



IAWS

Indian Association for Women's Studies

**XV National
Conference on Women's Studies**

Women in a Changing World:

Restructured Inequalities, Countercurrents and Sites of Resistance

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University of Madras, Chennai

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Presidential Address

National Conference of the Indian Association for
Women's Studies

Women in a Changing World: Restructured
Inequalities, Countercurrents and Sites of Resistance

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Dr M.S Swaminathan, Hon'ble Guests on the dais, participants from abroad, friends, and colleagues. It is my honour and privilege to welcome you all on the occasion of the XV National Conference of the Indian Association for Women's Studies in the 35th year of its history.

The IAWS was founded in 1982, the origin lying in the First National Conference on Women's Studies which was organized in Mumbai in 1981 jointly by scholars and activists. The triggers were several, among them being – the publication of the Status of Women Committee Report under the auspices of the newly formed ICSSR in 1975 which led to several research studies and projects being conducted

especially focusing on the recommendations of this seminal Report; the realization of the need to relate research to action and thus the appearance of the phrase 'action oriented research'; the intrinsic interconnects between academics, action and advocacy; the resurgence of the women's movement especially in urban areas in the aftermath of the infamous judgment on Mathura; interlinkages between class, caste and community; deepened questioning of the impact of the then-prevailing development paradigm on gender issues; acknowledgement that women's exploitation and oppression cannot be isolated from people's issues.

Today in its 35th year, the IAWS has grown to become one of the largest and most renowned and respected association of academicians and activists nationally as well as internationally. Apart from the rather path-breaking research that its members have undertaken, areas of major contribution are setting up of women's studies centres in institutions, assisting universities and other academic bodies in establishing centres, integrating gender in curricula, upgrading and up-scaling syllabi continuously and consistently, engaging in pedagogy and debates, involvement in policy making at both national and regional levels.

An innovative step which has far-reaching effects taken by this Executive Committee is the building up of new alliances and partnerships especially for the institutionalization of gender mainstreaming. Two such major initiatives taken are the establishment of Joint Panels with other professional bodies namely the Indian Society of Labour Economics and the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics. Two Joint Panels have already been organized with the ISLE in its two National Conferences held in Jammu & Kashmir in 2015 and in Assam in 2016. In this conference we are initiating the First Joint Panel with the ISLE.

This XVth National Conference – ‘Women in a Changing World: Restructured Inequalities, Countercurrents and Sites of Resistance’ – is being organized during a conjuncture in which we are witnessing a massive restructuring in the systems of production and reproduction, across market and extra-market formations in both developing and developed countries. Integral to the growth paradigm is the continued intensification of myriad disparities and inequalities especially those associated

with patriarchal structures. Patriarchy plays a central role in these transformations which cannot exist without upholding and reinforcing patriarchal systems, norms and constructs.

When production mainly continues to be located in the family and within the household, the non-monetized sector still predominates, and the motive force of production is still subsistence. It is the continuum between the forms of production, reproduction, consumption and maintenance that underlies the basic survival strategies of the marginalized, and this is where we see the often willful blurring of the lines between the recognized and unrecognized contribution of women to society, between paid and unpaid 'work'. The current scenario consequently necessitates and in fact demands the reinforcement of the interlinkages between women's studies and the women's movement, each dependent upon the other, each learning from the other, each strengthening the other.

The ongoing structural transformation with its inherent and inbuilt inequalities has impacted all sectors and sub sectors of the economy, the politics, culture and social

relations in society, permeating all regions and spaces and groups that constitute our nation. What is the nature of this transformation? The purpose is not to romanticize the past or demonise the present, but to analyse this restructuring in order to understand the new conflicts, needs and aspirations and the resultant new sites of resistance and struggle, in order to forge change, in order to affect and steer societal transformation towards equality, equity, egalitarianism, justice, freedom and the fundamental issue of democratic access to resources.

The agrarian sector is characterized by further intensification of resource inequality in various forms. A development paradigm which is based on the rampant exploitation and predatory acquisition of land and natural resources is dependent upon the ousting and uprooting of people and communities who have been living on the land for generations. Displacement, denial of access to common property resources and the reduction in user-rights leaves people with hardly any alternative means of livelihood and survival. The dismantling of production systems and decline in income-earning, income-augmenting and income-substituting activities leads not only to aggravation of

labour market segmentation, but also widening of the gender-based division of labour, male-female wage differentials and lack of livelihood possibilities. The crisis of survival and livelihood is linked also to global concerns around climate change and climate justice, while the question of the sustainability of the planet has thrown up urgent concerns challenging mainstream approaches of growth based on rampant destruction of the environment and natural resources by big business. That the impacts are heavily gendered and affect women in multiple and myriad ways has been noted by numerous scholars and activists via both research and struggle.

Growth and 'development' are being associated with and measured mainly by the levels of urbanization which is equated in a totally reductionist manner to the expansion of the construction sector and large physical infrastructure needing vast investment by both private and public capital, national as well as global. The current models of urbanization and city building deny the majority of people their rights as citizens, manifested in lack of access even to shelter and basic civic services like the right to water, sanitation, energy. Public transport, health and education are not

even available in most urban centres in India, and services that were available in the public sector, limited as they might have been, are being dismantled to be replaced by corporate-driven services far beyond the capacity of most citizens to pay. Privatization of all basic services and reduced allocation for welfare are taken for granted in the policy making paradigm. Most services are either not available, or inaccessible or unaffordable for the marginalized and vulnerable sections who constitute the majority of urban residents. Space is getting increasingly privatized and access even to hitherto public spaces is becoming restricted in favour of the elite. Women's lack of secure access to public spaces and increasing violence against women in public spaces has led to some of the most remarkable mobilisations of young women, both in the capital as well as in other Indian cities and towns.

The growth of cities and towns is no longer taking place in the classical paradigm of historical development, moving away from a land-based economy to manufacturing and large scale production and creation of capital, accompanied by a breakdown of feudal relations of production. Informalisation dominates all sectors and production chains in the economy,

in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Conditions of employment are characterized by non-payment of minimum wages, precariousness of employment, inhuman conditions of work, denial of access to even the most limited benefits available as workers, as citizens, as marginalized and as deprived.

In this context in particular there are three aspects of restructuring and inequality that currently characterize both the rural and urban sectors and that need to be emphasized.

One, the fundamental issue of the share of wages and the share of profits in production, the former losing out drastically to the latter not only in relative terms but even in absolute terms. The trend therefore centers on centralization of capital compounded by the decentralization and casualisation of the working class. Needless to say, the most profound and negative impacts are on women, who today record an unprecedented decline in access to employment; their work participation rate is today the lowest ever in Independent India, is the lowest in South Asia, and amongst the lowest in the world.

Two, the sheer hollowness of the facile commitment to 'financial inclusion'. It

needs to be recognised that the nature and strategies of financial and monetary systems and structures are closely intertwined with women's multiple and all-pervasive roles in an economy. Exclusion from the financial sphere is generally defined at involving two levels – first, keeping out the more vulnerable sections of the population from payment systems; second, exclusion from the formal credit market itself, compelling these groups to access non-institutional sources. An important feature of the rather occlusive macroeconomic policy is that large numbers of the rural population as well as the urban proletariat have been left out of the ambit of coverage. It was estimated almost a decade ago that almost three-fourths of farm households in India have no access whatsoever to formal sources of credit, with over half having access to neither formal nor informal credit. Financial exclusion has in fact been actually increasing since the advent of globalisation. Non-institutional sources of credit, especially the share of moneylenders, which had declined sharply particularly in the post-nationalisation decade with the advent of social and development banking, have now begun to rise quite steeply in the post-liberalisation period. Additionally and significantly, women in general and Dalit women in particular have

been excluded from whatever benefits have accrued. In none of the policies is economic agency ascribed to women, instead they are perceived as reproductive agents defined in the syndrome of patriarchal semantics.

Three, the spectacularly insensitive event of the recent declaration of demonitisation which has led to a massive transfer of resources from the poor and middle class to State and finance capital. The underlying philosophy is that the poor and middle class are inherently dishonest, that they are the ones who hoard wealth, that those who earn do not have a right to their own earnings, that 'cashlessness' can succeed in a country that has one of the lowest literacy levels, that digital payments can be carried out in areas such as the Northeast where two-thirds of the population have no bank accounts, that black money is not stashed abroad or converted into real estate, that 'bad' loans being written off is irrelevant to economic and equity principles. The impacts of this appropriation of people's capital are so profoundly deep and long-lasting that entire sources of livelihood and sustenance have been destroyed: agriculture where it is reported that more than 90 percent of the winter rabi crop has not been sown in many parts of the country; dairy; leather;

tannery; footwear; fishing; sweetmeats; brass work; traditional arts; forest produce; power-looms; handlooms; garment; hosiery; plantations of tea, coffee, rubber, spices; fruit and horticulture; sugarcane workers; domestic workers; construction; transport; plywood; sanitary wear; loaders; retailers; small financiers; traders; vegetable sellers; handcart pullers; casual workers; vendors; food & beverages – the list is indeed long.

Shorn of all posturing and fully demystified, two major consequences are immediately apparent – the transfer of capital from people to the authorities, and the massive decline in employment as well as wages in urban and especially rural areas. This double-edged process is compounded by a huge upsurge in financial exclusion rather than inclusion, with the poor and vulnerable being compelled to resort to moneylenders even for their minimal daily needs particularly in a context of destruction of livelihoods. Enough initial research has been conducted and several struggles have already been waged related to the catastrophic impact on the marginalized and deprived sections of people, the majority of whom constitute those termed as socially backward and minorities.

The violently exploitative nature of caste

and sub-caste systems is sanctioned through extreme force and violence exercised through caste and community hierarchies and their institutions. Related to this is an acceptance and internalisation of the logic behind group and family honour and pride based on caste hierarchy, and consequently murder of young women and men in the form of honour killing. It is indeed deplorable that instead of creating a context in which conflicts between groups can be resolved by peaceful methods through for example negotiations and talks, the State is resorting to violence against people in conflict areas in so many regions of the world. In India we see the same situation in many parts of the country – in Jammu & Kashmir, North East, Chhattisgarh, and elsewhere.

A State that overtly denies its role of providing for the welfare of its citizens goes against the basic principles of justice and also against the very *raison d'être* of its existence. Instead we are seeing its steady withdrawal from the public domain in favour of the private corporates. On the other hand, interference is oppressively present in the realm of people's personal choices relating to sexuality, religion, food, creative expression, knowledge, education etc. Outdated laws continue to be protected in the interests of an oppressive and

intrusive authoritarian machinery. An area of deep concern is State sanction of street justice through mob violence. What is heartening is that everywhere women and men are standing up against injustice: those who are members of various affected groups, sexual minorities, religious minorities, artists, writers, students, academics and ordinary women and men who are committed to the values enshrined in the Constitution of India.

The world-wide phenomenon of an upsurge of nationalism threatens the principles of peaceful coexistence which formed the foundations of foreign policies of most countries in the world. The threat of war in a nuclear world cannot be taken lightly. Nationalism as part of national culture is essentially characterized by militarism and masculinity which celebrate the identity of the warrior male, in which notions of femininity and feminism have very little space.

Women and men are struggling to defend their rights and to fight for dignity, equality, decent livelihood and a secure and peaceful life. This includes student movements for democracy; women mobilizing against violence; local population and particularly indigenous people defending common

property resources especially forest rights; struggles of disabled people to live with dignity; women plantation workers for minimum wages; informal workers for social protection and for maternity entitlements for all including home based workers; for freedom from bondage; construction workers for work site facilities; aanganwadi workers unionizing for a decent wage; fisher-people for protection of their source of livelihood; women farmers for recognition as farmers; struggles against displacement and against land acquisition especially by private business; women fighting and winning the right to enter places of worship. A large part of these struggles are either led or populated largely by women.

In the 35 years of its existence IAWS has made a remarkable contribution to the acceptance of women's studies as an academic discipline. The most visible indication is the setting up of 163 Women's Studies Centres across the country in universities, colleges and academic institutions. Combined with this is the integration of a gender perspective in major social science and humanities disciplines, and the fact that most research as well as policy cannot any more afford to ignore gender. We must ensure that these centres continue and expand. This is a central

task. It is also important to ensure that we are accountable to the women of the country, engaging with their most critical concerns and aspirations. We must also undertake to produce more ground-breaking and cutting-edge work that is inter-disciplinary, collaborative and relevant to the economic, political, social and cultural aspects of patriarchy and gender.

In this XVth National Conference of the IAWS we seek to strengthen the linkages between women's studies and the women's movement, supporting and reinforcing each other through continuous debate, discussion, discourse and collaboration. Women's studies as well as the women's movement need closer and active involvement with peoples' struggles too, since no societal change, least of all a system of inequality and privilege based on patriarchy, can ever take place without alliances and aligning with all those who seek equity, justice, equality.

This is the first National Conference of the IAWS in Tamil Nadu, a region that has a long tradition of struggles and inclusive movements and is path-breaking in many ways – the universalisation of benefits; creation and effective implementation of welfare schemes; formal recognition of the rights of several

categories of the excluded particularly sexual minorities; the extended empowerment of women; the existence of a truly empowered leadership headed by women. The IAWS is indeed honoured to be holding this conference in Tamil Nadu, in association with one of the most prestigious universities in the country.

“Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number –
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you –
Ye are many - they are few”.

- Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Women Performers of Parai Aattam, Sakthi Kalai Kuzhu,
Dindugal district, Tamil Nadu