

**GRADUATION PROGRAM IN GENDER & WOMEN STUDIES  
THROUGH DISTANCE LEARNING  
(A CASE STUDY)**

By Riffat Haque, Head of Department, Gender and Women Studies, Allama Iqbal Open University Pakistan - [riffathaque@hotmail.com](mailto:riffathaque@hotmail.com)

**Emergence of Women's Studies as a discipline**

Women's Studies, Gender and Women's Studies or Gender Studies it poses challenges to traditional knowledge and works towards change. Established knowledge have been produced by groups from which women were absent or marginalized. This new and an adjusted lens need to access and intend strategies to construct social, power relations and intellectual change. It particularly focuses on alternative ideologies, intersecting meanings of gender, race and class, and ranges over disciplines, nations, times and cultures.

The critical evaluation of change in society is an important aspect of women's studies. And we must not forget that feminism itself has a cultural context, intellectual context and it represents dimensions of contemporary thought and consciousness. It is relativistic and skeptical of overall gender issues especially investigates the lives of the powerless and the ignorant.

Gender and Women's Studies curriculum underpins second wave of feminism (1960's to 1980's) in the West. This wave of change reached our part of the world a decade later. It not only appraise established practices but it visions and develops new enabling and empowering practices [1] [2]. The discipline acts as catalysts for promoting and strengthening gender streamlining through teaching, research, action, fieldwork and extension [3]. It intends to develop a theoretical framework for analysis of the various dimensions of women's status in the development process. Therefore, Women's Studies contribution to knowledge in various fields, understanding the women's marginalization in the society and theorizing perspectives give an insight to dimensions of empowerment. The most pragmatic utilization of the subject could be creation of alternative concepts and distinctive

way of looking at the world and basis of enquiry. It establishes methodologies and theoretical paradigms to contextualize women and gender as a variable into a wider intellectual framework of social sciences. The discipline has also provided alternative spaces to academia of social sciences who examine their subjects with a feminist appraisal (4).

The established disciplines of social sciences distinguish themselves by obliterating gender concerns from their research agenda. The paradigms based on women and gender as a central variable can transform the existing academic disciplines in a fundamental way by introducing multi- disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary scheme of studies.

For last few decades the headway of involving women in the development processes and recent emphasis of gender mainstreaming is an agenda of every public or private sector institution. Therefore, the importance and demand of Women and Gender Studies has augmented. Therefore, the discipline can play a role of catalyst to take forward the agendas of CEDAW, MD Goals, etc in true character by sensitizing the masses about gender issues and also the planners, implementers, civil society, NGO,s CBO's etc. Besides bridging these gaps the understanding of indigenous gender perspectives is also very important for effective implementation of these schemas.

### **Women Studies in Pakistan**

In past 15 years Women's Studies has come of age in Pakistan. The emergence of the discipline in Pakistan has not been based on a struggle by the women's movement as has happened in the rest of the world. In 1989 the Ministry of Women's Development initiated the departments as a five year project at five universities to attain certain objectives such as; to develop courses, to promote academic and action research, to replicate and translate materials from other languages, to critically examine concepts, theories, methodologies for scientific investigation and development, to redefine curricula with a view to incorporate knowledge on women and contribution of the women scholars.

### **Gender or Women's Studies**

Teaching of gender and women's studies requires logical interpretation and deconstruction of theory and gender in the local contexts. In Pakistan we are still grappling with issues such as whether we understand and teach the discipline from gender perspective or women's perspective. Because if it is just women that means ignoring the standpoint. Gender gives it a holistic intellectual perspective effectiveness of the discipline. And the issue of masculinities and men studies is raised but yet not a point of academic discussion.

### **Conceptual Issues**

Gender and Women's Studies is a new discipline gaining some impetus in Pakistan. It has been realized the issues are numerous but there is lack of indigenous view point and approach. The indigenous issues need to be approached with local remedies situated with in feminist but local socio-cultural and political standpoint. The divisions in Pakistani society permeates the individual lives, families, work structure, politics, education, legal and judicial system, religion, culture etc. It is a system of power privileging those with less power or no power. And the class differences in the society exist not only in opposition to the differences of gender, caste, and ethnicity but rather, in and through them (5).

Although the origins of feminism can be traced in the Muslim world as well as in Pakistan but unfortunately for obvious reasons it is not acknowledged and widely appreciated. The origin of the discipline and theories are mostly evolved in the West and thus being understood from those perspectives. There is lack of indigenous theoretical framework even with the women activists. The western theories necessitate being adapted in our own cultural context. Because any feminist theory if not translated for local situation can not have any significance or relevance.

Which is a disturbing thing for both the academics and the students? The emergence of multicultural feminism and postmodern feminism has given some representation to third world feminism furthermore now Islamic discourse has given legitimacy to the feminist cause in the Muslim societies.

It is perceptible that in Pakistan within the Islamic feminist discourse there could be liberal, radical, conservative etc. along with parallel secular struggle. Two decades of struggle for regressive Hadood Ordinances which recently got amended and passing of 'Women Protection Bill 2006' has proved that the laws instituted in the name of Islam cannot be overturned by means of political action alone, but through the use of better religious argument and a progressive argument adapted to present circumstances. Pakistani women rights activists can find solutions from within Islam which is a cultural as well as a political force such a stance may brazen out less resistance toward women's cause. As such a stance can gain legitimacy, acceptability and connectivity with the ordinary women's issues.

### Gender & Women Studies at AIOU

Distance education is a flexible system allowing people to dip in and out of education and periodically update their knowledge thus contribute in need based life long learning. The paradigm of distance education system, its flexible delivery mode is most beneficial for in service people who could not complete their education or those who want to enhance their qualification. The department of Gender and Women Studies at AIOU has started creating its niche in fulfilling the needs of those who are active in their endeavors for gender mainstreaming in the development agendas/projects.

In mid 1990's the Open University took the initiative to start a Women's Studies department and it struggled for Ministry of Women and Development's patronage which ultimately was granted. The department since 1998 is offering certificate and post graduate diploma and in 2005 launched its MSc. program. Because the courses emphasis is on both gender and women issues therefore recently the nomenclature of the department has been changed as Gender & Women Studies.

**Gender and Women's Studies is a very new discipline therefore there is shortage of qualified people. Limited faculty of four academics at AIOU women's Studies department is facing the challenge of developing courses, improving the quality, arrange and conduct workshops, involve suitable resource persons, identify part-time tutors, prepare all instructional material such as course guidelines assignments, schedules, respond to student queries, identify books for library, review scheme of studies to make the curriculum more effective and attractive for versatile clientele and also be tutors for courses etc. The list does not end and the concern is that their quality of work can affect and their personal research work and growth is being jeopardized.**

### **Curriculum**

**The scheme of studies gets lead from the HEC curriculum guidelines for Women's Studies (and not gender).**

**The courses are conceived with an indigenous perspective. Although there is dearth of local and original research, epistemologies, reliable statistics therefore reading materials provided to the students is often foreign written. But the students have to prepare assignments thinking Pakistani scenarios. In interactive workshops resource persons who are chosen their gender sensitivity, practical exposure of integrating and implementing gender perspectives in development projects or in other field is the criterion to select the resource experts.**

**The Scheme of studies is based on ten credits courses for master's level to be completed in two years i.e. four semesters and five credits for post graduate diploma in one year. The students can also do certificate courses. At masters level they can opt for research thesis.**

**The study package consists of books, study guide courses, allied material, supplementary material such as T.V program, F.M radio programs (a recent development) and course wise workshops at the main campus. The lectures which**

are delivered at the workshops are being recorded and converted on CDs. These can be given to the students in the study package and help in organizing the workshops at regional level.

### Teaching of the discipline

Scholars such as Sandra Harding (1987) point out that in the construction of knowledge the so-called objectivity is in fact the objectivity of the male discourse. Women's Studies provide an opportunity to redefine objectivity and give space to feminist standpoint. Methodologically the voice of the observer, of the student and of the teacher becomes as important as that of the object of study (4).

Having said that it is acknowledged that there is scarcity of qualified people in the field who can be part-time tutors for various subjects. Most of the qualified people are involved in well paid jobs with Multi-national companies, international NGO's, local NGO's and public sector which also commits to integrate gender mainstreaming in its initiatives. Mostly, these people are situated in big cities. Our teaching assignment does not attract even the most dedicated ones due to schedules, targets and remunerations.

The qualified faculty in the subject can be counted in Pakistan. It is not only the financial package which deters people to join the profession other issues are the academic environment, chances academic growth and discrimination by administration.

The multidisciplinary nature of the women's studies discipline can solve the problem of availability of teachers but who may not be having gender understanding. So teaching methodology and content analysis both areas are of disquiet. I fore stall another task of the women's studies departments to give gender sensitization to teachers of other disciplines so to make them valuable for our purpose.

### Research

To have indigenous view point and for evolving theory research is significant. With in the academic circles research emphasizing gender perspectives has sprung up in the discipline of Anthropology, Psychology, Sociology, Linguistics, Economics, health and population related issues. Some government institutes and independent women resource centres also conduct gender relevant research which would nosh the policy planning and development projects.

The research initiatives by the students of Women and Gender studies would be a welcome addition. This would be an important contribution to strengthen the local feminist standpoint. Therefore, research is an important component of the scheme of studies. Gradually it can be built-up as limited trained expertise is available in feminist research techniques. Students are being encouraged to take up various issues for MSc level researches in the areas of gender and politics, health, female participation and experiences in politics, harassment at work place etc. This research is taking place in small towns and villages which is important for versatile and comparative perspectives.

#### Clientele /Students

The students are both men and women with various age groups. About five hundred students are enrolled at present are at different levels of post-graduate diploma leading to masters level. Students come from all over Pakistan but mainly from Punjab, NWFP and federal area. These part-time and time trapped adult learners come from all professions such as; teachers, nurses, lawyers, police, armed forces, NGO staff working in different capacities, social welfare department, UN agencies, ADB and world bank staff, house wives etc. Some are fresh graduates and some with masters in social sciences disciplines. Recently, some doctors, engineers and PhD have also registered.

Most of the students who are working and enhancing their qualification they know the utility of the discipline. It is heartening experience that the students are demanding and curious. This challenge is useful for the academia to come up with a scheme of studies which caters to the needs of a multi-talented group of students.

A large number of our students are from various public and private sector organizations working on gender mainstreaming development agendas.

### **Student Support**

Students come from all over Pakistan with the support of the regional network of AIOU. But the academic support i.e. faculty, part-time tutors etc is centralized due to which students face problems.

The question of maintaining sufficient student contact including timely assistance and adequate performance feedback is a serious concern as exploratory discussion with tutors and peer is limited. To some extent that is provided in week long workshops which happens during every semester for all courses.

Thanks to the technological advancement most of the students have access to a lot of information on net such as tutors addresses, assignments, workshop schedules, results etc. They can also be in touch with the academic department and support departments through email, phone, post and visiting the main and regional campuses.

### **Learners perspective**

During last few years it has been witnessed that the students have adjusted their lens to look at the world around them, and their understanding of women and gender as a category of analysis. According to a recent survey with third semester students the studies have had a positive impact on their reflections on the manifestation of gender in their lives—leading to a range of personal advancement and intellectual discoveries. Some of the male students said that they have a changed behavioral attitude towards the women in their families, now they respect their contribution and try to involve them in the decision making process. Concretization and sensitization of values, equality of sexes, discourse analysis could make a slow and gradual change.

### **Concerns and Strategies**

- ✎ **There is need of linkages between national and international linkages and collaborations in the areas of curriculum development, study materials, teaching methodologies, research methodologies and experience sharing between academia and students.**
- ✎ **For any institution offering courses would be central and important to know the impact dimensions of courses for which a case study has been planned [7].**
- ✎ **The legitimacy and further growth of this new scholarship depends on its curriculum and integration in other disciplines. Because it is not a simple matter of adding new material to the curriculum rather it involves introduction of new perspectives that challenges the assumptions and methods of the discipline.**
- ✎ **Linkages between activists, academics and the development experts/workers both in public and private sector are vital. This tripartite link is each others strength and for a holistic approach to advance the status of women.**
- ✎ **The research undertakings and its underpinnings could be important but quality and its utilization for gender mainstreaming is significant.**
- ✎ **The faculty in women's studies needs to enhance their qualification. HEC can give special allocations to facilitate the young faculty. The linkage programmes are beneficial.**
- ✎ **The departments need additional financial resources to establish research labs with research facilities and journals and latest writing.**
- ✎ **Future directions of the women's studies as multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary subject in social sciences need collaborative efforts.**
- ✎ **To clear the perception that the discipline is only concerned with women and for women, when it is not so. There is dire need of reorienting the discipline with a gender emphasis and bringing in both male and female**

standpoint. Although my own teaching experience is that no women issue can be discussed without bringing in the men's role in it. So both are unavoidable for what ever issue is to be discussed.

- ✂ Since in teaching and learning process of gender and women's studies the sharing of experiences, confidence building and prompt response from tutor is significant.
- ✂ To develop compatibility of feminist pedagogy with distance learning mode and its effectiveness (6).

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