Eat Darling, Eat — Debra Bergoffen, Director

Our Women’s Center is grounded in a gamble. Instead of following the example of most other universities and splitting the academic from the activist work of Women’s Studies, George Mason, acting on the feminist idea that theory and practice ought not be severed, created a program where thinking is valued as a form of action and where action is informed by theory. Our hybrid center brings faculty, staff and students together as it gives each constituency the space for creative work. Faculty develop women’s studies courses that meet general education requirements and create an MA certificate in Women’s Studies; students create women’s coalitions and men’s support groups; students, faculty and staff organize and participate in Take Back The Night and visiting scholar lectures. The gamble is paying off. Two of the more striking examples of how well the gamble is paying off were the fall general faculty meeting and the October breakfast. I could say that the great turnout at both events is a sign of our good health and that would be true.

But there is more, for you did more than just show up. You took up important and sometimes controversial issues; you talked them through, you argued with each other, you listened to each other. Sometimes we did not agree. Sometimes we did. When we disagreed we looked for ways to keep talking. When we agreed we took action. Sometimes the action called for doing something new — coming out for the women’s basketball team’s opening game— women; supporting women and having fun doing it. More than an excuse for a pre-game party, this was also an opportunity for us to demonstrate the feminist value of Title IX and to challenge the stereotypes of the feminist and the cheerleader — who said feminists couldn’t cheer? Sometimes the action called for reactivating old programs — re-instituting our brown bag lunches, this time with the long term goal of using these lunches to plan a spring event (perhaps a conference, perhaps a teach in, perhaps a ???) to present and examine the different faces of feminism.

Based on our breakfast conversations, the idea is to debunk two current ideas: the first, the idea that feminism exists in the singular; the second the idea that feminism’s day is past. We did not try find a common definition of a feminist. We took the time to share the plurality of our visions. Within these plural visions there was this agreement: a just world is one where women are respected as persons. We also agreed that for women to be respected as persons they must have the right to speak for themselves and the power to demand that they be listened to. Our first brown bag’s theme — Who is a feminist? — took its cue from these conversations. The second brown bag looked at the questions of feminism from an inter-generational perspective. And so we come back to the gamble and its payoff: Brown bag lunches that include students, faculty and staff, that take up the theoretical questions. Who is a feminist? with an eye toward a campus action that exposes the ways in which anti-feminist media stereotypes are harmful to women, whether or not they choose to call themselves feminists.

You may be noticing something else that all this feminist activity shares — food. Breakfasts, lunches, pre-game dinners, we do seem to be in the business of nourishing each other. Perhaps the truth of the feminist woman is this: wherever we may find ourselves on the feminist continuum we are near far from the voice of our childhood that said, “Eat darling eat,” as it twined the sharing of food to the sharing of friendship and love.
Profeminst Michael Kimmel: Re-Framing Violence as Men’s Issue

In his October 4th talk, sponsored by the WMST Research and Resource Center as part of “Turn Off the Violence” week, sociologist Michael Kimmel identified four major changes in women’s lives over the past thirty years and outlined how those changes have come into conflict with four “rules” for masculinity which have not changed much at all in the same space of time. These conflicts, he argues, are a significant contributing factor to violence against women and harassment in the workplace.

Kimmel, editor of the journal Men and Masculinities and a spokesperson for the National Organization for Men Against Sexism, was introduced by Provost Peter Stearns, who noted that he was “delighted at the growing interest in Women’s Studies and in relationships between men and women.” Kimmel, in turn, credited Stearns with teaching him some time back that “emotions have a history” and that “men can express more than anger.”

Speaking to an audience of about a hundred students, faculty, and staff, Kimmel began citing two surveys taken thirty years apart to determine how women’s and men’s roles and expectations have changed. The surveys seem to say that, in women’s eyes, men are “doing worse” than they were thirty years ago. Yet, Kimmel argued, it’s not so much that men are doing worse but rather that women’s lives have changed so dramatically in four major areas: 1) gender identity—women have “made gender visible” (it’s hard to imagine that the first WMST program dates from as recently as 1972); 2) work life—women are represented in the workplace in far greater numbers; 3) family life—women want to balance work and family, not choose between them (“Can women have it all? No, because men do.”); 4) intimate life—women feel entitled to sexual pleasure.

According to Kimmel, the “ideology of masculinity” has not changed to match these changes in women’s lives. Masculinity is still governed by four rules: 1) “no sissy stuff”; 2) be a “big wheel” (still measure masculinity by “the size of his paycheck”); 3) be a “sturdy oak” (“resemble an inanimate object in crisis”); and 4) “give ‘em hell” (John Wayne as icon).

The conflict is personal and political, Kimmel says: gender is visible for women but, for men, “no sissy stuff” means that “real” men can’t talk about gender. The “idea that gender is invisible to men” is a political, i.e., “privilege keeps your privilege invisible.” Men have an investment in continuing to see “man” as “disembodied Western rationality.” The downside is that men constantly have to prove they are not “sissies.” How, Kimmel asks, can we give boys a sense of security in their manhood?

When the “big wheel” rule for men comes in contact with the reality of large numbers of women in the workplace, both men and women suffer because of the “political economy of sexual harassment,” which is not necessarily the obvious “you sleep with me and I’ll do [blank] for you” but, more often, the creation of a hostile environment which keeps women from being as productive as they could be. But, as Kimmel notes, it’s in men’s interests for women to be production; women are allies in the workplace not enemies.

While women are demanding a better balance of family and work life, the “be a sturdy oak” rule makes it difficult for men to be fully involved as family men. To be nurturing figures, men need “quantity time” not just “quality time” with their families; their sense of this role needs to change from “pitching in” and “helping out” to “sharing.” Politically, we talk about a “family-friendly” workplace, but public policy in this area is still seen as a women’s issue when on-site childcare, flexible hours, and parental leave are devised.

Kimmel spent the remainder of his talk on the conflict between the fourth of the changes for women and “rules” for masculinity; that is, that women feel entitled to sexual pleasure while the “give ‘em hell” discourse for men means that public policies around “safe sex” are often seen as a “negation of male sexuality.” “Safe sex is an oxymoron” according to the rules of masculinity. Kimmel says. Yet, women need “safety as a precondition for sexual agency.” It is in this conflict that HIV transmission and date rape converge.

Date rape is typically configured as a woman’s problem and women are given lots of rules for self-policing; Kimmel sees this as an insult to men because it assumes that “men are violent and out-of-control animals.” The purpose of a Men’s Ally Group, like the one being formed on the Mason campus, is to show men that “rape is a choice men make to do but also not to do.” Kimmel concluded by saying that men and women have the same goals.

“Feminism will make it possible for men to be free,” he said, quoting a line from an article in Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990.

—Terry Myers Zawacki, English
WMST Faculty Noreen McGuire Retiring from the “Best Job on Campus” for Health Reasons

At the end of this semester, Noreen McGuire, director of Student Academic Affairs/University Scholars, will be taking an early retirement because of her health. Known for her smile and high spirits, Noreen has been a vibrant and integral part of community for eleven and a half years.

After serving the Mason community in a variety of ways and from a variety of perspectives, Noreen is quick to assert that she has had “the best job on campus.” Her journey to Mason began at University of Delaware where she was an Area Coordinator in Residential Life, Assistant Dean of Students and finally Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs. She even had a brief foray into coaching, first as soccer coach for three years—learning the game as she went-- and then as cheerleading coach, ending up judging a national cheerleading competition. 1985 found her at American University, where she worked as Graduate Assistant in Residential Life and then interim Director of Residential Life, while pursuing her doctorate.

Noreen came to the Mason as the Director of the Freshman Center in August of 1989. Four months later she was named Director of Educational Programs and Research. During the formation of New Century College, John O’Connor, dean of the college, asked her to join NCC, resulting in a shift in focus for her from student life to academic affairs. At that time she had a joint appointment with NCC and the Office of the Provost with the title of Director of Student Academic Affairs under which she has continued responsibility for the Freshman Center, the University Transition courses, supplemental instruction, and retention.

These changes, she noted, allowed her to learn a lot about Mason in her work with different groups of people from across the university. Because she enjoys change and tends to “go with the flow,” she has enjoyed the fact that she has not stayed in one job at Mason for more than two years. She expressed a deep appreciation for having been able to “work with wonderful people” as part of a team and to have been involved with the genesis of such innovations as Fall Orientation, the Parents Program, the Transfer Center, and UNIV 100, an introduction to academic life for traditional and returning students.

When asked about her health situation over the years, she replied with candor. In 1984, at the age of 29 when she was working at the University of Delaware, she was diagnosed with lymphoma through a routine physical. Thus began a series of surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. Not sure that she would make it through the year, she decided to live whatever remaining months she had traveling. And so she determined how much money, credit, and insurance she had so that she could pay for her burial, leave something for her mother, and pay for her travel expenses. In that time period, she proceeded to visit Hawaii five times, make weekend trips to London, and travel frequently to Boston and San Francisco. When her doctors then told her that she had beaten the lymphoma and that she was going to live, it took her five years to pay off her travel debts.

She has found the various diseases she has faced over the years to have been both a gift and a humbling experience. She has been blessed with the support of Barrett, her significant other, as well as family, friends, and coworkers. Her illness has allowed her to experience the gentleness and kindness in people toward her, to appreciate how precious life is, to “get to the essentials” and not “sweat the small stuff.” However, she is also frustrated that her body is failing her, although early on she decided that she had to make the choice between making the best of her situation or “shutting down.”

She has also found strength in the spiritual support of her family, friends, colleagues, and church, sharing that she has been “open to spiritual guidance from a lot of places.” One particularly close spiritual guide was her best friend, a woman who died in August from cancer. Friends since they were nine and ten months old, they found solace in being sick together. When she faced the terror of lung surgery five years ago, she felt the power of prayer, noting that she entered the surgery with a sense of peace and calm which she knew came from knowing that people were praying for her. Her illness has been in and out of remission over the years. Currently, she said, her problem is not cancer but an autoimmune disease called sarcoidosis, which is also treated with chemotherapy and has resulted in additional health problems.

When asked how she would like people at Mason to remember her, she responded “as someone who was part of team, who made a difference in students’ lives, and who helped people—students, faculty, and staff.”

— Ruth Fischer, English
Spotlight on WMST Minor, Tara Ellison by Rebecca Walter

Often we are surprised to find that our students have so much to teach us. As mentors, it is easy to forget that we, too, can be mentored by our students. Tara Ellison is a mentor. She stretches you to think differently. She is the student who speaks on behalf of groups on the fringe of the fringe. A 20 year old junior majoring in English and minoring in Women’s Studies, Tara will graduate a semester early. Co-chair of the Women’s Coalition and Publicity Director of the Pride Alliance, she designed the Pride newsletter, the Gayzette. She is a trainer for GMU’s LGBTQ Safe Zone Program and works three days a week at the Women’s Center. Tara is on the Pride Week planning committee, Eating Disorders & Body Image Task Force and the President/Provost Student Advisory Council, participates in various conferences, presents at the George Mason University Honors Conference and volunteers for HIPS (Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive) in DC one weekend a month. Many of these activities are a bit controversial when applying for traditional scholarships, but Tara takes the risk by listing them on her applications time and time again. Currently, she is trying to launch a student run fanzine mag tag at the Women’s Center and somehow manages to get a 4.0 every semester.

Tara and I regularly talk about feminism and important issues. I often ask Tara what issues are particularly important in her life. Not surprising, if you know Tara, is her reply, especially because she herself doesn’t identify with either of these groups: “inclusion and advocacy of transgendered persons in education and the rights of sex workers.” One of Tara’s missions is to help educate the general public on what transgendered means as well as to make sure “transgendered” people are included in feminist discussions and feminist space, including woman-only spaces. Too often they are left out of feminist and LGBT discussions. Tara is constantly aware of gender policing and how it harms all of us. Out of curiosity, I ask why this is so important to her. She tells me that her best friend recently came out as transgendered in March of this year.

We move onto the rights of sex workers. “Whores and Other Feminists”, edited by Jill Nagle and “Sex Work,” edited by Priscilla Alexander (both are anthologies of sex workers’ stories), are the books that led to her passion about the issue. This interest in sex and sexuality continues in her volunteer work with HIPS (www.hips.org). I ask Tara what rights sex workers want. She tells me that they want the rights to control over their own bodies in whatever way they choose (which includes not being treated like a victim) and they want the respect from the feminist community that any working woman receives. Tara does not think that sex work is inherently exploitative, which is not to say that there isn’t vast room for improvement in the sex industry. In the U.S. prostitution is illegal so they cannot work as free agents, conditions can be dangerous and they have the potential to be abused. Sex workers have very little agency, Tara is vehemently against forced prostitution. She is only referring to women who chose this as their profession. To suggest that women who have made prostitution their profession haven’t actually made this choice on their own is extremely patronizing. Choosing sex work as a profession shouldn’t be stigmatized, but Tara does recognize that more options for women to make money do need to exist and notes that prostitution is the only profession where women consistently make more money than men. After graduation, Tara plans to get her Master’s on the West Coast and work for a nonprofit assisting sex workers or the GLBT population.

Report on AAUW Summit on Women and Distance Learning in Higher Education

A Virginia Summit on Women and Distance Learning in Higher Education, co-sponsored by the Provost’s Office, Women’s Studies Program and AAUW Educational Foundation and local chapters on September 8, brought over 90 AAUW Diamond Donors and other members, education administrators and faculty to the Mason campus. The group gathered for the launching of Cheris Kramarae’s research, commissioned by AAUW, on distance learning. Kramarae’s report, “The Third Shift: Women Learning Online,” examines research to date and reports the results of interviews with or surveys returned by 500 women engaged in distance learning. Following Kramarae’s report, faculty and administrators with various kinds of experience with conducting on-line courses responded to the report. Lively discussion followed the presentations, as most audience members have experienced distance learning as students, faculty member or administrators. All agreed on the potential for such courses and degrees but identified a wide range of problems as well as opportunities that accompany such offerings. Kramarae’s report may be obtained from the AAUW Educational Foundation, 1111 16th Street NW, Washington DC 20036; 1-800 326 AAUW. A complete report on the conference by Caroline Pickens and Margot Gee can be obtained by contacting Ms. Gee at geema@fthsj.com.

—Anita Taylor, Communication, New Century College
Paula Gilbert honored for her scholarship on Québec Women Writers on Infanticide” at 4th Annual WMST Scholar’s Lecture

Paula’s November 6 talk was taken from a chapter of the book that she is currently writing, Violence and the Female Imagination: Québec Women Writers Confront Gendered Cultures. Her research and writing are being sponsored by a National Endowment for the Humanities Faculty Research Fellowship for this year. In her talk, she placed two Québec novels—Aline Chamberland’s La Fissure (The Crack or The Fissure) and Suzanne Jacob’s L’Obéissance (Obedience or Submission)—in the context of recent feminist historical, legal, criminological, and sociological scholarship, analyzing different levels of public and private violence in these constructed narratives of female infanticide, public courtroom trials, sensationalism in the media, and ultimate acquittals of the defendants.

Prior to her lecture, attendees perused an exhibit of photographs—“Faces of Women and Children”—which Paula has taken in her travels in Africa and Asia. Noting that she experiences her travels through the eye of the camera, she hoped that the audience did not see her photos as “betraying an imperialist eye on the developing world” but rather as an “adventure traveler/photographer.” Paula began her presentation by showing how current legal definitions of infanticide differ across countries. In the United States, infanticide refers to the act of killing a newborn either by the parents or with their consent. In Canada, infanticide is invoked if there is evidence that the mother was mentally disturbed from having given birth or from lactating. In Great Britain, the British Infanticide Act of 1922 considered infanticide manslaughter instead of murder on the basis of insanity resulting from birthing and lactating; later revisions of the statute extended the age of the child to twelve. This law has been replicated in at least 22 nations, including Canada, but not in the United States.

Despite these definitions, one significant question in infanticide cases is what triggered the homicidal action on the part of the mother. Over the years, it has been assumed that all women have some sort of maternal instinct and therefore an immediate bond between mother and child exists. When that bond is broken, as it can be said to be in cases of infanticide, then it is assumed that the woman has suffered some kind of mental breakdown that renders her unable to take full responsibility for her action.

Paula described how this question is worked out in Aline Chamberland’s La Fissure and in Suzanne Jacob’s L’Obéissance. Paula contrasted the private violence of these mothers who kill their daughters with the international violence with which certain characters in the novels are obsessed: “The infanticide cases in these novels,” she noted, “test the boundaries of public and private space, not only within the private home and then in the media accounts in the courtroom, but also as they are seen as contrasted or compared to presence of international violence of a massive proportion.” The private narratives of domestic violence/infanticide in both La Fissure and L’Obéissance are set within the context of national and international violence evidenced in the media. In L’Obéissance, for example, Julie, through whose mind Marie’s story is told, finds an abused child in the street and decides to contact the appropriate agency because of her concern not only about international violence, of which this child’s plight is a contextualized example, but the “collective amnesia” that allows us to remain silent in the face of international brutality.

Paula asserted that excessive storytelling about female violence is a symptom of society’s anxiety over women’s roles and their abandonment of traditional femininity. Citing Hayden White’s statement that “every narrative act is an artificial construct,” Paula contended that so too are the narratives surrounding female acts of crime. And since women are seen as “emotional, irrational, and therefore unreliable—especially when testifying on their own behalf,” others, such as prosecuting attorneys, defense attorneys, and other assorted experts must tell their stories. Consequently, she said, “there is little space for the creation of new discourses and knowledge about violent women.

Paula described the public trials in La Fissure and L’Obéissance with their attendant attorneys, psychological experts, judges, and jurors, figuring prominently. In L’Obéissance, for example, Florence, who had her daughter walk into the river and drown, does not even tell her own story; rather it is recounted by her defense attorney. The acquittal verdicts in these two trials play into “the perceived duality of women’s nature, female defendants’ ‘proper’ behavior in the courtroom, and prejudice against the poor, working class, and women of color” whom juries have historically acquitted even though they are guilty, particularly when the case is infanticide.

Paula concluded that “These novels must be read in the context of historical and cultural gender assumptions that foreground binary oppositions between men and women and thereby deny the complexities that need to be applied to female violence, whether real or artistically created.”

—Ruth Fischer, English
Muslim Women: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity
by Marie Dakake, Philosophy and Religious Studies

For many Americans, the Islamic way of life is somewhat mysterious at best, and misunderstood at worst. There has been a long-standing prejudice against Islam in Western thought and literature, largely owing to the fear with which medieval Christendom viewed the powerful Islamic world. Muslims have been historically impervious to Christian proselytization efforts, and have responded to twentieth century attempts at secularization with a strong religious resurgence that has taken place throughout the Islamic world and across various socio-economic and educational levels. Moreover, here in the United States, the level of religious commitment of Muslims is reinforced or heightened by the sense of communal solidarity with which Muslims often approach life in the pluralistic and individualistic West. Religion for Muslims, as for some other Americans, becomes a significant part of community building and identity politics—both in the society at large, and on college campuses like our own.

This should be enough to encourage people to learn more about this growing religion, but the events of September 11 have been a further catalyst for sincere efforts on the part of ordinary Americans to gain increased understanding and familiarity with the lifestyle and values of their Muslim neighbors. One of the aspects of this lifestyle that has often been considered quite different from that of many Americans is the role of women in the Islamic family and community. As we wage war on the Taliban, a regime whose treatment of women is perhaps the most repressive of any in the world today, Americans have begun to question the true status of women in Islamic society, and the extent to which the Taliban interpretation should be seen as an anomaly in the Muslim world. Let me begin by giving a general overview of the traditional rights and responsibilities of women in Islamic society, and then talk about the ways in which these rights and responsibilities have been applied and understood by Muslim women today, especially those engaged in public and professional lives in the West.

The view of women as expressed in the Qur’an, the Islamic scripture, is often defended by Muslims as being perhaps the most liberal of all the world’s religions. In many respects, this is true. The Qur’an clearly views men and women as spiritually equal. The Qur’an account of the fall of Adam and Eve, for example, does not pin the blame for initiating the act of disobedience on Eve, nor does it describe Eve as having been created from Adam’s rib (and therefore, somehow a lesser or inferior derivative of man.) Rather, the Qur’an states that man and woman were created “from a single soul,” usually understood as having been divided into its male and female embodiments at the time of creation. Women and men also have largely the same ritual duties of prayer, fasting, charity and pilgrimage, and are said receive the same reward as men in paradise for their dutiful fulfillment of them. Punishments for serious infractions of the law also are the same for men and women, and at least according to the Qur’an, both male and female sexual vice is viewed with the same level of seriousness. The view taken in the culture at large, however, is quite different, and here, as in many other cultures, a serious double-standard remains with regard to the way in which male and female sexual activity outside of marriage is viewed.

If the Qur’an is often quite explicit in its declaration of the spiritual equality of men and women, it is also clear that this equality does not completely extend to the social sphere. On the contrary, the Qur’an defines particular roles, duties and rights for men and women respectively, and undoubtedly gives both greater social rights and responsibilities to men. “Men are in charge of women,” the Qur’an states, “because they spend of their wealth” for the support of women. And while “women have rights over men, and men have rights over women,” it nonetheless stated that “men have a degree [of rights] above them.” This greater degree of rights—manifested in the male rights to limited polygamy, unilateral divorce and a greater share of inheritance from relatives—is often defended by Muslims (men and women alike) as a just arrangement considering the man’s greater responsibilities in society and in the family. The Qur’an holds men solely responsible for the financial burden of marriage—from the paying of the bride’s dowry to the complete support of the family—while women are not required to spend any of their own wealth (acquired through inheritance, dowry or remunerated labor) on the upkeep of the family or the home. The fact that male rights over women in the Qur’an seem to be explicitly connected, in certain passages, to their role as sole providers for their families, many Islamic feminists have begun to question whether male guardianship of women is legitimate in the case of working Muslim women who contribute substantially to their household income.

Of course, this is a relatively new phenomenon in Islamic culture. Muslim women, like women in other cultures, including our own, were not traditionally encouraged to work outside the home, but that is not to say that they were not considered worthy recipients of education—even at the highest levels. While economic necessity usually led to priority being given to the education of men and boys, women from wealthy or educated families often had the privilege of being educated through private tutors, sometimes to a remarkable...
Muslim Women: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity (Continued)

degree, even in the medieval period. In the mid- to late 19th century, there was a strong push for women’s education in some parts of the Islamic world. The first medical college for women was opened in Egypt in the mid-19th century, and for many decades, the women trained in this college performed the invaluable service of bringing Western vaccines and medical treatments to the Egyptian population. (The college was eventually closed by the British colonial overseer, Lord Cromer, upon Britain’s occupation of Egypt at the end of the 19th century. He was outraged that women should be practicing a “male profession.”)

But with increased access to education for Muslim women in many parts of the Islamic world, and especially for Muslim women residing in the West, women’s education has become an important value in the Islamic community. Today, nearly half of the enrollment in universities in many parts of the Islamic world is female, and in Iran, for example, women account for about 60% of medical school students. In other words, women’s education to high, professional levels is becoming increasingly commonplace throughout the Islamic world. A quick glance of Islamic matrimonials in community newsletters and magazines will no doubt confirm the value that is placed on education—especially to a professional level—by both Muslim men and women in seeking their future life partners. Even in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where strict Islamic social norms have been officially enforced since the early 1980s, one finds a substantial number of women working in nearly all employment fields, from medicine and civil law, to government ministries and major banks. In exchange for this access to public and professional life, however, women in Iran are required by law to wear appropriate “hijab,” that is, to cover their hair with a veil and to conceal their bodies beneath either a long coat or a “chador”—a tent-like covering worn from head to toe.

The Islamic term “hijab” can refer to the general Islamic principle that women in public and in the presence of any unrelated male should dress with modesty and in such a way as to avoid the possibility of arousing sexual desire. Since the veiling of women is one of the most obvious marks of separation between the Islamic and Western lifestyle, it is important to understand the source of this practice and the way it is understood by Muslim women themselves. In the Qur’an, both men and women are urged to deal with the opposite sex with modesty and to cover the private parts of their bodies. For women, however, the areas to be covered are more extensive. Men are traditionally required to cover themselves “from navel to knee,” while women were traditionally required to cover everything but the face and hands. There is a Qur’anic verse that stipulates that the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, should be covered completely, including the face. Later, this was taken by most Muslims in the medieval Islamic world to be correct practice for all Muslim women. However, by the early twentieth century, many Islamic women began to abandon the practice of veiling the face (“niqab”). Today this practice is enforced only in Saudi Arabia (for Saudi women) and in Afghanistan, although it continues to be practiced by a minority of Muslim women in other Islamic countries and in the West. Veiling in general, of course, is hardly a uniform practice throughout the Islamic world, with the extent and style of veiling varying tremendously across different Islamic communities and social classes.

While the wearing of the veil in either form is something that is often tied to the social and religious standing of a woman’s family in their neighborhood community, or in society at large, this is not always the case. It is true that family obligation frequently determines if, and how, a woman will veil—but not always. In fact, Muslim women in the West often have far greater latitude in determining the level of modesty with which they dress, and many Islamic women in America dress according to their own, individual religious convictions rather than those of their families—or sometimes in spite of those of their families. Therefore, when we encounter veiled Muslim women in our community and on our campus, we should not assume that such a woman has been cowed by family or community pressure into her particular form of dress. Perhaps as often as not, her manner of dress reflects a strong and often courageous personal decision about her own religious commitment and her desire to reflect that decision to the outside world through her outward appearance. Such manner of dress identifies her with a particular set of values and in many cases, with a particular social or peer group, which may be entirely of her own choosing.

It would be very wrong to assume that a Muslim woman who openly demonstrates her religious conviction in this or any other way necessarily lacks the self-esteem or intellectual independence of other, particularly Western, women. I have taught courses in religious studies at George Mason for three semesters, and my courses on Islam often have substantial numbers of Muslim students. I can say, without hesitation, that my female Muslim students are almost always the most vocal element in class discussions—not only in comparison to non-Muslim students, but also in relation to Muslim male students as well. Their comments in defense of their religion frequently reveal not only lucid reasoning and strong conviction, but also a high measure of self-assurance.
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On the whole, they have been some of my strongest students. But it is not only the substantial size of the Muslim student population on George Mason's campus that has made teaching courses on Islam here so interesting. It is also the great diversity of Muslim students and Muslim perspectives that I have encountered. From Shi'ite to Sunni, from convert to recent immigrant, the way in which each of these students negotiates their Islamic beliefs in a Western setting is unique. Especially for Muslim women, trying to educate themselves and launch careers in an American society that has been saturated by negative images of their religious culture—and their role as women in that culture—negotiating this divide can be difficult and is always highly personal. Some strongly defend traditional family roles and rules of modesty for women in the Islamic community and contrast this positively with what they see as Western forms of exploitation of women—from pornography and the nearly impossible standards of female beauty promoted by the media, to the double burden of professional and domestic duties for single women and those not fully supported by their husbands—while others take what can be called an Islamic feminist position, seeking to find within the spiritual equality and rights granted them in their religion, a basis for further reaching social equality. But regardless of their perspective, their commitment to their own education and in many cases, to their future professional life, remains strong, even as they struggle to define their very unique identity in American society.

Two New Courses Focus on Sexual Assault and How to Advocate for Victims
By Connie J. Kirkland, Coordinator, Sexual Assault Services

When I approached the GMU Administration of Justice Chair Steve Mastrofski, he was excited about the prospect of offering a three-credit course about sexual assault in summer of 2001. He deemed the idea as an appropriate complement to existing courses in victimology and domestic violence. The title chosen by ADJ was “Sex Crimes,” and it definitely attracted current and future criminal justice professionals to enroll. Based on both my knowledge and experience over the past twenty-five years as an advocate for victims of sexual assault, this course involved extensive reading of contemporary research on both the criminal justice and the sociological issues related to sexual violence.

The only book assigned to the students was titled Sex Crimes, written by famed New York City prosecuting attorney Alice Vachss, who directed the Special Victims Unit in Queens for several years. The premise of the book is that collaborators, both within and outside the criminal justice system, make prosecution of sexual assaults very difficult. The reading of this text set the stage for the many shorter readings which focused on the origins of the law of rape, recent legal and social reform, sexual deviance and criminality, effective law enforcement response, victim impact, and sex offender management.

The students, about equally divided between traditional and non-traditional age, were asked to write several papers which required both description and reflection about their various readings. This condensed course, which met nine hours per week for five weeks, employed numerous teaching strategies, centering on student exploration and classroom discourse. By using the entire spectrum of issues involved in a sexual assault, from the offender, to the offense, to the victim, students recognized the complexity of this crime and the level of trauma experienced by victims of such violence.

As a longtime victim advocate, I have learned that nothing much is taught in college that in any way prepares a person for such an occupation. I spent this past summer developing a course to be taught in New Century College in Spring 2002 that will answer this need. The course, titled “Principles of Legal Advocacy,” is focused on general practical skills and has been designed to further enhance the academic study of students planning to enter the fields of criminal justice, law, government, public policy, social work, sociology, victim assistance, and family studies. The need for a course like this enticed me to develop a proposal for a sabbatical offered to University Life administrative faculty members. Legal advocacy is a term which designates the assistance given to a client who is involved in any number of legal processes, to include those within juvenile or domestic relations court, criminal court, civil court, as well as local, state or federal social services' agencies. Legal advocacy involves the explanation of legal processes, the negotiation through the legal system with which one is engaged, and the communication of legal requirements and processes to the individual client.

Being a capable legal advocate is a necessary skill for any service provider working with family issues, victim issues, youth issues, or other social services issues. Most advocates simply learn by doing, not a very scientific base for one of the most intensely needed occupations in today's world—a world filled with trauma that few of us are able to escape. Embedded in this 3-credit course is one credit of experiential learning. Students will be asked to serve their community in a justice or social services agency, helping clients and/or researching means to improve client advocacy.

Who Is a Feminist? Notes on a WMST Brown-bag by Ingrid Sandole, Sociology

On October 31, 2001, a group of students and faculty members met for what, hopefully, marks the beginning of an ongoing brown-bag series in the Women's Center. This group explored different perspectives to provide some answers to the question of "who is a feminist?" and concluded that feminists are of “different persuasions.” They recognize that historical, social, and cultural environments influence women's lives and the choices they make. The group also discussed the importance of feminists living their daily lives in accordance with values and principles they have developed for themselves and their communities, and supporting causes, financially and otherwise, that embody values and principles they deem important for themselves and the communities they live in.

A murder has been committed in a lesbian bar in Montreal. Alibis, motives, old flames, new loves, and multiple triangles are the main themes of Canadian author Jackie Manthorne’s fifth mystery novel involving Harriet Hubbley, better known as Harry, the 50-something lesbian sleuth. The victim is Julie Beliveau, a flirt who settled down five years earlier with Francine Lachance, one of the three Lachance sisters.

Sudden Death takes place in Montreal where Harry spends one last month before moving to Key West to take care of the guest house that her first lover, Barbara Fenton, left her. As in Manthorne’s previous stories, the reader discovers endless triangles with lies and deceit revolving around the murdered victim. Harry believes in faithfulness, monogamy, honesty and loyalty, unlike most of the other characters. Manthorne’s characterization of lesbian lives and her presentation of faithfulness and monogamy are well portrayed.

Whether or not you know Montreal's gay district, the naming of places such as streets, parks or neighborhoods provides exotic references to a fabulous city and adds a pleasant backdrop to the story. Because I wanted to keep track of the characters’ meanderings, I even looked at a map of the city while reading this book, but it is not essential to understand the story.

After many twists and turns, Harry will of course solve the murder case and a week later, she will even be able to resolve some of her own hesitations about her relationship with Raven who happens to be the perfect mate for criminal investigation (as well as a gorgeous character).

I love mysteries and particularly Manthorne’s writing because of her delightful descriptions of “middle-aged” women and of the lesbian community in Montreal. However, one of the minor problems I encountered while reading this book had to do with the author’s preoccupation with ageism in the description of women. Manthorne’s sense of humor will more than compensate for what seems to be her characters’ obsession with age. Manthorne even alludes to more serious political matters like the police’s raids of gay bars before the Stonewall Riots and the rise of the gay and lesbian liberation movements. The physical condition of these physical education teachers is mentioned, as well as certain situations befalling aging lesbians such as a chronic disease that reminds you of your own mortality. While reminding us of some of history’s darkest events, Sudden Death also allows us to visit one of North America’s friendliest cities for gays and lesbians (I cannot tell you what happened, but suffice it to say that the character does not get killed because she is a lesbian!).

National Gallery Show “Virtue and Beauty” Investigates Renaissance Portrayals of Women
—by Sheila Holfiott

Virtue and Beauty, on view at the National Gallery of Art through January 6, differs from usual exhibition fare extolling the work of a single artist in that it examines the portrayals of women in Renaissance Florence. The centerpiece is the Gallery’s own Leonardo da Vinci portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci. Whereas this portrait normally appears in the context of the development of painting, this exhibition explores how it relates to other artists’ portrayals of women (in painting and sculpture) from about 1440-1540.

Only an institution with the stature of the National Gallery could have attempted such an exhibition because other museums would be loath to send their Renaissance sculptures or paintings on wood panel overseas. The result provides the unique opportunity to compare depictions of women in Florence in painting and sculpture, including the small-scale portrait medal, with a profile portrait on the front and an allegorical subject on the reverse. This practice explains the exhibition’s title, for in the case of women, the portrait image itself served to display the subject’s beauty, while the allegory extolled her virtue, explicitly her chastity. Poetry and “how-to” books from the period explain the imperative for aristocratic women to conform to this ideal.

Marriage provided the opportunity to commemorate Florentine women. Viewers will be struck by the preponderance of profiles of young women, heavily bejeweled with jewels. They literally wear their dowries and the gifts they received from their husbands. These young women are vehicles for the display of family assets and thus honor, for marriages were used to align families to their mutual advantage. The portraits function as signs of wealth and alliance, not of individuality. In the 16th century, portraits abandoned the profile view and represented more mature wives, often in the company of their children, a sign of their having fulfilled their familial duty.

Take or send your students to see this exhibition. Explore how many social norms still in force are apparent in this group of works. The exhibition catalogue contains well-written essays on the status of women in Renaissance Florence, on the poetic representation of women, and on costume and jewelry.

Note: Sheila was a panelist at a 2-day symposium on this exhibit held at the National Gallery on October 5 and 6.
Women’s Studies Faculty Accomplishments

Debra Bergoffen’s publications include: “Ménage à trois: Freud, Beauvoir and the Marquis de Sade” in Continental Philosophy Review; “Between the Ethical and the Political: The Difference of Ambiguity” in The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir; “From Husserl to Beauvoir: Gendering the Perceiving Subject”, in Feminist Phenomenology, “Disrupting the Metonymy of Gender” in Resistance Flight Creation: Feminist Enactments of French Philosophy. She also presented papers at three major conferences.

In 2000-2001 Jane Turner Censer served on the Executive Council of the Southern Historical Association and was second vice president of the Southern Association for Women Historians.


Visiting Fulbright Scholar to the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Dr. Lyudmila Harutyunyan published the first feminist journal in Armenia, New Beginning, in collaboration with a group of WMST faculty. The second issue of the journal will be published in October 2001 and will appear in Armenian as well as in English. GMU faculty members Debra Bergoffen, Marcella Ray-Ridlen, and Ingrid Sandole-Staroste are members of the editorial board of New Beginning and each has also written an article that will appear in the upcoming issue.


Lorna Irvine is currently the Academic Director of George Mason’s Honors Program in Oxford, UK.

Lynn Leavitt presented “Incorporating Service-Learning into Leadership Curriculum” at the National Forum for Service-Learning, Volunteerism and Higher Education.
Michelle LeBaron adapted her Women's Studies course on Women and Spirituality to a graduate course in Spirituality, Gender and Conflict Transformation.


Barbara Melosh gave an invited presentation at the University of Pittsburgh, on representations of transracial adoption in novels by Barbara Kingsolver and Sherman Alexie. The talk drew on her book on the history of adoption in the United States, Strangers and Kin (forthcoming Fall 2002 from Harvard Univ. Press).


Janine Ricouart was promoted to the rank of Professor this year. Her article “France Daigle’s Postmodern Acadian Voice in the Context of Franco-Canadian Lesbian Voices” came out in Franco-Canadian Women Writers of the 1990s, edited by Paula Ruth Gilbert and Roscanna L. Dufault, 2001. This past year, Janine presented her work on Marie-Claire Blais at two international conferences.


Anita Taylor participated with a group of colleagues in developing a print and web publication that recovers and narrates the stories of the eleven women elected to the presidency of the National Communication Association. For the project, she wrote a short professional biography of the fifth president and a memoir of her own presidency in 1981. She developed a special issue of Women and Language on the topic of paradoxes of communication, language, and gender, out in November 2001. She received the Inaugural Teacher/Mentor Award of the organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender.


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Women's Study Floor Coming Fall 2002 to Dominion Commonwealth/University Commons

This unique living environment provides female students enrolled in WMST 100-Representation of Women, WMST 200-Introduction to Women's Studies, or any of the WMST 300 level courses an opportunity to explore women's issues both inside and outside of the classroom while supporting the Women's Studies Mission: The Women's Studies academic program supports feminist scholarship across the university while developing unique programs to meet the needs of faculty and students interested in focusing on women's issues across the disciplines. The academic program develops programs and courses in Women's Studies. It supports the Women's Studies minor. It invites distinguished feminist scholars to campus, provides arenas for collaborative research, sponsors events that celebrate faculty scholarship, provides opportunities for student and faculty collaborations. Through these activities it nourishes a vibrant and dynamic community of women and men who share an interest in women's issues and who are committed to enriching the life of the university.
Mark your calendars:
—Feb. 8-10—Vagina Monologues featuring Lynda (Wonderwoman) Carter
—Feb. 10-16—Healthy Relationships Week
—Feb. 26, 2002—Jean Kilbourne, 7:30 p.m.—JC Multipurpose Room
—March 20, 2002—Patricia Hill Collins—1:30 p.m.—JC Cinema
—April 11-14—19th Century Knowledges Conference (Co-sponsored by WMST)
—April 21-27—Victims Rights Week
—April 25, 2002—Take Our Daughters to Work Day

March is Women's History Month

Men's Ally Group
The Women's Center has formed a Men's Ally Group, devoted to ending violence against women by promoting education-to-action on issues of gender equity, challenging stereotypes, and fostering positive relationships between women and men. The Men's Ally Group is built around the recognition that there are many little things that individuals can do every day to create a campus environment that is safer for women and men. The group will work as allies with women on campus to help prevent rape and other forms of men's violence by educating fellow students, promoting discussions about masculinities, and building awareness that sexual assault and other forms of gendered violence are men's issues as well as women's issues. For more information contact: tmickins@gmu.edu.