

Report of the Workshop on ‘Women’s Studies and Education: Issues and Concerns’

Organised by Sakhi Women’s Resource Centre, Thiruvanthapuram, and the
Indian Association for Women’s Studies.

19 and 20 May 2006: Animation Centre, Kovalam, Thiruvanthapuram

Day One

The workshop started at 11.30 a.m. with a welcome note by Aleyamma Vijayan, Director, Sakhi Women’s Resource Centre. She briefly described the background of this meeting. She said that various universities in Kerala are planning to start departments of women’s studies and offer post graduate courses and it is the need of the time to develop proper perspectives. This initiative is to bring together various people working on gender studies at different levels. This get-together is very important and this would be an initial step to build a platform for exchanging our experiences in the field of women’s studies in Kerala, she said.

The programme was inaugurated by Dr. Jancy James, Hon. Vice Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. In her speech, she talked about the issues and concerns in introducing women’s studies as an academic discipline in the University system. She shared her experience as a teacher, a post doctoral scholar and later as Vice Chancellor in introducing gender concerns in the curriculum. She pointed out the set backs faced by women’s studies due to the efforts for standardisation of issues and frameworks based solely on western feminist theory. Regarding a new framework for women’s studies programmes in Kerala, it should be rooted in local realities and have fluidity to include a new outlook. She said that M G University’s proposal to start a Women’s Studies Centre (WSC) is now with the UGC for final approval and it will be started in this academic year.

Ms. Sumi Krishna, National President of IAWS, made a note on the national scene of women’s studies and the evolution of IAWS as an organisation, its mode of functioning in a non hierarchical way and its activities in general. In the initial years after Independence, the focus was on women's education. Later the women’s movement helped to shift the focus to studying women’s condition and position. 2007 is the Silver Jubilee year of IAWS and this provides an opportunity for looking forward and looking back. Networking and local associations are very important in strengthening IAWS at the National level. From 1974 onwards the need for Women’s Studies as an academic discipline in India has been recognised. Neera Desai started the Centre for Women's Studies as a research Unit in SNDT Women's University, Mumbai. Today more than 60 WSCs are working in different Universities in the country. Environmental Studies also entered into the academic realm in the same decade. It was introduced at the primary school level whereas WS was recognised in higher education. She also shared the concerns raised in the recent consultations organised by the UGC at the regional level, which look into WS in a larger context.

These presentations were followed by discussion. Limitations in the UGC guidelines regarding Women's Studies, importance of mainstreaming gender in all academic disciplines, how to make inroads into government policies and institutions of governance, constraints that women researchers face in our universities, lack of gender sensitivity in the teaching community were some of the concerns shared in the discussion.

The afternoon session started with a presentation of the study of Women's Studies Centres in Tamil Nadu, conducted by the Madras Institute of Development Studies. This session was chaired by Ms.T.Radhamani. Dr. S. Anandhi, from MIDS, presented the findings of the study. She said that the CWS in TN were not established as a result of women's studies activism but sponsored by the State Government. The conventional approach and thrust on extension activities showed that regional dynamics is very important in shaping the institutionalisation of women's studies. In general, in Tamil Nadu, there is no importance for social sciences courses in higher education. When the pressure to switch over to job oriented courses increased, WS was sidelined.

This session was followed by two presentations. Dr. Manu Bhaskar, from the Dept. of Sociology, Kerala University shared her experiences of the beginning years of the Center for Women's studies located in the University of Kerala. The second National Conference of IAWS was held in Trivandrum in 1984, and the University of Kerala hosted it. The WSC in Kerala University started functioning in 1985, under the Dept. of Sociology. Syllabus and Curriculum revision of Political Science, Sociology, Psychology and Economics was initiated during that year. Economics incorporated gender component at the 1st year PG level and Dept. of Sociology introduced a paper on gender studies in 1990. These initiatives encouraged people to work on women's issues at the research level but the major obstacle was lack of gender sensitivity and women's perspective among research guides. The WSC was then transferred to the Dept of Education and during this period the National project on Girl Child was started. Again the centre was shifted to the Dept of Economics for three years. Some entrepreneurship development programmes were initiated at this period. Again the WSC was shifted to the Dept. of Sociology for a few years and now it is stationed in Institute of English.

She made a critical analysis of the functioning of the centre through these years. In her opinion, the University and the centre are answerable to the women's movement for its failure in producing women's scholarship and its failure in providing support and strength to girl students. Another notable development was the organising of Kerala University Women's Forum, an organisation of teachers, researchers and other individuals interested in women's issues. The forum tried to question the gender discrimination in teachers' organisations, higher educational bodies like the senate, syndicate, academic council etc. The Forum faced strong opposition from mainstream (male stream?) organisations. Slowly it became inactive as a result of internal conflicts and external opposition.

The second presentation was by Mini Sukumar, lecturer, Centre for Women's Studies, University of Calicut on 'Women's Studies in Kerala: The present situation'. In her presentation she drew the picture of rising 'Feminist Consciousness' and autonomous women's movement in Kerala. Unlike the all-Indian situation, Women's Studies in Kerala did not come in the age of diversity. But it succeeded in proving its presence to some extent in the academic system and

gained wider acceptance in the development circles. The history of feminist activism and academic initiatives were captured in her presentation. The active discussion followed this presentation contributed extensively to fill the gaps and provide more additions.

Day Two

Day 2 began with the panel discussion on Women's Studies – Research and Education: Issues and Concerns. The panel constituted by Dr.A.K.Ramakrishnan (School of International Relations, MG University), Dr.A.K.Jayasree (Director, Centre for Women's Studies, University of Kerala), Dr.Mala Ramanathan (Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies and Research, Thiruvanthapuram) and Dr.J.Devika (Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvanthapuram).

Dr.A.K.Ramakrishnan shared his experience in teaching a course on Feminism and International Relations in Pennsylvania University in USA. In US, very few men are engaging in feminism whereas in India more men are interested. Students' reaction to feminism in India is also more fresh and political. Women's Studies conferences there discussed about problems in teaching, learning and researching women's studies. The general feeling is that Feminism is more enabling while gender is more academic. The main problem we encounter now is how to study gender without losing the political edge. Interestingly, North American Universities consider 'feminism' as old. In the present juncture internationalisation and sharing of syllabi is very important. Feminism emerging in the Islamic world is very significant. We have to prove that feminism is not a monolithic western cultural produce. Linkages of academics with society at large are very important.

Dr.G.S.Jayasree made a presentation on the present functioning of WSC in Kerala University. This is one of the first generation centres started by UGC. Now it is mainly focusing on organising women's cells and extension activities through affiliated colleges, curriculum revision and orientation of teachers through refresher courses and orientation programmes. This year the focus theme is violence against women. She shared major obstacles in the functioning of the centre. Academic and administrative freedom is very important in WSCs. She shared her experience in publishing a journal on women, 'Samyukta' as a more energetic experience because it is voluntary work outside the formal stream of university. Samyukta publishes regular issues on women's experiences and their work. It is committed to bringing out translations from regional languages.

Dr. Mala Ramanathan made a presentation on their experience of introducing a course on 'Gender in Medical Education'. Medical Education is shaped with all existing hierarchies and the profile of medical students is becoming very urbanised and elitist. This posed a major obstacle in engendering medical education. But this course was received with great enthusiasm and she welcomed all participants to contribute, adapt and propagate it further.

Dr.J.Devika shared her experience in curriculum revision with gender inputs in the M.Phil course offered in the Centre for Development Studies. She reviewed her alliance with people work on

cultural studies as a great strength. Gender and Development, Philosophy of Social Sciences are included now in the M.Phil course.

This session was followed by group discussion of participants. Group discussion was coordinated mainly on the following points:

1. How should we in Kerala further develop a feminist perspective in education?
2. At what levels of education should we focus?
3. How should our action be strategising to achieve these objectives?
4. What institutional arrangements do we need to keep this process alive?
5. Indicate three priority areas in which we should focus in the coming years.

These are the suggestions that came out of the discussion:

Perspective

- There is no one single feminist perspective. Hence it is important further to clarify the feminist perspectives of those engaging in the process

Focus Areas/groups

- Education –should focus on formal as well as informal education starting from pre school level
- Concentrate on teachers/trainers and sensitize them
- Identify key positions with multiplier effect
 - Training institutes
 - Media
 - Local body members

Activities

- Through life skill education
- Religious leaders
- Influence media for slots
- Campaigns / networking
- Intensified and focused campaigns
- Charter of demands to Govt.
- Intervene in curriculum development
- Ask basic questions
- Documentation
- Debate the dress codes which are imposed verbally or non verbally : not just for students but also for teachers
- Study materials : further work to be done
- Intra-student :encourage intermingling and interaction
- Teacher-student : Teachers should be counselled
- Parent-centred approach at present : To be remedied through counselling on gender
- Ensure political content in women's studies
- Bring men in via masculinity studies
- Sensitise coordinators of women's cells in colleges
- Gender issues not just restricted to syllabus

- Prioritise areas where gender issues could be included – professional courses, journalism, MSW etc.
- Organisations / Media/ Policy makers have to be pressurised so women's issues are addressed
- Incorporate / encourage gender issues in M Phil/ Ph.D
- Managements / heads of institutions be convinced on gender sensitisation of faculty / staff members
- Specific packages /training material to teach women's studies
- Experience of Gender in Medical education can be followed as a model in other disciplines
- Add one paper on gender at PG level
- Intensive certificate courses on women's studies to be available to all colleges
- Vice Chancellors/ Directors of Boards of Higher Education to be pressurised for WSCs and mainstreaming women's studies

Major Obstacles

- How to develop genuine pluralist perspectives on tackling conservative interpretations of community/religious belonging
- How to forge groups to advance a feminist perspective? Become a pressure group? Carry out advocacy in institutions?

Last Session - Way Forward

There was an extensive discussion on strategies for moving forward on this platform. Everyone volunteered support to contribute to the journey forward. The following persons expressed their willingness in the following activities –

- Text book auditing at school level - Remadevi
- Translation and Publishing - Women's Imprint (Devika, Mini)
- Core committee to coordinate the work – Sakhi
- Translation of materials on decentralization – SIRD (Leela Kumari)
- Gender trainers pool – Binitha Thampi, Beena (CDS)
- E-group on gender studies in Kerala – Maya.S.S, Sunitha.T.V, Devika
- Theatre / Culture - Nireeksha (Sudhi, Rajeswari)
- Films to share among participants – Murali
- Short term programmes, trainings, talks – Beena (CDS)
- Space for dissemination meetings – Rajagiri College

Maya has already created a web blog www.iawskerala.blog.co.uk

[Report prepared by Mini Sukumar, July 2006]