

XVI National Conference on Women's Studies
Pre Conference Colloquium
Women's Studies at New Crossroads

27th January 2020, National Law University, Delhi

Concept Note

The field of Women's Studies is complex and contentious. Defined as the perspective to critique the conventional academic disciplines of knowledge production and engender those, Women's Studies significantly is at a new juncture when it is getting 'disciplined'. Though different worlds of a discipline are recognized, there is something that is specific about Women's Studies—mainly its site, location and content. Women's Studies is emerging in times when the questions of employability and difference in higher education are dominant and also, debates pertaining to quality and equality highlight challenges around democratization of knowledges.

Spaces of higher education find themselves in a peculiar position today where on the one hand, women and other marginalized communities are able to access the university through affirmative action and sustained struggles across movements, while on the other hand, the current moment is marked by various kinds of brutal violence, State-sanctioned silences and everyday discrimination and humiliation against the marginalized. The democratization of the university stands threatened by the extremely worrying ways in which students from minorities, Dalit, poor and Adivasi backgrounds struggle with issues of fee hikes and various kinds of institutional discrimination leading to a high drop-out rate, deep psychological trauma and as we have tragically witnessed, even suicide. Further, there is a strong move towards privatization and withdrawal of the state from the educational sector. Those concerned about the state of higher education in the country have often pointed out that the increasing attacks on the 'public university' as a space have much to do with the larger move to privatize education.

The recent #Me Too campaign has also posed the disturbingly familiar yet in many ways, confounding issue of sexual violence in a manner that has compelled 'us', as stakeholders in feminist struggles, to not only (re)think and (re)imagine the university and its relationship with persons from historically marginalized locations but also examine our own frameworks and practices within the classroom and outside. We are also being called upon, perhaps in more

compelling ways than ever before, to investigate the ways in which Women's Studies classrooms engage with, via pedagogic and institutional practice, hierarchies of caste, class, language and sexuality. This process is also exacerbated by the fact that Women's Studies departments are increasingly facing changing classroom configurations, also on account of their own expanding locations into research and technical institutes where they have to negotiate with hegemonic institutional cultures and dynamics.

One of the ways to approach the political and analytical task that Women's Studies spaces are being confronted with at this critical juncture is to ask—In terms of the commitment to reimagine the State as well as society, can WS departments look towards the Indian constitution and its ethic in order to think their own relationship with institutional practice? What are the ways in which the constitution's commitment to the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity can inform our own pedagogic practices, classroom relationships, construction of syllabi and learning frameworks? As pedagogues and scholars of WS, what role can we play in realizing the potential of social, democratic and human values enshrined within the constitution? Can a meaningful engagement with constitutional morality and its vision for society help us think in newer ways about the relationship between 'official knowledge' and 'situated knowledges' generated through the lived experience of persons from not just diverse but counter- hegemonic locations in WS classrooms? Most significantly, how to we draw from the constitutional fabric to make our syllabi and pedagogic practice speak to the issues of difference and inequality? We are guided by the conviction that given their own marginalized and often precarious position within the academy, WS departments are in many ways shaped by experiences and perspectives that make them apposite spaces to have this conversation. By reflecting on the relationship between constitutional principles and the political and disciplinary work that WS departments are being called upon to do in the contemporary moment, the pre- conference seeks to engage with some of these questions through the experiences of teachers and scholars engaged with WS, as a personal and political practice.

Panels:

Panel 1: Negotiating Interdisciplinarity and Disciplinary Boundaries: Women's Studies from Within and Without

- Panel 2: Teaching and Researching Gender at Diverse Institutional Sites
- Panel 3: *Hum Sab Anek Hain*: 'Situated Knowledges' and 'Difference' in WS
- Panel 4: Thinking 'Women's Studies' through Contemporary Students' Movements
- Panel 5: Women Studies at New Crossroads / Higher Education Policies: What is the way forward

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