



Indian
Association for
Women's
Studies IAWS

IAWS PRE CONFERENCE 2023

6 September 2023 • Thiruvananthapuram • Kerala

Breaking
New Grounds:
The Transformative
Potential of
Women's Studies in
Higher Education



Indian
Association for
Women's
Studies IAWS

IAWS PRE-
CONFERENCE

2023

6 September 2023
Thiruvananthapuram
Kerala

Breaking New Grounds: The Transformative Potential of Women's Studies in Higher Education

Breaking New Grounds: The Transformative Potential of Women's Studies in Higher Education

In the past few decades, we have encountered the massive expansion of higher education in India with increasing number of institutions, courses, degree programs, as well as increased gender parity and student enrolment. Simultaneously, the space of higher education has altered and shrunk in its 'everyday' form. Strikingly, in times of dwindling opportunities for students across disciplines, especially social sciences and humanities, we also see a major shift in the social composition of students, transforming our classrooms and universities into spaces with newer imaginations, possibilities, and disruptions.

The continuous targeting of Dalit-Bahujan, Adivasi, Muslim, Queer, Non-binary, and Women folk in higher education in an increasingly intolerant nation-state, at once reveals and masks the underlying social inequality existing across various fronts in higher education, as well as various intersectional sites like citizenship, marriage, sexuality, caste violence, and gender-based discrimination. Therefore, it becomes critical to map the various shifts in higher education, especially in its engagement with the question of women and gender.

Higher education has produced important discourses about interdisciplinarity and inclusivity through continuous engagements with questions of institutional exclusion and discriminatory practices. This has allowed us to reflect on the many ways in which the ecosystem of higher education intersects with the goals of radical transformative politics and practices. This pre conference seeks to understand the potential of the academic branch of Women's Studies for transforming the contemporary concerns in higher education. Through critical deliberations, it also seeks to understand the ways in which allied and interdisciplinary fields have continued to engage with and respond to Women's Studies as a discipline of knowledge production and dissemination.

The contemporary moment in higher education is marked by the hegemony of the neoliberal economy, evident in the National Education Policy 2020 which is aiming for an overhaul of the education system through rapid institutionalization and de-politicization. In a country marked by intergenerational and systemic exclusion, it would be imprudent to believe that this is not aimed at erasing the political potential of higher education. Students, who have been the central stakeholders in this inundating space, are often found at the forefront of radical transformative politics, bearing the brunt of backlash within the hallowed walls of the universities tied deeply to hegemonic state apparatuses. Their concerns echo beyond institutional boundaries as they continue to battle through issues of fee hike, hostel timings, questions of access and equitable opportunities, safety and freedom, caste and identity-based discrimination, the recent anti-CAA, anti-NRC protests, as well as the callous police, judicial, and state violence. Various queer movements in



Indian
Association for
Women's
Studies IAWS

IAWS PRE-
CONFERENCE
2023

6 September 2023
Thiruvananthapuram
Kerala

Breaking New Grounds: The Transformative Potential of Women's Studies in Higher Education

university spaces and beyond have allowed students to reflect upon questions of gender and sexuality, producing radical alternative ways of expression. The resistance demonstrated by students instil within us the belief that students hold the potential to bring liberation in higher education. It is fitting to say that in last few decades this space has been reimagined through its people, their movements, and the fight for not just a right to education, but right to survive and live with dignity.

The discipline of Women's Studies is in principle tied to the emergence and subsequent evolution of the women's movement in India. Constituted by varied groups of women, mass movements, anti-caste struggles, autonomous women organizations, non-governmental organizations, and others; the women's movement continues to disrupt normative foundations of society through dialogue and discord. It has emerged through an interrogation of the canonical disciplinary hierarchies, and has now branched out into a dense web consisting of multiple locations, positionalities, and interrelations between movement, studies, and the state. This has invigorated a critique of mainstream knowledge systems and structures in higher education. Its emergence is testimony to the radicalness embedded in a sincere critique of disciplinary regimes in higher education. In many ways, it has laid the foundation for reimagining intersectional questions of caste, class, sexuality, identity, gender, ableism, and heteropatriarchy in higher education. In critiquing the exclusionary structures of higher education and targeted catastrophes against marginalized students, it has produced pathways for re-

imagining possible solidarities and bringing together emancipatory education, politics, and practice. Evidently, the interdisciplinarity of Women's Studies and its relationship with the women's movement(s) has paved the way for destabilizing and disrupting existing cannons and breaking newer grounds in higher education through continuous self-reflection and dialogue.

The contemporary moment has also been severely affected by the deadly COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Not only were the boundaries of public and the private blurred with students having to continue education 'from home,' the very potential of education got displaced. It changed in form, structure and in its 'everydayness.' The sudden influx of the 'digital' points to the possibilities and limitations of performance, politics, mobilization, education, self-expression, and consciousness raising. Education and dissent both simultaneously intersect and find ground in the digital universe, pushing us to look at not just the potential for transformation, but the changing form of the transformative politics and practices in higher education. It becomes important to address the various shifts in movements from the 'chowk' to the 'digital' to understand how the mode of circulation and mobilization contributes to and alters the radical potential of higher education. With this changing nature of movements and engagements, how can we re-imagine interdisciplinary dialogues and debates in university spaces? Can newer ways of doing and engaging in movements safeguard Women's Studies' political function and potential? It is pertinent to examine the place, priorities, and negligence of Women's Studies in the Higher Education system in this context.



Indian
Association for
Women's
Studies IAWS

IAWS PRE-
CONFERENCE
2023

6 September 2023
Thiruvananthapuram
Kerala

Breaking New Grounds: The Transformative Potential of Women's Studies in Higher Education

The pedagogical potential of women's studies is therefore critical for what it can encompass – reinventing teaching, learning, and living in the universities by interrogating and interrupting assumed structures in higher education; thereby creating a space for a more sustained dialogue. Over the years, it has reiterated the importance of politics of education and knowledge production. Its radical, political potential therefore lies in a critical juxtaposition of interdisciplinarity with movements, theory, praxis, pedagogy, and the classroom. The last few decades have strived to destabilize and fracture this very idea of the discipline being a domain of singular inquiry, having engaged with multiple domains and bodies of knowledge. How students experience academic mobility is also linked to and constituted through these changing and fluid contours of disciplines. So, what potential does this interdisciplinarity carry, when the contemporary moment is under constant siege and attack by neoliberal forces? Do the limits of the hierarchical university spaces allow for the politics to thrive and the potential to sustain? Can we reimagine the political potential of higher education as a site of inquiry, knowledge production, and radical transformation through critical interventions and interruptions? What are the ways in which we can deliberate upon a future that nurtures principles of social justice and equality in higher education? It is through intentional listening and reflexivity that one can challenge the everyday and the spectacular nature of exclusions and discriminations in higher education.

We seek to understand this interconnectedness of Women's Studies and its rigorous engagement with the

project of feminist consciousness raising in higher education. These are the questions and ideas that we want to probe further, by inviting voices not only from the academic branch of Women's Studies, but various allied and interdisciplinary locations that have continued to engage with and respond to these shifts in higher education. The pre-conference will have invited presentations by master's students, research scholars, as well as young practitioners in the field.

Panels

Student Futures:

The Crisis of Praxis, Pedagogies, and Learning

The panel discusses the question of knowledge production through learning and pedagogical practices. How is the rapidly shifting landscape of higher education shaping students' futures and in what ways can we deliberate upon a future that nurtures principles of social justice and equality?

Centering Women and Gender across Interdisciplinary Knowledges

This panel critically unpacks the interdisciplinary nature of Women's Studies and its radical potential for reinventing teaching and learning by interrogating the disciplinary boundaries and structures in higher education.

The Digital Chowks: The Changing nature of Movement(s)

This panel addresses the changing nature and form of movements, including the women's movement in the context of contemporary shifting terrains. It maps the how the 'digital' becomes central in how we mobilize, imagine, and do collective action and movements.



Indian
Association for
Women's
Studies IAWS

IAWS PRE-
CONFERENCE
2023
6 September 2023
Thiruvananthapuram
Kerala

Breaking New Grounds: The Transformative Potential of Women's Studies in Higher Education

Towards a 'Holistic' Education: Policies and Beyond

Higher education has become a site for political upheaval, especially in an increasing depoliticized and 'holistic' environment. This panel interrogates how policies and dialogues beyond that nurture the potential and promise of education as democratic and inclusive.

Queering and Questioning the Space of Higher Education

This panel addresses how higher education becomes the space for reimagining gender and sexuality by challenging the conforming and rigid structures of heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy in higher education and beyond.

For any further information,

please write to us at iaws.preconference2023@gmail.com or call on +91 9665833358 / 9163137785

Coordinators

Dr. Sowjanya Tamalapakula

(Assistant Professor, School of Gender Studies,
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad)

Dinta Suresh

(PhD Scholar, Department of Women's Studies,
University of Calicut)

Sayali Shankar

(Researcher, Department of Women and Gender Studies,
Savitribai Phule Pune University)

Nupur Jain

(Executive Committee member, IAWS)

To register for the preconference, please submit your details here

[REGISTER HERE](#)

