

Women's Studies and Knowledge Production

Northern Regional Workshop of the IAWS

**In collaboration with the Centre for Women's Studies, University of Jammu
and the Centre for Women's Development Studies, CWDS, New Delhi**

April 20-21st 2007, University of Jammu

The northern regional workshop of the Indian Association for Women's Studies was held at the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Jammu April 20-21st 2007. The workshop was financially supported from different sources – the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Jammu, the IAWS, the Centre for Women's Development Studies New Delhi and by the participants as well. The workshop had more than one aim – to make stronger connections between women's studies and the region of Jammu and Kashmir, as well as to think about issues of knowledge production at all levels of the educational system. Prof. Poonam Dhawan, Director of the Centre for Women's Studies at Jammu hosted the workshop, with inputs from Zarina Bhatta and Mary John from the IAWS.

After words of welcome and an introduction to the workshop by the organisers, the first session was devoted to discussions of local issues in Jammu and Kashmir from a gender perspective. The speakers included Anuradha Bhasin, editor of the Kashmir Times, Kavita Suri, a senior journalist and member of WISCOMP, Dr. Yasmeen Khan, Director of Women's Studies at Women's College Srinagar, and Dr. Rehana Kesar from the J&K Health Service. The presentations and discussions revolved around the deep victimisation of men, women and children in the Valley due to the conflict. Displacement, high unemployment, sexual abuse and forced marriages, are indications of the extent of social breakdown, amidst the fight for survival and minimum security. The fact that 12% of the army is from the Jammu region has made for further divisions. The Association of Parents of Displaced Persons largely led by mothers and so-called half-widows of disappeared men, has made the strong demand that they want the truth from the state and not compensation. The region is changing in unprecedented ways – forms of extreme poverty including destitution not seen before, a shortage of men leading to changes in marriage patterns and fears of late or no marriage among women, the growth of dowry associated with “mainstream culture” elsewhere, among other developments. The discussions touched on all these extremely difficult issues in the context of the existence of nine women's studies centres in J & K, as well as the need for the State Commission of Women in Jammu to get a much-needed Chairperson so as to be active.

The next session on Education and Gender looked at various aspects related to education that require more attention from women's studies. The first two presentations by Sadhna Saxena (Central Institute of Education, Delhi) and Shirley Joseph (Jesus and Mary College) discussed the new four year course Bachelor of Elementary Education in the context of going beyond the hitherto dominant focus on questions of the accessibility of girls to education. The very training of teachers is an extremely significant site – both of conformism and of contestation. On the one hand, there are forces that emphasize conformism from the institution, especially given the increasing feminisation of elementary education, and parental pressure on the trainees to choose this course in the first place. A special paper on gender is optional at the CIE but has little institutional

support, while it is compulsory at Jesus and Mary College and one of the more popular papers, indicative of how gender can make a difference. The next presentation by Purva Bharadwaj focussed on the construction of nation and gender in language textbooks, part of a larger study conducted by Nirantar. Drawing on different textbooks – both by state and private publishers in Hindi, Urdu and Sanskrit – many interesting configurations of nationalism and gender emerged, and in contrasting ways. In the case of Sanskrit in particular, both the nationalisation of Sanskrit and the Sanskritisation of the nation have been simultaneous processes. Farida Khan, from Jamia Millia Islamia, talked about her relationship and work on education in the context of Kashmir. She was particularly interested in the historical difference between Kashmir and other parts of the sub-continent in that education for girls and women emerged much later in time. But she also emphasized the critical role that institutions of education have played especially in the current crisis. Keeping schools open and classes running has been one way of countering the fear and uncertainty of everyday life. The last presentation in this session was by Subbalakshmi Nandi on Literacy and Power in the context of SHGs. Her discussion exposed the claims of poverty alleviation and women's empowerment being made in the promotion of SHGs. In their study, literacy among SHG members was only 39% and clearly not a priority. With no links to local panchayats, and very few SHGs raising women related issues, even the poverty alleviation claims are quite unclear, since the money raised by SHG women is largely used for immediate needs and crises in the family. Considerable discussion on various aspects relating to education and literacy movements, teacher-student dynamics, education in the Jammu and Kashmir region, and so on ensued.

The second day began with two presentations mapping women's studies. In her presentation on women's studies and South Asia, Uma Chakravarti discussed the difficulties in accessing South Asia, given the way in which either our respective national contexts, western theories or local specificities get foregrounded. In the context of being part of creating a women's studies course on South Asia (in Lahore), she described some of the strategies she employed for teaching history – drawing on multiple patriarchies, historical scholarship from the larger region of Asia where detailed studies have been undertaken, work on nationalism and women's movements, majority/minority differences and so on. Reicha Tanwar from Kurukshetra University gave an account of the range of work being done by women's studies centres in the northern region – researches, outreach and teaching – against the background of the claims of women's studies to be both a perspective and a discipline. In particular, she focused on the kind of marginalisation experienced by women's studies in spite of the enormous demands they experience. The need for an orientation for many of the new women's studies centres was also discussed.

The next session was a roundtable on women's studies in their diverse institutional locations. Sadhna Arya made a presentation on the National Commission of Women in terms of its chequered relationship with the women's movement, focussing on the kinds of researches that the NCW has made possible. She emphasized that many valuable studies have been conducted, especially when women's groups have drawn on NCW support to conduct particular researches, which needs to be more widely disseminated. Manvinder Kaur from the Centre for Women's Studies in Punjab University described the challenges they have faced, especially in conducting an MA in Women's Studies. Forced to rely on faculty from other departments has sometimes been at the cost of the course, when a perspective and understanding is lacking. Issues of plagiarism and women's studies as a soft option not requiring any expertise also came up. Suranjita Ray from Daulat Ram college described a special certificate course in Women's Studies that has been offered by

some of Delhi's undergraduate women colleges for interested students. On the one hand, the course has already been designed, leaving little flexibility within the college context. On the other hand, depending on the commitment of the course coordinator, students do undergo a process of change, and especially relate to the more innovative aspects of the course. However, questions of epistemological approaches to women's studies and the need for creative methodologies require much more attention. The next speaker, Abha Chauhan from Jammu University discussed the interface between the discipline of sociology and work on gender. Work on gender of relevance to sociology has been done as much from within as outside the discipline. Areas of relative neglect, however, are still apparent – on issues of violence for instance, as well as regarding different communities and castes, such as the OBCs for instance. The final speaker in this session was Neloufer Khan from the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Kashmir. Her centre was sanctioned as recently as 2006 (one of three centres in Srinagar). While these new centres can expect special funding from the Government at the Centre, they remain isolated from the rest of country and from the developments in women's studies. The tendency is for such new centres to get into a proliferation of programmes, trainings and so on. Discussion following the roundtable drew links between the different sessions and topics, especially in the light of possible activities in the Jammu Kashmir region, as well as for women's studies elsewhere.