SPECIAL REPORT: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Educators Open Up to Gender Studies

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LONDON — Since their emergence from the feminist movement in the 1960's, gender studies have spread to hundreds of universities worldwide. From Cambridge, England, and Stanford, California, to the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Sana University in Yemen, gender has become a growing subject in academia. Even the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has a gender program. Multidisciplinary by nature, the courses often encompass race and class studies.

An offshoot of sociology, exploring roles and behavioral patterns linked to gender, the discipline has become increasingly implanted in what would seem to be unrelated fields, like economics or technological development.

In Britain, the Gender Institute at the London School of Economics was established in 1993. In a climate of economics and political science, gender might seem like a strange fit. Yet the department offers master's degrees with specializations that include development and globalization, as well as a master's degree combining gender and media studies.

"Such studies don't necessarily mean working in gender," says Maja Raskovic, a gender-studies graduate from the master's program at the London school. "Although many of my old classmates are now working for developmental organizations or the civil service, I now work in financial consulting. But my studies have certainly sharpened my analysis of the problems at hand."

Such problems include the current economic crisis: "Gender studies has always been about the relational interplay within and between conflicts," Ms. Raskovic said. "The theme of conflict seeps into all areas of life, from the very personal gendered, racial and sexual conflicts to the seemingly monetary issue of the current state of the economy."

"It was a blinkered, money-oriented perspective that drove us to this problem," she added. "Instead, we need a critical and wholesome understanding of the relational interplay between all conflicting factors to account for the current state of affairs."

Gender consideration is vital in any academic environment, said Thomas F. DeFrantz, director of the women and gender studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At an institution better known for physical sciences and engineering, the program, celebrating its 25th anniversary, is having an increasing effect on other departments.
“It’s a platform designed to consider how gender issues affect the teaching of science, and issues such as genetic testing, or the way people deal with technology,” Mr. DeFrantz said.

The introductory courses are always full, with students — typically an equal mix of men and women — coming from all of M.I.T.’s major programs.

“Students understand, instinctively I think, that gender and sexuality are implicated in the construction of science and technology,” Mr. DeFrantz said. “Students at elite research institutions and universities are compelled to study current research in these areas.”

The program has also staged workshops for the M.I.T. faculty, presenting a number of gender-based themes, like the mechanisms leading to bias and prejudice.

Gender studies are applicable to all forms of bias, including bias found in academia, said Nina Lykke, president of GEXcel, a gender research center established in 2006 by the Swedish government and the universities of Linkoping and Orebro.

Set up with the help of a 20 million Swedish kronor, or $2.4 million, government grant, the center was originally conceived as a five-year program but it is now working toward becoming a permanent institution. Dedicated to transnational and transdisciplinary studies of changing gender relations, it offers visiting fellowships to international scholars from multiple backgrounds and at different stages of their careers. It also offers postdoctoral grants, to help pay for the work of young researchers.

“Our motto is gendering excellence,” Ms. Lykke said. “We want to challenge the traditional notions of excellence and performance. We want to create a generous, open academic space.”

Focusing on issues like sex education and masculinity, it also explores less obvious themes like the interactions between gender and information technology, migration, or disability. Workshops and lectures at the center are open to students from both universities, in any discipline.

Sweden has been a pioneer in gender studies, Ms. Lykke said. “It’s not considered a controversial area,” she said. “On the contrary, we are encouraged to think of the role of gender in society.”

A similar awareness of gender issues is spreading widely in European universities, where gender considerations are finding their way into a broad range of programs. At the European University Institute in Florence, for example, gender issues have been incorporated into the law and politics programs.

People are increasingly aware of the importance of cultural conditioning, including gender conditioning, said Luigi Guiso, professor of economics at the institute. Intrigued by the high number of men at top scientific schools in the United States, Mr. Guiso recently completed a study on the relationship among the environment, gender and math.

From a young age, girls are not expected to do as well as boys in math, and they are expected to be better at reading, Mr. Guiso noted. But the supposition of an innate difference in math ability between men and women, suggested in 2005 by Lawrence H. Summers, the president of Harvard University at the time, is not borne out by Mr. Guiso’s research.

Mr. Guiso compared math and literacy performance with a gender gap index developed by the World Economic Forum in Geneva. The index keeps track of economic, political, education and health information in relation to gender inequality in more than 100 countries.

The research showed a clear correlation between the degree of emancipation of women and their high school math performances. In countries with high gender equality, like Scandinavia, the gender gap in math tends to disappear, Mr Guiso said, but the reading gap remains and even increases.

“Is there a genetic component?” he said. “I have no idea. But what is certain is that the role of culture is much more important.”