

Note on the First National Conference on Women's Studies April 20-24, 1981

The First National Conference on Women's Studies was held at the SNDT Women's University, Bombay, in 1981. The initiative for convening this conference was taken by the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, Women's Studies Centre, Kanpur University and the SNDT Women's University, Bombay. The objectives of the conference, as outlined by the 15 member organizing Committee, were:

- Reviewing the status of Women's Studies in the country;
- Establishing and strengthening communication between institutions, organizations and individuals both academic and non-academic actively engaged or interested in women's studies and women's development and across disciplines;
- Preparing a well-defined and time-bound programme of action for promoting women's studies in the next five years;
- Developing indicators for measuring women's participation in social and economic development;

The immediate objectives of the conference were to:

- Draw up an agenda for research;
- Develop a bibliography, documentation and other research aids to assist researchers working on women;
- Provide a forum for discussion on theories, methodology and findings of research in different subjects;
- Prepare course material and create an environment for introducing them in the curricula of different subjects;
- Define the special roles of women academics, women's institutions and women's organizations.

1. The conference had nine following themes:

2. Women and Law
3. Women and Work
4. Women and Education
5. Women and Science and Technology
6. Women and Health
7. Women in Development
8. Role of Women's institutions and Organizations
9. Women and Art and Literature
10. Women and the Media.

Addressing the first plenary session some of the reputed champions of women's cause Ashok Mitra, Lotika Sarkar, Hemlata Swarup, Ela Bhatt and Devaki Jain highlighted the following issues:

- The serious need for rethinking methods of analysis and policy formulation to improve women's status;
- The problems arising out of the growing confrontation between workers motivated by an ideology for the betterment of the down-trodden and the forces of authority and the status-quo;
- The responsibility of the educational system, the academic community and teaching and research institutions in stimulating desirable changes in women's status rather than reinforcing reactionary attitudes and values;
- The need to stimulate collaboration between intellectual effort, educational and communicational programmes and grass-root level activism in the common cause of women's equality and development;
- The need to examine the ideology of feminism in the Indian social context and the linkages between women's struggles and broader socio-political concerns;

- The need to re-examine the role of law as a catalyst in stimulating social change and to evolve clearer perspectives of the nature of changes envisaged in the context of the complexity and inequalities in Indian society.

The above issues were reflected in the deliberations of Nine Working Groups that organized the presentation and discussion of more than 80 papers covering the nine themes mentioned above. Each Working Group outlined research priorities in its area and made its recommendations. Additionally, the Conference reviewed curricula in such disciplines as Economics, Education, History, Literature, Political Science, Psychology, Science and Mathematics, Social Work and Sociology on the basis of review papers. The objective was to identify the extent to which these curricula covered women's issues. Outside the stipulated agenda, an impromptu but stimulating debate took place among women's organisations on the role and participation of women in the communist movement under the rubric of Socialism and Feminism.

The Conference produced nineteen working group reports and eleven resolutions. Some of the Working Groups recommendations had suggested action by the academic system, mainly by research and higher education institutions, while others had invoked action by the government, women's organizations, trade unions, and the media. Since many of the recommendations were overlapping, these were arranged under five headings:

- Economic development, women's work and the role of science and technology
- Law
- Health
- Media, Education, Art and Literature
- Organisations and Institutions

Three decisions made by the Conference have remained crucial to the development of women's studies in India.

The first was a unanimous decision to form an Indian Association for Women's Studies. The Conference entrusted the organising Committee of the NCWS, with suitable co-option, with the task of bringing the Indian Association of Women's Studies into existence.

The second decision was not to turn Women's Studies into a separate discipline. The Conference agreed with Madhuri Shahs the Chairperson of the University Grants Commission - suggestion that Women's Studies development will depend on the extent to which it acquires an intra-disciplinary as well as interdisciplinary thrust. In my opinion an ideal state will be reached when women's concerns, perceptions and problems have been so internalized by different disciplines at different levels of the educational process, that there will be no need for promoting women's studies separately. (Report of the National Conference on Women's Studies, 1981) The Conference was alive to the uphill task in keeping Women's Studies as an integrated part of various social sciences and save it from becoming a separate discipline. Yet they opted for making it an interdisciplinary study to save it from becoming ghettoized.

The third decision was to make Women's Studies research-action oriented so as not to lose sight of ground realities. While the first decision was in the nature of a unanimous resolution, the other two emerged as two basic assumptions.

In the remaining resolutions, the Conference deplored the discrimination inherent in the personal laws of different communities in the country; the complete neglect by law and society of women's contribution to the family well-being; the exploitation of the domestic workers, the absence of regulated hours of work and lack of minimum wages; the adversary litigation in matrimonial guardianship and related matters which did not secure the essential need for family welfare; and the increasing interference of university authorities in the curtailment of academic freedom of the various other authorities in harassments of the concerned activists for women's welfare. The conference urged

the government and other relevant authorities to rectify the situation in all these areas through legal or other means of reform.

The Conference succeeded far beyond the expectations of its organisers in bringing together not only feminist scholars and activist, but administrators, social scientists and legal experts to debate various aspects of women's subordination. When the organisers had initiated the moves to hold the conference, they were prepared for indifference, reluctance and resistance to the idea of developing Women's Studies as a new and unfamiliar venture within the educational system. But the response from all quarters was so positive that it was interpreted as hopeful indication of preparedness on the part of our academic community and others to accept a new challenge. (Madhuri Shah, *ibid*)

This response can be seen in various ways. Although about 150 institutions were approached to publicise the conference, 380 delegates attended it. They came from all corners of the country, more than half sponsored by their universities. Delegates came from Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and UNESCO and actively participated in the conference. Nearly all the fifty-plus commissioned papers were submitted in time. In addition about forty papers were volunteered. The funding sources readily agreed to provide the necessary help. These included government and private, local and international bodies. Significantly, fifty delegates were men-heads of university departments, vice- chancellors, directors of research institutions and researchers and activists. It was clear that Women's Studies in India was not going to be a only-only issue. Both men and women from different societal sections had come forward to nurture the new entrant into the academia and the movement.

There was a flip side to this rosy picture. Its exercise to review the existing university curricula brought home to the Conference the utter indifference of the university authorities to women's issues. In preparation for the Conference, the organizers had requested 160 universities and institutions of higher learning to send details of under- and post- graduate courses in social sciences and humanities, names of persons and departments doing research on women and to cite teaching courses on women, if any. They had also approached scholars with long teaching experience in their disciplines to undertake reviews of syllabi in their respective areas. While the latter showed exceptional zeal in undertaking this task, the universities response was abysmally dismal. Only 57 of the 160 institutions approached sent any reply at all, while barely 23 sent their syllabi and just 5 sent details of research work done in various departments.

The organisers' sense of despondence increased even more when their review, conducted with the help of other means, revealed that out of hundreds of research projects supported by the UGC from 1975 to 1980, only four were on women. While all the institutions of national importance, out of the sample studied, had done research on women, only 40 percent universities and 16 percent agricultural universities had any women's research to their credit. One agricultural university thought women's issues had no place in its work! And the 29 syllabi reviews done by university scholars left no doubt about the near total absence of women in the curricula.

These revelations gave further impetus to the conference to concentrate on finding ways and means of incorporating Women's Studies in teaching syllabi of social sciences and in research agenda. Each panel discussing one discipline made its suggestions, which were incorporated in a group report accepted by the conference.

[Note prepared by Kusum Dutta]