

**Inter University Centre for Social Science Research & Extension  
Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala**

**Fourth Feminist Methodology Workshop**

**Genealogies of Feminist Enquiry:  
Exploring the Politics of Knowledge  
16-20 August 2016**

**Call for Applications**

Inter University Centre for Social Science Research and Extension (IUCSSRE), Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala is organizing a five day workshop on Feminist Research Methodology from 16 to 20 August 2016. This year the workshop would provide an interdisciplinary space to discuss theoretical, methodological and epistemological challenges of doing feminist research.

MPhil/ PhD Students who are doing research in Gender/Women Studies are welcome to apply. Please send a covering letter indicating your interest in the concerned area and synopsis of the MPhil/PhD research topic in 1000 words along with a recommendation letter from the Director/Research Guide to Workshop Coordinator, Inter University Centre for Social Science Research and Extension, School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, Malloosery P. O. Kottayam 686041 or mail to [iucssre@gmail.com](mailto:iucssre@gmail.com). Last date for submission of proposal, along with a bio-data is 10th June. Selected participants will be intimated by 15<sup>th</sup> June, and candidates will be required to submit a detailed working draft by 10<sup>th</sup> July. This will be pre-circulated among the experts. Registration Fee: Rs. 500. Participants will be provided sleeper class train fare, food and accommodation support.

**Workshop Design**

The workshop will include thematic lectures by resource persons in an interactive mode, using print and visual mediums. The afternoon sessions of the workshop will focus on presentation of synopsis by MPhil/PhD students before resource persons. Students would be able to share progress of their research and experiences with each other, and with the resource persons, and receive constructive feedback and advice on their Research proposal, and their writing.

**The Concept**

Over the past three decades feminist scholarship has questioned the limitations of knowledge produced within dominant paradigms and these critiques has been instrumental in changing the ways in which research is done across multiple disciplines. Recognizing the need for conceptual tools to explain the persistent gender bias in knowledge production, feminist scholarship discovered that traditional

epistemological resources were ill-equipped to correct such biases. The issues raised by feminist scholarship in this transdisciplinary space have created foundational changes in social theory and at the same time, these interactions have tremendously impacted feminism also. These debates have led to methodological and epistemological disputes within feminism. In their effort to make knowledge on social reality and gendered lives, they have put forward numerous pathways to connect feminist ideas with the social reality.

The earliest challenge to feminist knowledge claims has come from the wider academic community to justify their knowledge in terms of rationality, objectivity, validity, rules of method, control of subjectivity, etc. In response feminists questioned whether the 'standard' scientific method was capable of producing knowledge not tainted by sexism. It was argued that the value neutrality, universality and claims of objectivity made it easier to mask masculine position as a neutral position. These discussions brought forth the nuances of 'masculine' knowledge production and unveiled the nexus between power and knowledge. It was brought forth that what passed for objective knowledge was masculine in several respects: the problems investigated, theoretical frameworks adopted, and the narratives that were constructed served the interest of the men, promoting their position and legitimating the subordination of women.

Feminist critique of 'objectivity' both its possibility and desirability, marked the importance of 'the subject' in the knowledge production. The idea that the sex of the knower could be epistemically significant or the concept of *Situated Knowing* became important in this context and it sparked a new range of arguments on knowledge and subjectivity. And the most influential perspective put forward was one's social location, gender being one among them both shapes and limits one's knowing. The discourse opened out into analyses of multiple intersecting specificities of subjectivity and positionality in their social, political and thence epistemological implications for the production of knowledge and knowers; and into questions about credibility, marginality, epistemic responsibility and the politics of testimony, none of which would have been meaningful in the discourse of orthodox epistemology. (Code, 2014) While these arguments endorsed the uneliminable role of social in shaping knowledge, it also presented certain challenges. The primary debates that emerged from this argument was if social location limits one's knowledge how can we know across social locations. Also, another important question that was raised was if knowledge is situated, then in what sense can knowledge be objective? This brought up the argument that either feminists must abandon the idea of objective knowledge, or they must rework objectivity to prove consistent with their insights concerning situated knowledge. This led to bringing forth the idea of contextual empiricism, which re-conceptualized empiricism from a feminist framework. One of the most significant contributions of this concept was its shift in thinking about knowledge production in terms of communal practice rather than an activity of individual. The communities were reconceived as primary epistemological agents, and argument maintained that relations both internal to communities and between communities needed to be examined for their epistemic import.

Experience has also been suggested as an important epistemic measure of knowledge. Feminist Standpoint theorists argued that knowledge anchored in the 'subjectivity of the oppressed' was less distorted than the one deriving from the dominant group. They argued that experience provided a basis

for an alternative, critical feminist epistemology grounded in the material, social, and cultural realities of women's lives. Women's experience, perspective, positions that were highlighted became another important reconstructive movement in feminist knowledge production. But the postmodernist and poststructuralist critiques interrogated placing 'experience' as the basis of feminist epistemology. They argued experience had no independent existence outside the language and discourse that constructed it.

Another challenge for feminist knowledge claims was its taken for granted approach to the 'existence of women'. These challenges came from women's varied experience of cultural differences, social divisions and power relations. The universal category, 'the women' was problematised by feminist researchers and scholars of colour. It became obvious that focusing on 'woman' as a monolith category resulted in the marginalization of 'different' women who were not fit in the universal category. In this context, the discussion on vast interconnection among other categories of difference like race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, etc emerged. Matrix of domination, intersectionality and standpoint theory were some of the methodological tools that emerged to conceptualise difference along a range of interlocking inequalities.

The movement to difference has had the effect of opening up new avenues of feminist research. It was critiqued that feminism was overwhelmingly a western phenomena and the process of theorization has created a unified category of 'third world women' which overlooked the diversity that exist among them. Besides, in the process of theorization these women were portrayed as victims of underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, illiteracy, poverty and religious fanaticism.

In the light of questions being raised by postmodernist and poststructuralist thinkers on the status, validity, basis and authority of knowledge claims, a sense of uncertainty loomed over feminist epistemology and methodology. As foundations of feminist knowledge & methodology were challenged by these thinkers, a fundamental question emerged whether there could be a feminist or even several feminist 'way of knowing'. In the backdrop, several questions of whether feminist need their own epistemologies or methodologies were being raised. We hope that the conference would enable researchers to look into these fundamental questions and rethink:

- What makes feminist research feminist?
- How has feminist enquiry altered existing social enquiry?
- Given the diversity and debates in feminist theory, how can there be consensus on what constitutes "feminist" methodologies and epistemologies? Or can we draw a parallel line connecting these approaches?
- Or do feminist need their own epistemologies and methodologies?
- What does feminism require of an epistemology?
- How do other inequalities intersect with 'feminist research'? How can research method or methodologies be intersectional?

### **Workshop Coordinators**

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