

# IAWS

INDIAN ASSOCIATION  
FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES

## XVII NATIONAL CONFERENCE

7-10 September 2023  
In collaboration with  
Government College for Women,  
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala



Theme:  
Women's  
Studies and  
Women's  
Movements:  
Challenges and  
Resilience



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President's Address





## President's Address

**Ishita Mukhopadhyay**, President

**O**n behalf of the Executive Committee of Indian Association for Women's Studies, I welcome you all to the seventeenth National Conference of Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS). I extend my gratitude to Gita Sen, Leela Gulati and many others who have responded to our invitation and graced the occasion. I express my cordial thanks to R. Bindu, the only women Minister for Higher Education in the country who extended collaboration. I also extend my thanks to Principal and all colleagues in the collaborating institution, Government College for women. We also convey our sincere greetings to many faculties and colleagues in Local Organising Committee of the conference who made the event possible. Indian Association for Women's Studies is an association of a different kind with a different objective. It is a professional association which bases itself on criticality of knowledge. The Association was formed in 1982 with the objective of understanding the condition of women in the country. Formed as a membership-based association and nurtured by the founding institutions of SNDT, Mumbai and CWDS, Delhi from the very first step of its journey it is yet to go a long way. Today in 2023 when IAWS is convening its seventeenth conference it has passed forty years of the journey.

This conference is centered on the theme of Women's Studies and women's movements: challenges and resilience. Introspection is required after forty years on the relationship between Women's Studies and women's movement in the country. Women's studies as a critical discipline of knowledge in the country is a direct outcome of Indian women's movement. Indian women's movement has a colonial past. The country is observing seventy-seventh year of independence. Formal higher education in the country introduced Women's Studies as a discipline in university system in 1987, although there existed many independent researches and knowledge base before the date. Decades of movement and decades of mainstreaming the issues of gender discrimination demands a discussion on the question of challenges in the pathway and points of resilience. Formation of the body of IAWS forty years ago was preceded by the publication of 'Toward's Equality', the report of the Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI) in 1974, history of women's movement in India in the seventies, national conference on Women's Studies in Mumbai in 1981. These are the dots, but the process of connecting the dots required struggle and resilience as a historical process. Committee on the status of women critiqued the country's sociopolitical progress on the question of equality of opportunities available to women. This conference is discussing in a Plenary Session the journey of the country while we are moving in to fifty years after the report. We are holding the seventeenth conference in Thiruvananthapuram where the second conference was held in 1984. We are rounding up our journey in movements, knowledge building and policy making in this conference. Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary space has thrown up more questions than it has answered. This is also a space for awareness raising and policy discussions. Gender mainstreaming as an outcome in state policies is a consensus in Beijing 1995 meeting. Affirmative actions in women's access to opportunities were taken up. This marked a crossroad in the journey of women's movement and the discipline of Women's Studies in the country.

Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary knowledge base was introduced and nourished by the institutions of knowledge Centre for Women's Development Studies CWDS, ISST and SNDT University. In 1986, UGC set up Women's Studies Centres and introduced Research Fellowships in Women's Studies with the National Eligibility Test.

The strong base of this interdisciplinary study is the history and ongoing struggle of women in the country. Women's studies was visualized as an understanding, awareness and action based knowledge creation. It was born in women's movement. The knowledge base directly is an outcome of women's movement. The word 'action' has been linked to Women's Studies from the very beginning.

History of women's movement in India has its genesis on the question of equality. The question of women's equality emerged in India with the transformation of Indian freedom movement to mass movement. The issue of women's education was a pivotal point. If we recall the First Wave of feminist women demanding suffrage for women, we also would like to recall that in India movement for suffrage for women was existing in the colonial period and linked to the freedom movement. Indian women gained equal rights to vote from the beginning of the journey of independent India. Indian Constitution recognized the rights of women and included the knowledge gained from the freedom struggle. Constitution guarantees equality of rights to women and also enables the state to take affirmative actions to address discrimination of women.

In post-independent India, there were visible signs of inequality and discrimination in education, health and employment. Development in the country suffered from exclusion. CSWI highlighted many of these areas. The sixties saw women's movement in the country which took a shape in the seventies and eighties. These were the days of independent women's movement. Political and civil societies took up independent programmes to highlight the question of gender equality. Women's movement gained ground to demand justice and legal remedy to violence against women like dowry and rape. Academics, social workers, political workers, non-government persons took up action programmes. Need for a discipline Women's Studies was unanimously felt. The report 'Towards Equality' was demanding the emergence of the discipline Women's Studies. The discipline was already there in some countries. At present the discipline is taught in more than seven hundred universities and institutes in the world. However, the relationship between women's movement and women's studies ceased to be linear after introduction of the discipline.

Women's education was the key issue in women's movement in pre-independence period. Justice before law against atrocities against women were the points of emphasis in post-independent women's movement. Did transformative role of women's education took a backseat in the years after independence in the course of women's movement? The question that why women's movement could not act as a pressure group in independent India in making women more visible in the spheres of development needs answer. 'Toward's equality' exposed the regression of women in the field of education, health, work, political participation, social vulnerability. Women's movement of the seventies and eighties were pro-active in terms of legal entitlement of women in the country and protection against violence against women. But why it cannot prevent increasing crime against women now needs an answer.

Beijing mandate of gender mainstreaming marked a change in the objective of linking voices of movement directly to policies in terms of affirmative actions. It is a crossroad as this menas a mandate on the state to recognize voices of women's movement. This also influenced the process of the relationship between Women's Studies and women's movement which was already a complex one. Till 1981, the year of launching of IAWS, the literature of Women's Studies is a scattered one. IAWS served the objective of legitimizing Women's Studies within the broad canvas of women's movement. Themes of National Conferences of IAWS in 1981 and 1984 centered around Women's Studies and its methodology, patriarchy, equality of women with respect to opportunities of education, health and law. Women as workers in agriculture and industry featured in conferences in 1986 and 1988. The country was already exhibiting deprivation of working women during the eighties. Severe distress of women in peasantry and poverty was experienced during this period. National conference focused on rural women and poverty in 1988. The fifth conference in 1991 had the theme of religion, culture and politics. It was clearly stated in the concept note that the objective of the conference was to assess the contemporary interaction between religion, culture and economic, political process and their effect on the rights of women. It was stated that the revivalist movement in the name of preserving religion and culture is creating an obstruction to achieving the goals of

gender equality. 1991 marked the year when neoliberalism was declared as the state economic policy. National conference in 1993 focused on this policy and impact on women. In this context a transition in the understanding of Women's Studies in the country was observed. 1991 also marked the year where many Women's Studies Centres were started in many parts of the country. Previously women's issues were discussed by individual scholars and activists of women's movement. It was already clear that the process of regression of women in terms of tradition, culture and religion went together with the advent of neoliberal economic regime. IAWS National Conference captured this dualism in its 1991 and 1993 conferences. In all conferences the complex relationship between women's movement, Women's Studies and the contextual sociopolitical economic environment of the country formed the fulcrum of discussion.

In 1995 the conference theme was feminist praxis and knowledge system. This conference had a reflection of CEDAW which was ratified in 1993 and India became a signatory. Post-Beijing the conference in 1998 focused entirely on challenges to Women's Studies. The concept note clearly visualized a new era. The conference recognized people's movement as a foregrounding tool on the question of equality. The conference explored the alternatives to the knowledge system of Women's Studies from the point of view of people's movement, unions in unorganized sector, women's movement, dalit and tribal movements. Women's movement was already intertwined in the country with these movements and the transformation in the Women's Studies with inclusion of knowledge base gathered from convergence of these movements was a challenge recognized. It was felt that post-Beijing inputs were there in the system to dissociate the knowledge base of Women's Studies from the people's movement and women's movement in general. The theme had the keyword 'survival'. Question of survival of Women's Studies in the form of a critical discipline emerged along with gender mainstreaming. There was a reflection of the tussle in the papers presented in the National Conferences of IAWS. In 2000 National Conference the theme was women's perspectives on public policies. This was a conference in the post gender mainstreaming era. The concept note of the conference clearly refuted the idea that gender

mainstreaming into policies coopted the agenda of women's movement. Question arose during those days globally that whether women's movement can coexist with the plethora of affirmative actions and mainstreamed agenda of gender equality in state policies. IAWS faced the question and the concept note of the conference stated that the conference will attempt to identify the dynamics and linkages of sectoral priorities with mainstream priorities of employment, health, violence, environment, communalism, family, political representation, and right to resources including property. 2002 Conference discussed globalization when the country was already experiencing the claws of neoliberal economic policy in terms of poverty, unemployment and deprivation. The issues of discussion were violence, democracy, and women's identity. Fractured narrative of democracy was already experienced in the country, pushing Women's Studies to new challenges. IAWS National Conferences have always acted as a pointer to the critical agenda within the knowledge system. The reason why 1995 served as a crossroad in the discussion is the reason that if we see conferences immediately after 1995 onwards, there was more discussion on the status of women in the country, state policies and challenges faced. Had the relationship between women's movement and Women's Studies gone more complex during this period? Was the focus shifted to realization of affirmative actions in terms of policies regarding the fundamental focus on gender equality? In this period Women's Studies as a discipline had both a proactive and reactive role. Women's movement and people's movement as correctly mentioned in one IAWS conference were collectively responsible for enactments protecting the rights of women in the cases of violence against women. Mathura rape case in 1972 shook the country and women's movement saw to it that rape laws are changed. Women's movements against violence led successfully to enactments and this was already the experience before gender mainstreaming was introduced as a policy measure. Did this lead to parallel straits in the path of gender equality? It is time to introspect. The complex relationship between women's movement and Women's Studies is now having the third point, state policies and affirmative actions. Action research became popular in the field of Women's Studies and research became more influenced by women's movement and people's movement in general. Inputs from dalit



activism nourished dalit feminist epistemology in Women's Studies.

The country during this period experienced poverty, inequality and from 2005 onwards official statistics exhibited a downward turn of women's employment. The term 'feminisation' in work lost its ground when we step in to the reality of official data. Myth of feminization within the policy of neoliberalism was already exposed. Indian state declared National policy of women's empowerment in 2001. In 1995, United Nations had already introduced the concept of empowerment in terms of critical numbers in education, jobs and political participation. There was the 73rd amendment to the Constitution where seat reservation for one-third of the Panchayati Raj Institutions to women was announced. Economic empowerment was declared to be achieved in terms of inclusiveness in credit support to self-help groups. Millennium Development Goals with gender rights as one of the goals was already declared and welfarist state was implementing policies. This is replaced by Sustainable Development Goals with again a goal in gender equality in current times. In this backdrop IAWS conference in 2005 discussed sovereignty, citizenship and gender. The contradiction between denial of basic economic rights, weakening of nation states and enforcement of a global order brought the question of deprivation of entitlements of different caste, class, gender and sexual identities. Women's Studies was already associated to the spectrum of knowledge to understand society, stratification, people and democracy. Silver jubilee conference of IAWS took place in 2008 with the theme of feminism, education and transformation of knowledge. The question of knowledge building process and transforming institutions came back again in the discussion. Women's Studies posed the question of transforming mainstream knowledge system on the gender question vis-a-vis building up a new knowledge system. With time both the waves remained and feminist methodology vis-a-vis 'add women and stir' featured in the institutional knowledge base. 2011 conference discussed marginalities and hegemony, and revisited gender politics. This was in the context of growing marginalization of historically oppressed communities and new forms of grasping hegemony. India had already entered into the second phase of economic reforms. The national conference in 2014 directly talked about perspectives of women's movement and pluralism. Education and women's movement again

came to be discussed together as a face-to-face dialogue. The conference clearly stated that increasing incidences of violence revealed that the message of women's movement and its struggle for the rights of women cannot be seen as a sectional right alone. It was widely recognized that women's movement was committed to equality and pluralism. In 2017, women were posed against the changing perspective of restructured inequalities, counter currents and recording the sites of resistance. Caste and religion as lens of women's movement emerged and required attention by the knowledge system. 2020 National Conference went back to discuss the Constitutional rights and morality in the seventieth year of constitution.

The journey of IAWS in the last forty years demanded a revisit to the relationship between women's movement and Women's Studies as a knowledge base. The relationship is a dynamic one changing its course with the sociopolitical change in the country and with changing route of people's movement in the country. Women's movement has reached a new height in contemporary times with more women workers and women peasant farmers hitting the streets on the question of rights. Demand for equality is more pronounced in contemporary times when deprivation reached its height. Affirmative actions in terms of cash benefits to deprived communities are more pronounced than earlier times. Employment guarantee and primary health guarantee programmes are less pronounced. Gender mainstreaming though underlined in all policies are unable to mitigate the crisis of unequal opportunities. This is the context of the conference in present times which will revisit the challenges and resilience on the relationship of women's movement and Women's Studies keeping policies not in linkage to either but in the backdrop. India has already achieved the outcomes of women in education. Did it achieve transformation on the question of gender equality in society? Did knowledge bring scientific temper in the community particularly women? Gender question on technology have unpleasant history. This demanded understanding the digital space and gender. Intersectionality prevailed and also was transformed. We need to understand the vulnerability of plural identities. New threat of climate change has forced us to reframe and rethink many old issues. The conference will revisit the report 'Towards Equality' after fifty

years. How far have we gone towards equality and how far have we gone away from equality in the sectoral spheres requires attention.

The three years after the last conference were terrible years for all of us. We are all yet to recover from the pandemic dislocation. World was stopped, dialogue was local, technology was the only way to link with the external world. Women suffered hardest. Invisible inequalities were visible. Details are already documented how the inequality enforced itself. Life and livelihood became a choice question pushing back the settled consensus on rights. India had the brutal imagery of trails of migrant workers returning home. Hunger and inequality intensified till then and the suffering faces are mostly of women. We are holding our conference in the time-space of gross inequality, deprivation and loss. Is it a new world which will never be same as before? Will climate change continue to hit vulnerable population mostly women forever? Do we have really an answer to increasing inequality in terms of the existing policies? Have we been able to read the signals of people's movement in the country? Has our policy of inclusiveness in education changed in the process of advancement? Is Women's Studies finding a space in the education highlights in present times? Is the world of work remaining the same for women or sunk? We expect light on these questions from the paper presenters in the conference. The conference will throw more questions than answers. But we need to be sure that we exit through a new door, which is not the same through which we entered.

With these words, I welcome you all to the seventeenth IAWS National Conference in 2023. We are in the 77th year of India's independence, 30th year of neoliberal economic policy, 30th year of 73rd amendment to the constitution, 50th year after passing of 'Towards Equality' report and 40 years of our own association. Our own history and contemporary are our engaging points. We also learn from women's movement in the Asian countries. Women have always come forward in peace-making efforts. The conference also gives a call for peace in the context of conflict-ridden societies in our country and abroad. Women bear the brunt of the pain of any conflict. Present day conflicts also bear the same narrative.

I appeal to you to rise to the cause of gender equality and peace unanimously.



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