

**INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON
WOMEN'S SITUATIONS AND WOMEN'S STUDIES: SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES
14-15 DECEMBER 2006
CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES
NORTH BENGAL UNIVERSITY**

Women's rights essentially are human rights - this simple if challenging proposition has inspired the pursuit of Women's Studies. The function of Women's Studies is however not merely to priorities the rights, responsibilities and relations of women as human beings within society, but also to articulate women's protests against the persistence of gender disparity and inequality of rights. The voice of protest has gained considerable strength ever since feminist theory has explicitly entered the domain of gender discourse. Although this is still perceived as a threat by many entrenched structures within the gender hierarchy, it gradually persuaded policymakers to include women more substantively within their agenda and has consequently also widened the operational sphere of Women's Studies to cover the situations of women in development.

Nevertheless, when these developments have been critically appraised by women, it has also been observed that gender disparities have perversely tended to widen despite such positive policy changes. The Beijing Declaration in 1995 hence urges women to start setting an agenda of their own, instead of merely acting as subjects for the agenda of international development institutions. It thus becomes imperative for academic researchers as well as women activists to take periodic stock of emerging issues and directions within the discipline of Women's Studies, and the International Seminar on WOMEN'S SITUATIONS AND WOMEN'S STUDIES to be held between 14-15 December 2006 at the Centre for Women's Studies, North Bengal University, is intended to be an effort towards this. In the overall context of women in this region where persisting gender discrimination has so far impeded the advancement of women in nearly all spheres - the Seminar shall endeavor to locate the voices of women currently emanating from all levels of society under four specific sub-themes.

SEMINAR SUB-THEMES

1. Cultural Dimensions of Women's Identity

Women's experiences and outlooks are traditionally shaped within a cultural and social matrix in which categories like class, race and gender have long formed the basis of unequal treatment. The role of women's collective agency is firstly to transform the way that women think about themselves, and secondly to transform the way in which they are personally and institutionally treated within this socio-cultural backdrop. Several continuing debates still persist nevertheless on whether the gender needs of women are universal and span all orders of society. Women's Studies must therefore be equipped to handle women's issues in all their diversity, while providing a policy stimulus for their collective redressal.

2. Global Change: Women's Experiences and Opportunities

While entrenched structures of social subordination and institutionalised discrimination continue to be deeply embedded within most developing societies, globalisation and structural change have been propagated as a new prescription for accelerating the pace of development and for the enhancement of economic opportunities. Most countries in the South Asian region are currently passing through this phase of transition, with mixed results where there have been gainers as well as losers. It thus becomes contextually important to

reflect on women's experiences of this structural transition and to investigate the impact it has had in either relieving or intensifying gender inequality.

3. Gender Insecurity and Women's Empowerment

Rather than being static, both economic and gender rights undergo gradual evolution, thus ultimately impacting on the wider status of women in social, economic and political spheres. However as studies from many disciplinary perspectives show, the direction of evolution has not always been favourable to women because of their limited ability to defend themselves against encroachment of their rights. The loss of women's rights accompanies gender insecurity, which in the long term can increase the subjugation of women. The women's movement plays a critical role in consolidating women's protest and in empowering women to collectively resist the erosion of their rights.

4. Women of South Asia: New Challenges and Common Goals

As development continuously widens the sphere of women's economic activities, their societal relations and their position in public space also undergo change. Meanwhile, this also places women under gender stress since their intra-household responsibilities and the family expectations they have to fulfill remain largely unaltered. The net result for most women is that the level of stress and insecurity among them has increased. Comparisons thus need to be drawn across the region so that an identification of best and worst scenarios can be made. Attention also needs to be drawn to gender-specific regional problems and evils like dowry, trafficking and violence, etc., which can be better addressed by following a common strategy.

OTHER DETAILS:

The Centre invites Papers from scholars, and it is requested that the Abstracts be sent to the undersigned by **15th June 2006** and full papers by **30th October 2006**. Local hospitality will be provided by the organizers and limited TA reimbursements (within the country) will be made available to participants and Resource Persons subject to the availability of funds. Accommodation will be provided subject to Guest House availability.

ABOUT THE VENUE;

North Bengal University is situated in Darjeeling District of the eastern state of West Bengal in India. The majestic eastern Himalayan range borders the district in the north while the famous Darjeeling Hill Station is just a couple of hours from the University Campus. The region has attracted tourists from all over the world for its scenic beauty, temperate climate, the view of the magnificent Kanchanjungha range of the Himalaya and also for the finest orthodox Darjeeling tea. The north eastern state of Sikkim is also an added attraction to the region.

All further communication should be made to

Dr. Sanchari Roy Mukherjee
Director, Centre for Women's Studies
North Bengal University
Dist. Darjeeling
PIN – 734 013
West Bengal
India

e-mail: sancho12@rediffmail.com

Tele: 0353-2699053 (O)

0353-2581243 (R)

or Dr. Beethika Moni Datta
Project Officer

Centre for Women's Studies
North Bengal University
Dist. Darjeeling

e-mail: cwsnbu@sancharnet.in

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2. Global Change: Women's Experiences and Opportunities
3. Gender Insecurity and Women's Empowerment
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e-mail: sancho12@rediffmail.com
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0353-2581243 (R)

Dr. Beethika Moni Datta
Project Officer
Centre for Women's Studies
North Bengal University
Dist. Darjeeling, PIN-734013, W. Bengal.
e-mail: cwsnbu@sancharnet.in