

Concept Note for Women's & Gender Studies as a Discipline in SOGDS

Women's & Gender Studies are significant areas of academic inquiry today. Women's Studies emerged as an area of study worldwide in response to the need for knowledge dissemination and research based on women's concerns and issues in various conventional disciplines. In India and internationally, a growing critical awareness about women's place in society has led to a sharp interest in researching and delving deeper into the specific experiences and subjectivities of women.

Critical and theoretical academic discourses regarding these subjectivities are reflected in literary and cultural studies, philosophy, social sciences, arts, media, ecology, sciences and other areas. Women's & Gender Studies, therefore, locates itself not only in traditional social science disciplines, but equally in the humanities (especially in literature and culture), in the sciences, as well as in arts, film and media.

During the 20th century, women's movements and feminist theories brought to the fore a variety of ways of thinking critically and analytically about gender inequalities and other related issues. Departments and programmes in universities and colleges thus began to incorporate, disseminate, and add to this fast building body of knowledge and to initiate programmes and courses of study with inter-disciplinary relevance. As an area of academic inquiry, Women's & Gender Studies, thus, focuses on multidisciplinary approaches of addressing historical and contemporary women's issues and aims to equip students in conceptualizing and developing analytical skills required to understand women's and gender issues through theory, critical analysis, praxis, research and practicum.

Both in India and abroad, mainstream women's movements and mainstream feminism have been interrogated and challenged by perspectives of other marginalized groups, to raise concerns related to caste, class, race, religion or sexuality. Such challenges in turn have had a bearing on the shape of Women's Studies so that its boundaries have expanded to address gender issues in relation to other inequalities. Internationally, by the end of the last century, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Race Studies and Queer Studies flourished along with established Women's Studies departments and

programmes. At the same time, there has been a growing acknowledgement that the study of masculinity cannot be completely excluded from women's concerns, based on the fact that women and men co-exist, interact with, and influence each other's lives and perspectives. Women's movements, along with movements and activism of gay and queer groups, had also begun to interrogate normative hegemonies, and explore non-normative life styles, sexualities, and perspectives. Gender Studies thus increasingly became a useful term in the effort to broaden the base of traditional Women's Studies programmes and departments.

In India, the women's movement, in its inception, was closely associated with the nationalist movement and dissidence against imperialism, as well as with the interrogation of all other kinds of social hegemonies. The women's movement has been greatly influenced by, and intimately associated with, ongoing struggles for caste, class and religious equality, as well as issues of region, ethnicity and land and forest rights. Some of these movements and struggles are themselves enthused by political and ideological convictions, such as, socialist and Marxist theories and ideologies. The Dalit women's movement, like the movements of women of color in the west, the struggle for peasant and tribal rights, concerns about religious traditions and their impact on women, a growing interest in ecology and its relation to gender issues, and various other factors have impacted and nurtured the evolution of women's studies in India. More recently, issues of sexuality and sexual identities, the normative and the non-normative, in their relationship to gender as well as class and caste, have also been raised. Activists, feminists and women's studies scholars have responded in varying degrees to all of these needs for inclusion. It becomes evident, therefore, that women's studies in India has grown into a complex and sophisticated area of critical study, pushed to think beyond its own gender specific barriers, and vitalized by its internal debates about what lies within and outside the scope of women's studies. UGC, in its eleventh plan guidelines has also emphasized the need to develop women's studies as a thrust area, in line with the MHRD policies. There is therefore an urgent need to address issues related to gender questions in India from an academic perspective through the dissemination of the growing body of knowledge already available in these areas

While no one disciplinary label can adequately represent the entire gamut of contemporary issues that are driving academic inquiry and research within these areas of study today, the co-existence of these two terms - Women's Studies and Gender Studies - in academic institutions and discourses both internationally and in India, speaks to an ongoing debate about the significance and relevance of each of the two terms. On the one hand, there are those who strongly believe that since the goals of women's movements for equal rights and representations have not yet been met, we are nowhere close to abandoning the term Women's Studies. This belief may also be linked to the apprehension that the replacement of Women's Studies by Gender Studies might dilute the concerns that are specific to women. On the other hand, there is an equally strong move towards mainstreaming Women's Studies into the broader rubric of Gender Studies, so that women's concerns may not get excluded from larger discourses which finally influence public policy and action. Equally, the growing interest in studies related to masculinity and non-normative sexualities, and the ongoing inquiries into the relationships between genders, as well as between gender and caste, class, race, regionalism, and other factors which are common to both women and to men, may also be addressed within the realm of Gender Studies. The broad and dual term, "Women's & Gender Studies," with the inherent dialogue between the two sides that it invokes, is intended to bring to the fore some of the important concerns that face all of us, women and men, as we collectively struggle towards achieving a more equitable society for all citizens. Currently, the Women's & Gender Studies academic stream attempts to address a large number of the above mentioned issues, while keeping alive contemporary debates. **The proposed discipline will address concerns related to the above issues along with those related to masculinities and queer feminisms.** A number of programmes are already on offer/ under development under this stream in the school. Establishing the area as a formal discipline in SOGDS will further help in emphasizing the importance of women's and gender studies as disciplinary areas of study in contemporary society, and in further strengthening academic activities already being carried out and proposed within the Women's & Gender Studies stream in the school.