

# **National Convention on Women's Studies Centers**

**New Delhi, 23rd August 2017**

**Constitution Club Annexe, Rafi Marg, 10 am to 4.30 pm**

Women's Studies Centres (WSCs) in Universities and Colleges have contributed significantly towards undertaking research on problems hitherto untouched by other disciplines – making women and their particular issues/experiences/histories/socio-economic locations visible in academics where gender blindness was entrenched and where effacement of women from the frame was the norm. The Centres have also played a role in building an interdisciplinary Women's Studies perspective, creating gender sensitivity through teaching and extension programmes, introducing foundation courses in schools and colleges, facilitating incorporation of gender in curriculum development, analysing policies, budgets and programmes with a gender lens to provide critical data to various layers and departments of government for formulating gender sensitive policies, etc.

In the process, WSCs have contributed to knowledge production at regional, national and global levels. Faculty members of the WSCs have been called upon as consultants and resource persons by educational institutions, government bodies, international institutions, NGOs and even corporate bodies for capacity building and in order to create awareness and impart gender sensitivity, leading to appreciable outcomes in terms of gender sensitive administration and governance. It is from such a wide ranging activity base that WSCs have grown to become important teaching centres for M.Phil/PhD, MA and a support for BA students interested in gender issues.

Despite such achievements, Women's Studies has remained marginalised due to continuing and entrenched biases in University structures. The WSCs have been able to grow and perform even basic functions, essentially because of support received from the UGC Scheme of Development of Women's Studies. A few of these Centres have been transformed into statutory Departments by their respective Universities and State government. Yet, barring a tenth of the Centres whose financial responsibility has been taken over by their Universities/State Governments, all other WSCs continue to function with grants from the UGC. In several reviews, the contribution of the WSCs have been acknowledged and appreciated by the UGC, which noted that WSCs "have contributed significantly to the expansion of Women's Studies curricula, research and innovative pedagogy in classrooms and in field action". Consequently, it was emphasized that the need was to further to expand the WSCs in order "to reinforce teaching in colleges and universities and enhance knowledge by initiating new courses." A 2011 Review Meeting Report of the UGC Standing Committee on Women's Studies also stated that WSCs have accepted implicit social responsibility to develop and empower women and to influence other disciplines to adopt a gender perspective. Further, it pointed out the need to increase women's visibility in teaching, research and management in the universities and colleges by enhancing their academic strength and competence. Clearly, the WSCs are playing an important role that is both academic and social, which needs special support.

It is therefore unfortunate that uncertainty regarding the continuance of UGC support to WSCs has come to the fore following the public notice by UGC issued on 16th June 2017 (dated 9th June) announcing that 'expenditure....would be admitted up to 30.09.2017' for 'Schemes being implemented under the 12th Plan', a category that includes the support programme for Women's Studies. This notice countermands an earlier notice of extension of support for such schemes till 31st March, 2018, would leave WSC students and teachers stranded in the middle of the academic term. The June notice draws on a directive from the Finance Ministry which gives the deadline of 30th September and makes any further continuance of the schemes contingent on review and appraisal. No steps for consideration or review seem to have been taken since, suggesting that UGC support for WSCs may be withdrawn after September.

## **Need for continued support to WSCs**

The cessation of central support for WSCs will have a huge and adverse impact on the ongoing process of gender sensitization and mainstreaming, directly impacting women's empowerment and women's equality. With the future of faculty, staff and students in all Centres in jeopardy, we are staring at the real danger of long term damage through a summary loss of the skills and experience that have been painstakingly developed in WSCs over more than two decades.

It may be recalled that women's studies was officially introduced as part of the 1986 National Policy on Education. Since 1989, 163 such centres have been sanctioned in various phases of several plans from the 6th to the 12th, that have led to incremental spread over 28 States and Union Territories. A majority of these centres will cease to exist if central support is summarily withdrawn as is implied by the June notice of the UGC, irreversibly washing away decades of effort.

## **Women's Studies and the Women's Movement**

The role of women's movements and women's organizations in India in formulating theories and contributing to the making of policies and laws, and to the process of nation building in general cannot be underestimated. The gamut of issues covered by the movement is wide and diverse, from banning retrograde social practices such as sati and child marriage, equality in personal laws, combating violence against women, legal remedies for domestic and social violence, reservations for women to enhance their political participation, to gender budgeting and gender audits, and including significant interventions on intersectional issues of caste and gender, class and gender, work/employment and gender, disability and gender, etc.

In all these issues a relationship with women's studies has been important and while women's studies developed as an inter-disciplinary academic field, its role in debating perspectives and strategies on the women's question, women's status and their issues, calling for a critical appraisal of existing theories and policies from a gender perspective, and initiating field research in these areas, has been inevitably linked with the broader social movement by women for gender justice and equality. It is the importance of this relationship that has led to several women's organisations having also expressed their concern at the imminent danger of the demise of several WSCs if central support to them is withdrawn.

## **National Convention at Delhi: 23rd August, 2017**

The National Convention on Women's Studies Centres is being organised in Delhi at the Constitution Club Annexe, Rafi Marg, New Delhi on 23rd August in the context of a looming crisis of survival of women's studies centres. Students, faculty and staff of WSCs from across the country are all invited to participate.

The Convention is being organised by the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS). IAWS was established in 1982 well before women's studies was acknowledged as a research area or discipline by official educational policies and institutions. It thus played a pioneering role in persuading the University Grants Commission (UGC) to set up Women's Studies Centres (WSCs) in Universities and Colleges. As a professional body of Women's Studies scholars, the IAWS is deeply concerned about the developments that now pose a challenge to the continued existence of so many WSCs.

We feel there is a need to bring together several people to collectively highlight the contribution of WSCs, share experiences and formulate strategies to deal with the current situation. This is the context for the National Convention on Women's Studies on 23rd Aug 2017 at the Constitution Club, New Delhi. The Convention will bring together reputed women's studies scholars and other academics, activists, students, teachers, eminent members of the women's movement, and all those who positively support the continuance of WSCs in the country. Members of the UGC Standing Committee on Women's Studies and representatives of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, and the parliamentary standing committee for MHRD are also being invited.