

The achievements and future of women's studies in Canada

By Stephen Hui

"Students still always wonder whether or not I'm a lesbian or not," Barbara Crow says. "Who cares?"

Although such stereotypes concerning the "F-word" -- feminism -- persist, she notes, women's studies has come a long way in Canada.

As an associate professor of communication studies at York University in Toronto, Crow is cross-appointed to the school's graduate program in women's studies. She's also the past president of the Canadian Women's Studies Association, having headed up the organization from 2002 to 2004.

Crow and her colleague Lise Gotell, an associate professor of women's studies at the University of Alberta, put together two editions of *Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women's Studies Reader*, so students could become more familiar with the writings of Canadian feminists.

We spoke by phone before International Women's Day, which is celebrated each year on March 8.

Stephen Hui: How did you get into women's studies?

Barbara Crow: It's a long story. The bottom line is when I was in university I was studying Canadian politics, and a friend suggested that I take a women in politics course. I said, "You've gotta be kidding me? I'm gonna study women?" Because in political science, women, power -- they weren't together.

I took the course, and it was unbelievable. It was the first time ever I had been the subject of intellectual inquiry, and that was it. After that, I became one of the first double major graduates in political science and women's studies from York University in 1984.

SH: So, what about women's studies has changed since then?

BC: It's changed dramatically. I'll tell you what is most interesting to me is that we've begun to see the institution be institutionalized, and there's a level of professionalization that has come with women's studies. I would still say, though, the students who take the courses are quite different from the regular student body. . . . I teach other classes where students think this is gonna to fill a requirement or get them a job, where the women's

studies students are taking it because it's giving them information, content, intellectual ways to query or know the world that makes them a subject that they don't get in their other courses.

SH: Have women's studies departments changed their universities and the programs they offer?

BC: I think that women's studies programs have certainly raised or been a site for changes in policy at the university -- for example, equity policies. I don't know any women's studies colleagues that don't sit on some committee on gender or race, or lesbian, bi, gay committee at any university in Canada. Almost all of my colleagues participate in some kind of capacity, representing women or feminism on campus.

SH: Could you tell me a bit about your recently published article *Antifeminism Inside the Women's Classroom*?

BC: That piece was about, really, a reflection on feminist pedagogy. That some of the values, some of the goals of feminist pedagogy -- or ways about teaching from a feminist perspective -- are not always supported by the university, our workplace. That when we do confront resistance in our classroom that is anti-intellectual, which is quite different from being antifeminist, there are ways of dealing with that within the bureaucracy or within the classroom. Antifeminist -- that's a political position, and it's difficult to discuss or find ways in the university to resolve those kinds of conflicts that happen in the classroom.

So, what we found in that particular piece -- my colleague Lise Gotell had a student come into class on a regular basis who made claims that women liked being raped, that all women want to be dominated, on a persistent and consistent basis. The feminist classroom is supposed to be a place where people feel comfortable and can say what they want. This is kind of the feminist pedagogy -- part of the position of feminist pedagogy. So, how do you deal with that kind of tension in the classroom, when clearly there were people in the room who had been raped or people who were afraid of that kind of position and that kind of talk?

SH: Now, how do you deal with that?

BC: It's very difficult. First, I think what's most important about a women's studies classroom is that people are subjects in the classroom. So, how do you tend to that? At the same time, I'm not a psychologist. I have had encounters with students where they needed somebody else to help facilitate what was happening in the classroom.

But generally I try to find a space and ask the student what evidence do they have for that, what empirical evidence do they have for that, what kind of research do they have to support their position. That's the first way I deal with it: what kind of evidence do you have to make that kind of claim?

SH: From your perspective, how have attitudes towards feminism and women's studies outside the field changed in recent years?

BC: I think that there is way more acceptance of feminism. Some people have described the current climate as a post-feminist one. I don't like describing our current state as post-feminist. I think there are still inequities in salaries, inequities in where and what kind of space women can still occupy. Many of my students are still afraid to come on campus at night to go to the library. I would have thought that would have changed from 20 years ago, when I was an undergraduate student.

So, I think things have changed. You see in a lot of the curriculum you see gender and race mentioned. You see better integration of some feminist scholarship into the curriculum. So, I see those kinds of changes that are dramatically different than from when I was an undergraduate.

What is challenging right now is that I think we have a lot of the rhetoric of equality but not the practice. Whenever we do engage or raise issues about discrimination or differences between men and women, it falls back on the logic that it's up to the individual: women can be whatever they want now, and it's up to us to make it happen. I think that takes away from the fundamental kind of social and political and economic practices that still are in place that make some group of people benefit more than others.

SH: Now, how does the field deal with the continually evolving and increasingly fluid concept of gender that's being advanced?

BC: I think that's been one of the things that's been most exciting about being in women's studies. When my colleagues ask me why . . . one of the reasons I am in women's studies is because I think it is a dynamic theoretical framework and practice. I don't know any other discipline that's been taking up these questions of gender in any other way. I don't know any other discipline that's taken up lesbian and gay studies. Lesbian and gay studies started and transsexual studies started as an affiliation with the Canadian Women's Studies Association. So, I think it's what makes feminism a really exciting theory and practice.

SH: Are there any areas of research in women's studies that are particularly exciting to you right now?

BC: Absolutely the transgender. I think that there has been really interesting work going on still around the relations of unpaid and paid work. I think we've seen incredible advances around violence against women, and I would argue the current debates on having national childcare is great evidence of women organizing in feminist politics.

SH: Now, do you see growth and transformation in the future of Canadian women's studies?

BC: I do. Like any discipline -- if you look at the history of other disciplines, we are following a similar trajectory. Once you become part of the university and become institutionalized, certain things come with that. What I've noticed is . . . many female graduate students who've come through the university do feminist research, and they're being hired in sociology, political science, English, chemistry.

So, feminism is coming through the disciplines, as opposed to women's studies used to be the place where that was done. We're seeing it diffused across the curriculum and in the disciplines. So I think that has made some of the claims that some programs have made for more hires more difficult because we can put together a curriculum by the different offerings of different feminist scholars in different departments. So, that's been a challenge for us.

I also think that every generation brings a whole set of concerns and context to the questions that they ask. So, certainly for me in the last five years of being a professor in women's studies I've found students way more interested in cultural intervention and anti-globalization in a way my generation wasn't interested in. So, I think that these are really important -- how students bring certain concerns that they have and the places they're active in political and social movements to the curriculum and raise really important questions for women's studies.

Stephen Hui is a founding editor of Seven Oaks.