

# **INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES**

## **XV National Conference on Women's Studies**

**Women in a Changing World:  
Restructured Inequalities, Countercurrents, and Sites of Resistance**

22-25 January 2017  
Chennai

From the first Women's Studies Conference in 1981, where it was decided to form the Association, IAWS Conferences have been landmarks in a united drive by scholars, students, activists, and allies of the women's movement in India to advance the agenda of gender equality. These Conferences have provided an important platform for studies, debates, and clarification of perspectives on a wide range of issues and questions that impact the lives of women.

The XV National Conference in Chennai, January 2017, constitutes one more step in this journey of ideas. Its central theme reflects the current context of a rapidly changing economy and society that is simultaneously and increasingly mired in a lived experience of uncertainty, volatility, insecurity, and conflict. There is accumulating evidence that far from being an equalizing or liberating force, the nature of contemporary change and continued restructuring of the State and the economy by neo-liberalism and globalization has expanded the range of inequalities, modes of discrimination, and forms of violence against women. In the midst of a significantly more complicated terrain of inequality, assertions and resistance by women across several new sites of public action have also come to the fore, even as some others may have become less visible. The intricately intertwined multiplicity of issues, questions, and debates that confronts any student of women's studies today, can indeed appear like a confusing medley of situations. It has foregrounded the need to search through the mounting complexities of day-to-day experiences, issues, and incidents for the structural underpinnings of contemporary inequalities and the violence it generates. Troubled and troubling times call for renewed efforts to engage with both accumulated experience and new thinking around the key elements of the contemporary condition, if we are to

effectively challenge the structures that breed and feed on inequalities of gender, caste, class and community.

A popular recognition of and widespread hunger for education as the way forward, has indeed led to significant increases in enrolment ratios among girls, including in higher education. This surge in women's involvement with education as students and teachers has also been reflected in a heightened presence of girl students and women teachers in debates and movements in colleges and universities across India. Gender issues, feminist perspectives, and resistance against inequality and discrimination have emerged as important components of campus discourse. Even as ascendant privatization is transforming and restructuring the political economy and role of education in India, it appears that public institutions have become important sites of renewed questioning by an increasingly diversified community of students and teachers. At the same time, the academic institutional space seems more fraught, restricted, and subject to new uncertainties at various levels. Nowhere is this uncertainty more directly apparent than in the case of the more than 150 Women's Studies Centres that have been established by the UGC, whose continued existence is still not assured. Debates around quality, interdisciplinarity, employability, accountability in education, thus necessarily intermingle with concerns regarding increasing contractualisation, adhocism, and discontinuities experienced by students, teachers, and practitioners of women's studies, as well as other new and old disciplines. The XV National Conference of the IAWS will provide a platform to discuss, document, debate, and develop collective thinking and strategizing on all these issues to face the challenges ahead.

For quite some time, the hyper-visibility of some new forms of employment for women, particularly in urban services, had masked the crisis in women's employment. After a quarter century of entrenchment of the neo-liberal policy framework, we now know that it has resulted in female employment rates having actually dropped to the lowest levels in the history of independent India. Paradoxically, the sharpest fall in women's employment took place during the period that saw the highest rates of economic growth. 21<sup>st</sup> century rural India has also witnessed widespread agrarian crisis marked by increasing non-viability of agricultural livelihoods. Its consequence has been a dramatic reduction in self-cultivation, with a greater fall in the number of women cultivators. The number of agricultural labourers, on the other hand, continued to increase to record

levels. Declining workdays in agriculture suggests that significant proportions of even those counted as employed in agriculture have little work. Interconnected to these processes are the issues of sustainability, environmental degradation, reduction of rights over common property resources, and the impact of climate change.

At an overall level, it has become clear that the narrow range of occupations in industry and services, in which many women had indeed found employment, was unable to compensate for the continuous and increasingly sanctioned process of eviction of millions of women from jobs not only in agriculture, but also in industry and services. There is mounting evidence that the losses in employment and related incomes encompasses even informal work that for long had appeared as forms of labour where particularly poor women seeking employment had been able to find some work, albeit in extremely harsh and exploitative conditions. At the same time, recent years have seen both spontaneous and organized protests by cadres and contingents of workers that are either all women or female dominated, suggesting a new dynamic of resistance that women's studies needs to engage with. The enduring question of unpaid work by women and its contribution to economy and society is also evoking renewed interest with the increased pressure on women's unpaid labour in a context of retreating public services, reduced public provisioning, and the consistent decline in public investment, even as paid care work is also on the rise. In this XV IAWS Conference, our focus is therefore on the nature of change in paid and unpaid work by women across regions and sectors in India and also the experience of other south Asian countries.

Once criticized for ignoring the divergent experiences and articulations of women of socially oppressed and Dalit castes/communities, women's studies and the women's movement in India have become significant contributors to contemporary Dalit assertion against caste based discrimination, stigma, inequality, and for affirmative action. Varied positions and arguments have emerged from within women's studies on Dalit women's unique experience and issues including one argument, advocating for feminists who may not be dalits to reinvent themselves as 'Dalit feminists' to enable a more 'emancipatory standpoint'. At the same time, diverse forms of Dalit women's organizations are also increasingly allying their anti-caste/anti-patriarchy assertions with the broader women's movement. Social perceptions of women's 'honour' being linked to caste identity and endogamy have of course long been accepted as oppressive for women, and the

women's movement has indeed stood steadfast beside young couples who cross such boundaries. Yet, in such cases, vulnerability to assaults, degrading forms of public humiliation, and even killings, remain a continuing reality, particularly when a Dalit is involved. We are fortunate that this IAWS Conference is being held in Tamil Nadu, a state which has a rich and long history of anti-caste social movements and ideas that have been ideologically linked with an agenda for women's emancipation. It provides us with a special opportunity for collective learning about this heritage, and also for debating its place and relevance for women located within restructured correlations of caste domination and countercurrents of resistance that define the contemporary Indian context.

New issues have also emerged from the recent experience of organized attempts to brutally suppress Dalit ferment intersecting with organized attempts at communal polarization and promotion of communal hatred. Recurrent practices of 'dishonouring' women in the name of community honour, and the virulent attacks on inter-faith marriages, do indeed appear to share features in common with violence against inter-caste marriages, albeit on a stridently political and communal register. Women's studies has from its inception, been committed to peace and communal amity as a basic condition for progression towards equality and emancipation. The adverse effects of politicization of religion on the advance of equality for women, the dangers of majoritarianism, as well as contemporary articulations of women's rights from within minority communities, are all important issues before this IAWS Conference.

There are other minorities whose movements for democratic rights and equality have come to the fore in recent years. The disability rights movement has expanded in scope and scale in recent years, and this conference will make space for integrating their location within the broader themes of the conference, while also providing a platform for articulation of their special issues. The Conference will also include voices of sexual minorities, and discuss their key concerns, including but not restricted to discrimination, prejudice, stigma, violence, as well the articulation and assertion of their right to dignity and equality.

Of special significance is the upsurge of different forms of militarization, and the immediate impact on women's rights, external as well as internal to their existence and location in the societal

structures and regions. Issues of conflict and peace thus form an essential component of the Conference, in order not only to debate and discuss, but also to develop theoretical research in tandem with women's strategies and movements for peace and security.

As we prepare for the conference, it is only fitting to reiterate that women's studies is by nature inter-disciplinary, just as IAWS is innately collaborative in its activities. We draw strength from the support of scholars, students, and teachers from a range of disciplines and departments. So also, we have been privileged to receive the support of several departments in the University of Madras, in collaboration with whom the XV IAWS Conference is being organized. The University of Madras has opened its doors to the women's studies community and given us a historic venue for the conference for which we are truly grateful. This will be the first IAWS National Conference in Tamil Nadu, and we can all look forward to a particularly special conference.

IAWS conferences have always been characterized by a lively cultural component and wider solidarities. Agendas and issues are not only debated in seminar formats or panel discussions, but also through films, plays, music and dance. 2017 also marks the 35<sup>th</sup> year of the IAWS. It provides a special opportunity to take stock of how far we have travelled, to look back and replenish our spirit to face the challenges ahead. A time perhaps to remember a little of what our founders felt and thought about the role of the IAWS, so vividly expressed in verse written on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of IAWS as

***Greetings for the Twenty Year Old: From One of the Midwives***

*Vina Mazumdar (2002)*

*You are twenty, going on twenty one, soon you will think you are old,*

*All who surround you, steer and guide you, some not so young, nor bold.*

*You are a rover, without any cover, not even a permanent home.*

*Many who love you, want to settle you, within the walls of a room-*

*Because they believe in - order and ruling*

*Filing and accounting order.*

*Records are needed, as and when heeded*

*To avoid in the future - disorder.*

*But you, my darling, were born without a farthing —  
To challenge a powerful system,  
The symbol of a hope, for many who were broke  
But believed they could transform the system  
Not through destruction, but persuasion,  
Carrying the torch for knowledge -  
Through research and teaching, action, debating —  
Enriching young minds with courage.*

*Structures these days, age faster than earlier,  
And become homes without people,  
With declining rationale, sponsors and personnel  
The life-force moves away — as natural.  
Life is dynamic, Knowledge not static.*

*'Tis a mistake to tie them down.  
Challenge especially, needs strategically  
New thrusts, ways and not frown  
On changing methodology, for order and maintenance  
Of records, history and the spirit -  
Of moving on gracefully, welcome affectionately  
New people ready to (wo)man it. Retain your youth, and remain a rover  
Keep on challenging the system!  
Systems — though obdurate, hesitant and cussed —  
Know they must bend to the wind.  
Fanning that wind is your raison d'etre —  
Think up new ways to do it better.  
Monolithic models hid most of our reality,  
Bharat darshan opens doors to diversity*