

Congratulations to the SWS 2020 Feminist Activism Award Winner: Ophra Leyser-Whalen



The SWS Feminist Activism Award, established in 1995, is presented annually to an SWS member who has notably and consistently used sociology to improve conditions for women in society. The award honors outstanding feminist advocacy efforts that embody the goal of service to women and that have identifiably improved women's lives.

This year's Feminist Activism Award Subcommittee included Victoria Reyes (Subcommittee Chair), LaToya Council, Mindy Fried, and Amy Blackstone. The Subcommittee decided that Ophra Leyser-Whalen will be the SWS 2020 Feminist Activism Award Winner. As part of this award, Ophra will deliver her Feminist Activism Talk at the SWS Summer Meeting in 2021 to take place in Chicago, Illinois and will participate in a campus visit during the 2020-2021 academic year. Ophra was nominated by Adelle Dora Montebancho, Theresa Morris, and Georgiann Davis.

Ophra Leyser-Whalen is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at El Paso where she's enjoying living, learning, and contributing to the US-Mexico border community, both as a civilian, and a sociologist collaborating with community groups such as the local abortion fund and a local birth resource center. She is a mixed-methods researcher working extensively with undergraduate and graduate students, publishing in clinical and social science journals on issues of reproductive health and justice with specific attention to issues of fertility, contraception, and abortion.

What stood out to the subcommittee was Ophra's commitment to engaging in feminist activism with regard to her students and in local community. As her nominator(s) said "Ophra's entire career has revealed the depth of her feminist focus and her commitment to making the world a better place for women, politically and socially. Fortunately for her community—UTEP, SWS, El Paso and beyond—she applies mind, body, and spirit to this goal."

At the university level, her nominators stated "As a faculty member in a position of power, Ophra takes very seriously her responsibility to mentor marginalized students at all stages of their career, especially female scholars—another example of her commitment to feminist activism within the academy. Ophra has been highly engaged with undergraduate research (UR)—intensive research mentorship of undergraduate students... Ophra is also a careful and attentive mentor to graduate students and post-doctoral fellows, as evidenced by the four co-authored publications produced by her mentored research with graduate students." She also has worked to cultivate a supportive network among junior faculty at her university.

More than her university-related service, Ophra is committed to working with three non-profit organizations: Texas Rising, West Fund and El Jardín, all of which are dedicated to reproductive justice, LGPTQ rights and women's rights. As the nominators described, the university is located in El Paso, "along the U.S.-Mexico border [and] reproductive health care, women's rights and LGBTQ rights have been consistently undermined and underfunded by the state." With Texas Rising, Ophra has served as faculty advisor for its UTEP chapter student group for six years and she has "has supported a variety of their leadership efforts: voter registration, inviting State Representative Wendy Davis to UTEP, co-organizing the El Paso Women's March, and co-organizing a fashion show for queer justice and reproductive justice" (nomination letter).

Nominators describe West Fund as an El Paso-based nonprofit, and more specifically, it "is a small group of volunteers who believe reproductive justice is only possible when all people have the information, ability, and resources to make their own healthcare decisions. West Fund fulfills its reproductive justice mission, in part, through gap funding. Raising these gap funds for West Fund is a responsibility Ophra has taken seriously: at every sociology conference she attends, Ophra brings West Fund merchandise and trades it for donations; she has raised nearly \$1,000 through this effort. In addition, she also collaborates with other West Fund volunteers to write thank you letters and pack merchandise." Ophra has also co-submitted with West Fund an application to the Society for Family Planning to support West Fund's work, including hiring staff for data collection and analysis.

Her work in the community and university are further linked in her co-designed and co-implemented research-based Introduction to Sociology course, which focused on medicalization of childbirth. As her nominator – and co-teacher of the course – stated

"The undergraduate research component of the Intro course was carried out in a mutually beneficial collaboration with an El Paso nonprofit, El Jardín Birth and Family Resource Center, an organization whose mission is to "nurture a regional culture through education and advocacy that supports, cares for, and empowers women during the critical transition of birth and parenthood." One of El Jardín's recent efforts is *Birth Stories*, a collection of video-recorded interviews with local mothers and maternal health providers that traces the history of the region's birth culture. In collaboration with El Jardín, Ophra's sociology students developed and shared their research skills to support the videos' conversion into an educational documentary designed to be a resource for both health professionals and private citizens. The spring 2017 students collectively transcribed and analyzed four video interviews with local maternal health providers; the spring 2018 students completed thorough reviews of the academic literature so the documentary could include peer-reviewed data (such as how and why prenatal education can improve birth outcomes for mothers and infants). These course activities offered students a prolonged intellectual engagement with the research process and contact with community activists and organizers."

Border politics is a pressing issue in today's society and Ophra's dedication to serving her local community is admirable.