silence Breakers," with "feminism" chosen as Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year. It also became the year that some women's-studies scholars

fielded increasingly pointed criticism about the merits of their field, and a year in which they coped with death threats and intimations of violence against them and their children. Blowback that once would have been seen as extreme has increasingly become the norm, these professors say.

"Our classrooms are a part of the larger society, and the kinds of divisions that exist and the kinds of scapegoating that exist spill over into our classrooms," said Barbara Ransby, president of the National Women's Studies Association. "It shouldn't be surprising that a number of our colleagues around the country have experienced hostility."

Scholars or Activists?

To some extent, the field has always had its skeptics.

Badia has heard it all: how women's-studies programs are like a small shop full of trinkets and candles — something you don't really need, and little more than "a boutique major." One academic celebrity, Jordan Peterson, has said that disciplines like Badia's have "no valid reason to exist" and should be defunded. "Any of the activist disciplines whose primary role is the overthrow of the patriarchy, which is about as ill-defined a concept as you could possibly formulate," said Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, "we've done enough public funding of that sort of thing."

These critiques strike many women's-studies scholars as being particularly jarring at a time when issues of gender and justice have taken center stage culturally and politically. Women have been visible and outspoken opponents of the policies of President Trump. Campus debates about affirmative consent have both sparked and reflected a broader national discussion about sexual assault.

But some institutions have sought to eliminate women's-studies programs or cut their funding. Badia's campus is in Fort Wayne, a heavily conservative area where 65 percent of voters chose Trump in 2016. Administrators there began phasing out the women's-studies program entirely in 2016 because of a \$7-million budget gap. On the day the program closure was announced, someone went to its Facebook page and posted,

"Good. Good riddance," Badia said. "There was a lot of that kind of trolling of us. It's people who have been angry we existed all along." After student protests, the program was reinstated.

Other programs have been threatened, too, as campuses across the country face budget cuts. In 2016, Western Illinois University administrators recommended cutting the women's-studies major and three other degree programs because of poor enrollment and low graduation rates. The College of Saint Rose, in New York, announced that it would discontinue its bachelor-of-arts program in women's and gender studies in 2015 along with other programs with low or no enrollment. The low regard in which some institutions have held such programs may also be historical: They were often founded as faculty-led projects, only later developing into official programs.

More recently, individual courses have been targets of outrage. One day, Carly Thomsen, an assistant professor of gender, sexuality, and feminist studies at Middlebury College, found her course, "Queering Food," described with four other women's-studies classes as pointless and "categorically insane" by the conservative website the Daily Wire. The author of the article made no apparent effort to research or understand the syllabus, Thomsen said. The course uses the lens of feminist and queer research to explore food-related topics like the politics of breastfeeding and the gendered labor of food production.

After the Daily Wire article ran, Thomsen received threats and hate mail from the site's readers, she said. Some called her a "quack professor" and a "womaniac." The effects of the article reached her classroom. Some students were livid that the course was being treated like a joke, she said. One of them told her it was the hardest class they'd ever taken.

Misconceptions about the field can extend further across the political spectrum, Thomsen said. Liberal feminists often assume that women's-studies professors are activists instead of scholars. Part of that misunderstanding is rooted in the way that women's-studies programs came into existence, said Thomsen. They emerged from the

women's movement in the 1960s. But today's scholars often have a different orientation, and many of them are divided over the role that feminist movements and activism should play in the classroom.

"It's the issue of the relationship between theory and practice, between scholarship and activism," Thomsen said. "The assumption that women's studies equals a kind of uncritical support for contemporary movements is wrong."

Another course, "Women and Right-Wing Populism," caught the attention of conservative outlets, as did its creator, Amrita Basu, chair of sexuality, women's, and gender studies at Amherst College. The course is described in the college's materials as seeking to "explore the consequences of neoliberalism, cultural conservatism, Islamophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments for women of different social and economic strata as well as women's divergent political responses."

Basu's inbox filled up with screeds. "Some women are nuts, vengeful and stupid," one read. "They drift left because they are unable to take care of themselves and need the government to do it for them. There, I've done your job, madam chairbitch."

She found the messages insulting, "but they were sad more than anything," she said. Beneath all the misinformation, she said, there was "a great deal of fear and paranoia about what feminists believe and what they teach."

'I Know Where You Live'

If social media and the inboxes of women's-studies professors are any indication, the fear and paranoia about feminists that Basu described is often quickly conflated with other hatreds — of black and LGBT people, of Muslims, Jews, and immigrants.

An email might start by focusing on women's-studies programs, but it branches out from there. One message shared with *The Chronicle* makes reference to the Women's March with "stupid people wearing pu\$\$y hats, acting like morons." Another comments on labor unions and tax increases, while a different one writes about "breeding too many people thanks to welfare," and "LGBTQRSTUVWXYZ freaks."

The messages can get personal. "They say, 'I know where you live and work,'" said Abby Ferber, a professor of women's and ethnic studies at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs who studies gender and racial privilege. In response to audio of Ferber speaking at a conference that was posted online, someone wrote, "I've seen this kikess Abby Ferber before, she writes all of these anti-white books and she's a hideous jew monster." Another wrote, "Turn on the gas boys."

In an article titled "Faculty Under Attack," published in the *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, Ferber described the toll that online threats and harassment can take, and what it feels like to weather them. She interviewed five female scholars who described how their syllabi, emails, and recordings of their presentations were pulled out of context and used in scathing articles. Some of the interviewees received as many as 200 messages, some of them threatening rape and death, within the first two days after an article was published. The scholars "felt betrayed, violated, shocked, and vulnerable," Ferber wrote. Many of them found it difficult to cope with the long-term impact.

When Thomsen, of Middlebury, spoke at a conference about how intersectionality was sometimes troublingly misused as an analytical shortcut by students, quotes from her talk were used in a College Fix article that describes the theoretical concept as a "fad" embraced by "diversity gurus." There, one commenter wrote, "Intersectionality should be renamed: 'We-hate-white-(and Asian and Jewish)-cis-gender-straight-males-to-the-point-of-taking-positions-against-our-own-interests principle.' And, people wonder why this is stirring up the crazy alt-right in response."

To Basu, of Amherst, the criticism that the so-called alt-right — a loose term that encompasses white nationalists — lobs at women's-studies programs is part of its disdain for identity politics more generally. "In a way it's a throwback to the old culture wars," she said. Groups advocating for same-sex marriage and transgender and reproductive rights get lumped in by the alt-right with women's-studies departments. "In part," she said, "the attack is on what they see to be the political orientation of women-and-gender-studies departments."

Alt-right groups on 4chan, Discord, and Reddit started a campaign days before the Women's March on January 21, targeting women's-studies programs on campuses across



Courtesy of Heidi Lockwood

Heidi Lockwood (left), interim director of women's studies at Southern Connecticut State U., attended the Women's March with family and friends. Now is an important time for her field, she says. "We are the one program on campus that is equipped intellectually and politically to actually do and care for the kind of work that needs to be done."

possible threat.

Efforts to call out liberal bias in academe have also focused on women's-studies scholars. The Professor Watch List, a list of professors accused of expressing liberal bias and created by Turning Point USA, included as one of its first targets Stephany Rose, director of women's and ethnic studies at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in Colorado's 5th district. She said she's increasingly received severe threats and messages declaring sentiments like "you hate white men."

The list, she said, is another form of harassment and one that expresses a deeper sense of unease. "These programs are looked at as the ground zero for how women are shifting," said Rose. "Like, this is where the problem starts, these people are trying to destroy common male/female relationships."

Students who once might have been simply skeptical of her course now walk into her classroom feeling emboldened by what they're hearing from the top levels of the government, she said. "They feel they can resist what we are teaching that much more."

the country with plans to post anti-feminist, sexist fliers in their offices. When discussing the campaign, users of these online platforms changed the feminist slogan "My body, my choice," to "My borders, my choice." They used the hashtag #mybordermychoice to mock the hashtag #metoo. A few campuses experienced anti-immigration postering the weekend of the Women's March, but fear of alt-right groups vandalizing their offices or causing other harm spread through women's-studies programs, leading some to alert campus police to the

Navigating Fraught Moments

In the last year, Rose said, she and her colleagues have felt more vulnerable than ever in their classrooms. She and others have been recording classes to defend against students who might accuse them of expressing bias. They wonder if some students in their classes are secretly reporting back to Campus Reform, a conservative site covering higher education.

Other professors, Rose said, are looking for ways to teach courses together so they can support and vouch for one another, and some have even requested that plainclothes police officers sit in on classes when discussions risk becoming too heated or personal.

Ultimately, though, many women's-studies professors hope to turn the current contentious moment into a learning opportunity, said Ransby, of the field's scholarly association, and a professor at the U. of Illinois at Chicago. Discussion of the #metoo movement or of a woman's much-parsed account of her date with the comedian Aziz Ansari, for example, can be tools for classroom discussion.

While some scholars would rather avoid current controversies, others, like Heidi L. Lockwood, acting director of the women's-studies program at Southern Connecticut State University, say it is part of their job — though it's a part that requires more caution than it once did.

Lockwood has broadened the curricula and allowed students more autonomy over the topics they want to discuss. When discussion becomes strained or difficult, she tries to make it clear that there's enough space for dialogue. "It has certainly been an unprecedented year," Lockwood said. "I am more careful about not alienating or antagonizing students who come from different sets of beliefs."

If anything, controversies about feminism and movements like #metoo and the entertainment industry's Time's Up are precisely why women's-studies programs are necessary, Rose said. "Now we are being looked to as programs and as scholars to have the conversations people haven't had before," she said. "We are the one program on campus that is equipped intellectually and politically to actually do and care for the kind of work that needs to be done."

Some students appear to be drawn to those conversations. At Middlebury, Thomsen said, the first time she taught "The Politics of Reproduction: Sex, Abortion and Motherhood" after Trump was elected, only three of the 37 students had taken a women's-studies course before. In previous years, almost all of those students would have been women's-studies majors. Many of the newcomers to her course told her that the political climate was the primary reason they were taking it, she said.

"As feminist-studies scholars, we do a disservice to ourselves if we don't recognize that our work is being understood as inherently political, even as in the classroom, we sometimes want to distance ourselves from the variety of politics to which gender studies gets attached," she said. "We need to be able to engage critically with the social world around us."

For Badia, in the northeast corner of Indiana, the political dimensions of her discipline are never far away. One recent morning, she arrived at work to find that the photo and quote from Emma Watson's 2014 speech at the United Nations headquarters — "Men, I would like to extend your formal invitation. Gender equality is your issue too" — that she'd posted outside the program office had sexist comments scrawled on it and a penis drawn on Watson's face.

The other poster, the one with the cartoon showing people discouraging a woman from having an abortion, keeps getting torn down. Campus police officers have advised her not to hang it back up, she said, and to put something less provocative in its place.

But that cartoon is still there. And if it were torn down tomorrow, Badia said, she'd hang it up again.

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