This section addresses the use of language to identify women’s studies resources. Language includes indexing terms, name authorities, subject headings, user-generated tags, and physical classification systems, all of which can affect the findability of material, both physically and in catalogs and databases.

The power of naming, labeling, and classifying is an especially critical one in women and gender studies because the works themselves frequently call into question the nature of the knowledge hierarchy that traditional cataloging structures reflect.

Hope Olson and others point out three major ways in which women’s studies challenges cataloging practice:

1. Library of Congress Subject Headings have developed in a sexist society;
2. Women’s studies is an interdisciplinary field;
3. Feminist research orientations do not fit into categories designed for traditional research;

Therefore, the act of assigning appropriate labels to women’s studies materials is often an act of knowledge creation and interpretation in itself.

Due to the dynamic and interdisciplinary nature of women and gender studies, Olson argues that improving the flexibility of cataloging to encompass these challenges will ultimately be beneficial for all knowledge classification attempts. It is crucial to research how subject access is currently being handled in online
databases and how it can be improved, not just for the benefit of women and gender studies practitioners, but for all researchers.

Although criticism of controlled vocabularies and classification for women and gender studies materials spans 40 years (Berman, Sanford. 1971. Prejudices and antipathies: A tract on the LC subject heads concerning people. Scarecrow Press: Netuchen, NJ.), continued analysis is important. Some questions include:

Should materials of interest to women and gender studies researchers be grouped together physically, such as is currently the case in the HQs, or should they be scattered throughout the collection with the disciplinary materials? Integration versus segregation has very important ramifications for the transformation of academic knowledge structures as well as access issues, and this question stems from cataloging and indexing practices. What are the ramifications of the mainstreaming of research on women and gender in regard to segregation versus integration? Studying how these issues are currently playing out is a fundamental exercise for deciding how the future can and should be shaped.

What do current taxonomies of gender-related concepts used in subject cataloging and database indexing look like? Are they different for every database? How and when is gender expressed in indexing/cataloging? How do controlled vocabularies affect the identification of materials about the interconnection of race, sex, gender identity, class, and other identities? Osmond (2007) compared a sample of concepts related to women’s studies in two thesauri and found that A Women’s Thesaurus focuses more on gender and defines sexual identity much more broadly than the ERIC thesaurus.

López-Huertas and Torres Ramírez (2007) examined vocabulary representing concepts related to the health, image and body of women, comparing related documents published in Spain to gender thesauri (primarily Spanish-language). Their research showed that the thesauri were not constructed on literary warrant, with over 50% of the thesauri terms not found in any of the documents, and 20% of the terms in documents analyzed not represented in thesauri.
Transaction log studies from online catalog could be used to identify and analyze users’ vocabulary choices in searching.

Olson (2001) offers a number of techniques for ameliorative change that can partially address issues of gender bias in library catalogs. Redemptive technologies can be applied to make systems more permeable, and tools can be developed to stretch standards such as LCSH and DDC that govern content of legacy data. One such example of a tool is that of Denda (2005), who developed an ontology for women’s studies that maps to Library of Congress Subject Headings, allowing for the expression of relationship, context, and other attributes important to an interdisciplinary field, attributes that are not represented in LCSH. This discipline-specific ontology greatly improves the information seeking process for women’s studies and offers flexibility, currency, and comprehensiveness. Denda recommends extending the ontology to reflect the historical development of women’s studies, to accommodate the older research outputs that are in library collections.

Are indexing terms evolving/emerging in key new areas of scholarly discourse? How does that process happen and is it a flexible enough system (e.g. SACO) to accommodate new knowledge that goes against the grain of traditional knowledge structures? Are new subject headings being created in a timely way, or is there a lag between the introduction of a new idea/term in the literature and the development of appropriate subject headings to describe the new idea? For example, Wood (2010) points out that LC did not create a subject heading for feminist theory until 1992, despite ample literary warrant. Christensen (2008) also points out a lag in the creation of LC headings relating to gay men and lesbians.

How do folksonomies and other forms of tagging affect the findability of content and do user-generated tags empower marginalized users? Adler (2009) seeks to answer this question for a sample of transgender books and concludes that a library catalog which utilizes both a controlled vocabulary and user-generated tags enhances findability. Further research in related subject areas could be of use.