

Mapping the Themes in the IAWS Conferences: A Journey through the Last Two Decades

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It is the journey from the review of syllabi in the First National Conference on women's studies in 1981, to the need felt in 2002 to discuss 'the doing of women's studies' in the tenth conference, that we would try to trace. We would attempt to chart out the thematic discussions at the nine IAWS conferences as articulated in the reports of the conferences. With the shifting contexts, challenges and pressures of the new millennium, looking back at the journey of the last two decades of the IAWS conferences seems necessary at this point. This recapitulation of earlier analyses, critiques and strategies examined in the various sub-themes would probably enable to have a more nuanced understanding of the question. This recapitulation is attempted through a content analysis of the sub-themes (called workshops in the first two conferences) floated in the different conferences. We have tried to categorize the themes in order to see how a particular theme is examined differently at different points of history. This categorisation is of course overlapping as a theme could be marked for more than one category. One is also aware that there are several gaps in the way a theme is chalked out by the coordinator, worked out in the conference abstracts and actually discussed and reported in the sub-theme reports. Within these limitations, it is possible to see the themes as forming around the following categories:

1) Work and Economic Issues, 2) Development and Environmental Issues, 3) State, Policies and Legal Provisions, 4) Political Participation and Women's Struggles, 5) Family, Household and Issues of Demography, 6) Education and Knowledge System, 7) Culture, Religion, Media and Literature, 8) Health and Reproduction, 9) Question of Violence.

It would be interesting to trace the career of one single theme-Work and Economic Issues, which has been a recurring theme.

In the first decade of the 1980s, with the gaping hiatus between the dream of modernity and development in the post independence India, and the reality of women's continuing subordination as revealed through the CSWI report, there was an examination of questions of survival and struggle and a concern to bring together academicians, government policy makers and implementers on these issues. This pointed out to the need to establish women's studies as an academic concern and to maintain its link with women's movement. The First National Conference on women's studies was convened to initiate the incorporation of women's experiences and roles in academic studies, research and curricula. Thus the effort was to underline women's studies as a serious area of academic concern. On the theme of women and work it questioned the very conception of work, sexual division of labour and 'non-working female population'. The problem of categorization, computation and remuneration of different sorts of women's work- house work, unpaid family labour, wage work- was examined in the wider context of class. Features of exploitation common to all women and those related to women of specific castes and classes were simultaneously highlighted

The Second National Conference outlined its aim as the consolidation of knowledge already available, with in depth discussion on a few limited areas including Women, Work and Employment. Under this theme, the attitude to women's work as secondary and the distinction between women's work within and outside home were questioned, pointing out its link to caste and class considerations. The patterns and factors underlying the changes in rural women's work were also examined linking it with forms of organisation of production. Through the micro studies, problems of women workers were highlighted and the apathy of the trade unions noted. The failure of special programmes for women of the government and the significance of women's organization was underlined. The categorization of work and worker in the census was also an important issue for discussion.

The Third Conference problematised women's struggles and sought to look at its relationship with women's research. In this conference the role of women in struggles in agriculture, industry, informal sector and professions was discussed in details as was the question of aligning of gender issues in it. The historical studies on the construction of the images of peasant women as sexual and militant persons revealed the need of writing oral history of women in various struggles.

The Fourth Conference sought to understand the social context of gender inequalities within the family and the outside. It highlighted the processes by which women and their work, within and outside the household was moulded to suit the need of capitalism by separating household from economic activities. The impact of technological change –in the domestic, agricultural and fishing industry and its implications for women's work were outlined.

The next decade was marked by two major incidents - the Shahbano and Roopkanwar case- which drew attention to the links between gender and community. The rising forces of communalism and globalization in the decade of 1990s influenced the concerns of women's studies in a major way. This led to an investigation of issues of religion and culture, which were previously not dealt, as there was overwhelming preoccupation with economic matters. The Fifth Conference engaged with the issues of religion, culture and politics in the context of weakening and reversing of women's rights. The significant links between culture and economy- cultural values, standard perceptions of women's role in the development programmes and women's role in economy came to be traced. This understanding was further nuanced by focusing on regional economies and the ways in which they shaped the characteristics of cultural practices like dowry, bride price.

The Sixth Conference examined the effects of Structural Adjustment Programme and the New Economic Policy on various aspects of women's lives including work, employment and food security. It was now apparent that varied data had been collected through various micro studies of women workers in different sectors -agriculture, prawns processing, rag-picking, jewellery industry to name a few.

The fifteen years of struggle had yielded some noticeable changes, some failures, yet there was hope and many gray areas of complexity and confusion had been opened up.

This called for a stock taking of feminist debates and alternative policies and also the development of future vision and strategies. With this in mind, the Seventh Conference not only assessed the changes in women's work but also discussed ways to support women workers, especially those in the unprotected zones. Discussions underlined the need to develop studied responses to globalisation .

The Eighth Conference sought to take these challenges to women's studies further, highlighting the issues of survival and sovereignty. It examined the issue of women's work by investigating into the challenge of food insecurity among various categories of people. It examined how changing entitlements to Public Distribution System on one hand and export oriented diversification on the other influenced women's work. The need to encourage local initiatives like grain banks was also underlined.

The Ninth Conference took up the exercise of assessments of trends in public policies as the state seemed to be continuing on its path of retreat. Interestingly this conference talked of the role of government initiatives in promoting women entrepreneurs in small scale sector and discussed the lacunae in the implementation process.

This brief review marks at least the following trends regarding the concerns of women's studies and women's movement about women's work. Firstly, with CSWI report, there was an engagement in the field of development and an effort to make visible the actual work done by women within the household, to some extent at the methodological and conceptual level. In 1990s as the issues of culture became critical, there was a significant contribution in terms of an analysis of women's work not only in the context of political economy but that of household, kinship and cultural patterns as well. The questioning of the development policy had also led to an analysis of the environmental issues and an inquiry into the alternative paradigms of development. Secondly, women's labour force participation, especially in the unorganized sector was documented extensively and analyzed through several studies of women workers in a wide range of fields. In the last decade, there were extensive micro studies assessing the impact of globalization on women's work. However these studies remained more or less descriptive, with little empirical rigour. Thirdly, the relationship between women's studies and women's movement has been quite uneasy. Initially, there were many academic activists, mainly coming from the left circles, questioning the notion of work and development. But there emerged a kind of hierarchy on the basis of experience and theoretical rigour and a chasm between them; the agenda of the women's movement and the focus of women's studies started sharpening.

Thus, the history of the interactions between women's studies and women's movement is not a unilinear but a chequered history. The debate over distinction/ relationship between theory /research /women's studies and practice /activism /women's movement has repeatedly appeared in the IAWS conferences. The question of autonomous women's organisations and their relationship with the broader democratic movements and presently the debates around the non-governmental organisations dealing with women's issues has also been a recurring theme. These questions continue in the concerns of the present.

Table 1: About the IAWS Conferences

The Main Theme	Plenary Sessions/ Workshops
First National Conference 1981, Mumbai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Review of Syllabi
Second National Conference 1984, Thiruvanthapuram, on 'Gender Justice'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Gender Justice ◆ The Position of Women in Kerala
Third National Conference 1986, Chandigarh on 'Women's Struggles and Movements'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The Relevance of Women's Studies in the Indian Context ◆ Alternative Perspectives on Women's Roles in Development ◆ Problems of Women in Punjab
Fourth National Conference 1989, Vishakapatnam, on 'Rural Women: Poverty, Survival and Struggle for Change'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ On Feminism and Being a Feminist ◆ Over a Decade of Research Policy and Activist Intervention: Achievement, Limitations and Future Prospects ◆ Women in Andhra
Fifth National Conference 1991, Kolkatta, on 'Religion, Culture and Politics'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Relevance of the Theme ◆ The Emerging Self- Identity ◆ Women in West Bengal ◆ Comparative Perspectives
Sixth National Conference 1993, Mysore, on 'The Dynamic of the New Economic Policy'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Women and development in Karnataka ◆ Violence against women ◆ Women in SAARC Countries
Seventh National Conference 1995, Jaipur, on 'Looking Forward, Looking Back: In Search of Feminist Visions, Alternative Paradigms and Practices'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Voices of Resistance and Struggle ◆ Rajasthan State Panel ◆ Women's Visions and Strategies for a Peaceful and Democratic South Asia ◆ Resurgent Patriarchies
Eighth National Conference 1998, Pune, on 'Survival and Sovereignty: Challenges to Women's Studies'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Stable Livelihoods v/s Pursuit of Profit: Micro and Macro Issues Related to Globalization and Food Security ◆ Economy and Ecology ◆ Our Households, Ourselves: Bodies, Subsistence and Resources ◆ Culture and Resistance
Ninth National Conference 2000, Hyderabad, on 'Women's Perspectives on Public Policy'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Women's Perspectives on Public Policy: Incomplete or Lost Agenda ◆ Tribal Issues and the Women's Movement ◆ Moving Beyond Wombs: Foregrounding Women's Health Agenda ◆ Reservation Policies and the Women's Movement ◆ Censorship and Silence: Perspectives on the Freedom of Expression

Table 2: Categorisation of the sub-themes in the nine IAWS conferences (1981 – 2000)

(The number in the bracket indicates the number of the conference)

<p><u>Work and Economic Issues</u></p>	<p>Women and Work (1) Concept of the worker (2) Caste, class and attitudes to women's work (2) Rural women, work and employment (2) Women in Industry (2) Women's organisations, income and employment generation (2) Women in agrarian struggles (3) Women and the Industrial working class movement (3) Women, informal sector and forms of struggle (3) Professional women's struggles (3) Technological Change, Labour Processes and Employment (4) Religion, Culture and Politics : The economic context (5) Work, employment and food security (6) Work and workers (7) Women, work and resistance (8) Women in business (9)</p>
<p><u>Development And Environmental Issues</u></p>	<p>Women and Development (1) Access to Productive Resources and the social organisation of production (4) Environmental Degradation and Regeneration (4) Natural Resources and the Environment (6) Women – centred natural resource management : Land, Water and Energy (7) Water and forest (8) Land alienation and displacement (8) Food security and entitlements (8) Meeting the evolutionary, cultural and ethical needs of communities (9) Engendering new and emerging community rights and responsibilities in natural resource management (9)</p>
<p><u>State, Policies and Legal Provisions</u></p>	<p>Women and Law (1) Constitutional equality and patriarchy (2) Woman and Her Body (2) Women and Family Law (2) Government policies and programmes : politics and economic Perspectives (4) Laws implementation and processes of legal change (4) State policies and their implications (5) Religion, Culture and politics: the impact of women's rights and legal system (5) State and sharing of political space (8) Public policy and people in prostitution and sex work (9)</p>

<p><u>Political Participation and women's Struggles</u></p>	<p>Women's Institutions and Organisations (1) 20th century movements for freedom from colonial rule and religio-cultural protest movements from earlier periods (2) Peasant/tribal/workers' movement (2) Participation in formal politics (2) Concepts (2) Women in youth and students struggles in India (3) Women and Indian nationalism (3) Regional and Sectional movements and women's rights (3) Ideology, political parties and groups and the women's question in post independence India (3) Political Institutions, Structures and Processes (4) Collective struggle for change (4) Political use of religious/cultural idioms (5) Political structures and processes (6) Women, political participation and politics of organizing (7) Women's experience in panchayats (9) Mobilizing for change : possibilities and challenges (9)</p>
<p><u>Family, Household and Issues of Demography</u></p>	<p>Family survival mechanisms (4) Family and Socialization (5) The demographic context and patterns of women's relationship to religion, culture and politics (5) Family and Social Security (6) Family and Women's sexuality (7) Intra-household access to resources (8)</p>
<p><u>Education and Knowledge Systems</u></p>	<p>Women and Education (1) Role of Science and Technology (1) Women's struggles for education with special reference to weaker sections and minorities (3) Educational and Socialization : The formal, non-formal and informal processes (4) The role of Education in religion, culture and politics and gender justice (5) Creation and dissemination of knowledge and knowledge systems (7)</p>
<p><u>Culture, Media, Literature and Religion</u></p>	<p>Women and Literature (1) Women and Media (1) Religion, secularism and women's rights (3) Sexist bias in media (3) Ideology, Culture and Politics (4) Mass-media (5) Religious organisations and institutions, fundamentalism and reformism (5) Education, Culture and Media (6) Women and media (7) Culture, Identity and Women's rights: Exploring new directions in feminist praxis(7) Women's writings: Redefinitions, Aesthetics and future visions (7) Culture, representations and movements (8) Globalisation and Culture (8)</p>

<u>Health and Reproduction</u>	Women and Health (1) Women's struggles for health and nutrition with emphasis on weaker sections and minorities (3) Health, Sexuality and Reproduction (4) Health and Population (6) Women and Health (7) Women's autonomy and reproduction (8)
<u>Question of Violence</u>	Women and violence (3) Gender and Violence: Role of state, community and family (4) Violence and the community (6) Alcoholism and Drug abuse (6) Violence against women (8) Gender, conflict and political violence (9) Violence against women (9)

Source: *Our Story*. Edited by Vidyut Bhagwat and Sharmila Rege. IAWS: 2000.