The Department of Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington includes eleven full-time faculty members, who are affiliated with History, Psychology and the Jackson School of International Studies, as well as sixty-six adjunct and affiliate faculty who hold appointments in other departments and share the feminist mission of GWSS. Intersectional and transnational analyses foreground our studies of race and ethnicity in U.S. and global contexts, as we analyze how these social formations intersect with gender, women, and sexuality in specific times and places. Our research and teaching complement and contribute to Ethnic Studies, Transnational Studies, and Women of Color scholarship.

In addition to our Feminist Graduate Program leading to a Ph.D., we offer undergraduate majors and minors in GWSS and graduate certificate programs in Feminist Studies and Sexuality and Queer Studies. All undergraduate majors are required to complete a senior capstone course and participate in an internship—distinctive marks of our commitment to excellence in writing and critical thinking, and to linking those skills to community-based social justice practice. Our alumnae hold important positions in academic, professional, and non-profit institutions.

Mission Statement

The Department of Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington draws on feminist thought to foreground transformative intersectional and transnational analyses of social formations such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality as they are shaped in conjunction with local and global, political and economic histories and structures. Our research innovates and enlivens academic and public debates using books, articles, archive development, exhibit curation, digital media production, poetry, performance, and community engagement. Our histories of innovative public engagement are both wide and rich. Faculty have collaborated, for example, with the local Seattle Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) and Museum of Popular Culture (MoPOP), as well as the national Smithsonian Institution and international organizations such as Gender Dynamix (South Africa), the Hong Kong Arts Centre, and Hyderabad Urban Lab (India).

Our department has long been an active participant in conversations about the institutionalized study of gender and sexuality. We are one of the oldest programs in the United States, and began in 1970 as the University of Washington Women Studies Program. Since then, we have continually embraced the shifting meanings and implications of gender and sexuality; our research and teaching reflect their unfolding complexities and contradictions within the university and beyond. To indicate that our work as a department is not owned by or solely relevant to women, in 2011 we changed our name to Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies.

Social justice concerns have been central to our mission from the beginning. As individual scholars and as a department, our research is dedicated to the analysis of historical and contemporary intersectional feminist praxis in the realms of feminist technologies and creative practice; gender equality, queer, and trans rights; indigenous, immigrant, labor, and environmental rights; prison abolition, Black Lives Matter, and anti-war movements; and other on- and offline mobilizations that advance justice-minded paradigms across the Global South and North and imagine new worlds.

Our department includes nine full-time, one half-time, and three emeriti faculty members, affiliated with American Ethnic Studies, American Indian Studies, Anthropology, Communication, Comparative History of Ideas, History, Political Science, Psychology, School of Music, the Jackson School of International Studies including African Studies, Asian Studies, Latin American & Caribbean Studies, and South Asian Studies, and the UW Honors Program. We network with approximately 65 adjunct and affiliate faculty who share the feminist mission of GWSS while holding appointments in departments and schools across the University. As we intersect with many academic disciplines, we rigorously interrogate and intervene in disciplinary formations, which have at times intentionally or unintentionally silenced the experiences and knowledge of women, people of color, sexual minorities, the Global South, and other oppressed populations.

GWSS provides career skill-sets sought in fields such as public policy, international development, law, medicine, social services, education, cultural programming, and community outreach.

GWSS at the University of Washington offers both an undergraduate major and a minor. All majors are required to complete a senior capstone course and participate in an internship—distinctive marks of our commitment to excellence in writing and critical thinking, and to linking those skills to career and community-based social justice practices.
Notably, we are home to a robust Feminist Studies Ph.D. program. The first of its kind in the Pacific Northwest, it is one of less than twenty doctoral programs in the U.S. We offer certificate programs, open to all graduate students at UW, in Feminist Studies and Sexuality and Queer Studies.

The interdisciplinary scholarship and pedagogical initiatives of GWSS at UW extend across four overlapping focus points. These focus points structure the undergraduate major:

1. Global Identity Formations
   How are individuals and communities shaped by ideas about difference—race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, immigration, and citizenship in the Global North and South? What hierarchies of power do these ideas delineate?

2. Decolonizing Empire
   How have historical and ongoing practices of colonialism shaped beliefs about international economic development, militarism, nationalism and communal relationships to place? How have communities in the Américas and Global South produced and invoked feminist theory and practice to resist colonial rule? How have they worked in concert with antiracist, indigenous, and other groups?

3. Feminist Knowledge Production & Radical Critique
   What are the different histories and strains of feminist theory and practice, and how have they intersected with other modes of critique proffered by collectives organizing around black power, indigenous rights, trans rights, immigrant rights, queer liberation, and other movements? What role have storytelling, visual arts, new media, music, performance, and theater played in challenging emphases on text-based, book learning?

4. Building Social, Cultural, and Political Movements for Change
   What strategies can we utilize to move from criticism—from simply pointing out what is wrong or problematic—to imagining, articulating, and producing alternative visions? What technological, practical, or methodological tactics can we leverage to articulate these alternate visions of radical justice?

You can find out more about these areas and the relevant courses from the GWSS Undergraduate Advisor.

Name Change

2011-2012 marked our first year as the newly renamed Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies Department. Students at the graduate level will now receive their degrees and certificates in Feminist Studies. These changes reflect current debates in the field that involve feminisms in different historical and geographic contexts; push research and teaching in new directions; and speak to complex, powerful relationships among social categories.

Gender is critical to our collective work. The ways bodies and social relations are constituted within a field of power, both inside and outside of man/woman binaries, are central to our scholarship and teaching.

Women Studies is the history and future of our department. Analyses of sexism and of women’s places in the world are critical to our work. We retain the non-possessive “women” instead of the more common “Women’s Studies” to indicate that our work as a department is not owned by or solely relevant to women.

Sexuality is integral to our scholarly and political inquiry into subjects as varied as reproductive politics, violence and war, racism, development, art and music, cultural studies, digital humanities, and queer studies.

Feminism is an analytic that opposes all forms of inequity and operates across traditional academic disciplines. Theories, politics, and histories grounded in decades of feminist scholarship allow our students to critique injustice and generate responses to oppression.

The core of this intellectual work articulates race and ethnicity in U.S. and transnational contexts, as we analyze how these social formations intersect with gender, women, and sexuality in specific times and places. This is an exciting time for us to discover debates of the past, evaluate debates of the present, and shape debates of the future!

Department Highlights

The Women Studies Program was founded in 1970. The first course was offered in Autumn Quarter 1970 (PDF). Demand for the major grew over time and departmental status was achieved in 1996. GWSS in its current configuration builds on decades of feminist research, teaching, and organizing. Our graduate program is the first of its kind in the Pacific Northwest and one of less than twenty doctoral programs in the U.S.

All undergraduate majors are required to complete a senior capstone course and participate in an internship—distinctive marks of our commitment to excellence in writing and critical thinking, and to linking those skills to community-based social justice practice.

Intersectional and transnational analyses foreground our studies of race and ethnicity in U.S. and global contexts, as we analyze how these social formations intersect with gender, women, and sexuality in specific times and places. Our research and teaching complement and contribute to Ethnic Studies, Transnational Studies, and Women of Color scholarship.

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