

Michigan State University's Center for Gender in Global Context: An Innovative Paradigm for Women's and Gender Studies

International Studies and Programs at Michigan State University is in the process of re-envisioning its area and thematic studies centers to better situate them in a global context. This description summarizes this ongoing effort as it relates to women's and gender studies.

A few years ago, a feminist scholar at our university hosted a delegation of West African women who were visiting the United States as part of an exchange program to learn about democratic organizing. She took the delegates to visit several gender-focused organizations across the state to learn about different approaches to political activism. At one organization, a second-wave women's rights activist spoke about the history of the feminist movement in the United States. She strongly implied that if African women just followed the path already forged by Americans, they too could be liberated. Her presentation revealed her belief that women's progress in the United States set the standard for the rest of the world to follow. The West African women reacted with disbelief. In one short speech, the American activist had erased their contributions as activists in their own right, delegitimizing their work, their experiences in their local context, and their ability to forge their own paths.

Observing this situation brought home the need to change an outdated paradigm for women's and gender studies. This paradigm, which privileges the United States while differentiating it from the rest of the world, can still be found in various efforts to internationalize curricula, particularly where institutions separate US-based topics from other area studies programs or employ the "add and stir" model of inserting international content into otherwise US-focused courses. At Michigan State, we have been eager to find new and creative ways to escape this paradigm. To expose students to curricula and research that better responds to an emerging discourse on global social justice, we formed the Center for Gender in Global Context (GenCen).

Merging Social Justice and International Development

GenCen was created by merging two academic programs: a degree program in Women, Gender, and Social Justice (WGSJ) and a research center focused on Women in International Development (WID). This merger had the practical benefit of consolidating institutional resources. It also gave us the opportunity to reconceptualize how we teach women's and gender studies, what outcomes we want for our students, how we support our affiliated faculty members and engage with our strategic partners abroad.

Prior to the merger, the WGSJ degree program was a traditional women's studies program that grew out of second-wave feminism in the United States. Its courses dealt primarily with Western and US-based ideas of gender and feminism and treated "international" topics only peripherally. The WID program, on the other hand, focused solely on international development and relationships with the "Third World." During the merger process, many faculty affiliated with these programs realized that their programs' respective models were outdated and problematic. These models didn't convey to students the realities of a globally interconnected world characterized by new communication technologies, rapidly flowing people and ideas, and

transnational social movements. Yet as we discovered, few programs in the United States primarily focused on gender and women's studies through the lenses of global transformation and interconnectedness. This was an oversight that we wanted to address.

Inspired by scholars such as Chandra Mohanty, faculty conceptualized a new type of center that would bring together teaching and research and create a global focus by merging local and international perspectives. Founding faculty and staff deliberately chose to use the term *global* in the center's name, defining *global* as distinct from *international* because it includes local, national, international, *and* transnational spaces. This approach, in Mohanty's words, "conceptualizes questions of justice and equity in transborder terms" (2003, 234). The center currently has three programmatic areas of focus that reflect these directions: gendered violence: gender, justice and environmental change; and gendered perspectives on women in academia and other institutional settings.

GenCen's Unique Organizational Structure

Unlike many other women's and gender studies programs across the U.S., GenCen is located in International Studies and Programs rather than in an academic college. Faculty from across the university's seventeen colleges and professional programs may affiliate with the center as either core or consulting members. Core faculty generally consist of those whose primary focus of research and teaching is gender related while consulting faculty may integrate gender issues into their work in various ways. We currently have 180 core and 74 consulting faculty from sixteen colleges and a number of other units which participate in our programmatic activities. GenCen administers the women's and gender studies major and minor and the LGBTQ minor at the undergraduate level for the College of Arts and Letters (CAL). It also administers the Women's and Gender Studies Graduate Specialization for CAL, the Gender, Justice and Environmental Change (GJEC) Graduate Specialization shared by four academic colleges, and the Graduate Specialization in International Development for the College of Social Science.

Financial support for the center comes primarily from the university general fund which supports the office functions and the salaries of the two co-directors, assistant director, secretary, half-time financial officer and part-time academic advisor. Five academic colleges provide support for hiring the faculty who teach the WS-coded courses. GenCen currently offers 13 WS-coded courses taught by affiliated faculty who are bought out from their departments for 1-3 years to teach a course yearly in GenCen. Another 27 WS-coded courses are cross-listed with departments across the university and are staffed by faculty in these respective departments.

Reaching Out to Students and Faculty

GenCen engages with faculty and students in diverse ways, including teaching, research and outreach functions. One of the center's goals is to create opportunities for research and teaching that mutually inform and strengthen each other while bringing students, scholars, and activists from all backgrounds and experiences into dialogue. In our work with undergraduate students, this means providing curricula and experiential learning activities that are informed by a global gendered lens. These opportunities are critical in helping students comprehend the complexities

that exist both on a global scale and in their daily lives, as well as the connections among these various factors.

By using a transnational or transborder framework, students can learn to “democratize rather than colonize the experiences of different spatially and temporally located communities” (Mohanty 2003, 244). As a result, they are better able to consider “the impact of global forces such as colonialism, modernization, and development on specific and historicized gendering practices that create inequalities and asymmetries” in communities around the world (Kaplan and Grewal 2002, 79). The goal is to educate students who will be better able to address pressing social problems and act as socially responsible citizens, professionals, and leaders. The courses in the core curriculum of our women’s and gender studies program reflect these ideas. The program’s introductory course, for example, draws on a wide range of texts to illustrate the variety of perspectives within the field of women’s and gender studies, as well as the similarities and differences in women’s experiences historically, cross-culturally, and across social, class, racial, and ethnic groups (Byron 2009).

GenCen provides several experiential learning opportunities for students. We sponsor three study abroad programs, one in Malawi, one in England and a newer program in Amsterdam focused on LGBTQ studies which we co-sponsor with the College of Arts & Letters and James Madison College. GenCen also offers students gender-focused internship opportunities in Michigan, placing them with organizations that work on issues related to social justice, human rights, community development, reproductive health, domestic violence, and environmental health and justice. These internships attract students from an array of backgrounds who want hands-on experience in gender-related career fields.

GenCen plays an equally important role in facilitating faculty research and engagement both in the US and abroad. The Assistant Director works with individual faculty to identify grant opportunities and assists in proposal development and review. Collaborating with the GenCen Co-Director for Research, she helps identify MSU faculty who have interests in participating in large multidisciplinary international research project proposals brought together by the Office for International Research Collaboration (OIRC), the Center for Global Connections in Agriculture and Natural Resources (CGC) and other university-wide units promoting research across campus. The Assistant Director is also called on to integrate a gender dimension into some of these large proposals especially in the agricultural, environmental and institutional capacity building areas.

In addition to these research support functions, GenCen makes funding available to support faculty groups interested in establishing long-term strategic partnerships with institutions abroad focused around gender issues. Affiliated faculty currently have active strategic partnerships with universities in Malawi, Tanzania, Rwanda and Turkey partially supported by GenCen.

A wide variety of colloquia and other speakers’ series are sponsored by the center, often in collaboration with other centers and departments across campus. GenCen publishes the *Gendered Perspectives on International Development (GPID) Working Papers* series, one of the longest-standing and best known of such series in the U.S.

Reconceptualization for the Twenty-First Century

The resources GenCen and its affiliated faculty provide to students allow them to gain a deeper understanding of gender relations, the cultural and material politics of place, and the relationships between global and local transformations in real-world contexts. In a review of a GenCen study abroad program, a student commented, “It is amazing how much traveling and living in another cultural context can teach you about not only gender in your country, but gender as it is conceptualized globally. This understanding of gender would not have been possible without real experience in another cultural context.” Another student wrote, “Before [participating in study abroad] I used to bucket gender—there [were] males and females and gender was tied to these buckets... Everything was very black and white. Now I see shades of color, and it helps me better analyze situations and surroundings I am in—specifically where gender IS forced into buckets.”

To us, these observations suggest the rich rewards of reconceptualizing women’s and gender studies using a global lens. GenCen works to move women’s and gender studies into the twenty-first century using a new approach and institutional structure that brings faculty and students together across colleges and builds on the long and laudable history of the women’s movement in the United States by including experiences across nationality, religion, race, class, and sexual orientation. By integrating this approach into research, teaching, and hands-on learning, the center provides opportunities to gain a better understanding of the forces that combine to create injustice and inequality on a global scale and what might be done to address them.

To learn more about Michigan State University’s Center for Gender in Global Context, visit www.gencen.msu.edu.

References

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