

The Women's and Gender Studies Program

Volume 4, Issue 1

Women Behind Bars:

The Voices of Oklahoma's Incarcerated Women and Their Children

Amina Benalioulhaj was jarred by the statistics: Oklahoma's rate of female incarceration is twice the national average, and over 70 percent of the women are incarcerated for non-violent crimes. "As a Women's and Gender Studies major, I found that the issues I had become aware of in the classroom, including domestic violence, single motherhood, the gender wage gap, reproductive rights and abortion, affect women in the criminal justice system disproportionately," Benalioulhaj said. She learned about the subject of incarcerated women while working as an assistant for Susan F. Sharp, professor of sociology and Women's and Gender Studies. She was moved deeply by Sharp's research on Oklahoma's incarcerated women.

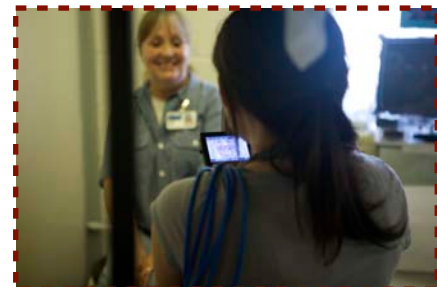
Benalioulhaj realized that the first step to making a difference on this issue was to educate the public. She decided to begin a film project documenting the realities of Oklahoma's population of incarcerated women. Her film *Women Behind Bars: the Voices of Oklahoma's Incarcerated Women and Their Children* takes viewers inside Oklahoma's female correctional facilities and brings them face-to-face with the mothers and children most deeply impacted.

The documentary filmmaking project was a huge undertaking for a self-supporting full-time student who works two jobs and also has extracurricular commitments. Her passion for the subject kept her going. She secured a small crew, equipment and technical assistance at little cost, while writing the story line, coordinating with the Department of Corrections and planning interviews.




A rough cut of the documentary premiered on the OU campus Oct. 26 to an audience of 215 people. Benalioulhaj presented a panel at the American Society of Criminology Conference in San Francisco in November with Susan Sharp. *Women Behind Bars* was featured at the conference and Sharp presented her research.

Oklahoma currently is ranked No. 1 for female incarceration per capita in the United States, despite the fact that Oklahoma's crime rate remains close to the national average. Approximately 60 percent of Oklahoma's female prisoners have been the victims of sexual and physical abuse as children, over 90 percent have been the victims of domestic violence in their adult lives and nearly all of them suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders related to these experiences.



"Documentary filmmaking had been my passion in the past. I saw this as a great opportunity to involve my community in grassroots-style education while incorporating the knowledge I learned in WGS," Benalioulhaj said.



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According to the research of Sharp, children with an incarcerated mother are twice as likely to end up in prison themselves. Sharp has conducted annual studies of the state's female prison population. Currently 4,500 Oklahoma children are known to have been displaced by the incarceration of their mother.



Photos by Sarah Warmker

For more information about Amina Benalioulhaj's film visit: womenbehindbarsthefilm.tumblr.com

Activist Blogger Mona Eltahawy Teaches “Women and New Media in the Middle East”

“I am tired of the stereotype of angry-bearded-Muslim-man and covered-in-black-from-head-to-toe-Muslim-woman,” was a frequent refrain of guest lecturer Mona Eltahawy. Her solution to breaking these and other stereotypes: social and new media.

“Blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and the video-sharing community YouTube have become popular in the Arab world and Iran. Young people, especially women, have embraced those new forms of media to express themselves in unprecedented ways and to challenge authorities of various kinds – political, social and moral – with newfound boldness,” said Eltahawy.

Over the course of three fast and furious weekends, students were familiarized with the history of women’s movements in the Arab world and Iran. They analyzed media dynamics of the Middle East, including women’s involvement with mainstream media. Students also were tasked with examining how blogs and social networking sites question authority, challenge gender roles, give voice and visibility to those who previously have been silenced, and challenge social taboos, such as coming out as lesbian and bisexual.

Eltahawy screened several films in class, including *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, the story of a young Iranian girl

growing up during the 1979 revolution. The class also watched *A Jihad for Love*, a documentary film about lesbian and gay Muslims.

Students were asked to complete a group project, interviewing an active



woman blogger from the Middle East. Among those interviewed were Eman, a Saudi woman blogger who writes saudiwoman.wordpress.com; a member of Mideast Youth website that works to create dialogue and acceptance across the Middle East; a contributor to Meem Blog, a blog and community of support in Lebanon for lesbians, bisexuals, queer and questioning women as well as transgender persons; and a co-founder of Muslimah Media Watch, a website that critiques the portrayal of Muslim women in the media.

Eltahawy’s visit to campus was made possible by the Women’s and Gender Studies Program and the Center for Middle East Studies. As the Center for Social Justice’s Activist-In-Residence, Eltahawy participated in several university-wide events, including a meet-and-greet breakfast, a “Blogging for Social Change” workshop and a panel discussion, “My America, My Islam.” In addition, Josh Landis hosted a dinner and discussion at his Faculty-in-Residence apartment with students from International Area Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies.

Eltahawy conducted a discussion and poetry reading on the topic of menstruation. The event was inspired by her online activism in which she made a call for poems and essay submissions to her blog about menstruation. One submission from a young Egyptian woman stated that while attending a demonstration in support of women judges in Egypt, a man who opposed the appointments yelled “a woman menstruates so she shouldn’t be a judge.” Women who attended the discussion brought their own poems to share and talked about why menstruation is a taboo topic.

Eltahawy is an award-winning columnist and international public speaker on Arab and Muslim issues. Her website is www.monaeltahawy.com.

Congratulations to Cindy Simon Rosenthal, Journal Record Woman of the Year

Cindy Simon Rosenthal, mayor of the City of Norman, director and curator of OU’s Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, and OU political science professor and Women’s and Gender Studies faculty member, was awarded the honorable title “Woman of the Year” by *The Journal Record* Oct. 8. Rosenthal was among 50 women honored at the 30th annual *Journal Record* awards gala as “50 Making a Difference.” The women are recognized for their leadership in business and service to Oklahoma.

Rosenthal began her career as a newspaper reporter. When she moved to Norman in 1985, she ran her own consulting business. In 1995 she received her doctorate in political science from OU. She then joined the OU faculty. She served two terms on the Norman City Council prior to being elected mayor of Norman in 2007 and is currently serving her second term.

Under her direction, the Carl Albert Center started the Women’s Leadership Initiative, which houses programs including the National Education for Women’s Leadership, The Appointments Project (TAP) and Pipeline to Politics.



A MESSAGE FROM THE ACTING DIRECTOR



Friends of WGS--

Serving as acting director this fall, I have been impressed by the program's energy and multiple dimensions as never before! We have 30 majors, 30 minors and 525 students enrolled in WGS courses taught by 14 faculty members; 10 students have declared the new Social Justice minor and 35 students are enrolled in Intro to Social Justice; the WGS graduate certificate program boasts 16 graduate students, six of whom are enrolled in the graduate colloquium this semester.

Semester highlights: Activist-in-residence Mona Eltahawy repeatedly drew crowds and garnered local media attention when she spoke on her New Media activism in her week at OU teaching in the Social Justice Center. WGS major Amina Benalioulhaj showed a rough cut of her film on incarcerated women in Oklahoma and the impact on their families, drawing a high-profile audience from both the OU community and central Oklahoma civic leadership. Kudos to the WGS Student Association for excelling in all-around activism this fall! Faculty have outdone themselves in teaching and supporting our students, serving on committees, directing projects and internships, and spending extra time speaking across the WGS curriculum and the OU campus.

Susan F. Sharp, who supervised Amina's project, returns from sabbatical this January to take the Women's and Gender Studies' reins for the final semester of Dr. Irvine's research leave.

--Catherine Hobbs, Professor, English Department

GET TO KNOW A MAJOR AND MINOR: SANDRA CRISWELL AND ESTHER CHONG



Sandra Criswell is a double major in Women's and Gender Studies and English. "Starting out as an English major exposed me to the world of gender analysis, which soon became an everyday part of my life—the way I thought, the way I spoke and the way I perceived interactions, ranging from my personal life to global issues. What started out as an interest that enhanced my discipline became a passion," said Sandra.

As a co-president of the Women's and Gender Studies Student Association, Sandra has organized such events as film

screenings, activism opportunities and a Reproductive Rights Week.

Sandra currently serves on the board of the newly formed Oklahoma Coalition for Reproductive Justice, a registered nonprofit organization.

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Esther Chong is a broadcast and electronic media major, minoring in women's and gender studies. Hailing from Seattle, Washington Esther has lived in Moore for the past nine years. Esther became interested in Women's and Gender Studies after taking Domestic Violence Law, in preparation for the LSAT.

After she graduates this December, Esther plans to attend law school for international law and perhaps one day go into politics. She said her political goal is to focus on education access worldwide.

In her free time, Esther enjoys dabbling in photography, advertising and graphic design. She loves to travel. Of all her many interests, Esther says, "I cannot live without music!"

Esther currently is the graphic design intern for the Women's Outreach Center, and she also volunteers for WOC events as a photographer.

Esther was born and raised in the United States, but her first language was Korean. She is fluent in both Korean and English.

One of Esther's favorite activities is traveling around the world. She has traveled in Mexico, Korea and Japan. She also has traveled to 48 of the states, excluding Alaska and Hawaii.

She spent 10 days last summer studying in China. The study abroad group visited six cities and studied Chinese architecture, landscape and cities.



SPRING AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS



Betty Baum and Norman Hirschfield Award

WGS awarded five scholarships to single mothers attending OU. Three students were awarded the Betty Baum and Norman Hirschfield Award: Jamie Brown, an undergraduate in nursing who hopes to pursue a master's degree in nursing education; Katherine Eaves a graduate student working toward a Ph.D. in journalism and a certificate in women's and gender studies; and Angela Person, a graduate student pursuing a Ph.D. in geography. The Betty Baum and Norman Hirschfield Award was permanently endowed in Women's and Gender Studies by E.J.

Hirschfield and Alan Hirschfield in 1999 in memory of their parents.

Empowerment of Spirit Award

Two students were awarded the EOS Empowerment of Spirit Award, an award for single mothers established in 2009 through the leadership and generosity of Cindy Merrick and Ally Richardson. This year's recipients are Leslie Baker, a graduate student pursuing a Ph.D. in political science and Sara Linman, an undergraduate student in letters. The EOS award is funded contingent upon continuing private donations.

Social Justice Award

In 2009, the Women's and Gender Studies Program's Center for Social

Justice introduced an annual Social Justice Award for students and faculty. Faculty member Lisa Frey was recognized as the 2010 faculty awardee for addressing inequality and discrimination in her work as a professor and a psychologist. Velvet Brown, a graduate student in social work, was recognized as the student social justice awardee for her commitment to advocating for those with sickle cell disease and their families.

Outstanding Senior Award

Stephanie Heck was awarded the Outstanding Senior Award for her excellent academic record. Stephanie was the banner bearer for Women's and Gender Studies at May graduation.



WGSSA Activism

The Women's and Gender Studies Student Association led a large pro-choice response to the Justice for All anti-abortion exhibit that traveled to campus in November. The response included providing noisemakers and kazoos, a T-shirt making station, and a pro-choice picnic. WGSSA also provided fact sheets about abortion and a factual, historically accurate critique of the exhibit. The goal of this response was to create a space for pro-choice members of campus to build community and demonstrate that there is more than one side to this issue.



NEW WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES CLASSES OFFERED IN SPRING 2011

WGS 3220 Race, Class, and Gender

Race, Class and Gender addresses issues of white privilege, masculinity and race, gender and sexism, the media's portrayal of racism, sexism and classism, and how education and health are impacted by race, class and gender. Susan F. Sharp will teach this class, to be offered for the first time this spring.

WGS 3220 Queer Theory

R.E. Davis will teach Queer Theory – the first time that it will be offered during the spring or fall semester. Previously a summer catalog course, Queer Theory will address formation of identities and influences of power structures.

WGS 4120/ 5120 Pathways From Poverty: Research and Advocacy

Erin Taylor will teach Pathways From Poverty: Research and Advocacy, which looks at understanding generational poverty. Students will develop advocacy skills to help marginalized women and poor families. This course will offer undergraduate and graduate students opportunities to engage with women in an international and Oklahoma context.

WGS/ HON 3810 Cross-Cultural Construction of Gender

Joy Pendley will teach Cross-Cultural Construction of Gender from an anthropological perspective, focusing on how individuals experience gender within different cultural contexts. Students will examine what produces social stratification in gender and how other categories, such as race/ethnicity, class and sexuality, impact gender. The course will examine how history, economics, migration, and political change affect gender ideologies.

LOVE YOUR BODY DAY

The Women's and Gender Studies Student Association, together with the Women's Outreach Center, the Center for Social Justice and the Women's and Gender Studies Program, sponsored a film screening of the film *Fifty Nude Women* for Love Your Body Day Oct. 20. *Fifty Nude Women* is a short film montage, set to music that features images of diverse women's bodies. More than 35 students

attended this screening and partook in a lively discussion about body image afterward.

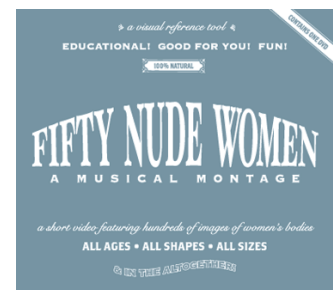


and demeaning.

Each year on Love Your Body Day, women and men around the

country hold events to encourage body self-esteem and to reject unrealistic and unhealthy expectations of bodily perfection.

The Women's Health Project of the NOW Foundation launched the Love Your Body campaign in September 1998 as a national day of action to speak out against advertisements and images of women that are harmful, offensive, disrespectful



For more information visit:

<http://www.fiftywomen.com/>

<http://www.loveyourbodyday.com/>

News and Notes

STUDENT NEWS

- **Congrats to Julianne Davis, Eulonda Rushing, and minor Kymber Fennel for graduating this December!**
- **Ashley Edwards**, social justice minor, was awarded the Kelly Sullivan Memorial Scholarship and the Robert Dean Bass Memorial Scholarship, both awarded by the Political Science Department.
- **Madison Mélon** led an Honors Feminist Reading Group and co-founded The Oklahoma Group, which pairs student consultants with local nonprofits.
- **Britan Mills**, WGS major, was selected as part of the University of Oklahoma Homecoming Royalty for 2010.
- **Caitlin Campbell**, WGS major, was awarded the Political Science Cortez A.M. Ewing Public Service Fellowship, which allowed her to intern in Congressman Boren's office in Washington, D.C., this summer. Caitlin also was awarded the 2010 Neustadt Student Fellowship.
- **Katie Knutter**, WGS major, was awarded the Robert Dean Bass Memorial Scholarship from the Political Science Dept.
- **Rosie Sontheimer**, WGS minor, interned at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., this summer.
- **Lindsey Vandeventer**, WGS major, was selected as a Ronald E. McNair scholar for her future doctoral work.

FACULTY NEWS

- **Hester Baer** was elected the next President of Women in German, the national professional organization of feminist scholars of German Studies. She will serve a two-year term as Vice President, followed by a two-year term as President.
- **Lupe Davidson** co-edited with Kathryn T. Gines and Donna-Dale L. Marcano, the book *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, which recently was published on SUNY Press.
- **Julia C. Ehrhardt** is organizing a new honors abroad program in Arezzo, Italy, for the fall 2011 semester.
- **Catherine Hobbs** is serving as the acting director of Women's and Gender Studies this fall.
- **Jill Irvine** received a research grant from the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research. This fall she is a research associate at the Five Colleges Women's Studies Research Center at Mt. Holyoke College and traveling to Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to conduct field research.
- **Nancy LaGreca** was named the Executive Director of the South Central Modern Language Association in Jan 2010. The SCMLA has a regular session on Gay and Lesbian Studies and strongly encourages special sessions on women, gender, language and literature.
- **Nina E. Livesey** has published a book, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol: Early Jewish Treatments of Circumcision*.
- **Cindy Simon Rosenthal** was awarded the *Journal Record's* Woman of the Year award.
- **Susan F. Sharp** was elected to the Board of the American Society of Criminology as an executive counselor.
- **Martha Skeeters** received the first WOC-tastic award from the Women's Outreach Center. She presented a paper, "Red Dirt Women and Power: Educating Women Through a Video/Oral History Project," at the Educating Women Conference in Albuquerque this summer. She also founded the Oklahoma Coalition for Reproductive Justice with faculty JoAnna Wall.
- **Meredith G.F. Worthen** traveled to Italy to conduct research on homophobia on college campuses, comparative research in the United States, Italy and Spain.

New Center Coordinator



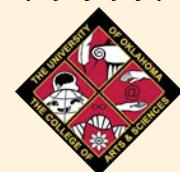
In June, the Center for Social Justice welcomed a new program coordinator, Stephanie Heck. Stephanie is a recent graduate of the Women's and Gender Studies Program at OU. Stephanie was the Women's and Gender Studies Outstanding Senior in the spring of 2010. She is a native of Norman, OK.

Stephanie said, "I am so grateful for the opportunity to work at the Center. I have the chance to combine everything I love doing and all that I learned in my undergraduate study in women's and gender studies. It is exciting to work for something I am passionate about-social justice and connecting students with community involvement opportunities.

Welcome to the Center, Stephanie!

WGS

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