

# Engendering the Academia: Integration of Women Studies in India

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## **Abstract**

The integration of gender studies into higher education in India began in the latter half of the 20th century, influenced by global feminist movements and women's rights campaigns. Initially focused on addressing women's issues and gender inequalities in the distribution of power and resources, the field gradually gained prominence in academic discourse. However, traditional societal norms, gender stereotypes, and social resistance posed challenges to fostering a gender-sensitive society and empowering women. Early advocates of modern education in British India, social reformers, and feminist activists in post-independence India played a pivotal role in nurturing the foundation of women's studies, which later evolved into gender studies. This article explores the Indian academic landscape through a gender lens, offering insights into the development and progression of women's studies in the country.

**Keywords:** Engendering, Feminist movement, Women question, Social resistance, Gender stereotypes

## **1.1. Introduction**

The development of women's studies in India was significantly influenced by global feminist movements. These movements in the West created supportive social contexts, leading to the establishment of women's studies as an academic discipline in the mid-20th century, followed by the emergence of gender studies at a later stage. In India, social reform movements, the introduction of modern education during British rule, and the spread of modernity contributed to the structuring of women's studies as a scholarly field.

Epistemologically, women's studies are interdisciplinary, focusing on the lives and experiences of women at their core. Intellectually, the advent of deconstruction theory in the context of post-colonial studies inspired the exploration of marginalized social categories, including Dalit studies, women's studies, and subaltern studies. While women's studies primarily address the biological distinctions between men and women, gender studies delve into the socio-cultural constructs of gender identities, examining issues of power, politics, and resource distribution. This discussion explores the evolution of women's movements in India and the establishment of gender studies as an academic field.

## **1.2. Engendering: The Conceptual Framework**

The term "engendering" holds a critical place in gender studies and feminist scholarship, referring to the process of reinterpreting and analyzing social, political, historical, and cultural phenomena through a gendered lens. It is not merely about including women in existing narratives or frameworks; rather, it signifies a deeper transformation of how knowledge is constructed and how social realities are understood.

Engendering seeks to highlight that gender is not a peripheral or individual attribute but a central organizing principle that shapes institutions, relationships, ideologies, and experiences in profound ways. Conceptually, engendering involves uncovering the invisible and taken-for-granted gendered assumptions embedded in mainstream discourses. Traditional knowledge systems have often been male-centric, treating male experiences as universal and rendering female or non-binary perspectives as marginal or irrelevant. Engendering challenges this bias by foregrounding the specific experiences, roles, and contributions of women and other gender minorities, thereby correcting historical omissions and misrepresentations. It pushes scholars and analysts to ask: Who is speaking? Whose experiences are represented? Whose voices are absent?

Engendering is not simply additive—it is reconstructive. It does not aim to append gender to pre-existing frameworks but to reshape the very foundations of those frameworks. For instance, in historical research, engendering might involve re-examining events like wars or revolutions not just from the perspective of male political leaders, but through the lived experiences of women, domestic workers, or other marginalized groups. In development studies, it questions how gendered power relations affect access to resources, decision-making, and opportunities, thus offering more nuanced and equitable approaches to policy.

Engendering also carries a political and epistemological charge. It interrogates how knowledge is produced, who produces it, and for what purposes. Feminist theorists argue that what is often presented as objective or value-free knowledge is, in fact, deeply gendered. Engendering knowledge, therefore, is part of a broader project of democratizing knowledge production—ensuring that it reflects a multiplicity of voices and experiences rather than reinforcing dominant power structures. In contemporary contexts, the concept of engendering has evolved to embrace intersectionality, acknowledging that gender cannot be separated from other axes of identity such as race, class, caste, sexuality, and ability. Engendering today means being attentive to these intersecting dimensions, recognizing how they shape and compound experiences of oppression or privilege.

### **1.3. Genesis and Evolution of Women Studies in India**

Women's studies in India are a relatively new academic discipline that emerged amidst the socio-political upheavals of the 20th century. The social challenges and vulnerabilities faced by women remained largely unaddressed until Indian reformers, influenced by the modernity introduced under British rule, began advocating for change. Prior to the 20th century, literature and resources focused on women were virtually nonexistent and rarely considered subjects of academic inquiry.

As a field, women's studies centers on exploring and analyzing the social, political, and economic status of women. It investigates the historical and cultural evolution of women's roles, amplifying their voices, expressions, and contributions in history, arts, and literature. The development of women's studies was strongly influenced by the feminist waves following World War II, although its institutional presence in India was initially limited to universities and higher education institutions.

Two key aspects stand out in the growth of women's studies in India. First, much of the knowledge about women's status was produced by academia, particularly universities and higher education institutions. Second, feminist movements in India had limited direct influence on the emergence of teaching and research on women's status, which gained momentum after independence (Chitnis, 1991). Consequently, the origins of women's studies are closely tied to the socio-cultural sectors of society, with social activists

and reformers contributing significantly to the field's early development, often more so than academic research.

**Towards Equality Report:** The Indian Constitution and the United Nations Organization have played pivotal roles in advancing women's empowerment and fostering women-related studies in India. The Towards Equality report of 1971 offered a comprehensive portrayal of the condition of Indian women and has since served as a cornerstone for subsequent research and studies. However, at the policy level, the report's findings were largely overlooked. Women's movements in the 19th century had minimal influence on women-focused literature, and the incorporation of women's studies into academia only gained momentum after World War II.

In 1947, the Indian Constitution affirmed gender equality by granting women equal status as citizens while categorizing them under the "weaker sections of society" for special provisions (Chitnis, 1991). The Indian government took significant steps to promote research and institutional mechanisms for women's advancement, spurred by the UN General Assembly's 1967 proclamation of gender equality as an international objective. This declaration urged member states to eliminate discrimination against women in education, employment, and politics. Responding to this, and recognizing the disparities within the country, the Indian government established a committee in 1971 to assess the status of women.

The committee's report, submitted in January 1975 and titled Towards Equality, revealed widespread exploitation of women within families, society, and the economy. It highlighted their unequal rights in areas such as marriage, property, and adoption, as well as severe neglect in health, nutrition, and education (Mazumdar, 1985; Chitnis, 1991). The report exposed the harsh realities of women's lives and underscored the socio-political disparities between women and men. Even today, Towards Equality is regarded as the Magna Carta of women's empowerment in India and continues to serve as a crucial reference for research and studies on women's issues.

The Equality Report gained significant attention during this period, dominating public discourse. Two key international events further stimulated women-centric discussions. First, the United Nations declared 1975 as the International Women's Year, and second, the Non-Aligned Nations' Summit in Colombo in 1976 adopted the theme "Women in Development" (Chitnis, 1991). These events played a pivotal role in integrating women's narratives into global discussions, creating favorable conditions for women's progress by publishing data that revealed the harsh realities and struggles faced by women worldwide.

The Colombo Conference was particularly influential in raising awareness among third-world countries about the importance of women's integration and equality. It highlighted the detrimental effects of women's deprivation and neglect in socio-political and economic spheres, warning that such disparities could hinder overall development. In response, the Government of India recognized the gaps and introduced several policy initiatives aimed at ensuring women's active participation in development processes (Kumar, 2020; Government of India, 1975).

The Equality Report triggered significant changes in policies, institutional frameworks, and public governance. The government took proactive steps not only to launch initiatives but also to decentralize systems to ensure they reached the grassroots level. To promote women's equality and advancement, several ministries, departments, and special cells were established. In 1975, the Ministry of Labour and Employment created a special cell for women, while the Ministry of Social Welfare launched a dedicated division for women's welfare.

In 1976, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi formed a National Committee under her leadership to oversee women's empowerment policies. The National Commission on Agriculture was tasked with examining

women's roles in agriculture, leading to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development setting up a special division to encourage women's participation in rural development activities (Chitnis, 1991). The Ministry of Rural Development also facilitated working groups on women within the Planning Commission and the Adult Education Program Unit.

The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women (1975) provided a foundational source of data on Indian women, while the Report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women (1988) further enriched the understanding of women's status. Numerous committees and organizations, including government, semi-government, and non-government institutions, generated valuable data, which informed women's rehabilitation and empowerment programs launched by the government (Government of India, 1975).

The Government of India, along with subsidiary institutions, played a vital role in fostering change through public campaigns, academic initiatives, media outreach, and volunteer groups. These efforts brought about notable progress in various sectors, including education, workplaces, public administration, politics, and cultural institutions, significantly advancing women's empowerment and equality.

In addition to the United Nations, international organizations such as ESCAP, the World Bank, and the International Labor Organization actively supported women's issues by sponsoring research and studies on women's empowerment. These studies primarily focused on key aspects of women's lives, including their economic status, health, education, and fertility, aligning with the priorities of international organizations and the realities faced by Indian women.

At the same time, Indian social activists and feminists developed their own research agendas, often critically analyzing and challenging the government's development policies. A significant initiative in this area was led by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), which responded to the Equality Report of 1975 by advocating for changes to the existing curriculum to incorporate women's studies. In 1976, the ICSSR, a quasi-governmental body, became a strong proponent of women's studies and emphasized its integration into academic institutions (Mazumdar, 1985; Indira, 1999).

Responding to the report of the committee on the status of women, ICSSR included research on women in its five-year plan and published the program objectives as following:

1. Generation and analysis of data in view to uncovering significant trends in patterns of social and economic organization which effect women's position in the long-run.
2. Developing new perspectives in the social sciences through examining basic assumptions, methodological approaches and concepts such as family, household, women's work, economic activity, productivity etc. to compensate the neglect and underassessment of women's contribution to society.
3. Reviving the social debate on the women's question that was initiated during the freedom movement. The Council identified five key priority areas for research: the changing occupational structure and employment patterns of women, the impact of migration on women, the women's movement in India, family organization and socialization, and women and development (Mazumdar, 1985). To encourage research in these areas, particularly by women social scientists, the Council provided doctoral fellowships and research grants.

Additionally, the Council established the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi. Under its leadership, a network of researchers was formed, comprising experts from government agencies, voluntary organizations, higher education institutions, activists working on women's issues, and

representatives from international organizations such as the UN and ILO (Chitnis, 1991; Mazumdar, 1985; Indira, 1999).

**Impact of Feminist Movements:** Feminist movements, which gained momentum in the late 1970s, played a crucial role in reshaping the direction of women's studies in India. Prior to the movement, studies and research on women's status had already been initiated by various governmental and non-governmental organizations. However, the feminist movement pushed the government to replace biased and gender-insensitive terms, such as "work" and "household," commonly used in census data and policy formulations, with terminology that better reflected gender equality (Shiva, 1988; Indira, 1999).

Feminist leaders engaged with the government on issues related to production, distribution, technology, and economic systems to highlight the various forms of exploitation, oppression, and marginalization faced by women. Women's activism was also pivotal in influencing major developmental projects, such as the World Bank-funded Narmada Valley project, where activists raised concerns not only about the suffering of women but also about the environmental damage, including issues of garbage disposal, soil preservation, and the destruction of traditional agricultural practices. Indian feminists argued that gender discrimination and exploitation were key factors contributing to poverty and the marginalization of women in societies where gender-defined roles are deeply entrenched.

#### 1.4. Women Studies in Higher Education

The integration of women's studies into universities and higher education institutions in India was slow due to resistance to teaching and research on the subject. As a result, women's studies developed outside of universities through the efforts of governmental and international organizations, with the feminist movement further contributing to its growth.

Universities established during the British period in India were not designed to be advanced centers of knowledge and excellence; instead, they functioned primarily as tools for governing the country. The university system in India lacked the capacity to offer programs suited for a free society and did not encourage interdisciplinary studies, as was common in European universities at the time (Mazumdar, 1985). These universities had two main objectives: to produce an 'elite group' familiar with European culture and values, and to train Indians who would assist the British in colonial administration, commerce, and serve their needs in law, medicine, and education. As a result, these universities failed to address Indian social, economic, and cultural realities in their curricula and practices, instead replicating European models.

After independence, Indian scholars identified several issues within the education system, many of which were addressed in the years that followed. New higher education institutes were established in fields such as engineering, medicine, management, and technology—areas previously neglected by the British—and these institutions were granted the status of 'deemed universities.' Additionally, numerous specialized research institutes at both national and state levels were created to fill the gaps in academia. However, the rigid university system in India remained a major obstacle to incorporating contemporary, real-world issues into academic curricula (Indira, 1999; Mazumdar, 1985).

The first center for women's studies was founded in 1974 at SNDT Women's University in Bombay with financial support from the Ford Foundation, a U.S.-based philanthropic organization (Chitnis, 1991). Following the 1975 report by the Committee on the Status of Women, the UGC encouraged research and studies on women's status. However, universities were slow to adopt these initiatives. A survey conducted by SNDT University in 1981 revealed a low level of interest among higher education institutions in



adopting women's studies. Out of 160 institutions surveyed, 57 responded, and only 23 offered courses related to women's studies. By this time, 144 research projects, including PhD and MPhil dissertations, had been completed, with 36 out of 94 universities contributing to the research process (Chitnis, 1991).

**National Association for Women's Studies:** A significant development during this time was the establishment of the National Association for Women's Studies in the 1980s. In response to the reluctance of Indian universities to embrace women's studies, the association worked actively to promote ideas and research on the subject. It called for the inclusion of women's studies in universities and, in 1984, pressured the government and the University Grants Commission (UGC) to take necessary steps to foster the development of the field in higher education (Chitnis, 1991).

The UGC reaffirmed its commitment to advancing the discipline, emphasizing that "Women's studies should not be narrowly defined as studies about women or mere academic improvement..." It promised support for teaching, research, workshops, extension activities, and logistical assistance, including grants for books, journals, seminars, travel, faculty exchanges, research fellowships, and office equipment for colleges and university departments interested in offering women's studies. However, the growth of the discipline was modest. According to a review by the ICSSR, the number of universities offering women's studies courses increased from 23 to 37 between 1981 and 1988, while the total number of universities in the country rose from 94 to 120 (Chintis, 1991; Indira, 1999).

A key issue for discussion was whether women's studies should be treated as interdisciplinary courses focused on specific themes such as women and development or women and health, or whether it should be integrated into traditional disciplines like History, Philosophy, and Sociology. Despite recent changes, universities have generally been reluctant to adopt women's studies as interdisciplinary courses.

### **1.5. Gender Studies: Growth and Development**

Women's studies, also referred to as gender studies, emerged in the 19th century and gradually evolved into an independent academic discipline over time. According to Vina Mazumdar, the development and growth of women's studies can be categorized into five phases, beginning as a major issue in social debates among reformers and eventually establishing itself as a recognized academic field in contemporary times (Mazumdar, 1985).

The first phase of addressing women's issues came with the emergence of the newly educated middle class, the early beneficiaries of the colonial education system. Exposure to modern education inspired this group to emulate the lifestyle of the colonial rulers, which led them to perceive the low status of women in their society as a problem. Practices such as the treatment of widows, child marriage, and the denial of education to women were seen as severe societal flaws and became subjects of criticism. During this period, social reformers began to raise their voices against the oppression of women, marking the beginning of a movement for change.

The second phase marked the rise of cultural nationalism and revivalism, which emerged as a response to the growing influence of Western values on the younger generation. Revivalists advocated for women's education and condemned women's exploitation as a means to preserve indigenous culture and traditions. They argued that educating women would reinforce the traditional family structure, portraying women as the custodians of cultural values. In the 1890s, Jyotiba Phule challenged the dominance of high castes, asserting that women's subordination was a tool for maintaining Brahminical control over Indian society. Another reformer, B. M. Malabari, campaigned for the "Age of Consent Bill" and urged the media to highlight women's real-life experiences to raise awareness (Mazumdar, 1985).

In the third phase, women's issues became intertwined with the nationalist movement. As the movement gained momentum and mobilized the masses, women's participation became essential, with many actively engaging in revolutionary activities. During the 19th century, women bore the brunt of the economic colonization of India. They were the backbone of industries such as cotton and agriculture, but their roles were severely diminished over time. In Bengal, approximately 3 million women, one-fifth of the total female population, were employed in the cotton industry during the 18th century, but this number drastically declined. Similar declines occurred in the silk and jute industries, with women's participation in the jute sector dropping by about 50%. Village markets and tribal women were also uprooted from agriculture. Facing such livelihood crises, many women joined the nationalist movement to fight for their rights and survival.

The fourth phase began after India's independence, when women's issues were addressed through constitutional mechanisms, including the principle of equality. Women gained access to education, the right to vote, and opportunities to enter the labor market, public services, and political offices. Women's organizations, which had actively fought for women's rights during the 1930s and 1940s, transitioned into welfare agencies during this period, operating with government grants to support the broader population. The fifth and final phase was marked by the publication of the Committee on the Status of Women in India report in 1974. This report exposed severe discrimination and growing inequality faced by women, highlighting issues such as their marginalization in society and the economy, a declining sex ratio, and disparities in life expectancy and death rates between men and women. The report served as a guiding light for the government and other organizations, shaping policies and initiating empowerment programs aimed at improving women's welfare.

The evolution of women's studies has undergone several stages, from addressing women's issues during the colonial era to the feminist movements influenced by Western feminist waves. While the discipline initially saw significant progress in research and teaching, its growth slowed in the post-independence period as women's organizations shifted their focus towards welfare-oriented programs.

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