

# Making It Relevant

## Mapping the Meaning of Women's Studies in Tamil Nadu

*What is women's studies? Is it a discipline? A subject? What should a women's studies programme connote and what obtains in practice? Through a survey, this paper attempts to map the different aspects of the women's studies programme in institutions of higher education of Tamil Nadu. The contention of the paper is that the forms and conditions of the institutionalisation of women's studies in places of higher education to a large extent constrained the possibilities of carrying out research in this area as an academic discipline. The paper has important implications for bodies such as the*

*University Grants Commission that, at one level, have been in the forefront of the institutionalisation of the women's studies movement in India, particularly in the 1990s, but, at another level, have failed to achieve the kinds of intellectual and political changes promised by the founders of this discipline in India.*

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Women's studies is both the location of new disciplinary thinking about women and gender, and the point at which feminist scholarship and theorising within these older disciplines intersect with those occurring within ethnic studies, area studies, sexuality studies, and cultural studies; with the work taking place in activist projects and organisations; and with the insights drawn from personal narratives and the creative arts.

— Bonnie Zimmerman<sup>1</sup>

### The Context

One of the important aspects of women's studies in India is its successful institutionalisation as a higher education programme within the universities and colleges with curriculum for teaching and research focusing on women and women's issues. By now, we have fairly good accounts of the genealogy of the institutionalisation of women's studies<sup>2</sup> that tell us how women's studies was instituted as a programme in the institutions of higher education and what perspectives informed the teaching and research in women's studies. However, women's studies practitioners continue to be confronted with the problem of how to define women's studies and also the issue of what constitutes women's studies? For instance, is it a discipline subject/interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary/integrating activism with academics/critical interrogation of existing disciplines/inclusion and visibility of women through academic activism? What does a women's studies programme connote: is it about integration of women into the existing curriculum/changing the disciplines rethinking theoretical and analytical approaches/adding new knowledge about women to the ongoing research and teaching projects? All these seem to be unresolved issues even after two decades of "successful" institutionalisation. Even as women's studies scholars continue to engage with these questions there is very little attempt made to connect practices of women's studies to specific forms and patterns of institutionalisation and how the latter has impacted on the kinds of knowledge produced, nurtured and disseminated. Also, over the decades mapping of its "successful" career has meant that

there is very little critical analysis of its perspectives and programmes.

In the above context, this paper attempts to explore how women's studies was defined and carried out within the academic institutions of higher education in Tamil Nadu. Our contention is that, to a large extent, defining women's studies as a subject or discipline or as a critical perspective was contingent upon the nature of initiatives and the forms of its institutionalisation in higher education. In other words, the conditions and possibilities of introducing and carrying out women's studies as an academic discipline were also constrained by the very nature of this institutionalisation.

Based on a survey of academic institutions that are engaged in women's studies, this paper attempts to provide an account of important trends and the direction that women's studies has taken over the years in Tamil Nadu and its implication for the development of women's studies as a discipline. In this context, it is important to briefly engage with the history of how women's studies was conceptualised and instituted.

### 'Disciplining' Women's Studies: The Founding Discourse

As acknowledged by many women's studies scholars, the foundation for women's studies was laid in the 1970s with the tabling of the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India called *Towards Equality* (1974), followed by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) Advisory Committee on Women's Studies (1977) that demanded new research on the social and economic conditions of women.<sup>3</sup> The committee for instance stated: "the main objective of the programme of women's studies is the generation and analysis of data with a view to uncovering significant trends in patterns of social and economic organisation which affect women's position in the long run".<sup>4</sup> In other words, the committee underlined the fact that the purpose of these research activities was to challenge the marginalisation and misrepresentation of women in social science disciplines and

scholarship by adding new knowledge about women through generating data, etc.

Institutionally, it was the SNDT Women's University in Bombay that established the first women's studies centre as the Research Centre for Women's Studies in 1974 with a focus on the systematic documentation of various aspects of women's lives that could be made available as "data on the status of women in diverse fields".<sup>5</sup> Around this time two more institutions, the Institute of Social Studies Trust (founded in 1976) and the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS, established in 1980) were also established mainly to undertake new research on women in the context of socio-economic and political transformation.

Until the 1980s, the number of institutions committed to carrying out women's studies programmes was very minimal. But discussions on the scope and objectives of women's studies were already taking place in various platforms. The ICSSR committee defined the main objectives of women's studies programmes as research on the socio-economic conditions that affect women's lives and thus generate new data and analysis that add new knowledge and also a critical perspective to the social science disciplines. Similarly, in 1979, a group of women's studies scholars in their first discussions on the nature and scope of women's studies defined its objectives as "transformation of spheres of knowledge production" with the "new academic search to organise knowledge on various aspects of women's situation resulting in changes in perspectives about women's contribution to society and their needs and problems in the context of modernisation, development and social change".<sup>6</sup>

A cursory glance at some of the early discussions on what constitutes women's studies make it clear that in the formative years women's studies was envisaged as "interventionist" within higher education and not as a "discipline with a course or curriculum or teaching methods. It was largely perceived to be a "critical instrument in the educational process".<sup>7</sup> The first National Conference on Women's Studies held in 1981 defined women's studies as a "critical perspective" and an intellectual pursuit in understanding social reality and not as a discipline or as a separate programme.<sup>8</sup> Instead, it recommended an integration of the women's question in all disciplines. Similarly, the UNESCO conference on Women's Studies in South and South-east Asia held in 1983, described it as "critical instrument for social science development" and also a "critical understanding of social reality".<sup>9</sup> Around this time, feminist scholars too defined women's studies as a "process of becoming aware of situation of women" and as "a movement to assert the interests of women as a sex".<sup>10</sup>

However, in the early 1980s both the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) clearly felt that it was not enough to merely acquire new knowledge on the conditions and status of women but that women's studies needed to be integrated into existing academic disciplines as courses and as a research agenda with a multidisciplinary focus. For the first time, in a joint seminar organised by the IAWS and UGC in 1985, the importance of founding separate Centres for Women's Studies within institutions for higher education, to carry out research and teaching in women's studies was emphasised. In conceptualising the role and status of the women's studies centres, it was emphasised that they should be "independent and parallel to the department and faculties" in order to avoid "structural constraints and delays" in coordinating research and teaching. It was believed that by

instituting women's studies, the educational system would be made accountable "to expand the social concern against injustice, marginalisation and oppression of women".<sup>11</sup> Towards this, the centres for women's studies were expected to play a "catalytic role" in motivating the entire university community to address issues that concern women's development.

Though women's studies was conceptualised primarily as a research and teaching agenda to be carried out at the institutions for higher education, there was considerable anxiety to make it relevant to the outside community. Especially, in the 1980s, as the women's movement gained momentum, women's studies researchers, teachers and students were urged to link their scholarship with action programmes of women's groups in order to make it relevant outside the academic community. When the CWDS was founded as a research institute to undertake research on women, its founders "tried to balance research and action in their agenda".<sup>12</sup> In other words, women's studies research itself was conceptualised as outreach programme.<sup>13</sup>

The anxiety to make women's studies accountable both to the academy and activism found its place in the UGC's policy on women's studies which right from the beginning emphasised the "extension activity" as an important component of women's studies. For instance, the first UGC guidelines for development of women's studies in Indian universities and colleges brought out in 1986, clearly underlined that extension work was crucial for women's studies programmes to play an interventionist role and in the implementation of development policies for women. The guidelines stated,

(g)reatest importance to be attached to extension work, as a learning and developmental instrument, for the benefit of the community, students and teachers. Its role in women's studies is crucial as it would enable the women's studies programme to play an interventionist role for the improvement of women in particular and society in general. At the same time it will lead to an effective implementation of development policies meant for women as well as the other weaker sections of the community.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to note here that in the guideline, but for the call to recognise the relevance of women's studies as policy intervention, nowhere had the UGC spelt out the linkages between research, teaching and extension work in terms of how they would feed into each other.

Since the UGC was mainly responsible for the institutionalisation of women's studies in Indian academic institutions, it is important to see how the disproportionate stress on extension activity as an important component in carrying out women's studies substantially diluted the earlier conceptualisation of women's studies as a "critique of knowledge production". This clearly points to the need for a critical review of the nature and content of the "successful" institutionalisation of the women's studies programme by the UGC.

## UGC Initiatives in Women's Studies

### *Institutionalisation*

The first UGC guidelines for the 'Development of Women's Studies in Indian Universities and Colleges', brought out in 1986, envisaged women's studies as "support for other policy thrusts of UGC and for the induction of extension as the third dimension of university activities".<sup>15</sup> Though the UGC recommended that women's studies "should not be organised as a separate discipline or

department" it came up with two models of the institutionalisation of women's studies within universities: (a) women's cells within existing departments and (b) centres for women's studies as independent units with the status of a department. Along with research and teaching, these centres were expected to carry out their extension activities as collaboration and networking with national and international agencies.

Based on these guidelines, from 1986-97 the UGC funded 22 women's studies centres and 11 cells in various colleges. During the Ninth Plan period in 1998, the UGC funded centres for women's studies in universities and colleges increased to 34 and 13 respectively. As per the Tenth Plan, an additional 22 centres for women's studies were to be created in the universities along with 12 more centres in the colleges, with a total of 66 centres for women's studies within the universities and colleges all over India. While the sheer magnitude of the number of these centres indicates the successful institutionalisation of women's studies, it makes one ponder about the nature of this institutionalisation and more important, the implications of such institutionalisation for the academic content of women's studies.

### **Women's Studies as Outreach Programme**

Almost a decade after constituting these centres, it appears, that to a large extent, the research and teaching activities seemed to have been marginalised at the cost of carrying out "extension work".<sup>16</sup> Often the centres came to be recognised by UGC as advanced centres mainly for their successful outreach programme and not for their academic contributions. For instance, an approach paper brought out by the UGC in 1998, while reviewing the activities of these centres, took special note of their ability to "build the component of action potential in whatever research has been undertaken".<sup>17</sup>

In the Ninth Plan, not only extension activity but advocacy was also identified as a priority area for the centres to concentrate upon. In that, the guideline emphasised "partnership and clustering" and networking with various organisations. Accordingly, the centres were also placed under various phases for funding, etc. For instance, it was required of these centres in their phase I to concentrate on "networking", which could also mean focusing on extension activities and outreach programmes. Not only was very little importance given to academic activities within the budget allocation for these centres, but also priority was given to extension activities, since the UGC considers that "fulfilling the national goals of women's empowerment is a priority area for all women's studies centres".

### **Budget Allocation**

Unravelling the components making up the budget of a centre, we find for instance that, during the Tenth Plan women's studies centres have been given a total of Rs 6 lakh for the implementation of an "action plan and activities and programme" and Rs 7 lakh for "other activities such as mobilisation, skill training and councelling to microcredit and SHG groups".<sup>18</sup> A mere Rs 1 lakh has been allotted for documentation, development of educational materials, syllabi and course material, publication, etc, and another Rs 1 lakh for the purchase of books and journals.

Despite this complete lack of emphasis on the academic content of women's studies as revealed through budget heads, and despite exhorting the centres to focus their entire attention on the outreach

programme, the UGC has no compunctions in mandating these centres to draft curricula and syllabuses in women's studies for different disciplines within the colleges and universities. In fact, at phase III these centres are expected to become a resource or nodal centre in their regions with a special mandate to carry out outstanding academic works in women's studies. At the third phase, the centres are demanded to be "strong academic centres of teaching and learning, generating new thinking and knowledge on feminist theory and offering women's studies courses". In other words, by the time a centre is placed at the third phase, it appears that it is expected to convert its entire extension works or outreach programmes into academic activities such as drafting syllabi, etc.

However, detailed case studies of different centres reveal that this has not been possible for various reasons. When most activities in the first phase of women's studies were not connected to "knowledge generation and critical perspective on social sciences", it can hardly enable a centre to suddenly launch full-fledged academic activities. The implication of this, (that is, disproportionate emphasis on extension work), according to us is that, it has had deleterious consequences for the ability of women's studies centres to contribute to developing women's studies as a discipline. This calls for collective and critical reflection. So far, there has been very little attempt made to connect practices of women's studies to specific forms and patterns of institutionalisation and how that has created an impact on the kinds of knowledge produced, nurtured and disseminated.

### **The Survey**

This survey was carried out after a brainstorming session at the Madras Institute of Development Studies where faculty teaching women's studies courses in colleges in Chennai deliberated on several aspects of their experience. This brainstorming enabled us to put together a "guideline questionnaire" that formed the basis of our data collection for this survey.<sup>19</sup>

In retrospect, we feel that this approach has been instrumental in throwing up a rich variety of institutional typologies, sometimes within the same college/university. Here, we must qualify our effort as an introductory – level survey only of women's studies at the institutions of higher education in Tamil Nadu. It is not a complete review of scholarship and pedagogy of women's studies; rather it attempts to map the direction that the institutionalisation of women's studies has taken and in the process enables us to understand what meaning and content inform the practice of women's studies in Tamil Nadu.

The survey was conducted in three regions of Tamil Nadu covering 30 institutions of higher education. The survey mapped the nature and history of institutions and different departments that offered women's studies.

The category of the course, whether it is a core, optional, major or allied paper, the duration of the course, eligibility criteria for joining the course, nature of certification, specific requirements of the course (if any), expertise, infrastructure and other facilities available for teaching and carrying out research activities, methods of teaching, specific requirement for teaching women's studies, the staff recruitment procedure, profile of the students/participants, teachers, nature of networking and alignment with outside women's organisations and the nature and source of funding for

women's studies were important components of the survey. Other than this survey, individual interviews with a few founder members, teaching staff and students were also carried out.

## Institutional Patterns

The survey revealed the existence of a variety of institutional patterns that in fact contest the idea that women's studies is a fallout of the women's movement. Instead, there definitely was a "women's studies movement" in Tamil Nadu prior to the women's movement and prior to UGC initiatives. Following is the broad typology of initiatives undertaken to institutionalise women's studies in Tamil Nadu.

- Government initiative of starting of a women's university to exclusively teach and research in women's studies (Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal)
- Starting of women's studies in Christian colleges by the United Board of Christians for Higher Education and also by the All India Association of Christians for Higher Education.
- Self-financed private institutes that offer mainly certificate courses and diploma degrees in women's studies.
- UGC initiatives in colleges and universities in the form of centres and cells other than introducing women's studies in various departments as degree granting programmes.

Each of these patterns contain a variety of methods and practices of women's studies which reveal not just how women's studies got instituted but also the ambiguities and contradictory nature of teaching and doing research in women's studies in Tamil Nadu.<sup>20</sup> For want of space, we provide limited details on select institutional typologies.

## Government Initiatives in Women's Studies

Even before the UGC directive on starting women's studies courses in colleges and universities, a women's university was started in Tamil Nadu to teach and research women's issues. The founding of a university, mainly to carry out women's studies was premised on the understanding that there is a need for an enquiry mainly in the form of research into the subordinate position of women and to suggest ways and means of attaining women's equality.

In 1982, at the instance of Bharathiar Centenary celebrations, the then chief minister, M G Ramachandran decided to establish a women's university. Towards this, an expert committee was set up under the chairmanship of Malcom Adisesiah to advise the government in establishing the university. This committee outlined the purpose of setting up of a women's university as:

to monitor the progress of and obstacles to women's education in the state and the country, offer consultancy services to women's educational institutions at all levels to speed the progress of women's education, and undertake research on all obstacles to the attainment of equality of status by women and the means of overcoming them.<sup>21</sup>

This is how the Mother Teresa Women's University came to be established in 1985.

In setting up the university, the expert committee clearly stated, that the primary task of this university was to establish women's studies as a "multi or trans-disciplinary and challenge the arrangement of knowledge into academic uni-disciplines...." Towards this, the university was expected to mainstream women and

women's experiences through changing of existing curricula and methodology of teaching and research in all social science disciplines.<sup>22</sup> Though the committee for setting up this university clearly emphasised the need for women's studies, it was not clear to the faculty in these departments as to what exactly women's studies was all about.<sup>23</sup> However, individuals within these departments made efforts to include topics related to women, like in the case of the Tamil department where there were papers related to representation of women in Tamil language and literature to be taught as MPhil courses. Similarly, within the department of history, a paper on 'Women through History' raised issues of invisibility of women in history. By about 1987, with the help of UGC funding, the university introduced a regular course for the MPhil degree in these departments and also started new departments like economics, sociology and home management. It was only after 1993, that the university introduced the regular MA degree courses in various departments.

In the formative years the university was also engaged in, what it described as, "sort of a campaign for women's studies". The faculty of different departments went to various colleges in Madurai to conduct workshops and to lobby with the institutions to start women's studies within various disciplines. As Devadata observes, "though the university was not involved in doing research, it prepared syllabuses and course modules for teaching women's studies and distributed to them college teachers during the awareness programme".<sup>24</sup> In the early years, despite lack of space and infrastructure facilities, with the help of few staff and with suggestions from women's studies experts, the university managed to build a strong library with a fairly good collection of books on feminism and women's studies and thus became a resource centre for researchers. The staff were also encouraged to undertake independent research and sent on various exchange programmes to other women's studies centres abroad. The university received both UGC funding and funds from the state government, though there was no international funding.

In terms of teaching and degree programmes, the starting of postgraduate (MA) courses in various departments could not take off since there were no students due to the inaccessibility of the place where the university was located, in adequate hostel facilities, etc, and also for other reasons such as the MA courses not being "job-oriented". So much so, that in the department of women's studies, started in 1988, there is not a single student enrolled since 2001 and the centre for women's studies has no staff at all except the director. Given the UGC mandate to the centres for women's studies to carry out research, teaching and extension activities, the director alone single handedly carries out various research projects, training programmes, etc. Our investigator observes that the entire university has only 300 students registered either in the department of distance education or in the research programme of some departments.

The significant aspect of Mother Teresa Women's University is the offering of women's studies as a course through 125 study centres located at various places in Tamil Nadu. Since the university failed to attract students to enrol for regular courses, it started the distance education programme. Students could now register at these centres for various degrees and get their degree awarded by the university. As one of the staff in one of these centres observed, "these centres attract students mainly because they offer career-oriented courses like BBA, MBA, and diploma in catering, corporate finance and masters in computer applications". The

staff also feels that the offering of vocational and job-oriented courses to women students has completely changed the goals and objectives of starting the university and also the idea of women's studies.

The university has also started a women's college in Kodaikanal for career development or vocational courses mainly offering degrees like BBA, MBA, MCA and MCom, etc. Interestingly, though these courses are offered ostensibly to "empower women" they do not even offer a single paper on "women and development" or on any other themes in women's studies. On the other hand, the degree courses in social science subjects offer managerial courses with the view to generate employment opportunities. Within the social sciences departments, the postgraduate first year students of history are taught papers like 'women and management' and "women and technology". Also the MA degree in women's studies has been renamed as "MA in women's studies and computer applications" in order to make it relevant for students to acquire jobs. Now the students of women's studies are not offered papers on women's history or on the women's movement. Instead, the second year MA students are taught papers like "women and entrepreneurship and NGO management".

Another unique feature of this university is that it has both a department of women's studies (funded by the university) that offers MA, MPhil and PhD degrees and also a centre for women's studies funded by UGC, offering similar degrees but mainly carrying out the UGC mandate of "extension work". Caught up within the agenda of making women's studies relevant, the centre organises a variety of programmes like AIDS awareness, environmental awareness programmes along with counselling and gender sensitivity training for adolescent girls. Training programmes for women self-help groups (SHGs) in entrepreneur development, fashion designing, flower making, jute product making, and bee-keeping nursery are offered from the centre as certificate courses. The centre is also actively involved in forming the women's SHGs and also in establishing a marketing centre for products of the SHGs. As the centre's handbook indicates nearly 75 such women's SHGs have been formed by the centre. A production centre run by the centre for women's studies markets goods produced by the SHGs like garments, juices, jams, etc. One of the centre's future programme is to open up showrooms for these products in other parts of Tamil Nadu and also to "participate in local, regional, national and international exhibitions to reach some export orders for some products".<sup>25</sup> The centre carries out research projects mainly to "educate" women on the state welfare programme like 'Mahalir Thittam', micro-credit for SHGs, women's cooperatives, IRDP, etc.

### **Christian Institutions' Initiatives in Women's Studies**

As far back as 1972, it was the Christian higher educational institutions in Tamil Nadu that were engaged in debates on making women's studies an academic discipline. Colleges like the Women's Christian College started the Madras Women's Centre primarily to carry out research on women and to systematically document the role and status of women. Interestingly, all the Christian academic institutions defined women's studies primarily as women's education with the clear objective of conscientising the entire academic community on women's issues

and to some extent rethink social science disciplines from women's point of view. The methods adopted by these colleges in introducing women's studies as a teaching programme was also quite unique unlike in the case of UGC sponsored women's studies programme. Many of them had intensive faculty orientation programmes and active involvement of teachers and students in curriculum planning and in evolving the new course structure for women's studies. Women's studies was clearly perceived to be an educational activity, the pursuit of new knowledge and not as community activism or an outreach programme.

Towards this end, it was considered highly important to raise awareness among the academic community and also shape the discipline of women's studies through new curriculum planning, etc. In other words, capacity building of faculty to teach the women's studies course was given high priority within the women's studies programme. The initiative of Lady Doak College, Madurai, needs to be particularly noted for its recognition of the need for enhancing the capacity of all faculty and the special efforts that were made to provide this orientation before faculty was entrusted with the responsibility of teaching the course as interdisciplinary one. However, this was not always the case with all the Christian colleges. While one could attribute the success of the women's studies programme in these colleges to the motivation and funding offered by the International Christian Higher education bodies, to a large extent, within each college, it was the local level and individual initiative that shaped the meaning and content of women's studies.

However, over the years, these colleges also became entrapped in the business of making women's studies relevant and accountable to women other than the academic community. By the 1990s, many of the centres and cells within these colleges too became catalysts in carrying out 'outreach programmes' and not paying adequate attention to curriculum revision and academic research in women's studies. In the area of teaching, colleges had to modify the women's studies courses to suit the interest of the students of self-financed courses and make women's studies more accessible to job aspirants. In response to changing requirements, the theme of making women's studies "relevant" meant that a women's studies courses had to demonstrate its interest not just in women's development but also in "human development" and further, to show that it was not opposed to male interests.

In other words, even while constituting an identity for women's studies as one where the primary interest was women's development, these courses and centres were quick to add that women's studies did mean excluding men and that they were neither anti-men nor feminists. The latter is the common refrain used by a number of women's studies practitioners in these institutions as well as in the women's studies centres funded by the UGC. Put differently, women's studies or gender studies need not adapt feminist perspective. The fact that both the teachers and students within women's studies constantly reiterate that they are not feminists but support equality of the sexes reveal that women's studies programmes in Tamil Nadu share the idea that equality can be achieved and has been largely achieved without feminism.

### **UGC Sponsored Women's Studies Centres**

Right from the beginning the UGC initiated women's studies programme was conceptualised and carried out mainly as an outreach programme and community activism, in which the students and teachers of women's studies were expected to involve themselves instead of just carrying out academic activities

like other departments of the universities and colleges. The plethora of community activities carried out by the centres was to exemplify the interdisciplinary nature of women's studies since it was combining activism with academic degrees (not necessarily academic output in terms of research papers and academic publications). While these centres have been quite successful in implementing the UGC guidelines through their extension work, their pedagogical and intellectual legacies are marked by insignificant scholarship among the faculties who otherwise play an important role in making women's studies action-oriented.

In this context, it becomes important to enquire how far these centres, have been able to mainstream gender within the other disciplines that are taught in the university. A few centres are located within a predominantly science/technology university; the question then arises, how have such centres been able to work across the social science and science divide. Other questions that are relevant in the Tamil Nadu context include the following: Why is it that the UGC sponsored women's studies programme in Tamil Nadu is largely successful only as an extension programme and not as an academic one? Why are these centres not recognised as centres of excellence in academics? In our limited engagement with these questions, it seems to us that, to some extent, this has to do also with the state's higher education policy that has consistently marginalised teaching and research in social science subjects in favour of what the state considers as more important, namely, vocational higher education.

It is not only that the entire higher education system in Tamil Nadu is tuned towards providing employment-oriented and professional courses, but equally, within the higher education policy, women's studies is conceptualised only as a programme that offers women students career-oriented courses. Towards this end it was expected that women's studies centres would implement government programmes for women's empowerment.<sup>26</sup> In other words, although the UGC guidelines identified various sets of activities including teaching and research along with extension work, the centres in Tamil Nadu, in order to be recognised by the government for future funding, preferred to constitute women's studies either as career courses or as activism to implement government programmes. Even "activism" was narrowed down to outreach programmes. For instance, within the university campuses, by and large these centres hardly did any activism, in terms of taking up issues like sexual harassment of women staff or students or even the special needs of women employees. While the centres do not network among the women employees or students, they have been actively networking with government agencies and NGOs.

Given the orientation of women's studies towards outreach programme, one also wonders, why in a few cases the UGC approved a centre when a department for women's studies already existed.<sup>27</sup> In the case of colleges, the intervention by bodies such as the UGC seems to have bypassed and/or not taken cognisance of initiatives already in place in a few colleges. It is not clear whether a "rigid" application of UGC norms killed local initiatives or whether college managements found the UGC norms handy to stop activities that had begun to raise uncomfortable questions on a range of issues, not necessarily confined to pedagogy.

It is quite clear that much of women's studies in Tamil Nadu is all about institutional activism devoid of an epistemological base and even less of scholarship. Even rethinking course work along these lines seem to have enabled the restoration of women's traditional image as responsible beings and their roles as volunteers. Undoubtedly, the identity of women has become central

to women's studies but there has been no shift to such expansive terms like gender and sexuality studies despite some good critique of the exclusive focus on women in women's studies.

### **Pedagogy of Women's Studies: A Flavour of Courses Offered**

From the 1990s, the pedagogy of women's studies has gained enormous significance, which is evident from the number of courses and papers in women's studies being introduced within various disciplines/departments of social sciences in the colleges of Tamil Nadu. In Chennai, out of the 18 institutions covered by the survey, 13 institutions including the Madras University offer a course in women's studies in the department of history, either for undergraduates or for postgraduates or at both levels. The department of economics in six colleges and in the university offer courses on various aspects of women and the economy. From 1994, the department of economics in the university also runs a centre for gender studies. While four colleges offer women's studies within the department of social work, two colleges offer it in the discipline of psychology, three in sociology and three in the English department. In Trichi, two colleges offer women's studies within the department of history, two in economics, two colleges within English, and one in social work and two in the department of Tamil. In Madurai, out of the six institutions covered, one college offers courses in women's studies within the department of history, one in sociology, two in the department of English and one within the Tamil department. Women's studies courses are also offered through a separate department of women's studies and by the centre for women's studies in two universities. It needs to be noted here, that women's studies, by and large, has been introduced only in women's colleges with the exception of a few co-education/men's colleges that are mainly Christian colleges.

In almost all colleges, depending on the requirement of the course within various disciplines, on an average at least 40 to 60 students at the undergraduate level and 20 to 40 students at the postgraduate level attend the course.<sup>28</sup> However, in the co-education colleges, mainly women students opt for women's studies courses. In some colleges, the male students seem to take up the courses only if job prospects are part of the papers offered. Also, since the Tamil Nadu government excessively focuses on the development of women entrepreneurs, within the business degree courses like BBA and BCom at least one or two units on women entrepreneurship are offered, which male students find unavoidable to obtain their degree. In Loyola College, where only male students are admitted for undergraduate courses, an optional paper, introduced in 1992, entitled, 'Women and Dalits' has attracted male students to opt for it since it is "topical and relevant". Whereas in the same college, when a paper called 'Gender Justice' was introduced in the sociology department for undergraduate male students, until 2004 not a single student had opted for it. In some colleges, like in the case of St. Joseph's College in Trichi, even if the male students choose the courses in women's studies as part of their research degrees, research on themes related to women or gender especially at the MPhil and PhD levels were undertaken only by female students.

Even in the women's colleges, if the course offered is not "job-oriented", the number of students attending the course seems to be drastically dwindling. For instance, in Stella Maris college, where women's studies is offered as an optional paper against other "job-oriented" or vocational courses, only very few and

sometimes none of the students opt for it. In WCC, for more than 10 years beginning from 1982, the history department offered a one semester paper entitled ‘Women’s Studies’ as an optional open to a cross-section of undergraduate students. While the response to the paper in the 1980s was said to be good, by the early 1990s, it appears to have lost out to more “job-oriented, technical and vocational courses” that were available, and this optional paper on women’s studies had to be withdrawn. Other optional papers offered by the history department, such as human resource development, tourism, art and architecture seem to have attracted students in large numbers. Similarly, at the St Joseph’s College, Trichi, in the department of human resources, for three years women’s studies was offered as an allied paper for the final year postgraduate students. Since there was a poor response from the students the entire paper had to be dropped.

In some cases, departments have considerably modified the women’s studies courses to accommodate the students’ interest in “job-oriented” courses. For instance, in SDBVN college in Chennai, in the department of psychology, a paper called ‘Personality Theory and Women’s Studies’ was introduced in 1996 but was dropped in 2002 since there were no students opting for this paper. Instead, a paper on ‘Entrepreneurship Development and Women’ has been introduced to attract the students. Sometimes, when the established disciplines in social sciences like history, did not find adequate number of students enrolled for the courses, these departments were converted into departments of human rights, which in turn offered one or two papers on women. It is significant to note that across different colleges in Tamil Nadu, within the department of history, a shift from women’s studies to human rights has occurred. For instance, at the Holy Cross college, Trichi, from the early 1990s, a paper on ‘Women’s Studies’ was offered to the undergraduate students of history, which received a good response. However, when the department, in 2003, wanted to introduce women’s studies at the postgraduate level it decided to have papers like ‘Status of Women’ only as part of the course on ‘Human Rights’. It also consciously included projects and field works as part of the teaching method, unlike in the case of other papers in history. The course on ‘human rights’ seemed to have attracted a substantial number of students who perceived the future prospect of a job in the NGO sector. Again, in Ethiraj College in Chennai, the department of history once had a compulsory paper called ‘Women’s Studies’ for undergraduate students. In 2002, when the department shifted its focus from women’s studies to human rights, the paper ‘Women’s Studies’ was reduced to a unit within a paper on ‘Group Rights’. Within a paper on ‘Duties of Citizen’ a unit on ‘Duties of Women’ was introduced.<sup>29</sup>

### **‘Making Women’s Studies Relevant’: Some Reflections**

The “objectives” enumerated by different colleges for introducing specific papers in women’s studies, is revealing for the palpable anxiety to be “relevant”. The changes in the content of various courses over time and the change in the nomenclature show, that this business of making women’s studies relevant is articulated in very many ways.

In the Madras Christian College, from the beginning it was emphasised, “Women’s Studies is not a clarion call for asserting women’s superiority. There is absolutely no question of any debate on male-female superiority, but on the other hand a definite emphasis on male-female parity”.<sup>30</sup> In the same college, a staff member handling the course on women’s studies in the department

of history observed that the change in nomenclature from women studies to gender studies has evidently increased the comfort level of male students, who now opt for this course in greater numbers.

Similarly, in the history department of Women’s Christian College, the women’s studies course was restructured to make it more “topical” and “relevant” by titling the course as ‘Gender Studies’. At the Holy Cross College, the department of economics claimed that a paper on ‘Women and Development’ aims to “motivate [the students] to participate effectively in community building”. Reading through the syllabus, it is clear that the course is no way geared to critically engage with the discipline of economics. Rather the paper is structured to “inform” students of the lacuna in our understanding of economic processes because of the exclusion of women as a category. From a study of the “economic situation” of women, papers on women’s studies in the economics department, in general, end up trying to promote “women as entrepreneurs”.

In Mother Teresa Women’s University, right from the beginning, the anxiety was how to make women’s studies accountable to the government’s development programme. For instance, in introducing the aims and activities of the university to the principals of the colleges, the former vice chancellor warned that “research projects must be such as are relevant to the needs of the times and respond meaningfully to the demands of national development”.<sup>31</sup>

At Avinashilingam University, the anxiety seems to be to make women’s studies relevant to students by offering job-oriented courses to them. As the director of the centre comments,

being relevant is important for women’s studies to grow and to be beneficial to all women. Therefore there is a need for even a separate department for women and computer application and not just a course. With the lofty ideals of women and nutrition as subject of study, no student is coming forward to take up those courses. Therefore, we need to have courses like ‘women and visual communication’ with a syllabus, etc. But for this UGC concurrence is important. These job-oriented courses then could be offered as PG/MPhil courses to all the students of the seven departments at the university. This would enable the students to get jobs.<sup>32</sup>

The anxiety to “sustain” women’s studies’ departments/centres (in order also that the staff employed in these are retained) is evident from the change in the titles of the departments and courses to attract students. For example the Mother Teresa Women’s University, following the department of women’s studies at the Alagappa University, has titled the MA degree course as ‘Women’s Studies and Computer Applications’.

Often women and gender studies have been used interchangeably as a name for the courses or for the centres. What is offered at the undergraduate level as women’s studies is renamed as gender studies at the postgraduate level. As with the promotion of a degree course, women get promoted to gender. Otherwise there seem to be no rationale behind why the undergraduate students are offered women’s studies while the postgraduates are offered gender studies. A related but equally important issue that needs to be highlighted is the following: a paper or course offered by, say, a department of history, that does not consider it necessary to interrogate the discipline itself. Hence what we have observed is not the integration or mainstreaming of women or gender within a discipline but the addition of a separate course called women/gender studies (whatever that means).

In other words, what we are emphasising is that there is no engendering of scholarship in different disciplines through the introduction of women’s studies courses. While it is true that

there is very little of an interdisciplinary base for teaching women's studies, the courses on women's studies introduced by different disciplines/departments have not paid sufficient attention to the existing methods and practices of different disciplines and whether or not these are adequate for studying gender. The sheer number/variety of papers offered in women's studies, in our opinion, seem not to add up to the problematic of "integration" or "mainstreaming" gender into various disciplines. They are quantitatively additive in the sense of being added to the existing or even new and emerging disciplines like human rights, environment, etc. Therefore, women's studies as it is currently conceptualised in Tamil Nadu institutions of higher education do not challenge existing disciplines and/or disciplinary practices.

On the contrary, given the perception that gender is marketable, courses like women and entrepreneurship have acquired immense popularity. Further, women and women's studies today has become an acceptable topic for research; the latter is often undertaken uncritically without the preliminary exercise of examining a discipline's basic concepts, theories and methods that would very often have constructed and validated the exclusion and marginalisation of women in the first place. In order to do so, there is a need for women's studies scholars to have a strong foundation in established disciplines. As Krishnaraj observes,

...persons exposed exclusively to women's studies may develop sensitivity to issues and pick up its language and rhetoric, but somehow lack the foundation of intellectual discipline that comes from grounding in a parent discipline and exposure to readings in other areas that are linked with mainstream developments.<sup>33</sup>

In short, from the detailed survey of the curriculum we are unable to comprehend how the women's studies courses, taught as part of various disciplines, transcend accepted premises and methods of the discipline. In other words, what are the aspects of the course that challenge disciplinary practices such as the mode and content of teaching, the curriculum and the examination models? Does the aspect of making it relevant automatically challenge disciplinary boundaries? Here we may have to critically note the role of higher education in strictly maintaining disciplinary boundaries, which has hardly been challenged by the institutionalisation of women's studies. On the contrary, as Mary Romero observes, "...the further institutionalisation of women's studies increases the multidiscipline structure rather than 'interdisciplinarity'... [whereas] critical interdisciplinarity, is aimed at critiquing and challenging the organisation of knowledge into disciplines and the reward system that maintains it".<sup>34</sup>

Even by 2000 the course outlines or reading lists for papers on women's studies within various disciplines hardly changed to reflect the recent and emerging feminist scholarship and the politics of women's movements. Therefore, we find that papers and courses on women's studies continue to focus only on the experiences and voices of upper caste women who serve as models for understanding "femininity" and "womanhood". Differences and inequalities among various groups of women were neither acknowledged nor formed part of the teaching or research in women's studies.

We have already alluded above to the fact that in quite a number of colleges and centres for women's studies, both faculty and students emphatically stated that they were not feminists and that women's equality could be achieved without adherence to feminism. The association of feminism with militancy and aggressiveness, and as being alien to India, were perceptions that were deep-rooted but without any base in scholarship. It is

interesting however to note that both the faculty who teach the course and the students who opt for the course, when asked to explain what made them teach or opt for it stated, among other things, that they did not perceive the course as "too political" and therefore found it acceptable; they also considered women's studies courses as "soft subject" and hence also non-rigorous. The perception that women's studies courses are non-rigorous is quite pervasive in Tamil Nadu and across the country and has contributed in no small measure to women faculty preferring to remain in their "original" disciplines and departments even while researching on issues of gender and feminism from an interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary perspective.

In comparative terms, women's studies as a degree-granting programme has been quite successful compared to the minimum level of research undertaken in these institutions. Nevertheless, a glance at the women's studies curriculum offered in various disciplines seem to indicate that it has benefited very little from the research in women's studies carried out by feminists scholars in India and it has not adequately motivated students to undertake research in women's studies. Further, there is a complete lack of conceptualisation of gender as a system of relations that connects to polity, economy and society. Today, women's studies centres with its various programme are not the place where research on women or feminist knowledge is produced.

### By Way of Conclusion

The teaching and research on women's studies in Tamil Nadu has not moved beyond what Leora Auslander calls as "recovery projects",<sup>35</sup> i.e., documenting women's experiences and recovering positive female role models. Making women visible by centring of women's voices and experiences has been integral to women's studies but unless these develop into concepts, methods and analysis in women's studies they would remain mere self-validation without scholarship.<sup>36</sup> The problematic of providing visibility to women through centring of women's experiences without making that to be an academic enquiry has been quite well elaborated upon by feminist scholars.<sup>37</sup>

Academic enquiry into women's experiences, exploring the interconnection between gender, sexuality, caste and women's studies and linkages with various disciplines has not formed part of the women's studies programme in Tamil Nadu. Even as these centres are incapable of influencing government policies related to women, the outreach programme has gained popularity among the government agencies since women's studies centres have been instrumental in uncritically carrying out the state's "women's empowerment" programme.<sup>38</sup> At one level, given the high visibility accorded to women's studies programmes one could suggest that Tamil Nadu had a "women's studies movement". But the question that begs an answer and detailed analysis is whether this women's studies movement has been able to achieve the kinds of intellectual, institutional and political changes promised by the founders of women's studies in India. EPW

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### Notes

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- 1 Bonnie Zimmerman, 'Beyond Dualisms: Some Thoughts about Women's Studies for the Future' in the Question of Women's Studies, [http://info-centre.ccit.arizona.edu/ws/future/plenary\\_papers/part\\_1.pdf](http://info-centre.ccit.arizona.edu/ws/future/plenary_papers/part_1.pdf).
- 2 See for instance, Neera Desai, Vina Mazumdar and Kamalini Bhansali, 'From Women's Education to Women's Studies: The Long Struggle for Legitimacy' in Devaki Jain and Pam Rajput (eds), *Narratives from the Women's Studies Family: Recreating Knowledge*, Sage, New Delhi, 2003; Kumud Sharma, 'Women's Studies and Higher Education: The Troubled Journey', Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 9: 2 (2002); Maithreyee Krishnaraj, 'Blazing a Quarter Century Trail: Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT University' in Devaki Jain and Pam Rajput (eds), *Narratives from the Women's Studies Family*.
- 3 One may note here that even before the Report of the Committee on Status of Women underlined the importance of new research on conditions of women, the SNDT Women's University resolved to set up a research unit within the university to carry out research and systematically document issues related women. For details of how the research unit in SNDT pioneered in carrying out women's studies see, Maithreyi Krishnaraj, 'Blazing a Quarter Century Trail'.
- 4 Indian Council of Social Science Research, *Programme of Women's Studies*, 1977, cited in Neera Desai et al, 'From Women's Education to Women's Studies', p 54.
- 5 Maithreyi Krishnaraj, 'Blazing a Quarter Century Trail', p 88.
- 6 Kumud Sharma, 'Women's Studies and Higher Education', p 210.
- 7 For details of how women's studies was conceptualised in the early years see, Neera Desai et al, 'From Women's Education', pp 44-77.
- 8 Report of the First National Conference on Women's Studies, cited in Kumud Sharma, 'Women's Studies and Higher Education', p 212.
- 9 Kumud Sharma, 'Women's Studies and Higher Education', p 212.
- 10 Maithreyi Krishnaraj, 'Why Women's Studies? Some Feminist Perspectives' in Maithreyi Krishnaraj (ed), *Women's Studies in India: Some Perspectives*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1986, pp 34-35.
- 11 Neera Desai et al, 'From Women's Education', p 67.
- 12 Kumud Sharma, 'Women's Studies and Higher Education', p 212.
- 13 Mary John, 'Women's Studies: Legacies and Futures' in Lotika Sarkar, Kumud Sharma and Leela Kasthuri (eds), *Between Tradition, Counter-Tradition and Heresy: Contributions in Honour of Vina Majumdar*, Rainbow Publishers, Noida, 2002, p 54.
- 14 The UGC Guidelines for Development of Women's Studies in Indian Universities, UGC, unpublished, 1986.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 In the Ninth Plan document, the UGC has defined the extension activities of the centre for women's studies as follows:  
"Extension programmes will include social action and community development activities like consciousness raising, sensitising on women's rights, capacity building, counselling, legal literacy aid and so on to be carried out as outreach programme". See, 'UGC Guidelines and Approach Paper for 1998', p 6.
- 17 The UGC Approach Paper 1998, p 3.
- 18 The other services included under this budget for centres in general (for the total of Rs 7 lakh) are as follows: (1) Project support for self-reliance to distressed women in families. (2) Educational awareness especially for women students, teachers and community. (3) Promotion of entrepreneurship among women especially for their participation in national activities in organising village trade fair, etc. (4) support to art, culture, dance drama music for preservation and maintenance as well as uplift of the tradition among the village girls or women. (5) Setting up of childcare centres and counselling/helpline.
- 19 As of now, there is no directory on centre for women's studies or details of colleges that offer women's studies courses in Tamil Nadu. The colleges as well as some universities were reluctant to provide us with the details of departments, courses and other historical details on women's studies, since they were extremely suspicious of our intention to collect information related to women's studies. For these reasons, we were able to collect information of colleges and universities that teach and carry out research in women's studies, only through our personal contact with the teachers in various colleges and with the help of research assistants. Therefore, the selection of institutions for this survey was based merely on our proximity to different colleges and universities, are only selective and do not represent the entire higher education institutions that carry out women's studies courses and programmes.
- 20 Details of each of the above typologies are discussed in detail in a paper available with the authors.
- 21 Malcolm Adiseshiah's letter to the minister for education dated September 15, 1982, reproduced in Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal Publication I (nd).
- 22 Ibid, pp xv, xvi.
- 23 Interview with Devadata, former registrar, controller of examination and head of department of Tamil, Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal, January 11, 2005.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Centre for Women's Studies, Mother Teresa Women's University, *Handbook*, nd.
- 26 The Tamil Nadu government empowerment programme in higher education includes the involvement of all higher education bodies in organising entrepreneurship development programmes, within the science programme, developing a data base on women scientists, free coaching for women students to appear in the IAS/IPS examinations, employment-oriented diploma programme for women students, etc. The government higher education policy note (2005-06) clearly envisages the main activities of Mother Teresa Women's University as "providing consultancy and monitoring services for the welfare department schemes for women". In the case of Avinashilingam University for Home Science the policy lists women's studies as a "career-oriented programme". See, [http://www.tn.gov.in/policy\\_notes/higher-education.htm](http://www.tn.gov.in/policy_notes/higher-education.htm).
- 27 Given the marginalised identity of these centres, as one director of one of the women's studies centres states, the desire to have a department for women's studies is mainly because the department has more power and prestige like all other departments within the university and is recognised for its academic works like offering degrees, etc. Whereas the centre has visibility mainly among the non-academic community.
- 28 More details on the courses offered in women's studies within various disciplines, the nature of student participation and the methods of evaluation, etc, are contained in a detailed paper available with the authors.
- 29 Similar changes have been introduced in other colleges like the Presidency College where the department of history has replaced a paper called women's studies with a paper on human rights. It is also interesting to note here that in some colleges, the paper on women's studies continues to be taught at the undergraduate level but the paper on human rights is introduced at the postgraduate level especially in the government arts colleges where very few students have enrolled for history.
- 30 Rukmani Sampathkumar, 'Women's Studies: The Madras Christian College Experience', in *Consultation on Women's Studies*, p 4.
- 31 Report of an address by the vice chancellor, K Vasanthi Devi at the conference of principals of women's colleges of Tamil Nadu, in Mother Teresa Women's University Publication I, p 4.
- 32 Interview with K C Leelavathy, director, Centre for Women's Studies, Avinashilingam Deemed University, Coimbatore, February 14, 2005
- 33 Maithreyi Krishnaraj, 'Blazing a Quarter Century Trail', p 108.
- 34 Mary Romero, 'Disciplining the Feminist Bodies of Knowledge: Are We Creating or Reproducing Academic Structure?' *NWSA Journal*, Vol 12, No 2, 2000, p 158.
- 35 Leora Auslander, 'Do Women's + Feminist + Men's + Lesbian and Gay + Queer Studies = Gender Studies?' *Differences*, Vol 9, No 3, Fall 1997.
- 36 For a detailed discussion on experience and analysis in women's studies see, Joanna De Groot and Mary Maynard, 'Facing the 1990s: Problems and Possibilities for Women's Studies' in Joanna De Groot and Mary Maynard (eds), *Women's Studies in the 1990s: Doing Things Differently?*, Macmillan, London, 1993, pp 149-78.
- 37 There seems to have been a fairly detailed discussion among feminist scholars based in the American universities on the question of engaging with "women's experience" as knowledge in women's studies. See for instance, Marilyn J Boxer, 'Unruly Knowledge: Women's Studies and the Problem of Disciplinarity', *NWSA Journal*, Vol 12, No 2, 2000.
- 38 Feminist scholars have already critically reviewed the concept of empowerment and empowerment projects for their "assimilation and instrumentalisation" of women. For details see, Saraswathi Raju, 'Limited Options – Rethinking Women's Empowerment 'Projects' in Development Discourses: A Case from Rural India', in *Gender, Technology and Development*, Vol 9, No 2, 2005 and for a critical understanding of the concept of empowerment in women's studies research see, Maithreyi Krishnaraj, 'Research in Women's Studies: Need for a Critical Appraisal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 40, No 28, July 9, 2005.