

INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES

XV National Conference on Women's Studies

Sub-theme:13

'Teaching Women's Studies'

Women's studies emerged in India during the 1970s from an acknowledgement that social, political and educational processes after Independence had failed women – a finding established by the publication of the “Towards Equality” report. Initiated by the women's movement to counter the invisibility and marginalization of women, spaces marked as 'women's studies' within universities, research centers, and non-government organizations came forth to challenge the patriarchal structures of institutions, movements and epistemological processes. Within a few decades 'gendering disciplines/disciplining gender' became the totem pole around which revolved debates about the scope, nature, ramifications of institutionalization of women's studies as a discipline. Similar to women's movements, women's studies too shares a paradoxical relationship with the state. On the one hand, the 160 women's studies centres in the country today are funded by state governments, independent, autonomous academic institutions and government institutions under the guidance of the University Grants Commission (UGC); on the other hand, one *raison d'être* of women's studies is to challenge statist structures and spaces that invisibilised woman. Nowhere was the attempt to appropriate women's studies by the state more obvious than the attempt by UGC to rename 'women's studies' into 'Women and Family Studies Centres' in 2005.

'Teaching women's studies' remains both ideologically and politically fraught as has been pointed out by many teachers, scholars, and practitioners. While it is true that there has been a spurt in the visibility of 'gender' in academic discourses (whether in terms of dissertation topics, research papers, and themes for conferences, seminars and workshops), it is also true that mainstream social science disciplines remain recalcitrant to feminist epistemologies. The question of what is to be taught, in what language and how remain pertinent when one tries to address the theme 'teaching women's studies'. Not lagging far behind is the dogged question: Do we need a separate centre/school or should traditional disciplines open up to feminist politics and theories? This sub-theme is also an effort to understand the possibilities and challenges of gendering disciplines better: While Women's Studies have wrought significant changes in some disciplines, some others like Engineering and some branches of Science remain elusive and untouched

One of the questions that the sub-theme 'Teaching women's studies' would like to foreground is the question of interdisciplinarity: what is to be taught in a women's studies class room? Those who enter women's studies classrooms necessarily may not be open to the interdisciplinary nature of the subject. Coming from varied disciplines of social sciences, humanities, physical and biological sciences, students often find little interest outside their disciplinary training and research interests. While there are some students who feel that there ought to be a greater emphasis on

theoretical orientations, others favour cultural constructions of gender and still others felt that what was really relevant was the role of women in development. Following close behind is the positing of the binary of criticality versus employability. Like many other social sciences and humanities disciplines, women's studies too face the inevitable 'what now?' after a degree in women's studies.

The other questions that the sub-theme hopes to raise are the question of building regional histories of women's studies and its relationship with language and the importance of multilingualism in women's studies. While regional variations cannot be ignored, we must also exercise caution whether women's studies should now become region specific, and what then would be the linkages and interconnections between a women's studies curriculum in the South and maybe in the East. The question of regionalism also foregrounds language and whether English be the universal vehicle of teaching? If the vote is for regional languages to be used in classrooms, then one must be vigilant of the relation between hierarchies embedded in regional languages and aspirations of students, particularly from working class, lower caste communities. This would also entail examining process of curriculum building and non-availability of resources in regional languages. The student community (not just in a women's studies classroom) is composed of members both from elite as well as disprivileged backgrounds, but what makes a women's studies class room unique is the linkages between experience and theories, which entail bringing one's social contexts in the class rooms. How does one negotiate the existing inequalities of class, caste, communities, sexualities and disabilities within the classroom while ensuring academic rigour? The connection between the theoretical knowledge and active intervention, including activism in campus, is much more needed today. The linkages between women's studies and women's movements also bring to surface who studies in a women's studies course? What are the criteria of admissions as well as appointments? How does the objective set of criteria that an institution demands negotiate the tensions between academic 'merit' and 'commitment' to activism? We also welcome discussions on the pedagogy of teaching women's studies. The push towards digital humanities has not left women's studies untouched— does it exacerbate inequalities within the class room or does innovative pedagogy help confront social inequalities?

A great challenge to women's studies is being posed by the rapid growth and consolidation of the right-wing and the escalating caste violence, affecting the campuses as well. Liberal spaces in the campuses are getting constricted and are being claimed by regressive-reactionary elements of the society. Centres as liberal enclaves have already begun to feel the brunt; there being threat of co-opting and losing its radical character. Women's studies in today's scenario are expected to play a far more meaningful role and need to connect with the movement to raise critical issues of local and national importance.

Sub-themes/ theme tracks:

- Mapping change with women's studies initiatives
- Teaching and writing resistance
- Institutionalization of Women's Studies: Issues and concerns
- The 'region' in women's studies: histories, languages and development
- Challenges today: Confronting communalism, sectarian- caste violence
- Caste, class intersections in women's studies teaching
- Women's studies and campus disparities
- Debating women's question in class rooms: local specificities
- Connecting developments in women's studies and the movement
- Women's studies in conflict zones

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