Is Women's Studies Still Relevant? An Interview with Maureen Rowley Barnett

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Q. The purpose here is to determine whether Women's Studies is still relevant. In your work in the health care field, as a social worker, and as an educator, you've had a strong focus on women and women's issues. As a therapist, how do you approach your work with women?

A. Yes, I have focused on women. But women don't live in a bubble; we're connected to all of these other people that generally provide many challenges in our lives. I find that I can help women more if I also engage the other players in the system, the significant other, other family members, so that everyone involved is working on a system change, so that women aren't the only ones making the changes.

Q. How has Women's Studies helped you in this regard, and in choices you've made for your own life?

A. What I've worked to do over the course of

my adult life is to understand the imbalance of power in the world we live in, and what that means for women. Within a patriarchal model, even when working with couples or families, I'm still often working with balancing the power, shifting the power so that we're not dealing with a one-down, one-up paradigm which is the paradigm of patriarchy. What Women's Studies courses have taught me is the historical oppression of women and what that has meant in terms of how women have lived their lives in relationship to men. Based on this, the decision I've made in my life is to lead a life of interdependence.

Certainly I want to be with men, to connect with men. But I want to experience my own independence, my own autonomy. I don't do very well with anybody else calling the shots. I need to be calling my own shots. But I want to do that in collaboration. And it's helped me to understand that what I have to offer people, and what I can teach, either in school, in therapy sessions, or in consultation with organizations, is the beauty of being able to collaborate and share the power. I think this is a female paradigm; I don't think it's a male paradigm. It's not the hierarchical model that we (mostly) experience. It's a different way of seeing the world.

Q. Is this paradigm of collaboration common? Is the power balanced yet?

A. No. I think we've made some progress; there have been some inroads. I don't think systemic change happens very easily, any more than change within a family, or with a couple happens very easily. We're all basically fairly resistant to change. People are motivated into therapy when something isn't working anymore, something's causing them

pain. I think this is what we're seeing systemically, too. The old paradigm doesn't work anymore and people are really struggling with it. It certainly is not something that society has said, 'Yes, what we need to do is to collaborate and share the power.' But as women have begun to claim more of who they are, men have shifted in the process. Certainly, I have seen things change over the years in my work. Have they changed dramatically? No. Has the need for Women's Studies died? I don't think so. I think that there's a backlash.

Q. Backlash. That's a word that has been bouncing around for awhile, particularly since Susan Faludi's book, *Backlash*. What is backlash?

A. Backlash is when things move forward and every possible attempt is made to keep them in line, so to speak. It comes from people who are terrified of change, of what they're going to lose by virtue of that change. They then move hot and heavy to pull things back to the way they were, or further back than they were, as a matter of fact. It's almost like an attack. One example of backlash is what's currently happening in the Republican Party with the strong swing to the right. Certainly the swing to the right affects women in many ways. What comes up most often is abortion. But it's more about claiming, again, that women don't have the right to make decisions for themselves, to choose for themselves.

One of the surprising things that I see happening as I work with young women, women now in their twenties, is that they don't understand how hard women have fought for what women have. There's a tendency in these young women, I think, to be more diminutive, more serving of the male than I had seen, for instance, in the generation right

after me, women now in their thirties. So, I don't know if that's a backlash, of women getting back in their place, back where they belong. One of the things Susan Faludi cites, and I always think this is a good example because I work with so many women who struggle with their bodies, is that as we women gained more and more in our power and assertion, our bodies (in terms of the model figures we saw) seemed to get smaller and smaller. I don't know the actual percentage of weight decrease that has taken place over the last thirty years, but it's been significant in terms of what the model is. It's almost like the Iron Maiden model. It's a model that no normal woman can achieve. It's again promoting this kind of self-starvation, this self-mutilation, this women not being all that they can be in and of themselves, to following a model that is unrealistic.

Q. There does seem to be a big push back to "traditional" values, and to more traditional roles for women, especially given all of the discussion about the effects of child care on children. There seems to be a lot of that old conflict—work vs. family—about what women are supposed to be doing. What are women supposed to be doing now?

A. Nobody's contemplating what men are supposed to be doing, which is always the other interesting piece of it. I suppose there are some men who are choosing to not fast-track on the job in order to be with the family. But I don't think there are as many men as there are women contemplating this choice, or, maybe, it's not publicized as loudly. It's a little bit like Rosie the Riveter. Rosie was sent into the factory because the men were overseas and she was needed. When all the men came back from the

war, the model suddenly changed back to the woman of the 1950's who stayed at home with the kids. Again, these shifts are driven by the politics of the time, and by the economy; what women are supposed to do and not supposed to do has economic and political ramifications. But of course this is never discussed. And there is a huge backlash about family values. I would like someone to articulate just what the heck 'family values' are anyway. Tell me why you have to have mom, pop, and two kids to have those kinds of values.

Q. If this backlash is what young women coming into the adult world, and even the children and teenagers coming up behind them are experiencing, how will it effect their ability to maintain what ground women have gained? Are we going to slide even further back? Are there going to be young women saying, "This struggle for choice, for autonomy, isn't worth it?"

A. I have a fundamental belief in people. I think oppression breeds resistance, and so my orientation is to think that people are only going to take that kind of stuff for so long and then we'll see another upsurge. This is the way change really takes place. Incrementally. We move forward and then there's the backlash. Certainly I think Blacks have experienced this and talked about it. It's kind of a push forward and then a big leap backward, and then another push forward. Gradually, incrementally, society moves. But it isn't without this constant struggle. And it's pretty predictable. This is part of the process. I think the hierarchical paradigm, somebody on top, somebody on bottom, is still the strongest for both men and women. But I think the paradigm shift that we're moving toward is colle-

gial, a sharing of the power, realizing globally the necessity to pay attention to this.

Q. How do young men fit into this struggle? Are they willing to make changes? Do they differ from their fathers in the way they are participating in change?

A. I do see some differences. The young men are nervous. They don't know exactly what to do. But they do know that they have to do something different, and they are far more willing than their fathers were. I see some differences, too, in terms of women expecting a little more from men. For instance, women are expecting men to be more involved in child rearing or to be more attentive to the relationship. Maybe in the wider picture of politics, that is so widely reported in the media, it all seems like backslide but on an individual level there are more people willing to make an effort at change.

Q. What are the specific areas that Women's Studies needs to be addressing in order to draw young women and young men in and keep things progressing ahead?

A. I was wondering about calling it Gender Studies. I guess that's glossing over it, but it really is about the way in which society sets up an imbalance of power between the genders. It doesn't do men any good over the long haul either. Then my question would be, what is the market telling you is needed? If a large percentage of the student body isn't signing up for Women's Studies courses, why isn't it? And how do you tailor the course of study so it's going to be useful to the current generation? Somehow it has to have a tangible applicability to their lives. Certainly a Women's Studies program

has a breadth and depth of information to share: history, economics, politics. The message can get through in many ways. It's just whether or not you're going to have the audience.

Q. In all of this, then, are you saying that Women's Studies is still relevant?

A. Sure, it's still relevant. I think part of the parcel of change is speaking the truth, and the more forums there are in which the truth can be spoken, as in Women's Studies programs, the more chance there is for progress. It's only when we silence ourselves, when collectively there's no forum to discuss what is, that there's more potential for sliding backward.