

# Why Women's Studies? Theorizing Social Disability and Status of Women in India

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of initiating Women's Studies as a course by UGC was to critically intervene into academics. There is a commonly adapted belief that Women's Studies are for the sole benefit of women and women's rights which in turn would result in men being treated as subordinates due to role reversal. This is a misconception as feminism advocates social justice and equality. Women's Studies intervene in studying the various forms of oppression due to patriarchal set up which is based on caste, class, disability and sexuality. Women's Studies also take on the task of providing a more accurate view of our history where women were rendered as invisible as their tasks were demarcated as non economic activities. By engaging with Women's Studies you do not only take a task on which we can learn and evolve, moving things in the right direction from here on, in our current day. The National Policy on Education, 1986 introduced Women's Studies as a course in colleges by playing the role of a positive interventionist in a male dominated regressive society. This paper would elaborate on the importance of feminist methodology in studying the society.

**Keywords:** *adaptive preference, gender mainstreaming, ideal type, patriarchy, social justice, sensitization, sexual division of labor, vulnerability*

## INTRODUCTION

Development means a positive change and the society where we live thrives on the fact that the powerful tend to dominate and dictate the rules of existence or as the popular saying goes 'Samrath ko nahi dosh Gosain'. So if we do want to bring about a transformation in this society we need to look into two things: 'Equity', ensuring the 'good for all' includes women and 'Sustainability' that would ensure the availability of these resources for the future generations to enhance their capabilities. Women and men are born with a set of innate abilities and these can be enhanced through social conditioning and access to resources but if we create barriers then the growth of women will always remain stunted. Feminist methodology of social science research is an analysis of the way of life where patriarchy is enmeshed in every domain. In order to understand this society women's role in the society needs to be analyzed and studied within the academic discourse. The National Policy on Education, 1986 is a positive change in the right direction supporting gender mainstreaming and sensitization about issues that remained silenced for many years.

## II.ROLE OF MEN IN ADVOCATING WOMEN’S RIGHTS

The impact of patriarchy might appear to be seemingly benign but it creates impediments to ensure that women retain their subordinate position in the society. Male reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotibha Phule and Raja Ram Mohan Roy stepped into the picture trying to be the messiahs who would advocate women empowerment by focusing on three issues- abolishing child marriage, sati pratha and reintegrating widows in the society. Beharam Malabari argued that male reformers stepping in to ensure women’s access to education also represented the hypocrisy dominating the society where men would continue to be the decision makers of the family and confine women within the private domain.

Gandhi too tried motivating women to get educated and participate in the Salt March as their knowledge and expertise would help them in being proficient mothers. Male reformers wanted women to get educated, access the public domain but not question traditions and customs that sanctioned the primary role of women as care givers and looking after domestic chores. The conflict between modernity and tradition can be traced to the time when male reformers felt that modernity meant blindly following the West. This would reduce the dependence of women on their male counterparts which in turn would result in the loss of the ideals of Indian womanhood built on the self sacrificing and submissive nature of women. “One is not born a woman, rather becomes a woman”. (Beaviour, 1969)

## III.SOCIALIZATION AND SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOR

Gender is a social construct and solely dependent on one’s socialization since childhood. Family plays a vital role in developing a self perception and the model of an ideal type of masculinity and femininity. Goffman argued how the sexual division of labor projected in the family creates a role model for imitation by the children. The psyche of a child is molded through the demarcation in toys and hobbies that are inculcated since their birth. Boys are encouraged to play with weapons and vehicles whereas girls are motivated to play with kitchen sets and dolls.

Hoschild argued that the behavior is eventually internalized by men and women and they behave accordingly in order to be accepted in the society. Pink collar professions have come up as a resultant of providing an area of ensuring employment to women for providing services based on care giving. The work of air hostesses, beauticians and telephone service agencies are based on the ability to look provide care and emotional labor which reiterates the stereotypes in the society regarding feminine behavior.

Scholars, Sen and Nussbaum argued how violence and the fear of violence is what jeopardizes women’s lives by making them dependent on their father’s in their initial years and later on their husband’s. Girls are socialized from the very beginning to look after the domestic chores and make adaptive preferences as per the social norms. Sen and Dreaze argued that violence against women begins even before their birth resulting in the skewed sex ratio in the country. Female infanticide and female feticide are the denial of basic human rights and prevails in various parts of Indian society. Discrimination towards the girl child is made even in allocation of resources and protein rich food prior to their marriage which adds to their malnutrition.

Madhu Kishwar also elaborated on dowry being a reason to justify violence on young brides. When the natal family of the brides are unable to match up to the demands then brides bear the brunt of their anger in many cases resulting in dowry deaths or suicide. Promilla Kapur and Amita Tyagi also studied how majority of the marital adjustments are made by a wife and marriage is one of the most oppressive institutions in a woman's life. Scholars such as Ritu Menon, Tanika Sarkar, Kannabiran, Karlekar, Uberoi, Krishnaraj and many others have time and again elaborated on how gender discrimination takes place within the private domain.

The prevalence of breadwinner paradigm signifies how Palriwala clearly states that the male head of the household is the earning member of the family so all important decisions regarding finances are to be made by him. A woman is expected to comply with the social norms and this leads to curtailment of her movement or access to education which could lead to her becoming self sufficient. In Palriwala's in depth analysis of the structure of the family and demarcation of tasks in rural Rajasthan it was evident how women have no bargaining power. She is constantly under the triple authority of the male head of the household, his wife and her own husband. There is also seniority in the distribution of food and the woman who cooks the meals is always the last one to eat. So, in case of any unexpected guests women forego their meal in order to cater to them. Preferential treatment towards the son is meted out from the very beginning as he is seen as the asset of the family. Hence, girls are neither provided sufficient nutritious food nor access to education to develop their skills and become economically independent like boys.

The tasks allocated to women are considered as non economic activities and that is why they are invisible from the structure of national accounts. The Census only considers gainful employment as economic activities and the tasks such as livestock maintenance, collection of firewood, carrying buckets of water and domestic chores are only contributory roles expected to be performed by women. Karlekar argues that the complete disregard of women's contribution in the economy and financial dependence on their respective husband's adds to their vulnerability. Therefore, Partha Chatterjee's argument regarding public- private dichotomy is applicable here as even though women could be given equal rights legally but the right to access those opportunities for availing those rights lies within the private domain.

#### **IV.CONTEXTUALIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S STUDIES IN INDIA**

The genesis of Women's Studies in India can be traced back to the women's movements which began in the 1970s. The purpose of releasing the Towards Equality Report was to evaluate the distressing conditions of women in education, health, employment, political participation, violence and societal status. Women should get a platform to bring these issues to the forefront and form a bond of universal sisterhood by fighting for their rights. Eventually Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) stepped in to fund research projects in universities, which was another major step taken towards development in the trajectory of women's studies programs. Finally in 1974, a unit for research on gender issues was set up in the SNDT Women's University, Bombay that was declared officially a centre in 1985.

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Initially the women's movement represented only the demands of the upper caste and class by largely ignoring the marginalized identities such as sex workers, disabled women, Dalit and Muslim women. Being a woman born in a patriarchal society anyway leads to a lot of restrictions and the stigmatized identities along with their sexuality left them doubly marginalized. Women's Studies was introduced not just as an optional course in colleges but with the larger purpose of studying the society. Since one's sexuality becomes one's significant identity marker it is imperative to have a clear picture of the impact it has on one's life.

Gradually with the initiation of difference feminism women from marginalized communities stood up for their rights. Women's Studies were introduced as a course to encourage the study of the society using a gender lens and to help in developing the ability to think critically. The status of women in the society is dependent on the accessibility, affordability and availability of resources. Hence Women's Studies as a course would ensure gender mainstreaming and sensitization in the society.

The National Policy on Education, 1986 introduced Women's Studies in the curriculum as a means of reforming the course content which was male centered and overlooked the role of women in the society. Women's role and status in the society in history could be traced by reading the archives, autobiographies and personal diaries. Access to education was completely denied to women due to the fear of violence, honor of the family and early marriage where their primary role was demarcated as care giving. The autobiographies of some eminent women such as Rassundari Debi, Kumud Pawde, Binodini Das, Lalithambika, Nalini Jameela, Kamalini Bhansali revealed the socio cultural environment of women. The case studies, reports and research conducted in various sections of the society would help in gaining an understanding of women's lives and treatment.

Women's Studies would provide incentives for increasing the enrollment of girls in school and the root cause of girls discontinuing education. Menon for instance argued that Muslim girls are denied access to education or drop out early as their families are usually not in a position to fund their schooling. The cost benefit analysis does not work out as lucrative for them as the poor quality of schooling that they can afford does not provide them with good employment opportunities. Cultural barriers in the form of purdah ensure partial seclusion of women and the communal riots in 1992 have increased the fear psychosis that leads to restrictions on their mobility. Menon also argued that it is very difficult to find a suitable groom for a highly educated girl. Kannabiran on the other hand elaborated on the case study of Rameeza Bee's gang rape in 1978 and her husband's murder. During the enquiry the legality of her marriage was questioned and she was termed as a prostitute due to her communal identity. Her knowledge about the tenets of Islam and the Holy Quran was used to prove whether she was a "good woman" with a dignified character. Her failure to prove the legality of her marriage was used as an argument to prove her as an immoral woman who can be raped. This incident and judgment aroused agitation across India. Similarly the right to maintenance issue brought up by the Shah Bano case in 1985 was seen as interference in Muslim Personal Law in a country dominated by Hindu ideologies.

The autobiography of Rassundari Debi titled "Amar Jiban" was about the socio- cultural environment of upper caste women in the society. Through a creative use of metaphors such as "prisoner on parole" and "bird trapped in a golden cage" she illustrated on how her life involved mundane activities of cooking three square meals a

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day for thirty family members. She found secret corners of the house as the thirst for knowledge kept her motivated to fight all the ordeals in order to read the religious epic “Chaitanya Bhagavat”. Over the years she along with other women made a secret reading circle with an elaborate warning system to prevent discovery. She has twelve guards and three servants accompanying her and her sexuality was a representation of the honor of the family which had to be protected. Uma Chakravarty and Leela Dube elaborated on the impact of caste on the lives of women from the upper caste. Das illustrated the caste norms by saying that women’s sexuality is like an earthen pot which can get defiled easily whereas a man’s sexuality is made of brass which can just be washed and brought back to normal use.

In complete contrast to Rassundari’s life was Kumud Pawde as she belonged from the Malhar community of Maharashtra. Born in a caste where women were compelled to carry on defiling occupations as purity and pollution dominated the society she decided to study Sanskrit. In her autobiography “Antasphot” she wrote a chapter titled “The Story of My Sanskrit” elaborating her struggle for education and discrimination she faced studying in a school dominated by Brahminical prejudices. She went ahead to have an inter caste marriage after being unemployed for two years. It’s not just that her name changed from Kumud Somkuwar to Kumud Pawde she got all that she desired in life. She got the job of a lecturer in the University she studied in and the respect she always craved for. But all her achievements made her question why the women from her maiden caste still remained deprived and she could not do anything to end the caste system. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege, Meena Gopal, Annie Namala and Ruth Manorama studied the lives of Dalit women extensively through reading Dalit women’s testimonies. Women from the lower caste were labeled as morally lose and allocated defiling occupations in unhygienic working conditions such as manual scavenging, tanning of leather and midwifery. Religion, community and state also operated in stigmatizing the bodies of women from the lower caste. Lavani performers in Maharashtra belonged to the Kolhati caste and were expected to do provocative dances for landlords under the rules of a male dominated panchayat. Devadasi tradition on the other hand ensured that young girls from the Isai Vellalur caste in South India would be devoted to perform sexual services in the name of temple based prostitution. Similarly women from the Bedia community in Maharashtra were the sole bread earners from their family and resorted to bar dancing to sustain their living. Surrogacy is another stigmatized source of earning a living among families from lower classes and complying with the commercial demand for children by infertile couples willing to pay for the services. There have been conflicting debates regarding each of their modes of earning a living as a school of feminist studies believe that it is a woman’s right to work and state’s responsibility to ensure safe working spaces but at the same time it questions the use of a woman’s body for commercial purposes.

Nalini Jameela’s autobiography of a sex worker unravels the life of profession which is stigmatized and unsafe leaving women with no bargaining power due to their vulnerability in the society. The reports of Durbar Mahila Samanyva Committee discussed about the lives of sex workers in Sonagachi, oldest and largest red light area of India. The major cause for concern are the working conditions, health hazards in the form of painful abortions as safe sex by using condoms cannot negotiated with the customers and the stigma associated to their work. The

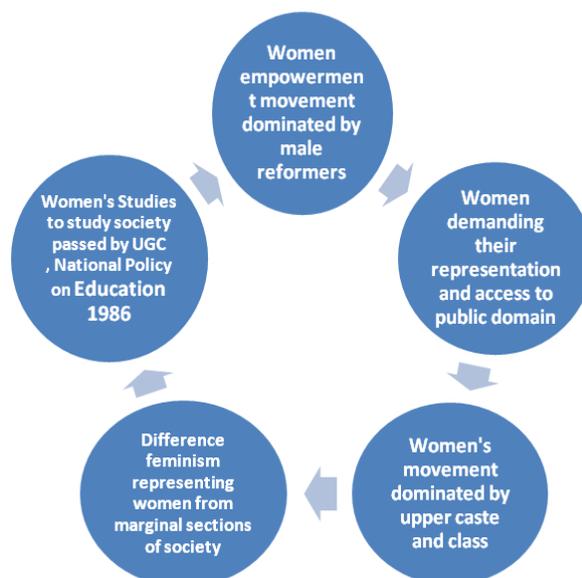
reports asserted that by decriminalizing sex work and ensuring the protection of sex workers by law sex workers would somehow gain some bargaining power in the society.

Ghai's work discussed regarding the double discrimination faced by disabled women and "othering" as they fail to match up to the ideal standards of womanhood. Disabled women are excluded in this regard due to the stereotypical notion of them being incapable of being a mother, asexual, dependent, pitied, and unattractive, lacking the essential attributes of femininity leading to low self-esteem and body consciousness. Therefore the autobiographies and writings on women's lives provided a holistic idea of the status of women in India. The National Policy on Education, 1986 was formulated with this purpose of restructuring the curriculum and ensuring the participation of women in developing the content with the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration.

The National Policy on Education, 1986 aimed to provide women with a better sense of self perception and play the role of a positive interventionist in the society. The aim was to ensure that girls get access to education and ability to think critically. Incentives such as mid day meal scheme, free schooling, proper sanitation facilities in schools, employment of more female teachers in primary schools, courses on skill development and ensuring proper security were identified as means of motivating parents to send their daughters to school. Degree, diploma, vocational and certificate courses were also incorporated into the curriculum. The primary goal was to ensure that women become financially independent.

#### IV.FIGURES AND TABLES

The following cycle depicts the series of events that took place as a means of introducing Women's Studies as an academic discipline in the society:



## V.CONCLUSION

Gender plays a major role in defining an individual's identity and experiences in the society. So it makes it imperative to gain a holistic understanding of the feminist methodology as a means of studying a wide range of issues in the society. History reveals that men were privileged to have both rights and duties and on the contrary women were only given duties to fulfill. The invisibility of women from the society gradually became a point of contention and eventually developed into a course in colleges. Women 's Studies as an academic discipline touches upon diverse themes such as caste, class, informal sector, religion, region, disability and so on. The National Policy on Education, 1986 introduced Women's Studies as not only a choice based course but also a way of mainstreaming gender in the society.

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