

Diverse Perspectives on Women's Studies

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Abstract

The inception of Women's Studies in India has a distinctive historical significance. The genesis of this phenomenon may be attributed not just to influential people but also to the historical context in which it emerged. The establishment of its site at the esteemed SNOT Women's University in Mumbai was spearheaded by Dr. Neera Desai, a distinguished Professor of Sociology at the institution above. The author's research on women's problems in her Master's thesis, together with her active participation in the women's movement, provided her with the necessary foundation to conceptualize the idea that a women's university should not only focus on teaching women various academic subjects but also participate in critical analysis of the status and experiences of women. The same objective drove the establishment of the Research Centre for Women's Studies in 1974 as the publication of the report on equality by the Government of India occurred one year later. An educationist first initiated the establishment of the institution. Shri Dhondo Keshav Karve was awarded a generous contribution by the businessman Shri Damodar Thackersey, resulting in the institution being christened SNDT Women's University in honour of his mother, Shrimathi Nathibai Damodar Thackersey. This centre was established by capable and visionary executives at the university, who played a leading role in its growth. As a result, the centre has emerged as a prominent advocate for addressing women's concerns.

Keywords: Gender, Inequality, UGC, Interdisciplinary, power, Privileged, oppression, literacy rate etc.

Introduction

Women's Studies, sometimes known as Gender Studies or Feminist Studies, is an interdisciplinary scholarly discipline that examines socially and culturally constructed gender roles and assesses the political, societal, cultural, and historical aspects from a female and feminist perspective. The subject matter is intricately connected to the broader domain of general studies. The field of women's studies encompasses examining women, their historical narratives, and their societal contributions.^{1,2}

The field of research concerns examining how the intersectionality of many factors, such as gender, color, age, class, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and sexuality, influences a wide range of social, political, and cultural aspects.³ Women's studies is an academic discipline that focuses on examining women's social standing and their contributions to society, as well as exploring the intricate link between power dynamics and gender.⁴

Studies on Women Cover a Wider Spectrum

Women's Studies should be a crucial tool for social and intellectual development rather than just an accumulation of knowledge about women. The prioritization of attaining a more thorough, critical, and balanced understanding of social reality is crucial in women's studies. The essential components of the subject matter may be outlined as follows:

1. The Role of Women in the Social Process
2. Examining women's subjective perspectives on their experiences, the broader social context, and their efforts and objectives.
3. The present discourse examines the underlying causes and frameworks of inequality contributing to women's marginalization, invisibility, and exclusion from the purview, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks of the predominant intellectual investigation and social engagement.⁵

The historical trajectory of Women's Studies in India

Women's Studies emerged in India during the 1970s, serving as a vehement critique of the societal and governmental mechanisms that had marginalized women after the country gained independence. Furthermore, it aimed to address the lack of representation of women in higher education, particularly in the context of India. Notably, India holds a prominent position in the Asian region regarding the quantity and diversity of content within the field of Women's Studies.⁶

Although the aspiration to examine women's experiences and implement measures to enhance their educational circumstances is not unprecedented, what distinguishes this approach is a fresh standpoint that is firmly rooted in theoretical understanding and ideological foundations, both in the realms of research and practical implementation. Nevertheless, the school system has shown reluctance in advocating for gender equality and principles of justice.⁷

Changes in India's emphasis on the study of women

Before 1970, women in the educational system were subject to little attention. During the 1981 First National Conference on Women's Studies (NCWS) in Bombay, there was a notable disintegration of the prevailing system's resistance towards including women's perspectives in curricula. The National Council for Women's Studies (NCWS) assessed curricula across many disciplines and found a significant need for more representation of women. A total of 57 institutions sent a response to the request made by the Conference organizers for a status report about the inclusion of women's research and women's representation in the curriculum. Out of the total of 100 universities and around 50 institutes of higher education, including technical and non-technical disciplines, a mere 23 institutions fulfilled the requirement of submitting their syllabi. In 1984, the SNTD Research Centre for Women's Studies showed heightened attentiveness by initiating contact with various institutions. However, it is noteworthy that only 30 universities sent a response. Out of the total number of universities surveyed, 26 institutions were found to provide Women's studies courses. However, it was observed that only 12 of these universities provided teaching curricula across different levels. This signifies a significant advancement within less than three years, which is very promising. This narrative explores the inception and development of women's studies in India.^{8,9}

Women's Studies become the Part of Curriculum in Indian Institutions

Many Indian educational institutes include women's studies and gender studies as integral components within their undergraduate Social Science curriculum. At the postgraduate level, the opportunity to engage in comprehensive research is limited to specializing in specific gender problems. After completing a Master's degree, there is often an increase in the availability of research possibilities. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has funded many study centers at different universities around the country, such as Jadavpur University, SNTD in Mumbai, and Calcutta University's Women's Studies Research Centre.

During the early 1980s, scholars acknowledged the significance of including women's studies within university academic programs. In 1983, the University Grants Commission (UGC) proposed incorporating women's studies courses and their integration into the social science curriculum. This suggestion was made after the First National Conference on Women's Studies, which took place at SNTD Women's University in Mumbai in 1981. Additionally, a UNESCO workshop held in 1982 further supported this proposal. Subsequently, several institutions have created dedicated institutes for Women's Studies.^{10,11,12,13}

The Significance of the University Grants Commission (UGC) in the Field of Women's Studies

The establishment of the Centre for Women's Studies by the University Grants Commission (UGC) was motivated by comprehensively comprehending and incorporating women's viewpoints within education. The primary aim of this organization is to promote the integration of women's issues into mainstream discourse and enhance women's participation in educational pursuits. The University Grants Commission (UGC) established 70 Women's Studies Centres at diverse educational institutions throughout India to achieve this objective. Since its establishment as a unique field of study, the Centres have been engaged in research about women's concerns via non-conventional methods of education and instruction.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has played a pivotal role in advancing, enhancing, and supervising the nation's Women's Studies Programme since the implementation of the Seventh Five-Year Plan.

The University System founded the Women's Studies Centre throughout the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Plan eras. Their contributions have played a key role in advancing and extending the field of Women's Studies education. The topics of scholarship and fieldwork are being discussed.

In the present context, the Women's Studies program must engage in interdisciplinary collaboration with various disciplines and professions, including life sciences, bio-sciences, and other scientific and technological fields such as agriculture, forestry, medicine, and architecture. This collaboration is necessary due to the funding provided by the University Grants Commission (UGC), which has allocated resources to establish 51 centers in universities and 16 centers in colleges under the X Plan. The financial allocation for these centers saw a significant growth from Rs. Fifty lakhs to Rs. 10 crores during the X Plan. However, it was observed that the expenditure exceeded the allocated amount substantially.^{14, 15}

Women's Studies in Higher Education

Incorporating Women's Studies into India's higher education system is a noteworthy achievement for the women's movement in India. The primary purpose of Women's Studies centres was to actively engage in many areas of research, development, policy, and practices by offering a gendered viewpoint. The size of women's studies was formed to catalyse the progress and advocacy of women's studies, including activities such as teaching, research, the transmission of information, and involvement in the subject. Although much work still needs to be done, the Centres for Women's Studies have contributed valuable to raising awareness of women's issues. These centres have endeavoured to combine academic knowledge with socially relevant concepts and have facilitated cooperation across many disciplines.¹⁶

Informational Stats about Women's Education

India is positioned unfavorably in international rankings about female literacy. India is set at 38th among the 51 developing countries, based on the earliest grade level at which at least 50% of women are literate. This measure serves as a proxy for assessing the country's education quality.

In 2010, the literacy rate among females was recorded as 80.35%. Over time, there has been a further growth in this percentage. From 2010 to 2021, there has been a notable growth of 14.4% in female literacy rates in India. The acceleration observed in the year 2021 was recorded as 91.95%. The worldwide adult literacy rate was 83%, with a male literacy rate of 88% and a female literacy rate of 79%.

Currently, the literacy rate among women has increased to 77%, while the male literacy rate in India remains at 84.7%.¹⁷⁻²⁰

Conclusion

Women's studies emerged as a formal area of academic inquiry during the mid-1970s, when the first women's university in Mumbai established a distinct section, which eventually evolved into a center under the leadership of Neera Desai. Women's studies is an academic discipline that utilizes feminist and interdisciplinary approaches to prioritize examining women's lives and experiences. It aims to analyze the social and cultural constructions of gender and the systems of privilege and oppression that exist. Additionally, it explores the intricate relationship between power and gender, particularly about other aspects of identity and social positions such as race and sexual orientation.^{21,22}

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