



## 07. Introduction of Gender Lab in Women's Studies Centres in Indian University System

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### Abstract

*Defining a limited agenda for gender equality is both impractical and impossible when faced with the harsh realities of women's existence, their fragility, and their oppression. A standard classroom teaching on women's studies course would not be adequate which introduce students to concepts theories, and methodologies, it is equally important for them to learn the grass root realities for in depth understanding of theories, methods and approaches related to women's issues. A gender lab is a concept of empowering experience for students to use unconventional methods for debate and evaluation in the field on the issues taught in the class room. Additionally, the concept of Gender Lab would be really close or parallel to the main premise of Women's Studies, which is the confluence between social activism for generating awareness of women's rights and to combat gender inequality/ disparity both in the public and private domain. The courses that are taught in the classroom will all be reflected through Gender lab, a kind of social activism, an important part of Women's Studies. The introduction of the Gender Lab would equip students with practical experience in engaging with members of the community, gaining knowledge about interactional ethics, persuading others to support a gender-just society, and using tools and techniques that will support their pursuit of research for higher degree. Gender Lab aims to bring women's studies courses closer to pressing social concerns that impact women, so making them more socially relevant.*

**Keywords-** Gender Lab, Women's Studies, Indian University System, gender equality

### Introduction

It is evident from examining the origins of the academic discipline of Women's Studies that the 1960s- and 1970s-women's movements and the skepticism of academic women over the academic knowledge production's failure to acknowledge gender as an analytical lens were key factors in the development of the field. Women's Studies, as it is now known, is an interdisciplinary topic that studies gender roles as they are determined by society and culture. It crosses the boundaries of traditional disciplines, drawing on academic fields like history, psychology, media sociology, sociology, literary criticism, and anthropology to raise significant questions about our basic social and political institutions, our organizational structure, and knowledge itself. The intersectionality of gender, color, age, class, nationality, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and other variables influencing nearly every aspect of women's social, political, and cultural experiences was also raised by this multidisciplinary discipline of women's studies. The goal of the field of women's studies is to bring about some kind of equality for women in society. Hence, women from all areas of life, particularly highly educated women especially the faculty and students in higher education institutions, began to express concerns about the male-centric orientation of most courses and curriculum. Women academics in conventional areas like history, English, and philosophy began to provide courses geared toward women. Courses on sexual politics, women's roles in society, and how women's



personal lives mirror wider power systems began to emerge, drawing on the women's movement's premise that "the personal is political".

Nonetheless, women's studies in the academy have always been highly contentious. On the one hand, within the institution, the discipline was deemed insufficiently intellectual due to several prejudices and misconceptions propagated by the administration and academic community. The major academic subject of social sciences has around one paper on women's concerns. On the other hand, feminist activists outside of academia contended that the field was overly scholarly.

Many of the critiques and disagreements among early practitioners, such as whether women's studies should strive to integrate into the standard curriculum or remain an independent outsider? Should women's studies turn to discourse theory instead of the political activism that founded the field? Can you teach something you haven't experienced? Can a White lady teach Multiculturalism? Is it possible for a high caste lady to have the same experience as a schedule caste or tribal woman? Should individuals prioritize transgender and other sexual problems over those of postcolonial and poor countries, and so on? (Boxer, 1998; Florence, 2000).

Keeping all of these contestations in mind, it is clear that early women's studies courses and curricula were frequently driven by theoretical questions such as why women are not included or where women are in various academic and development discourses, among others. In this article, I'd want to address the nature of curricula and how to make them more applicable by incorporating a "gender lab" component into women's studies courses at colleges and universities.

### **Women's studies courses in universities: Global and national**

As stated earlier, starting from the late 1960s in the US women's studies has moved around the world as an idea, a concept, a practice and by the early twentieth century women's studies were recognized in higher education from India to Indonesia, from the United States to Uganda, China to Canada, Austria to Australia, England to Egypt, South Africa to South Korea and so on. During the 1970s, the pioneers of Women's Studies concentrated on establishing the area as a distinct discipline with autonomous programs. In the 1980s, the emphasis shifted to "mainstreaming" Women's Studies within the existing curriculum, introducing feminist studies into numerous academic areas. In this way, Women's Studies would no longer be confined to an academic ghetto, but might begin to reform and gender-balance all aspects of the curriculum. However, when one examines "long history," one discovers not just "great women" but also everyday women, not victims but women who shaped their surroundings, women who had agency, even within the limitations of a small sphere, the private domain. Simon de Beauvoir described women as "other" in *The Second Sex* (1953), while Betty Friedan examined "the problem that has no name," the malaise and victimization of middle-class women, in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Helen Hacker contrasted women's status to that of minorities (1951). However, none of these significant forerunners-initiated women's studies.

When it comes to women's studies courses and curricula, the first one is said to have been produced by American historian Mary Ritter Beard, who in 1934 created a 54-page syllabus for a course titled *A Changing Political Economy as It Affects Women* (Tuttle, 1986). Although the course was never offered, it laid the groundwork for the establishment of the first Women's Studies department in the United States. The first Women's Studies department was established at San Diego State College (now San Diego State University) in 1970. At San Diego State, the on-campus Women's Liberation organization organized a committee involving professors and



community members named the Ad Hoc Committee for Women's Studies. Hundreds of people signed a petition in support of a Women's Studies program. In 1970, five San Diego State faculty members from established departments presented courses on Women's Studies. In the fall of 1970, the first Women's Studies Department was formally established. By 1974, San Diego State had launched a national faculty search to improve the Women's Studies Department. By the 1974-75 academic year, the department had grown to two full-time and four part-time teaching members, with almost 400 students enrolled. The Women's Studies department expanded and began providing a master's degree alongside the bachelor's degree in 1995. The program also has a Women's Resource Center on campus. Cornell University also established a second Women's Studies department in 1970. In 2002, Cornell's program was renamed Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

Nonetheless, there have been some significant discussions within the Women's Studies Program. The subject of what constitutes a woman has received more attention and discussion than any other inside the program. "The concept of 'women'...had largely been defined as white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian, educated women of privilege," according to the early Women's Studies curriculum and scholarship of the 1970s (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 16). Power imbalances among women were ingrained in the emerging Women's Studies departments, despite the field's origins in the broader struggle for equality for all oppressed groups. Women from marginalized identities created their own movements and academic disciplines in order to give voice to their experiences after realizing that the Women's Studies programs of the 1970s and early 1980s did not fairly represent their viewpoints such as Black Women's Studies programs was to centralize Women's Studies around Women of Color and to incorporate Black feminist literary critique and Black female authors' research into the curricula.

A fresh debate erupted in the 1990s about whether Women's Studies should continue to be called Women's Studies or Gender Studies, with some saying that a term focusing only on women will perpetuate the concept that males are the norm and that women should only be studied in specific programs. Opponents argue that changing the title will diminish the importance of feminist studies in academia and Women Studies' connection to the women's movement. According to Zimmerman (2005, p. 37), women's studies must be feminist, but gender studies may not be. Beyond the matter of what to call Women's Studies programs lies the larger question of whether the programs should continue to exist in higher education. "When references are made to 'women's studies'," as Mary John (2001:238) observes, "it is often not clear whether we are talking about a 'subject' with its own curriculum, about a field of scholarship, or about outreach and advocacy on women's issues."

Women's studies courses till 2015 were available at over 700 colleges in the United States, as well as in over 40 countries across the world. (Tracy; Cheryl 2015). Most women's studies courses, both nationally and internationally, provide an introduction to women's and gender studies, familiarize students with key issues, questions, theories, and debates in women's studies/women's movement, both from historical and contemporary and intersectional perspectives, critical analysis of gendered performance and power in a variety of public and private spheres, and cultural assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality. In short, a women's studies course covers topics such as feminist movement, research methodology, feminist history, gender, health and violence, migration, sexuality, citizenship, governance, peace and conflict, and so on. Furthermore, women's studies scholarship encourages instructors, students, and researchers to cultivate a reflective critical awareness with the objective of not just



informing, but also transforming what and how they know. To achieve this purpose, it employs a wide range of analytical techniques and analyzes issues vital to women's lives that have hitherto been overlooked by formal knowledge systems. (Boxer J. 1998; Maher F A. 2001)

### **Women's Studies Centres and Courses offered in Indian universities and colleges**

In 1986, the National Policy of Education included Women's Studies. The University Grants Commission established Centres for Women's Studies (CWS) to transform the many components of women's empowerment in terms of teaching, research, policy interventions, advocacy, and raising awareness in society about women's equality and equity. Since the VII Plan, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has fostered, strengthened, and directed the country's Women's Studies curriculum. The goal of establishing WSCs in universities was to help universities become teaching and research departments within the university system, as well as to develop field action projects for action, research, evaluation, knowledge enhancement, and collaboration across caste/class/religion, region, community, and occupational boundaries.

Women's involvement in the global people's movements of the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to women's studies. Women realized that entitlements and rights are gendered. Academic women questioned why the current theoretical frameworks did not take into account the experiences and contributions of women in their analysis. The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) first established the agenda for women's studies in India, outlining three main goals: first, identify necessary policy changes and work toward enacting them; secondly, persuade the social science community to reconsider the theories, methodologies, and analytical tools of social research, which had effectively excluded women's roles, statuses, and circumstances from the field of social investigations; and finally to bring back the women's topic back into the public discourse, which had diminished in the years following independence despite becoming a significant issue during the war for independence. The first important step in establishing a Research Centre for Women's Studies was done in 1974 by SNDT Women's University, which was the pioneer in India in using the phrase "women's studies." Nowadays, a wide range of national organizations are involved in women's studies. These include UGC-funded women's studies centres, ICSSR-funded centres, non-governmental organizations, and lone researchers. The Centres were required to start official teaching programs by the UGC's 1998 amended guidelines, and several of the Centres are currently delivering courses at different levels. The goal is to establish and sustain a teaching/learning environment for feminist and gender studies, as well as to provide impetus for the development of feminist and gender scholarship in the two-thirds world/Indian context. An important component envisioned in the guidelines, particularly for rural women, was to raise awareness and educate people about women's rights, laws, and initiatives taken by the government to improve and protect the rights of women (Rajput and Kaur 2003). More precisely, the Women's Studies Centers were designed to operate as catalysts for the promotion and strengthening of women's studies through teaching, research, curriculum creation, field and extension work, training, continuing education, and other activities.

But colleges all throughout the nation have started offering undergraduate and graduate courses in women's studies in response to student demand. Concerns over the "ghettoization" of women's studies and the loss of its multidisciplinary nature sparked a discussion among women's studies experts on the merits of formal degree programs. Some thought that instead



of being included into traditional education, it should only serve as a catalyst. One question that was posed was: Is women's studies a separate field of study? In the beginning, a Foundation Course on Women's Studies was proposed as an alternative to official degree programs. This plan, however, was never able to gain traction. Certificate programs in women's concerns were being offered by several universities.

Women's studies refresher courses had been begun by some, allowing for the inclusion of the viewpoint of women in the teaching of a variety of disciplines. There are certain similar units of study among the different Women's Studies courses provided by Indian colleges, notwithstanding their differences. These include: sexuality, family and kinship, women's legal position, concerns of violence, citizenship, communalism, feminism, research methodologies, women's movement and involvement in the greater socio-political process, and sexuality. The numerous Women's Studies courses that are available in the Indian university system are grounded on the actualities of Third World nations like India. To put it briefly, the courses provided cover the academic and research aspects that are crucial for comprehending and resolving the problems of gender inequality that exist in our society, but they fall short in certain respects when it comes to the practical aspects.

Currently there are 159 Women's Studies Centres established in various Universities and Colleges (84 Universities and 75 Colleges). There are 65 colleges that offer Women Studies in a full-time mode of study. Among these, there is a split of colleges by ownership, public / government: 45, private: 10 and public private: three. (<https://www.shiksha.com/humanities-social-sciences/colleges/m-a-women-studies>).

After considering the main goals of the establishment of Women's Studies centers, significant discussions surrounding them, and the courses offered, it is crucial to shed light on the issue of how to convert this formal knowledge into a more gender-based and useful knowledge system for the benefit of the students offering women's studies course. How to apply theory to practice in a way that will increase students' practical knowledge and awareness of discrimination, exclusion, and loss of their rights and advantages while simultaneously transforming this awareness into policy initiatives. The better answer these questions are to incorporate a component of gender lab, a credit-based core course into women's studies curricula at educational institutions. The idea behind introducing gender lab is that the students may gravitate to gender and women's Studies when their own experiences of theoretical knowledge that demonstrate social inequalities and which they need tools to understand, and move on to learn how to employ interdisciplinary and multicultural gender sensitive approach to transform primarily themselves and the transnational world for more equitable and gender just society.

### **Integrating the component of Gender Lab in Women's Studies Course**

Involvement with political and cultural groups and their initiatives, is sometimes claimed to be distinct from academic research in the development of women's and gender studies. Thus, the question of whether or not a women's studies degree should entail an internship in an activist group remains up for dispute. Are the connections to involvement with people for understanding of deeper theoretical knowledge worth exploring in women's studies courses? Do departmental hierarchies have an obligation to consider involvement of students with the group of people for application of knowledge gained in the class room teaching? It seems probable that discussions on these issues will continue to be at the core of the discipline and in some ways, the answers to these discussions might be provided by the establishment of gender



labs as part of curricula. Hence, the idea of Gender Lab aims to bring women's studies courses closer to pressing social concerns that impact women, so making them more socially relevant.

What is meant by a gender lab? Let me clarify. Gender Lab is an applied side of women's studies course grounded in a community or group of people where students can apply their theoretical knowledge to gain a better and more practical understanding of the issue taught in class by interacting with them in an informal setting and seeing how the subject taught can be made more effectively and how the community or group-based needs can be met. For instance, in our culture, regardless of caste, class, location, or religion, violence against women or intimate partner abuse is a socially accepted norm that cannot be researched in a conventional laboratory. One must travel to the field and document the experiences, reasons, and corrective methods based on the women's narratives. Here lies the answer. This can be accomplished through the Gender Lab, in which students who have been taught theoretical approaches or models for understanding violence against women will apply their knowledge to understand the practicality and severity of the act of violence and its impact on women through direct interaction with women and raising awareness among them. Nevertheless, the case may differ from woman to woman, unlike in a normal laboratory where the mixing of two chemicals ( $H_2+O_2=H_2O$ ) produces the same result uniformly.

In order to address whether conventional laboratory can be replicated in women's studies in the form of a gender lab for the application of theoretical knowledge in the field/community, let me first discuss the concept of conventional laboratories and how useful they are in the application of theoretical knowledge in the respective disciplines. In a traditional laboratory, students carry out experiments in accordance with the guidelines, write up a report, analyze the information, and interpret the findings. The pupils' capacity to observe and analyze is enhanced by this exercise. Understanding theoretical concepts, cooperation, observational skills, communication, analytical abilities, and other concepts are all greatly aided by the laboratory. The introduction of Gender lab course in women's studies, students would come to the realization that defining a limited agenda for gender equality within class room teaching is both impractical and impossible when faced with the harsh realities of women's existence, their fragility, and their oppression. Furthermore, a standard classroom education would not be adequate for women's studies, which must not only introduce students to its ideas and methodologies but also point them in the direction of changing gender roles and society. A gender lab is the ideal solution since this instruction must be an empowering experience that uses unconventional methods for debate and evaluation. Additionally, the concept of Gender Lab would be really close to the main premise of Women's Studies, which is the confluence between social activism or involvement of people from the grass root and the university in term of advocacy and community outreach. The courses that are taught in the classroom—on topics like feminization of poverty, globalization, education, violence against women, empowerment, reservation, fundamentalism, and women's health and reproductive rights—will all be reflected in this through offering the course on Gender Lab. Last but not least, the introduction of the Gender Lab aims to equip students with practical experience in engaging with members of the community, gaining knowledge about interactional ethics, persuading others to support a gender-just society, and using tools and techniques that will support their pursuit of graduate-level research.



Gender Lab would help students understand the concept more practically and in depth because they would be interacting with the target group without having any research question or hypothesis in mind. This is because the focus of the courses offered in Women's Studies at various levels is to understand the basic reality of women's lives and their exclusion from various public and private spaces due to certain established gender norms and stereotypes. For instance, students who are taught the concept of Masculinity in the class room, can use a gender lab to interact with school-age teenage boys to discuss various facets of masculinities and their experiences for knowing the practical consequences and expressions. They can also motivate the boys to challenge the social construction of masculinity by making multiple visits, evaluating the results, and submitting a report for assessment. This is an example of how the concept of masculinity can be applied. Similar to this, as part of the gender lab, students can give university and college students information about women's difficulties pertaining to the menstruation, sexuality, health, drug misuse, sexual harassment, and other similar topics covered in their course.

### **How to Integrate and Implement Gender Lab in curricula**

According to UGC guidelines for Women's studies centres, one of the primary objectives of Women's Studies Centres is to organize frequent common awareness events, programs, and schemes. Introducing the Gender Lab would be the most effective approach to achieve the UGC's aim. Gender labs allow students of gender studies to organise various activities on the topics taught in class, such as a community debating club, dance performances, drama, street play, exhibition, in the neighbourhood and community on gender issues, and to write a report on the activities, which will be evaluated at the end of the semester. For example, if in a semester a paper on 'Gender and legal safeguards of women' is offered as a core paper, the applied side that can be done through gender lab is students can organise various activities in the neighbourhood for generating awareness and can develop a better understanding of the hurdles in accessing legal aid and accordingly suggest for revision in the syllabus, if required, to improve it by adding the experiences they had in Gender Lab while interacting with the women,

### **The modalities for introducing Gender Lab as Credit based Course**

How to implement Gender Lab in the curricula and what is the significance of introducing Gender Lab in women's Studies course. Gender Lab has to be included in the core course and has to have credit-based spreading all four semesters at post graduate level in each semester (two credits in each semester) and eight semesters at undergraduate level. It may be of five hours per week comprising of two credits or 50 mark (field visit report -3marks and 15 marks viva voce) and can be termed as Student-community Interface: Health and Education or Student-community Interface: Awareness, Rights and Access or whatever topic the faculty of the department decides in their meeting of committee of Studies or Board of Studies. The major purpose of this Gender lab based on the theme to be given to the students for their lab would be to generate awareness in the community and create a dialogue through community participation in an open environment particularly engaging women in this dialogue. The expected outcomes of this proposed idea would be to expose students to the grassroots to understand the ground realities and to acquaint students with the relevant theories and concepts and its applied side for expanding their knowledge. At the end of each semester the students



will submit a short report which will be evaluated and a viva of sharing their experiences will be conducted.

For each semester, theme of Gender Lab and its relation with the core course offered in the same semester has to be identified. There has to have a connection between the course taught and students exposure to Gender Lab. For instance, if a particular semester offers course on gender- based violence and legal rights of women, students should be given similar topic for their gender lab to have a deeper understanding of the concepts, approaches theories, causes and consequences. This will solve two purposes: one mandate of the establishment of women's studies centre would be met to reach the community and secondly, theoretical knowledge can be transformed into practicality and would enhance knowledge of students. Also, the combination of the understanding of grassroot reality and the theoretical knowledge would help the students to understand and suggest improvement in the curricula and need based community and policy interventions for bridging caste, class and gender disparity.

Having explained the modalities of integrating and implementing component of Gender Lab in women's Studies courses, the next point is who will supervise the students. In the 12<sup>th</sup> plan guidelines, the UGC for Women's Studies Centres had sanctioned posts of research Assistants, these research assistant, in consultation with the faculty members can assist the students for carrying out the assigned activities in the field and students can be accompanied by these research assistants. The Director/head of the centre can assign a teacher-in-charge (rotational basis) for overall functioning of Gender Lab.

Now, one could wonder how Gender Lab differs from internship; they are not the same thing. Allow me to explain the difference. An internship is a temporary employment within a firm or organization that allows a student or recent graduate to get work experience in a particular sector. Interns can learn about the sector, improve skills, and create professional contacts. Gender Lab, if included as a credit-based course, would be a continuous academic activity in which students would study the applied elements of gender-related concepts, techniques, and theories via interactions with individuals in the community and society at large.

It would be more about filling in the gaps in theory and practice via paper review and learning how to be more gender sensitive when creating policies and programs than it would be about gaining professional experience in order to improve career possibilities. Gender Lab will not be limited to any specific semesters. Additionally, internships required as part of curriculum typically occur in one or two semesters or at the conclusion of the semester, especially in professional and technical courses. It would take place across the whole semester.

### **Conclusion**

As previously stated, a gender lab differs from a conventional lab in that participants for interaction come from various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, have different exposure and experiences related to the topic taught in the classroom, and thus provide context for suggesting strategies. By striving to imitate "real life" as nearly as possible, Gender Lab can improve the context and outlines of the curriculum. Furthermore, because Gender Lab will have people from various socio-economic and cultural background, they may assist in examining the behavior of distinct groups and determining whether it is constant across caste, class, community, and region borders. Accordingly, the context and contours of the syllabus and gender -based need and interventions would be suggested. Also, the introduction of Gender Lab as core course, can be helpful for better understanding of the effect of policies and programs, which are being taught in the core course, on the lives of women which varies with





the socio-economic, regional and religious background of the women. Moreover, it would be in line with the mandate of UGC as well as Women's Studies.

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