prism of gender

New scholarship about women’s lives is changing the academy. Highly diverse, filled with debate and contention, scholarship about and by women pervades the curriculum, transforming not only the content but, often, the methodology of established courses. These changes are controversial. Critics of women’s studies often recall with approval an earlier era when there seemed to be a general consensus about what the traditional academic disciplines were doing and what their methods were. If women entered these disciplines at all, they did so without questioning the traditional methodology and subject matter of the disciplines. They did not demand that they be allowed to do research on the lives of women, and thus these lives remained largely unstudied, in disciplines ranging from art history to classics to psychology and history. If we depart from the customs of this era, critics argue, we must be motivated by an illegitimate “political agenda”.

But before the rise of women’s studies there were large gaps in the disciplines, gaps created by a failure to study women with the seriousness with which men’s lives had long been studied. What Mill observed in 1869 was still true a hundred years later: we knew very little about the history of women, about their psychology, their bodies, their religious attitudes, their philosophical ideas. The very generalizations about women’s “nature” that Mill mocked as inadequate and lacking a basis in true research still dominated many discussions – when women were discussed at all.

M ills predicted that this situation would not change until women themselves did research and told their own story. He might have been proven wrong. The imagination can cross boundaries of gender and class and race, and David Herlihy’s idea of “spiritual friendship” between women and men can be realized. But the absence of women in the academy was in fact accompanied by a culpable failure to study the lives of those who had been excluded from academic citizenship. Gaps in knowledge and understanding, themselves hardly apolitical, undermined both teaching and research concerning one half of the human race.

Nor could these gaps be addressed by simply plugging some new information about women into the existing research paradigms and the curricula stemming from them. In many cases, the defects were methodological as well, and the remedy required thinking again about how to gather reliable information about the lives of those who were marginalized in a nation’s culture, or economy, or religious history. For example, as Caroline Bynum argued, historical research focusing on large-scale political events, and using the techniques appropriate to study such events, proved unable to provide a rich account of the lives of women. In order to discover what work women did, how much property they controlled, how children were raised, what they thought about politics or religion, needed to be forged, both narrative and demographic.

Again, when the gross national product of a modern nation is reported in fields such as public policy and economics, domestic labour is not counted as productive labour. And yet domestic labour is essential to understanding a nation’s overall economy and the quality of life of its members. Without new methods of inquiry, it was difficult to take account of this labour or to estimate its importance. There were similar fail- ures in biology and medicine, in psychology, in philosophy, in art history, in many other fields. Families, and the work women do in them, were often assumed, but at the same time ignored. Mill’s criticism was still valid.

As Okin argues, the family is one of the most important topics studied by political and economics, since its influence on human development is pervasive and deep. The most influential economic model of the family has been that proposed by the Nobel Prize–winning economist Gary Becker. This model is widely used to make predictions, to chart the direction of public policy, and even to gather information. A prominent assumption of this model is that the male head of household is a beneficent altruist who adequately represents the interests of all his family members, and can be relied on to distribute resources fairly. Relying on this assumption, users of the model do not ask how each particular member of the family is doing, they ask only about households. A recent attempt to study the situation of widows in India, for example, found that there were no data on widows’ nutritional or health status because the data did not disaggregate households into their members.

Becker’s assumption, however, is false. Conflicts of interest over occupational choice, division of labour, basic nutrition and health are pervasive parts of family life the world over. A closer look at the family reveals that in many parts of the world girls are fed less well than boys, less frequently taken to the doctor when ill, less well educated, less well protected from violence – all this if they are permitted to survive infancy in the first place. To reveal these facts, new methods needed to be devised.

The silence about women in the academy was not a benign or neutral silence. It supported, as it was supported by, the exclusion of women from the dignities of the scholarly community. Treating women as of such little account that they were not worth studying was a way of denying respect to women’s lives; this denial of respect went hand in hand with the denial of academic employment. Worse still, the silence concealed evils in the larger world, ranging from unequal opportunity to domestic abuse and malnutrition.

Women had many urgent and justified grievances, in short, against traditional male research and teaching. These failures were failures in scholarship for all, since all need to know the truth. Men should have been asking these questions and doing this research, and in some cases they did. But on the whole, correction of these deficiencies in scholarship awaited the arrival of women in the disciplines in sufficient numbers to influence the direction and character of research, seeing traditional topics “through the prism of gender”.

Already in the fourth century BC, Plato recognized women’s lives was an uphill struggle, in a culture long accustomed to restrict women to a domestic role. Socrates says to Glauc in the Republic that most Athenians will find it ridiculous to think of women doing exercise out of doors, or studying philosophy – and therefore they will avoid asking sincerely and objectively whether women have the capacity to do these things. Any question that challenges deeply rooted habits seems threatening, especially when the challenge is to entrenched structures of power. But Socrates reminds Glauc that many things we now know to be fruitful seemed absurd when they were first introduced – for example, the custom of public exercising that is now at the heart of Greek culture. When people reflected well about that change, however, “the appearance of absurdity ebbed away under the influence of reason’s judgment about the best”. He reminds Glauc, later, that rational reflection can be crippled by habit even at the level of language: if they do not use both the masculine and the feminine forms of the participle when they talk about rulers (equivalent to our practice of saying “he or she”), they will be likely to forget what they have agreed: that women should have the opportunity to attain the highest functions in the city. Reason can falter through a failure of imagination.

Women’s studies, at its best, makes just such an appeal to reason. It asks the scholarly community not to surrender to the tyranny of habit and to habitual ideas of what is “natural”, but to look for the truth in all its forms, using arguments that have been carefully sifted for bias. In this way, it has by now transformed virtually every major discipline in the social sciences, humanities and life sciences, not simply by altering the content of what is studied, but by devising new methods of research.

In striving to incorporate adequate instruction in these many areas, the academy is striving to arrive at a more adequate account of reality. Critics of feminism are wrong to think that it is dangerous for democracy to consider these ideas, and dangerous for college classrooms to debate them. Instead, it is dangerous not to consider them, as we strive to build a society that is both rational and just.