

# JOURNEY OF WOMEN'S STUDIES IN INDIA (1974-2023)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*It is essential to critically reflect on cross cultural studies from feminist perspectives and understand the dimensions of universal standards of gender equality in different cultural contexts and interpretations. In the Indian context, women's rights movement, women's studies and gender studies have provided such space for reflections on cross-cultural perspectives. Women's Studies as a discipline aims to theorise for the oppressed and direct its knowledge construction efforts for a gender transformative agenda. This article aims to provide a survey of the history of this discipline in India, and to critically present its main challenges, while underlining its most evident achievements.*

**Keywords:** Women's Studies, gender challenges, feminist agenda, gender mainstreaming

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## 1. Introduction

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Women's Studies (WS) as a discipline has provided an analytical tool, a worldview to understand the status of women and an alternative viewpoint to existing knowledge construction. The vision, mission, goals and objectives of women's studies have been to bring about transformative changes for gender equality. Five pillars of women's studies have been teaching, training, documentation, research and action. Women's studies is not an ivory tower academic exercise done from a 'social distance'; knowledge construction in women's studies is a participatory process and rooted in women's experiences of intersectional marginalities, vulnerabilities, as well as women's agency to fight back the discriminatory forces in the personal and public life. Women's studies is pro-women field, not anti-men, and tries to deconstruct patriarchal control over women's labour, sexuality, fertility. It also throws light on how to bring changes in the structures and systems of male domination so that they become gender just (Desai and Patel, 1989).

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## **2. Genesis of Women's Studies in India**

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The genesis of women's studies lies in the women's movement (WM) of the 1970s that brought a new direction, scope and dynamism for the institutionalization of Women's Studies in higher education institutions. Commitment to 'women's cause' was the guiding force for the pioneers of women's studies in India. During the 1970s, revolutionary social movements and non-party political formations which were voicing the needs and demands of the oppressed and exploited sections of society (namely, workers and peasants, students and youth, rural poor, Dalits, ethnic and religious minorities) had attracted many young educated women. These women activists started questioning exclusion of women's concerns in these mass movements and started autonomous women's organisations by mid 1970s. The United Nations directive to its member countries to come out with the "Status of Women" Report made 165 countries to constitute an interdisciplinary expert committee to prepare a comprehensive profile of women's predicament in the demographic, economic, social, political spheres. These processes, one 'from below' by the women activists, and another 'from top' by the official research institutions generated serious interest in the 'women's question'. In most of the countries including in India, by 1974 the status reports on women were ready and debated in the public platforms. 'The Status of Women in India' Committee Report, entitled, '*Towards Equality*', was debated in the Parliament of India. The report, based on extensive study visits by the committee members and hard-core data from the official sources, brought out 3 startling results- a continuous declining sex ratio (i.e., number of girls and women per 1000 boys and men), the secular decline of work participation of women and the extremely high mortality and morbidity among Indian women and children (GOI, 1974).

Newly formed feminist groups highlighted an exponential rise in violence against women: dowry murders, trafficking of women and girls, rape, discrimination at the workplace, misogyny of the criminal justice system and the sexist portrayal of women in print and electronic media (Desai & Patel, 1985). Massive media coverage of these debates resulted in the Indian Council of Social Science research pro-actively, promoting research on the survival struggles of women from the underserved sections of society in the rural, urban and tribal locations (Patel, 2002). The intersectional perspective of the feminist praxis shaped the foundations of Women's Studies (WS). Dalit Studies, Disability Studies, Queer Studies and Ethnicity Studies have had a humbling impact on WS scholars and WM activists. This new quest for knowledge construction with inclusiveness has resulted in acceptance of the plurality of understanding the 'women's question' and democratization of mainstream academic disciplines (Aneja, 2019).

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### **3. *The UN Declaration of International Women's Year (IWY) in 1975 and International Women's Decade (1975-85)***

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The UN IWY in 1975 opened the door for national, regional and global discourses by the women's rights groups and newly emerging University Grants Commission sponsored women's studies centers in the Indian universities. The cross country exchange of ideas, practices for curriculum development, grounded research for theorization and for formulation of evidence based policy formulation, putting in place structures and mechanisms for fulfilling 'practical gender needs and strategic gender needs'<sup>3</sup> (Moser, 1993) of women and sexual minorities were facilitated by support of the University Grants Commission (UGC), an apex body of higher education in India, the Indian council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the UN agencies. This helped in crystalizing the vision, mission, goals and objectives of women's studies as teaching, training, research, documentation, mentoring scholarship and advocacy. In the curriculum development for certificate-diplomas-degree courses of WS, women's movement activists were not only consulted, but were also commissioned to write study material in terms of monographs and books. The establishment of a feminist publishing house, *Kali for Women*, during the mid-1980s resulted in a huge body of literature that was included in the syllabi of women's studies programmes of the universities across the nation (Patel, 2002).

During 1985, serious debates on mainstreaming Women's Studies in the mainstream academia resulted on curriculum development in Women's Studies for the undergraduate and post graduate courses. The 'End of the Decade' Conference in Nairobi provided platform for Indian women's studies enthusiasts to interact with delegates from 165 countries and learn best practices of sharing their collective wisdom through writing teaching material. Global women's rights movements have had a far-reaching impact on the knowledge construction process, policy making, legal reforms and grass-roots level action agenda of the Women's Studies centers (Patel and Mondal, 2021).

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### **4. *Institutionalisation of Women's Studies in Higher Education***

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By the early 1980s, Indian women's studies academics had started to discuss about the need to study women's issues in universities and to conduct research based on experiential learning and participatory action research for theorisation. The dialectical relationship between WS and WM during 1980s and 1990s expanded

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<sup>3</sup> Practical gender needs refer to the ones helping women in their everyday activities, such as access to shelter, water, etc., whereas strategic gender needs aim to redress the gender power balance: increased participation in decision-making or equal opportunities for employment, etc.

horizons of gender sensitivity and put pressure from outside the academia (by the social movements) and within the academia (by the proactive Women's Studies scholars within various university departments). The discourse on this subject proved to be relevant for activists, academics, researchers, policy planners and the UN system, which made a collective effort to prepare a solid ground for the institutionalisation of Women's Studies as an academic discipline in both formal and non-formal education systems (Mazumdar, 1994).

The Research Centre for Women's Studies (RCWS) of SNDT Women's University, Mumbai took the lead in organising series of technical workshops, seminars, deliberations, consultations, to come out with subject specific monograph series, reading series, contribution to women's studies series, concept series, movement series, edited volumes. Within a decade, over 100 publications were available to dissemination at the nominal cost for all educational institutions so that the students had reference material in Women's Studies addressing issues and challenges specific to the Indian reality (Krishnaraj, 2005). For policy-oriented research on women's issues, the Centre for Women's Development Studies, formed in 1980 and supported by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), has taken a lead (Krishnaraj, 2005).

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### ***5. Goals, objectives, and performance of Women's Studies Centres (WSCs) in India***

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Women's Studies Centers work with the commitment to the Constitution of India's Guarantees of equality- equal opportunities, equal treatment and equal rewards for contribution in the economic development through paid and unpaid work irrespective of caste, class, ethnicity, location, gender. Over the last three decades, WSCs have facilitated the process of understanding, recognizing and highlighting the contributions made by women, men and sexual minorities and examined the reasons for the subordination of women, the stigmatization of sexual minorities and covert and overt forms of male domination. The participatory pedagogic processes have resulted in the empowerment of women and sexual minorities who got galvanized into action for concerns of gender justice and played an effective role in all decision-making processes in the classrooms and outside the classrooms. WSCs also strived to evolve inclusive development alternatives and transcend gender binaries and ableist biases in their knowledge construction and dissemination efforts. They have ensured visibility of gender in all spheres of life. Through ethnographic research, WS scholars have directed their intellectual energy to identify and understand roots of gender-based inequality and intersectional marginalisation and exclusion based on caste, class, race, ethnicity, ableism, geographical location and gender, that results in the non-recognition, invisibility and exclusion of women and sexual minorities from the intellectual world (Rege, 2006). They have supported

social action aimed at equality, development, peace, education, health and employment (Patel, 2010).

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### *5.1 Concepts and analytical tools of WS*

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Women's Studies starts from the premise that for over 5000 years, the patriarchal value system has persistently succeeded in perpetuating male domination and subordination of women. The public-private dichotomy has been used to keep women confined to the domestic arena and men in the public life. Women's unpaid care work is devalued and non-recognised. This forms the foundation of discrimination, degradation, oppression, patriarchy and gender stereotyping. Patriarchal control over sexuality, fertility and labour of women results in the objectification (especially the sexual objectification) in the media, literature, fine-arts and aesthetics. Hence, the discipline of Women's Studies has developed concepts and analytical tools that help in bringing to the fore the nature, historical roots, causes and consequences of varied forms of interplay of socio-cultural, political and economic forces that create a disabling ecosystem for women. The way out can be found in promoting women's agency and initiating intervention strategies in order to enable the environment for women and intersectionally-vulnerable communities (Crenshaw, 2014).

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### *5.2 Critique of gender biases in theories*

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Women's Studies scholars in the academic institutions have challenged the epistemological basis of male superiority and female inferiority in all philosophies and theories. In Sociology, they have critiqued theoretical premises of the Structural Functional Analysis, and in economics, neoclassical analysis based on law of marginal utility in consumer analysis, marginal cost in the product pricing and marginal productivity have come under severe scrutiny. In the area of home economics, Nobel Laureate Gary Backer's model of 'competing interests' in the distribution of resources in the households and higher 'opportunity cost' of men as 'bread-earners' and women as 'home-makers' is criticized by women's studies scholars as sexist and status quo-ist. Misogyny in psychology, the 'Add women and stir' approach in the mainstream historiography have also been questioned by WS. They have not only asked why women have been hidden from HIStory, but also brought to the fore women's historical contributions in different stages of history. In literature, they have deconstructed the 'male gaze' and profiled 'women's agency'. In the legal studies, they have critiqued covert and overt misogyny and provided alternatives for gender just legal reforms in civil, labour and criminal laws (Omvedt, 1991).

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### *5.3 Major milestones*

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As a result of dedicated efforts of Women's Studies and of the Women's Rights movement, in 1981, the establishment of the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) materialized. IAWS provided a democratic platform for debates and discussions for a wide range of feminist efforts with plural perspectives and intervention strategies. The major milestones in the achievements of women's studies and movement have been the visibility of women in statistics and the official data systems, the publication of a report on self-employed women and women in the unorganized sector called *Shram Shakti* Report in 1988; the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000); the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments in the Constitution of India that granted 33% reservation of women in the rural & urban local self-government bodies in 1994; the establishment of the National Commission for Women in 1995; at subnational level (State and Union Territories), the Policy on Women during 1994-2020; the National Policy for Empowerment of Women in 2001 and the adoption of a Gender Responsive Budgeting at Union for sub-national and local levels in 2005 and the formation of the Ministry of Women and Child, Government India in 2006 (Patel, 2010).

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### *5.4 Transforming agenda*

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Research in Women's Studies proved to be knowledge resources for social transformation. Important findings have been made on the declining sex ratio in Asia, the right to safe abortion as a backup service on demand by women, the reproductive rights of women and the fight against the draconian population control policy, the gender gap in education, the violence against women-rape, dowry murders, domestic violence, sex selective abortions of female foetuses; the portrayal of women in the media, the unpaid care work and the non-recognition of women's work, decision making practices and political participation, the rights of sexual minorities. All were helpful in building data driven campaigns (John, 2008).

### *5.5 Overarching Concerns in Women's Studies*

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#### *5.5.1 Right to Health Care*

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Women's Studies have focused on a life cycle approach in health as the "State of complete physical, mental and social well-being" (WHO, 2023), where social determinants of health issues of women have been probed. The collective actions of the women's movement promoted the rights-oriented based approach, that sees health as a basic human right, and highlighted the intra-household differential distribution of health and nutritional resources, pin-pointed culture specific forms of discrimination at conception, birth, infancy, childhood, puberty, marriage,

motherhood, middle-age, menopause, old-age, defined by patriarchal prejudices, provided pathways to break the vicious cycle of ill-health and the occupational health hazards, busted the myths about women's bodies/body processes, recommended reproductive rights beyond gender binaries, promoted women's choice in birth control practices as against vertically imposed state controlled family planning measures. Women's Studies research has provided inputs for the health policy, legislation on abortion, as well as new reproductive technologies dealing with contraception, assisted reproduction and sex selection (John, 2008). The last two years of several waves of the coronavirus pandemic have brought attention to gender differential impact of health emergency on unpaid care work, the decline in economic activities resulting in women being eased out of the workforce, the implications of working from home, the digital divide leading to girls being forced out of the education system, gender and reverse migration, compounded miseries of women in the informal sector, the strengthening of toxic patriarchy, the trafficking of girls, forced child labour, the increase in child marriages due to economic distress, the shadow pandemic of domestic violence, the burden of women health workers, the mental health of women, the elderly women's predicament during COVID-19 triggered lockdown and women's rights groups priorities in the post-pandemic world (George and Kuruvilla, 2021).

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#### *5.5.2 Paid and unpaid work of women*

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Women's Studies produce relevant research into a variety of topics. Among those, we can name women's paid work, unpaid family work, contribution to care economy, the changing nature of work participation of women, the composition of women in the organised and unorganised sector, girl child labour, professional women, women entrepreneurs, labour law, labour standards, women in agriculture, the discourse on women and development, the critique of conventional indicators of development, engendering development discourses and introducing gender development indicators and gender empowerment measures, gender based division of labour, women-headed households, the segmentation in the labour market, the myth about working women, the private attitude affecting public policies, the gender audit of public policies and gender responsive budgets have been useful in engendering macro policies, the justice system and programme implementation of the state and non-state efforts (Patel and Mondal, 2021).

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#### *5.5.3 Gendered challenges for education*

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Women's Studies have used the gender lens in describing access to education and in highlighting the need for the reduction of the gender gap. It has also done content analysis of textbooks in school and university education and has demanded education for gender equality by eliminating sexist biases in textbooks. They are demanding from the state 6% of the gross domestic product to be allocated to education. They

have prepared manuals for non-formal education and gender sensitization of students and teachers in schools, colleges, universities. They are also grappling with an uphill task of motivating more women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) courses. A current concern in WS has been why women degree holders are not in the work force and how to challenge gender norms in India so that work participation of women can be improved (Aneja, 2019).

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#### *5.5.4 Gaining ground in the public space*

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Women's Studies research has critically reflected on disabling factors for women in public life. They have analysed women's role in the freedom movement and in politics, in the administration, their legal, education, social work in the in pre- as well as post-independence periods, women as voters and women as candidates, women in urban and rural or local self-government bodies, the challenges for reservation of seats for women in the legislative assembly and parliament of India, the performance of women elected representatives. They have periodically brought out research-based reports on India's compliance with the international covenants, implantation of Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1995) and Women Empowerment Policy, 2001 (Aneja, 2019).

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#### *5.5.5 Violence against girls, women, and sexual minorities*

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Because of the grass-root level activism on violence against women, qualitative research has been conducted on the principles of participatory action methodology. Guiding lights of this knowledge contribution to address gender-based violence have been women's rights movements mottos, 'Peace begins from home' and 'Personal is political'. WS research on sex selective abortion of female fetuses, domestic violence-beating, child abuse, incest, dowry murders, glorification of widow burning *sati*, violence outside the home, sexual violence, harassment at the workplace, street harassment, acid attacks, campus violence have proved to be valuable for legal interventions, judicial reforms and to put systems and structures in place. Cybercrimes have been the current agenda of WS research and training programmes supported by the National Commission for Women. This has also guided legal research for gender just laws. Women's Studies Centres have been actively engaging with One Billion Rising campaign. They have brought out analytically rigorous reports on legal battles and public interest litigations by the women's groups, systematically documented processes for the enactment of the Pre Conception & Pre Natal Diagnostics Techniques Act, 2002; Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013; social audit of International covenants by International Labour Organisations, Human rights discourse: Women's Rights are Human Rights and 15 days of activism



on violence against women and girls (VAWG) from 25<sup>th</sup> November to 10<sup>th</sup> December, since 1993 to the present (Arya, 2020).

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#### *5.5.6 Gender transformative development discourse*

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In 1975, WS began with the critique of the trickle-down theory and adopted the marginalisation thesis popularised by the UN as Women in Development (WID). By 1980, the 'Integration of Women' Approach, known as Women and Development (WAD), got legitimacy as an overarching development during the decade of 1975-1985. At the Nairobi Conference in 1985, the Development Alternatives with Women (DAWN) and Gender and Development (GAD) approaches gained popularity in the WS analysis. By 1990, the leadership of women in the decision-making process and empowerment through participation in the public space became priorities of WS research. India ratified the Convention on all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in 1993, the Human Development Index, the Gender Empowerment Measure in 1995, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) during 2000-2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the period 2015-2030 and accepted G20 presidency in December 2022. This has shaped WS engagement for gender mainstreaming in planning, policy making and programme implementation, financing for gender equality, and gender responsive budgeting (Arya, 2020).

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#### *5.5.7 Gender environment and climate change*

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Women's studies research has shown that women are the worst sufferers of environmental degradations and climate emergencies. Increasingly extreme weather, deluge, floods, drought, famines, heat waves, sandstorms, typhoons, forest fires year after year cause stress not only to the ecosystems, but also to urban, rural and tribal women, resulting in an extreme existential crisis for them and hardship to humankind. Those who are closely surviving along with nature, such as forest dwellers, fisher folks and farmers, face vagaries of climate change in extreme form. Women's Studies has provided primary data collection based qualitative studies that can be useful for mitigating the negative impact of environmental imbalance and boost resilience of the community (IMPRI& NIDM, 2021)

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#### *5.5.8 Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP)*

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The Feminist Foreign Policy is an emerging area of inquiry in the women's studies in India. It emerged from transnational feminist solidarity and post-colonial feminist research that happened alongside the efforts of women's rights activists in peace-building in the war/civil war torn countries and promoting international development aid with an objective of financing gender equality by reducing gender gaps in education, health care, employment, decision making, power, and by addressing

gender based violence through direct intervention. FFP also aims at gender parity in diplomacy by increasing women's representation in posts of ambassador, diplomatic missions and peace negotiations. In the domestic arena, it advocates for women's leadership in the governance and political institutions (Devasia, 2022).

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### ***5.6 The Gender Mainstreaming Strategy of Women's Studies***

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In the past few decades, the struggle for the promotion of the advancement of women and gender equality, the strategies have changed to an important degree. Initially, efforts were focused on separate targeted activities for women and many produced positive results, particularly for women who could benefit directly (although a limited number). However, it did not deal with the structural constraints to gender equality. Thus, in the 1970s the change was towards integrating women into all activities rather than keeping women on the side-lines of academia. Nevertheless, the gains made through the integration strategy were limited by the delay with which these measures were undertaken. Also, integration was often taken to mean only increasing women's participation in academic agendas already decided upon by others without taking their contributions, knowledge, priorities and needs into consideration: "add gender and stir". Therefore, the potential for bringing about the types of structural changes in order to achieve gender equality was reduced (Krishnaraj, 2005).

A new approach was developed in the 1980s, called gender mainstreaming, with the objective of placing gender equality to the centre of all academic activities. Mainstreaming as a term means bringing attention to gender equality into the mainstream of academic activities. Attention for gender equality should be awarded from the initial stages of processes in order to attempt to influence goals, strategies and resource allocations and thus bring about real changes in policies, programmes and other activities. Thus a real difference to gender equality in the all teaching-learning and research agenda of the academic institutions could be achieved.

The ECOSOC Agreed Conclusions 1997/2 provided a clear definition of the mainstreaming strategy as:

*[...] the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality. (ECOSOC)*

Mainstreaming involves taking up gender equality as relevant perspectives in the analysis, visibility of gender in indicators and data collection, and other knowledge construction and dissemination activities, to ensure that all processes consider the contributions, priorities and needs of the entire stakeholder group, women, men and sexual minorities. Gender equality needs to be mainstreamed into all academic research, analysis, policies and programmes, as well as in operational activities.

The Platform for Action (Beijing Conference, 1995) made it very clear that gender analysis is the first essential step in the mainstreaming strategy. Before any decisions are taken in any area of academic efforts, an analysis should be made of the current responsibilities and contributions of all genders and the potential gender impact of planned processes and activities.

Mainstreaming does not replace the need for targeted, women-specific policies and programmes, affirmative actions for historically neglected sections facing intersectional vulnerabilities of caste, class, ethnicity, ableism, religion and gender and positive legislation. Gender mainstreaming and empowerment are complementary strategies and should always be implemented in a manner which facilitates empowerment of the marginalised individuals, groups and communities.

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#### *5.6.1 Process of gender mainstreaming*

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First of all, gender mainstreaming involves understanding why promotion of gender equality is important for securing human rights / social justice for both women and men, as well as for achievement of academic goals. Secondly the opportunities for introducing gender perspectives need to be identified in the work tasks undertaken. These opportunities or entry-points can be found in research and analysis, policy formulations, use of gender disaggregated statistics, training events and workshops/conferences, as well as in planning and implementing projects and programmes. Thirdly an approach or methodology has to be identified for successfully incorporating gender perspectives into these work tasks in a manner which facilitates influencing goals, strategies, resource allocation and outcomes. This could include, for example, giving attention to gender perspectives and the goal of gender equality in terms of reference (ToRs) and job descriptions. In terms of developing guidelines, utilizing gender specialists, appointing committed women/gender studies faculty to support gender mainstreaming are essential.

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#### *5.6.2 Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Queer Studies*

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The dialectical relationship between 'pedagogy' and 'praxis' regarding 'women's question' was the focus of the ones who looked into Women's Studies throughout the world, as well as in India. In the early 1980s Indian women scholars began to discuss about the necessity to study women's issues in academic institutions and to conduct

research based on experiential material and affirmative action. This type of discourse has become relevant for activists, academics, researchers, policy planners and the UN system alike. Women Studies as an academic discipline has engendered the mainstream academia - economics, political science, sociology, literature, history, education, psychology. The analytical tools and the theoretical insights, the feminist research methodology and vibrant debates on the scope and limitations of WS within institutionalised structures, consultancy and priorities in research and action have been reflected in Masters courses, diploma and certificate courses and doctoral programmes.

The transition from women's studies to gender studies must be seen in this historical context. Gender Studies brought about an epistemological break by critical challenges to the idea of a natural link between sex, gender and heterosexuality. Women's Studies have become critical of androcentric assumptions that make men the human norm. It has been said that gender studies hold men accountable for gender inequalities in power, while Women's Studies does not, but this is clearly proven wrong by women's studies scholarship that precisely do point to men's part in the constructions of these systems. Possibly, at least in part, the dispute has to do with the various definitions of gender that appear in scholarship, which range from the social relations of the sexes (usually analysed in terms of power inequalities) to a vocabulary for power. As most of the curriculum and scholarship focus on men, with gender used as an analytic framework or not, we believe in the absolute necessity of creating programmes centering on the study of women.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a move from Women's Studies to Gender Studies is gaining ground in the mainstream academia. While justifying WS as a felt-need for a new epistemology, the basic understanding was that, that male dominant ideology and sexism in the social sciences and humanities were unable to capture women's perceptions and it was necessary to decentre a patriarchal discourse. Justification for Gender Studies comes from an understanding that both men and women are constructed and constrained by the unequal power relations based on intersectionality of class/caste/race/ethnicity/religion/ablism and gender.

In the last decade, Queer Studies has been introduced in several academic courses by Women's Studies departments. Based on the foundation of gender fluidity and challenging gender binary and heteronormativity, Queer Studies as an interdisciplinary field examines how gender, sexuality and notions of "normal" work together. Queer Studies prepares students to scrutinise how gender and sexuality are constructed and policed.

Have Gender Studies and Queer Studies undermined Women's Studies by diluting thrust to confront patriarchal power entrenched in systems and structures that keep women at the bottom of the pyramid of households, community, economy, polity, governance and socio-cultural realm? Can Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Queer

Studies co-exist despite ideological differences and build bridges of mutual solidarity and support? These are important questions for present day feminists.

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### *5.6.3 Challenges Confronting Women's studies*

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Knowledge construction through a gender lens, gender sensitization, ways to improve the work force participation of women, transcending gender binaries, identification of strategic and practical gender needs, early childhood education for gender justice and ways of unlearning sexism, production of gender sensitive textbooks in regional languages, inculcating multicultural ethos, non-violence and peace education, plural ways of knowledge construction and dialogical approach, gender transformative public policies in the community, economy, polity have been the current challenges of Women's Studies.

Over the last 45 years, Women's Studies in collaboration with the Women's Rights Movement have brought women's concerns centre stage, have deeply examined different life worlds of women and foregrounded lived realities of women. They have theorised and built perspectives to identify multiple patriarchies operating in the private and public domains. This has help formulations of policies and strategies for creating enabling ecosystem for empowerment of women and resistance towards patriarchal onslaught on all marginalised groups. WS is consistently reviewing its pedagogical practices to see to it that theory and gender politics, activism and academically rigorous research and connection with the masses are given equal weight. Women's Studies have fostered efforts at gender equity resulting in higher participation of women in the higher education system as students, teachers, researchers, and decision-makers. Epistemological processes of Women's Studies have been able to challenge the patriarchal structures and system to a considerable extent. In India the Constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights and directive principles became the touch stone of academic inquiry. Since 2014, the women's studies centres in the university system have been collectively fighting against their marginalization within universities, reversal in gender mainstreaming in academic disciplines, and depleting budgetary allocation for women's studies centres

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### *5.6.4 Publication of books for Women's Studies Courses in regional languages*

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Over the last 20 years, massification of higher education has seen the entry of students from regional language backgrounds in higher education institutions. Because of mandatory gender sensitization programmes that Women's Studies centers, as well as Women Development Cells have to conduct, demand for regional language material for Women's Studies has grown.

Women Studies papers are introduced in courses offered by disciplines such as sociology, political science, geography, economics, education, psychology, social

work, literature, law and foundation courses of several universities. Most of the states have started distance learning centers for working persons, spread all over, who also need reference material in their mother tongue. Thus, Women's Studies materials in the regional languages with region specific examples and case studies are in great demand. Even to build an intersectional perspective and promote a transformative action agenda, teaching-learning of Women's Studies courses for certificate, diploma, degree courses must be taken up as a serious agenda.

Academically rigorous Women's Studies publications in Kannada by SAMATA (Mysore), in Marathi by Kranti Jyoti Savitrbai Phule Women's Studies Centre (Pune), in Telugu by Anveshi (Hyderabad), in Hindi by Dr. Kusum Tripathi (32 books on Women's Studies subjects), in Gujarati by Dr. Neera Desai and Dr. Usha Thakkar (15 books on subject-matter of Women's Studies) have been used extensively by the undergraduate and postgraduate students in the state universities.

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## **6. Conclusion**

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Over the last decade and more, especially since the adoption of neo-liberal policies, trends with regard to women's employment have posed serious questions to scholars seeking to study the complex interconnections between economic growth, development policies, and women's status. There has been a visible decline in women's work participation rates over the last decade and more. The sectors in which women find work, and also the conditions in which such work is available have on the one hand underscored the need for deeper analysis. Furthermore, these trends have triggered both organized and sporadic struggles on the ground. In the face of the contemporary crisis of dispossession, loss of access and control to livelihood options, and a visible impoverishment in the face of the economic slowdown, the shrinking opportunities of work have hit women in specific ways. The violation of existing legal frameworks governing labour has acquired a special meaning during the pandemic when the phenomenon of retrenchment and dispossession has gained momentum. The issues of women's loss of livelihood and work assume far greater primacy in situations when millions amongst the labouring poor are faced with hunger, malnutrition, and even death due to extreme poverty. The Covid lockdown has shown the vulnerability of all labouring people.

Over the last several decades, Women's Studies has built up a rich repertoire of scholarship to advance analysis of the macro context and tools to understand the linkages between power and domination that result in control of and power over women's body and mind. A continued dialogue between the Women's Movement and Women's Studies is critical to understand and oppose gender-based violence and the economic marginalisation, dispossession of entitlements, exclusion from the intellectual world and political participation of women. The Women's Movement agenda is to build solidarity around issues of depletion of livelihood resources,

existential challenges, peace-making, peace building and peace keeping at micro and macro levels.

Existing 163 Women's Studies Centers in the Indian universities, recognised and partially supported by the University Grants Commission are at a crossroad and every crossroad leads to a new road. Let that road be of gender transformative knowledge construction and of reaching the unreached so that Women's Studies becomes more inclusive and more effective in shaping the minds of a large number of students within Women's Studies, as well as in the mainstream disciplines that have included Women's Studies in their syllabi. Making the textbooks as well as reference material in the local language is an important mandate for Women's Studies. Availability of Women's Studies publications in regional language will also facilitate mainstreaming of this discipline in the curricula of social sciences, humanities, foundation courses and several interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary academic programmes.

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