

Centre for Women's Developments Studies
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Reflections on the Past: Looking to the Future
Fifty Years of Towards Equality
March 3-5, 2025

Conference Report

From March 3–5, 2025, the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) organized an international conference as part of the Golden Jubilee of the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), *Towards Equality*. As is well known, the Report was the first comprehensive and critical analysis of the status of women in independent India. Its publication ignited a nationwide discourse on gender equality, propelled the establishment of a specialized field of research as women's studies, powered hitherto neglected women's concerns and issues into policy and planning processes, and provided a sovereign view on women's issues that had an inspirational effect on fellow decolonizing countries of the global south.

The CWDS conference aimed to reflect on the enduring impact the report over the past five decades, on the evolution and diversification of gender-related discussions since its publication, on fields and concerns that were untouched or lightly touched in *Towards Equality*, but have since emerged with emphasis in women's studies, and to collectively think and discuss possible directions for the future.

What was particularly striking about the conference was the substantive nature and quality of the discussions across a wide range of themes and issues, and the enthusiastic involvement of scholars and students from across generational divides. Senior and veteran scholars brought to the table a reservoir of experience and scholarship while the young brought insights into their contemporary experiences in fields of work and research. It was the interaction between the two and the sweep across five decades of experience and across a wide range of issues, questions, and

themes that marked out this conference as a special moment for women's studies in India.

The format of the conference combined a series of seven plenary sessions every day in the morning with paper presentations by mostly young scholars/researchers across five continuing and parallel specialized sub-theme sessions in the afternoons.

The first day plenaries (apart from the inaugural) comprised of a session on Women's Studies as Resistance and Resilience, and one on Legal Reforms. The second day plenaries focused on Women and Political Participation, Rural Women and Agrarian Crisis, and on Intersecting Marginalities, Social, Regional, and Identity based. The third day plenaries delved into Challenges and Strategies in relation to Gender and Environment and the Role of Media in shaping Gender Narratives (apart from a wrap-up session).

The first sub-theme focused on violence as a substratum of gender inequality and inequity, emphasizing how violence against women remains a major barrier to achieving gender equality in India.

The second sub-theme addressed inequality, gender, and education, highlighting significant gender disparities in access to education and how these disparities hinder women's long-term social and economic mobility.

The third sub-theme examined gender and chronic health conditions, shedding light on the intersectional challenges faced by women dealing with chronic illnesses and the ways gender and socio-economic factors shape their healthcare access and experiences.

The fourth sub-theme, women and political participation, analyzed the barriers women face in politics, particularly at the local and national levels, and how gendered power dynamics continue to limit women's political agency.

The fifth sub-theme explored women as workers, investigating the interconnections, exclusions, and nuanced challenges women face in the workforce, including labor market discrimination and the unequal division of unpaid labor.

Inaugural Session

Day 1 | 03 March 2025

The inaugural session of the international conference titled "Reflections on the Past: Looking to the Future – Fifty Years of Towards Equality" was organized by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) at the India International Centre (IIC), New Delhi, from 3rd to 5th March 2025. **Sanghamitra Jana Chatterjee** of CWDS welcomed all esteemed guests, scholars, and distinguished speakers to the conference. She acknowledged the presence of a distinguished panel, including Prof. Vasanthi Raman, Prof. N. Manimekalai, Shri K. N. Srivastava, Dr. Kumud Sharma, and Prof. Jayati Ghosh, each of whom would contribute valuable insights throughout the event. **Vasanthi Raman**, Chairperson of CWDS and Chair of the session, opened the proceedings by reflecting on the enduring significance of the Towards Equality report on its 50th anniversary. She emphasized that the report had provided a comprehensive assessment of the status of women in post-independence India, addressing critical issues such as economic disparities, education, and marginalization. Prof. Raman noted that the current global context is increasingly polarized and fragmented, necessitating dialogue on links between global transformations and grassroots realities. She stressed the importance of revisiting earlier strategies and frameworks to address the persistent challenges in achieving gender equality.

N. Manimekalai, Director of CWDS, highlighted the collective efforts that had made the event possible. She underscored the historical significance of the Towards Equality report and the crucial role played by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in advancing gender and women's studies in India. Referring to the pioneering contributions of early advocates such as Prof. Vina Mazumdar and Dr. Lotika Sarkar, she affirmed that their foundational work was instrumental in institutionalizing women's studies as a formal academic discipline. Prof. Manimekalai concluded by expressing hope that the conference discussions would help shape the content of future initiatives for gender equality in India in a meaningful way.

K. N. Srivastava, Director of IIC, noted the monumental efforts undertaken in preparing the Towards Equality report. He highlighted the report's historical significance and its role in initiating vital debates on women's rights and issues. Shri Srivastava also acknowledged the ongoing challenges faced by women today, including violence, poverty, and limited access to resources, calling for sustained efforts to address these pressing concerns.

Kumud Sharma, former Director and Chairperson of CWDS, provided insights into the evolving engagement of women's studies and the women's movement over the last five decades. Having served as the Research Officer during the drafting of the Towards Equality report, she reflected on the historical trajectory of gender equality in India. Dr. Sharma emphasized the impact of shifting political and economic landscapes—such as the economic liberalization of the 1990s and the internationalization of gender discourse. She called for policies that address the economic and social challenges women face today and stressed the need to analyze gender equality through both national and global perspectives.

Jayati Ghosh, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts, USA, offered a critical reflection on the contemporary relevance of the Towards Equality report. While acknowledging progress in women's life expectancy and education, she highlighted persistent issues such as low workforce participation and the burden of unpaid care work. Prof. Ghosh argued that India's economic development model continues to perpetuate gender inequality by depending on cheap, unpaid labor, particularly from women. She advocated policy changes that prioritize public employment, affirmative action, and gender-sensitive economic development strategies.

Sanghamitra concluded the session by thanking the distinguished speakers for their insightful contributions and expressed appreciation to all participants and attendees for their engagement, emphasizing their role in ensuring the conference's success.

Plenary Session 1

Day 1 | 03 March 2025

Confronting Histories of Subjugation: Women's Studies as Resistance and Resilience

The session was chaired by **Kumud Sharma**, Former Director and Chairperson, CWDS.

The first speaker, **Indu Agnihotri**, historian and also former Director, CWDS, emphasized the broader historical context in which the Towards Equality report was framed / written. Grounded in women's experience of struggles that took place in the run-up to independence, and which had laid the foundation for the rights enshrined in the Constitution of India, she emphasized that the Report represented a Manifesto for Change in post-independence India. She pointed to the fact that it continues to be cited because of the continued relevance of its recommendations and framework in understanding persistent issues with regard to women's oppression and discrimination, the adverse sex ratio and declining work participation of women being just two such significant aspects which it highlighted.

Noting that the methodological approach underlying the Report located women's rights within a broader concept of universal equality, Agnihotri drew attention to the its acknowledgement that women's subordinate status could not be studied in isolation from the context of the development policies pursued since independence, and was embedded in the structures that upheld inequalities on account of caste, class, region, religion and other identities. In critically examining the debates around tradition and modernity, she opined that the Report had put forth a perspective that social transformation was linked to undermining practices which upheld exclusion, discrimination and inequality.

Agnihotri also highlighted the fact that the report had triggered interest among women activists across South Asia, in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka at the time, including through the platforms of the ILO and UN agencies. Such cross-border dialogue had facilitated the emergence of a community of women –academics from the South in international platforms, ensuring that debates in such forums did

not remain restricted to perspectives emerging only from first world locations. She observed that the resurgent women's movement in India -from the 1970s, widely shared the recommendations of the report to keep alive a critical dialogue and debate on women's rights in India.

The second speaker, **Kim Eun-Shil**, Emeritus Professor of Women's Studies, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea, in a presentation on "The Politics of Institutionalizing Feminist Knowledge: Women's Studies as a Knowledge System" discussed three major epistemological phases over 40 years of Korean Women's Studies. Modernization and Development – centered on the tension between universality and particularity, the professionalization of Gender and Women's Human Rights with the institutionalization of Women's Studies and the introduction of "gender" as a form of professional knowledge, and personalized approaches under Neoliberalism involving debates on equality vs. fairness, intersectionality, and solidarity that transcends backlash or victimhood politics.

Kim traced the roots of feminist resistance in Korea to male-dominated labor and democratization movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s', during an era of patriarchal, chauvinist nationalism and military dictatorship, mentioning that EWHA Woman's University began offering a multidisciplinary course in Women's Studies in 1977. Alongside the rise of radical feminist organizations, the Korean Women's Studies Association was founded in 1984, and several feminist magazines and academic journals also emerged during this period. She credited the 1975 UN International Women's Year with playing a crucial role in institutionalizing Women's Studies in Korean universities.

The first major theoretical debate in Korean Women's Studies—"Universality vs. Particularity of Korean Women's Experiences"—dominated the field between 1984 and 1994 and was the central theme of several annual conferences during the late 1980s. Post the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, the South Korean government adopted gender mainstreaming policies and hired gender experts across institutions. In 1999, the Korean Women's Studies Association succeeded in getting Women's Studies recognized as a multidisciplinary academic category by the Korea Research Foundation. However, the 1997 "IMF crisis" led to backlash, with growing

criticism of Women's Studies programs and gender quotas. During this time, Asian feminist solidarity also began to grow. Korea, lacking a singular representative group, looked to "Asia" as a new collective identity. This led to the founding of the Center for Asian and Women's Studies at Ewha in 1997, the publication of a national Women's Studies textbook in 2005, and hosting the 9th International Interdisciplinary Conference on Women. In the neoliberal era, while Korean Women's Studies became globally recognized, activists found it harder to voice their struggles, often leading to emotional fatigue and fragmentation. While many young feminist groups formed, they were often short-lived and disconnected. Still, Prof. Kim noted that new forms of solidarity are emerging through experimental feminist alliances.

Malavika Karlekar and **Leela Kasturi**, Editors of the Indian Journal of Gender Studies (IJGS), which is internationally read. Kasturi traced the journey of IJGS, now in its 31st year, beginning with how the Towards Equality report had redefined public discourse on women's status and created a demand for gender-based data. CWDS was established in 1980, and Samyashakti, its earlier publication, was launched in 1983. Initially published biannually, IJGS now releases three issues a year. It receives submissions from a wide range of contributors—academics and non-academics alike—from various countries. The journal includes research articles, book reviews, and special issues, covering gender topics that remain relevant over time. Kasturi emphasized that patriarchy is a recurring theme in papers that come to the journal, from across regions and disciplines.

Malavika Karlekar reiterated that Vina Mazumdar was insistent on naming the journal Gender Studies, pushing beyond the limitations of the term Women's Studies. She referred to her current work—a collaborative project with Geraldine Forbes aiming to break new ground in feminist research, as her "swan song". She stressed that the journal maintains a rigorous peer-review process which leads to a high rejection rate, but ensures scholarly quality.

Mala Khullar, Independent Researcher in Gender, Women's Studies, and Development, served as the discussant. She pointed out the thematic commonalities in the session, especially around the concept of equality. She contrasted the Korean model—where Women's Studies evolved within universities to inform the broader

public—with the Indian model, which often engaged activism from outside academia. Khullar urged attendees not to get so caught up in diversity that they overlook shared experiences and common feminist struggles. She emphasized the important role of IJGS in shaping gender knowledge and the need for journals to act as both curators and gatekeepers of feminist discourse. She also noted that sometimes papers that initially appear unpublishable contain hidden insights and deserve a second look.

In the course of a lively interaction with the audience, Flavia Agnes emphasized key omissions in the report, including minority rights. Indu Agnihotri reiterated that the Towards Equality report was a call to the State to address structural inequities. Kim reflected on how neoliberalism undermines feminist activism by reinforcing market-driven priorities.

Plenary Session 2

Day 1 | 03 March 2025

Legal Reforms and Gender Justice

Amita Dhanda, Professor Emeritus of NALSAR University of Law chaired this session. In her opening remarks, reflecting on the state-centric focus on legal mechanisms in the Towards Equality Report, she raised a critical question: can the law alone ensure gender justice? This question laid the groundwork for the session's three presentations, each of which, in different ways, questioned the adequacy of relying solely on the judiciary and legal reforms to advance gender justice.

The first speaker, **Kalpna Kannabiran**, Distinguished Professor, Council for Social Development, in her presentation titled “Lawscapes in Towards Equality,” examined the role of law in the 1974 Towards Equality report and traced the evolution of legal discourse on women’s rights over the past five decades. Her analysis went beyond the chapter on legal reform, drawing connections between national legal developments and broader international human rights frameworks.

In mapping the intersections between local and global gender justice efforts, she offered insights into both the progress made and the challenges that persist in the legal terrain shaping women's rights in India today.

The second speaker, **Justice K. Chandru**, Retired Judge of the Madras High Court, delivered a critical presentation titled “Legal Reforms & Gender.” He pointed to the slow, inconsistent, and often contradictory nature of legal reforms aimed at gender justice. For instance, he was critical as to how the much delayed 106th Constitutional Amendment (2023), on women’s political reservation has been further delayed by preconditions such as delimitation. He also pointed to the Haryana two-child policy for local elections having been upheld despite its discriminatory nature and despite previous judgments rejecting such arbitrary restrictions.

Justice Chandru highlighted stalled cases, including the Sabarimala review and the denial of same-sex marriage rights, as examples of institutional reluctance to enact meaningful change. While some reforms, like the ban on Triple Talaq, were swiftly implemented, others—such as the effort to separate succession laws from personal laws—remain unresolved. He emphasized that the judiciary, like the legislature and executive, is often complicit in slowing the path toward gender equality due to its own institutional inertia.

The third speaker, **Flavia Agnes**, Women’s rights lawyer and Co-founder of MAJLIS, presented her paper titled “Providing Support to Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Abuse: The Journey of Majlis.” She outlined the work of Majlis, founded in 1991 to address what she had found to be a critical gap in the women's movement, namely its narrow focus on legal remedies without sustained support. As she put it, MAJLIS, run by an all-women team, provides both legal and emotional support to survivors of domestic and sexual violence, and helps survivors navigate the complex legal process while centering their autonomy in decision-making. A major focus for the organization is to improve conviction rates in sexual assault cases by providing long-term, consistent assistance during legal proceedings.

Agnes also drew attention to the unique challenges in child sexual abuse cases, especially when the perpetrator is a family member—often the father, who may also be the family’s primary earner. She said that MAJLIS engages in confidence-building, helping victims transform into survivors, and walks alongside them through the often slow and taxing legal journey to ensure sustainable and meaningful outcomes.

Plenary Session 3

Day 2 | 04 March 2025

Women and Political Participation: A Regional Perspective

The third plenary session was chaired by **Neera Chandhoke**, Former Professor of Political Science, University of Delhi. She began by introducing the panellists and inviting them to present their work under the session's theme, “Women and Political Participation: A Regional Perspective.”

The session opened with **Rosemary Dzuwichu**, Director, Centre for Peace and Gender Studies, who presented a regional perspective focusing on the North-Eastern states. Her presentation highlighted the significant progress made by women in the region despite numerous challenges. Dzuwichu showcased the success stories of women's organisations that have effected positive change through persistent struggles and grassroots movements. She concluded by emphasizing that women's political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving gender equality and genuine democracy.

The next speaker, **Anandhi S.**, Former Professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, discussed the paradox in Tamil Nadu, where women have outperformed men in areas such as literacy, employment, maternity welfare, and life expectancy, yet this progress has not translated into increased political participation. She attributed this disparity to the impact of neoliberalism, which, she argued, has reshaped democratic functioning. Anandhi argued that the interpretation of the Constitution today is influenced by modern oligarchs, whose discourse on democracy functions primarily as a tool for oligarchic wealth accumulation.

Sanjay Kumar, Professor and Co-Director, Lokniti, CSDS, presented data on the evolving patterns of political participation in India. He pointed out that the gender gap in voter turnout remained between 12–15% in the early decades after independence. However, this began to shift in 2004 when the gap closed at the national level. In fact, in 21 states, women's voter turnout surpassed that of men. This trend persisted in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, with women leading in 25 states, and again in 18 states

during the 2024 elections. Kumar concluded that this rising trend in women's voter turnout is not only visible nationally but also at the state and regional levels.

The final speaker, **N. Sukumar**, Professor of Political Science at the University of Delhi, examined the factors that enable and inhibit the political participation of women in local self-governance. He particularly focused on the barriers faced by women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes after being elected. Drawing on his personal experiences in evaluating training mechanisms, Sukumar concluded by proposing strategies for training of representatives that takes into account their special situation, advocating for stronger representative institutional mechanisms, and highlighting the importance of engaging with feminist dialogues to envision a way forward.

Plenary Session 4

Day 2 | 04 March 2025

Rural Women in the Context of Agrarian Crisis

The session, chaired by **Ravi Srivastava**, economist and former Professor of Regional Development, JNU and currently Director of the Centre for Employment Studies, Institute of Human Development.

Utsa Patnaik, Professor Emeritus, JNU, spoke on the adverse effects of neoliberal reforms on nutrition, particularly for women. Drawing historical parallels, she linked the decline in food grain consumption to colonial exploitation and noted how post-independence policies—had initially improved food security. However, she argued that the neoliberal reforms introduced in the early 1990s reversed these gains. Despite official claims that poverty has declined by up to 20%, Patnaik asserted that nutritional distress, particularly among rural populations, has increased significantly. She highlighted the alarming rise in anaemia among women, which poses serious risks to maternal and child health. Criticizing the reduced public investment in welfare programs, she warned that this exacerbates hunger and malnutrition.

Amarjeet Sinha, IAS, Senior Fellow at CSEP (Centre for Social and Economic Progress), explored the changing roles of rural women, noting a recent rise in the

Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) and improved educational access. While poverty levels have declined, he pointed out that wages remain low. Drawing from his research on poverty reduction, he identified six key factors behind the sharper poverty decline in Southern states: adolescent girls' access to higher education, improved primary healthcare (especially maternal and child care), the formation of Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs), vocational and technical skills training, lower fertility rates, and access to collateral-free loans. He highlighted the positive impact of SHGs, MGNREGS, and NRLM in enhancing financial inclusion and strengthening rural agriculture. Despite these successes, he noted that rural women still face considerable social and economic barriers.

Seema Kulkarni, Senior Fellow at SOPPECOM (Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management), presented case studies illustrating the gendered dimensions of agrarian distress. Drawing on examples from Maharashtra, Punjab, and Telangana, she described the multiple burdens rural women face—including debt, displacement, violence, and climate instability. She particularly emphasized the vulnerability of widows and single women, who bear the brunt of microfinance-related pressures and shifting agricultural practices. Kulkarni criticized the limited understanding of the intersectionality of agrarian distress and called on the state to adopt more inclusive and gender-sensitive policies.

Navsharan Singh, Independent Researcher and Discussant, reflected on the presentations and offered additional insights. She cautioned that while the rising female workforce participation may seem encouraging, it often reflects economic desperation rather than empowerment. Much of this participation occurs in unpaid or poorly paid informal work, especially in rural areas. Singh criticized the invisibility of rural women in mainstream economic policies and acknowledged their critical role in resisting exploitative systems. She also highlighted unresolved land issues, noting that women and Dalit communities continue to face structural barriers to land ownership, while land grabs for large-scale projects persist. She called for stronger advocacy for land rights and economic recognition for rural women.

The session concluded with a unified call for comprehensive policy to address the economic insecurity, limited access to credit, and rising nutritional challenges facing

rural women. Speakers emphasized the urgent need to recognize rural women not as passive beneficiaries but as active economic contributors and agents of change.

Plenary Session 5

Day 2 | 04 March 2025

Intersecting Marginalities: Social, Regional, and Identity-Based Perspectives

Renu Addlakha of CWDS introduced the session and the chair, who then invited the panelists to present their work under the theme Intersecting Marginalities of Caste, Religion, and Gender.

In her opening remarks, **Mary John**, Former Director of CWDS in the chair, acknowledged the challenge of addressing such a broad and complex theme within limited time. Reflecting on the Towards Equality report, she noted its tripartite categorization of women based on economic status, while critiquing its underdeveloped analysis of caste and religion. She highlighted the report's limitations—particularly its lack of intersectional engagement—and referenced historian Durba Mitra's critique of its biological determinism and failure to address caste violence and sexuality. John pointed out that although the 2015 High-Level Report made progress in recognizing the rights of sex workers and transgender people, queer women remain excluded from the conversation. She questioned whether intersectionality is a fair critique of Towards Equality, arguing that while the report acknowledged differences among women, these remained descriptive rather than analytical. She concluded by calling for greater engagement with regional perspectives, linguistic diversity, and ecological divisions to better understand marginalities.

Ruth Manorama, Distinguished Development Worker, delivered a powerful critique of the layered oppressions experienced by Dalit women, who simultaneously endure caste, class, and gender discrimination. She emphasized that their marginalization is not merely an additive effect of these systems but a deeply entrenched and systemic form of subjugation. Dalit women face caste-based violence in both public and private spheres, often at the hands of dominant-caste men who use sexual violence as a tool of control, with little to no redress from the legal system. Manorama also highlighted

the marginalization of Dalit women within both mainstream feminist and Dalit political movements. Her address was not just a testimony to suffering, but a call to action—urging collective mobilization, political representation, land rights, and economic redistribution. She argued that India's true progress must be measured by the liberation of Dalit women from structural oppression.

Ghazala Jamil, Assistant Professor at the Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, JNU, examined the complex relationships between the state, governance, and marginalized communities. She discussed how institutional structures often fail to deliver true justice, and how state interventions—though framed as protective—often serve to regulate and control vulnerable groups. She highlighted the contradictions within the developmental framework, pointing out that while legal provisions such as reservations and constitutional safeguards exist, they often fall short of translating into meaningful empowerment due to entrenched systemic barriers. Her presentation urged a critical examination of the power structures shaping social and economic realities.

Manjula Pradeep, Human Rights Activist and Lawyer, offered a deeply personal and political reflection on the intersecting oppressions faced by Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and other marginalized women. Drawing inspiration from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, she discussed how caste, gender, and ethnicity collectively determine access to education, employment, and justice. Sharing her own experiences of caste-based discrimination and sexual violence, she underscored how societal expectations restrict Dalit women's agency.

She critiqued the masculinity prevalent within Dalit movements and the invisibility of gender within caste struggles. Using government data, she demonstrated the wide disparities in literacy, wages, and employment, and highlighted the high incidence of sexual violence against Dalit women. Pradeep called for stronger legal implementation, the collection of disaggregated data on caste-based crimes, and a more inclusive feminist leadership. She also emphasized the rise of Dalit feminism, inspired by Black feminism, as a vital counter to Brahminical patriarchy.

V. Geetha, Independent Feminist Scholar and Activist, critically examined foundational reports such as Towards Equality, the Mandal Commission Report, and the Sachar Committee Report, underlining their continued relevance. She questioned how we can move beyond political rhetoric to empirically establish the intersections of caste, gender, and class. Analyzing these reports together, she aimed to refine feminist and anti-caste methodologies for understanding systemic oppression.

Geetha discussed how these historical documents framed development—often portraying marginalized groups as populations in need of integration into national productivity. She traced how caste-based exclusions were documented, from the Elayaperumal Committee’s findings on untouchability to the Mandal Commission’s expansion of caste analysis beyond Dalits. She also noted the Sachar Committee’s disturbing revelation that Muslim women are often viewed not as full citizens, but as minorities with limited rights.

Concluding, Geetha questioned whether the Indian state is truly capable of delivering justice to marginalized communities, and expressed a preference for anarchism over engagement with a state mired in contradictions.

Plenary Session 6

Day 3 | 05 March 2025

Gender and Environment: Challenges and Strategies

Bijoya Roy from CWDS introduced the chair of the session, **Indira Jaisingh**, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of India, who emphasized the critical issue of intergenerational problems caused environmental disasters, drawing on her legal work on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. She highlighted how, at the time of the tragedy, the courts failed to grasp the full implications of exposure to methyl isocyanate (MIC), which crosses both the blood-brain barrier and the placental barrier. This exposure, particularly concerning for pregnant women, has resulted in significant health challenges for their children. The chair stressed that such events should not be viewed as isolated incidents but rather through an intergenerational lens, with a focus on addressing the gendered and environmental health challenges that arise from such exposure and developing comprehensive strategies to tackle them.

The first speaker, **Amita Baviskar**, Professor of Environmental Studies and Sociology and Anthropology at Ashoka University, spoke on “Gender and the Changing Urban Environment.” Baviskar pointed out that discussions on gender and the environment in India have predominantly focused on the struggles of rural women. Shifting focus to urban contexts, she discussed the structural, epistemic, and physical violence that working-class migrant women face in cities. She explored how these women navigate the intersections of class, caste, religion, and regional identities while attempting to access the environmental resources necessary for their livelihoods and to assert their citizenship.

Baviskar argued that the difficulty faced by working-class migrant women in claiming urban resources is rooted in the prejudices held against migrants. She also noted that the dominant classes, aided by the media and higher courts, have co-opted ecological justice, promoting what she termed “bourgeois environmentalism,” which legitimizes the exclusion of working-class communities and their concerns. In concluding, she outlined how climate change intensifies the reproduction crisis, linking rural and urban households, and its implications for collective action.

Arjan de Haan, Senior Programme Specialist for Climate Adaptation and Resilience (CLARE) at IDRC’s Asia Regional Office, spoke on “Gender Inequalities in Climate Change, Politics, and Finance.” De Haan discussed the disproportionate negative impacts of climate change on poorer countries and marginalized groups, particularly women. He emphasized the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding these inequalities, noting the multiple, interconnected impacts of climate change, including rising temperatures, droughts, water scarcity, warming oceans, and biodiversity loss. He highlighted how climate-related disasters, such as storms and cyclones, lead to higher mortality rates and increased gender-based violence, with women informal workers being particularly vulnerable to the health and unpaid work burdens caused by rising temperatures and extreme weather. He also pointed out that the climate finance infrastructure often fails to address these intersecting inequalities, ultimately reinforcing the vulnerabilities of women from poorer households and the informal sector. He concluded by reflecting on the need to address structural inequalities and gender disparities to understand and mitigate the impacts of climate change effectively.

The third speaker, **R. Rengalakshmi**, Director of Eco-Technology at the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, presented on “Towards a Green Environment: How Women are Breaking Barriers with Sustainable and Safe Pest Management.” Presenting the experience of longitudinal involvement with sustainable pest management, Rengalakshmi discussed the growing importance of the One Health concept, which links environmental health to human health. She emphasized the transition to integrated pest management as a key strategy for ensuring safe and sustainable food production while protecting the environment and human health.

Drawing attention to the traditional gender roles in farming families, she noted that while men typically manage pest control due to its connection to income, more women are now taking on managerial roles in agriculture as men leave the profession. Rengalakshmi highlighted how women’s knowledge, skills, and connections to institutions enable them to overcome challenges in pest management. She also discussed three models of empowering women in pest management: first, gender-responsive plant clinics at the village level; second, training women’s groups in microbial biopesticide production, which transforms women laborers into eco-entrepreneurs; and third, promoting organic farming and decentralized inputs, where women play a leading role in preserving traditional varieties and fostering nutritious crops.

In her concluding remarks, the chair Indira Jaisingh noted the lack of comprehensive environmental laws in India, particularly regarding climate change. She pointed out that, unlike other countries, India lacks a unified climate change law. She also raised concerns about the limited awareness among younger people about crucial environmental laws, such as the Environment (Protection) Act of 1986, which was enacted following the Bhopal disaster in 1984 but remains inadequate in addressing today’s challenges.

Plenary Session 7

Day 3 | 05 March 2025

Media's Role in Shaping Gender Narratives Analysis and Perspectives

The session was chaired by Uma Chakravarti, Feminist Historian, Filmmaker, and Activist.

Kavitha Muralidharan, Independent Journalist and Translator, opened the discussion by shedding light on the patriarchal gaze that dominates Tamil Nadu's mainstream media. She pointed out that survivors of gender-based violence often find themselves scrutinized rather than supported by the media. The #MeToo movement in Tamil literature and media, she noted, was a crucial moment in challenging entrenched gender discrimination. Despite the backlash, survivors collaborated to document their experiences through anthologies, breaking the silence on abuse. However, she lamented the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in newsrooms and called for structural reforms to foster inclusive narratives.

Neha Dixit, Independent Journalist and Writer, followed with a compelling argument about the need for a 'gender lens' in media reporting. She argued that despite occasional reports on domestic or sexual violence, women's issues remain largely sidelined from mainstream economic, political, and social coverage. She emphasized that a gender lens is not merely a tool but a perspective that allows journalists to critically assess and challenge the biases inherent in decision-making structures. Applying this approach, she said, would help the media highlight inequalities and push for a more balanced distribution of power.

Pamela Philipose, Indian Journalist, took a historical approach, identifying four major turning points in media narratives on gender in India. She first credited the 'Towards Equality' report (1974) with providing the foundation for critical media discourse on gender relations. The Mathura Rape Case (1978–79), she pointed out, was another defining moment, sparking widespread media coverage of gendered violence. The third shift, she noted, came with the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, which transformed gender representation in the media. Lastly, she highlighted

the Delhi Gang Rape (2012) and the role of social media in amplifying feminist discourse, particularly on gender violence.

Bina Paul, Film Editor and Director of Documentaries, brought the discussion to the realm of cinema, detailing the struggles of women in the Malayalam film industry. She spoke about the formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in response to the abduction and assault of a senior female actor. Their demand for gender-based data led to the formation of the Justice Hema Committee. However, she noted that the report's publication was delayed for nearly four years, and when it was finally released, crucial parts were redacted. Despite its findings exposing the gender disparities in Malayalam cinema, progress has been slow. Women remain underrepresented behind the scenes, and misogynistic narratives continue to dominate storytelling. She stressed that while Malayalam cinema is celebrated for its artistry, its gender politics remain problematic.

Discussant **T.K. Rajalakshmi**, Journalist, Frontline, provided critical reflections on the presentations, emphasizing key concerns. She noted how influential figures in media frequently escape accountability for sexist remarks and biased headlines. She challenged the perception that women's issues are "soft beats," arguing that they are integral to broader socio-political discussions. She pointed out that while women constitute about one-third of media workers, their issues remain largely disregarded. There is a glaring absence of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in many media organizations, and gender sensitization remains an overlooked priority. Rajalakshmi also highlighted the class perspective in gender discussions, stressing the need to address structural inequalities within media narratives. She critiqued the media's prioritization of sensationalism over substantive gender issues, citing how crime stories make front-page headlines, while crucial topics like mid-day meal schemes or ASHA workers receive minimal coverage. She argued that the logic of market-driven journalism often dictates coverage, favouring what generates profit rather than what fosters social justice. She also pointed out that while the Hema Committee shed light on workplace issues in cinema, while media coverage disproportionately focused on sexual harassment alone, sidelining the broader discourse on labour rights and gender parity in the film industry.

The discussion highlighted the persistent gender biases entrenched in media structures and the urgent need for systemic reforms. The speakers collectively emphasized that while some progress has been made, gender sensitivity in media remains inadequate. There is a pressing need for gender-sensitization programs, greater representation of women in decision-making roles, and a shift in editorial priorities to include critical issues affecting women. Addressing these concerns is not just a matter of representation but a fundamental requirement for a fair and inclusive media landscape. Only through sustained dialogue, policy changes, and collective action can the media truly fulfil its role in shaping a gender-equitable society.

In the end, the session concluded with Uma Chakravarti highlighting a few key points. She referenced the open letter first published in Dawn, remarking that it is a depressing but long struggle on the road. Sexual harassment was discussed in the global context, underscoring the worldwide nature of the issue and the persistent fight for gender justice. Her closing remarks reinforced the necessity of dismantling systemic biases in media and adopting a more inclusive, feminist approach to journalism.

Wrap-up Session

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Reflection and Future Direction

Renu Addlakha, Professor at CWDS and Chair of the session, began by noting that the conference had reached a critical juncture. She reflected on the event's title, "Reflections on the Past: Looking to the Future," emphasizing the importance of this final session in consolidating the key discussions from the last three days. Acknowledging the significance of the moment, she stressed that the conference offered a valuable opportunity to assess progress toward gender equality and to strategize future directions. She then introduced the panel of eminent speakers, each tasked with summarizing the deliberations and offering insights to guide the path ahead.

Mohan Rao, Former Professor, Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, JNU, opened his remarks with appreciation for CWDS and its team for organizing a

remarkable conference, commending the breadth of themes and depth of scholarship. However, he highlighted a major gap in the discourse—the issue of masculinity. He pointed to the global rise of toxic masculinity, referencing the influence of high-profile figures and the growing perception among some that men are victims of feminism. He questioned whether this backlash stems from economic stagnation, the aspirations of women, or the rise of right-wing politics. Rao called on the feminist movement to actively engage with this issue, emphasizing the need for critical reflection and solidarity.

Ritu Dewan, President of the 64th National Conference, ISLE and Former President, LAWS, revisited the Towards Equality report, recognizing its foundational role in shaping gender studies in India. While acknowledging its limitations—such as insufficient focus on identity politics and feminist economics—she emphasized its continued relevance. Dewan illustrated how economic and social policies are influenced by gendered perspectives, using GST as an example of how religious and cultural symbolism shapes economic policy. She warned of a regression in gender equality and urged ongoing engagement with foundational policy documents, particularly Article 39 of the Indian Constitution, which addresses the equitable distribution of resources and prevention of wealth concentration.

Syeda Hameed, President, NFIW and Society for Communal Harmony, reflected on the Towards Equality report's attention to the socio-cultural barriers faced by women, particularly in relation to social customs. She shared her work within the Planning Commission, where she sought to integrate gender perspectives into the 11th and 12th Five-Year Plans. However, she lamented the dismantling of such policy frameworks. Highlighting the ongoing struggles of Muslim women, Hameed pointed out that despite decades of advocacy, conservative custodians of Shariyat continue to resist reform. She urged younger generations to carry the fight forward, ending her speech with a poignant poem on gender justice.

Monisha Behal, Founder, North East Network, offered a regional perspective on gender activism in Northeast India. She shared her personal journey from fieldwork to research and discussed the deep-rooted patriarchy in Assam. She noted the absence of a strong feminist movement in the region, due to factors such as poor connectivity,

political unrest, and religious influences. Behal called for stronger networks between Northeast women and academic institutions and advocated for a follow-up report to *Towards Equality* that reflects contemporary realities. She concluded with a mix of frustration over slow progress and renewed commitment to the cause of gender justice.

Urvashi Butalia, Writer and Publisher (Zubaan), acknowledged *Towards Equality* as a landmark document but critiqued its neglect of issues like caste, sexuality, and conflict. She called for a more inclusive feminist research framework that centers marginalized voices and challenges the traditional hierarchies between researchers and subjects. Butalia also stressed the importance of qualitative methods, particularly oral histories, to address gaps left by limited government data. She emphasized the need for collaboration between academic and feminist institutions to sustain the movement amid growing resistance.

Rajni Palriwala, Treasurer, CWDS, offered a comprehensive reflection on the conference. She noted that *Towards Equality* was not merely a report, but a catalyst for action. Tracing the evolution of feminist scholarship, she emphasized the need for interdisciplinary approaches to tackle current challenges like climate change, masculinity, and neoliberalism. She cautioned against the state's withdrawal from essential public services, such as education and health, and underscored the importance of collective action. Palriwala concluded with a call for continued critical engagement and stronger alliances between academia and activism to advance the struggle for gender justice.

Vote of Thanks

Rajni Palriwala expressed gratitude to CWDS, its faculty, and the organizing team for curating an intellectually stimulating event. She acknowledged the support of key sponsors – **ICSSR, IIC, NCAER, Nirantar Trust, IWAGE**, the contributions of speakers, and the participation of young scholars who brought fresh perspectives. She also recognized the efforts of rapporteurs in documenting discussions and stressed that the success of the conference lies in the ongoing conversations it has sparked. She ended with a call for collective celebration of the shared commitment to gender equality and a sustained movement towards justice.
