

**Y Women's History?:**

Because!



Because women want to learn, too.

It was a time when women didn't really understand about gender discrimination that disadvantaged women and advantaged men, nor did men, or did they? Was it sexism? Or was it just the way it was? Or was the way it was, taught and learned?

It was a time when women began to openly question the role of academics in crafting the way it was. If the way it was, was taught and learned, could it not be taught and learned so as to advantage and disadvantage men and women equally?

It was a time when one woman, getting her doctorate at Columbia in the 1960s, had to fight blatant sexism on the part of the history faculty there when she told them she wanted to study the role of women. They laughed at her and thought her crazy.

She wrote that, "Graduate school was not a happy experience for me. I was presented with a narrative of the past in which women did not exist. I kept saying, 'Where are the women?' I was told they were having babies."

"It's such a total absurdity," she commented, "that one half of the human population had accrued to itself the pretense that what it did was significant and what the other half did was insignificant." She would learn she wasn't alone in her observations and desire to know herHistory.

Married with children, she began college at age 38, when her children were older. Typically, it was the way it was to attend college for many women wanting higher education, but not so typical for this woman. She, perhaps more than any other scholar in the world, excavated the role of women in history and insisted that this role be recognized -- not only in her field, but in society as a whole.

Gerda Lerner (1920-2013) received her BA from the New School for Social Research in 1963 and went on to complete an MA and Ph.D. from Columbia University in an astonishing three years. Lerner would go on to pioneer the course of women's history academics by teaching classes, establishing master and doctoral degree programs and would become known as the Founder of Women's History.

It was a time when women addressed how the way it was, was taught and learned.

During the 1960s, the women's liberation movement increased public awareness that university education often lacked a woman's perspective. The first women's studies programs were created as scholars attempted to re-examine history, literature, anthropology, psychology, chemistry, physics, biology, literally all subjects, and to explore how best to ingrain the missing woman's perspective in academia.

Such explorations began in January 1969, when author and activist Sheila Tobias organized a feminist conference at Cornell attended by 2,000 women. The conference addressed the exclusion of women and their historic contributions from traditional academic disciplines. In spring 1970, in response to the conference, the first courses focusing explicitly on women titled, "The Evolution of Female Personality," were offered at Cornell. A giant leap for women's studies considering it happened at Cornell, a major American university.

The courses drew 250 undergraduates, 150 auditors, and covered such topics as the economic and psychological dynamics of consumer society, cross-cultural studies of marriage and child rearing, images of women in literature and media, and the sociology of race and sex. In its wake, in the fall of 1971, a very small program called "Female Studies," predominately run by grad students, was developed at Cornell. It did not have much academic credibility on campus.

In 1972, a dedicated group of female faculty members who met throughout the 1971-72 academic year, helped set up an interdisciplinary program approved by the College of Arts and Sciences with a women's studies first full-time director. It was perceived not to be about serious scholarship.

The founders were not sure how long the program would be around, but eventually it would become a serious full-fledged interdisciplinary program at Cornell. It would be the second women's studies department in America, in the world.

The first women's studies department was founded at San Diego State College (now university) in 1970 when the on-campus women's liberation group formed a committee with faculty and community members called the Ad Hoc Committee for Women's Studies. The group collected hundreds of petition signatures in support of a women's studies program.

That year five San Diego State faculty members from existing departments taught classes related to women's studies. In the fall of 1970, the first Women's Studies Department was officially approved. It offered the first bachelor degree in women's studies. By the 1974-1975 school year, the once fledgling department had two full-time and four part-time faculty and an enrollment of nearly 400 students. In 1995 it offered a master degree program in addition to the bachelor degree.

Shortly after San Diego State's first Women's Studies Department, Cornell established its

Women's Studies Department the same year, and other universities began offering classes in women's studies. By the mid-1970s, there were at least eighty women's studies programs of some dimension across the U.S.

In 1972, Sarah Lawrence College became the first institution to grant master degrees in women's history, the program started by Gerda Lerner. At Sarah Lawrence, Gerder fostered projects that led to women's history month and African-American women's courses. In 1980 Lerner created the nation's (world's) first Ph.D. program in women's history at the University of Wisconsin/Madison. The first Ph.D. program in women's studies at Emory University was established in 1990.

A 2007 survey conducted by the National Women's Studies Association found there were 576 institutions offering women's studies or gender studies at some level. As of 2012, there were 16 institutions offering a Ph.D., all located in the United States. Courses in the United Kingdom can be found through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.

Women's history courses are open to all men and women who want to learn about women's accomplishments, women's contributions, women's inventions, women's heroics, in essence, their (men & women) history, everyone's history.

Thanks to Lerner, Tobias, ALL their colleagues, and a generous generation or two generous generations of dedicated feminist scholars, discriminating sexist policies, that still do exist, no longer prevail due to what now is being taught and learned about Y women's history?



Gerda Lerner and her husband, Carl, in 1966, at her graduation from Columbia with a doctorate. Photo Credit "Fireweed: a Political Autobiography"/Temple ...

Sources: <http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/2009/11/cornell-looks-back-40-years-womens-studies>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's\\_studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's_studies); [http://womenshistory.about.com/od/practice/a/womens\\_studies\\_programs.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/practice/a/womens_studies_programs.htm); <http://www.progressive.org/news/2013/01/180324/gerda-lerner-founder-women's-history>; <http://www.news.wisc.edu/21393>.