

# Reorienting Women Studies

## Retrograde Moves

*Even more worrying than the UGC's recent move to redesignate Women Studies Centres to include family studies are the simultaneous changes being prescribed in the scope of their activities and the structure and functioning of these centres.*

The UGC supports 34 centres and four cells of Women Studies (WSC) in various Indian universities. While the UGC funds these centres, they have been run autonomously with individual traditions of each university, each with its own name, subject to overall supervision of the university in question with broad guidelines from the UGC. All of a sudden, these centres have received a communiqué from the UGC addressing the centres as 'Women and Family Studies Centres'. This raises a lot of questions about the purpose of the change of name as well as the manner in which it has been initiated. Without so much as a discussion, suggestion or debate, the universities have been confronted with an imposition in the most undemocratic manner.

It is not just a matter of the UGC conferring to itself the right to give a name to a programme or a department. More serious issues emerge when one reads this step in the light of the new guidelines put out by the UGC for 2003. First of all, the linking of women and family has implications about the perceived new thrust the UGC envisages for women studies. It must be recalled that in the aftermath of the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women (1974), the International Women's Year and the International Women's Decade and the spread of women's movements, national bodies like the ICSSR and the UGC played a seminal role in grasping the importance of critical studies to bring in the gender dimension to our understanding of social reality and the knowledge

base that existed in the disciplines. Women Studies from the beginning was projected as a critical inquiry that would seek to expose the structures that upheld the subordination of women. To the credit of women studies, in the last few decades, is the opening up of the family as a major site of oppression and exploitation of women. Further women studies scholarship linked the family with the structure of unequal gender relations in the broader society. For example, violence within the family is replicated by violence against women as the target victims in any conflict situation. While such an approach by no means sought to 'destroy' the family, it sought to uncover the dynamics of family in order to work for greater equality and power relations within and outside the family. Mainstream sociology departments already have studies of the family. Hence this linking of the family with women, accomplishes at one stroke the idea that women are primarily to be placed within the family, ignoring the fact that women play a larger role outside in many sectors – which indeed was one of the facts that women studies assiduously tried to instil among policy makers. Women are workers, are political leaders, artists, media persons, social activists, and so on in a hundred other arenas just as men are.

The UGC in its 10th Plan guidelines reveals the idea behind the innocent sounding move. It emphasises that women studies should no longer be giving importance to theoretical engagements as apparently in its view enough has already been done

so far! Secondly, women studies should be concerned with extension mainly, social welfare activities. The schemes it will in future support will be establishment of women's hostels, day care centres, part time fellowship for women, improving infrastructure for women teachers in colleges and promoting professional education for women. Not that these are not needed but to put the onus of doing these on women studies centres is to take away the prime objective of women studies as an intellectual inquiry to facilitate action. One can ask why do economists study poverty, why do they not run soup kitchens? Without the enormous critical knowledge of various facets of our society, such as, for instance, the way our legal system works, its gender biases, the way educational establishments perpetuate gender discrimination, the way work places practice unequal treatment and gender biases within the institutions and agencies of the state, etc, many of the reforms that have been initiated would never have been possible. Likewise without the opening of the family-household as a subject for dispassionate analysis the manner in which girls and women have unequal access to all social resources would not be known.

The UGC also calls on the new 'women and family study centres' to uphold family nurturing values to prevent disintegration of the family. Nobody has any quarrel with the view that the family should be nurturing but it is the implication drawn here that women studies has promoted 'western values of feminism' with its appeal for women's liberation which is at issue. The consequence that emerges is the idea that women must once again be guardians of the conservative values of a family built on unequal power relations between genders, at their own physical and psychological cost.

It is ironic that the same UGC which is pushing for globalisation and western technology and capital and western education by inviting foreign universities, western media and satellite TV, sees among disciplines, a threat to the Indian family and Indian values *only with respect to women studies*. What is distressing is that the UGC which had played a major role in establishing women studies in the university system as an academic enterprise to promote social transformation and gender equality should unilaterally undertake such a retrograde step, undoing all its past progressive measures. As recently as

2002, its own guidelines spelt out the following:

WSCs will be multi-disciplinary. Women Studies will be a tool to promote gender equality. WSCs will have the status of an academic department of the university and the core faculty will be eligible for representation in the university bodies.

The new development also seeks to undermine this representation. Hitherto the UGC had a steering committee which included members from WSC, the president of the Indian Association of Women Studies was an ex-officio member, other women studies scholars and representatives from organisations working for women such as the National Commission for Women and other departments found a place. This body has been dissolved and a review committee has been set up where the representation of women studies has been whittled down. The chair today is a professor of Sanskrit who has no experience or knowledge of the women studies developments in the country. A steering committee plays the role of giving directions to WSCs. The review committee merely 'reviews'. More alarming is the new stipulation that all material generated by WSCs must be submitted to the UGC which would undertake to 'publish' suitable documents from this. Individual WSCs will not publish material on their own. The

UGC would also run a journal of women studies. Given the current ideological slant it does not leave much to imagination what kind of content and perspective such a publication would acquire. It is assumed that the UGC bureaucrats possess all the expertise needed for a publication programme. More damingly, all funds coming for the WSCs will now have to get clearance from the UGC.

We believe that this whole enterprise is not only blatantly undemocratic but part and parcel of the ruling party's sectarian and backward looking vision through interventions in education. First it was questioning history writing; then it was promoting Sanskrit studies, Jyotish Vidya and Purohitya as inter-disciplinary studies in universities. WS is now next to receive gratuitous gifts! All those who are concerned with the foundational objectives of higher education in this country must challenge this onslaught. Such trends if unchallenged may gather strength to foray into other areas. **EPW**

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