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Student Perceptions of Gender Studies as an Academic Discipline in Pakistan

By Rabbia Aslam¹ and Saad Ali Khan²

Abstract

The article aimed to highlight the varied perceptions of students studying Gender Studies as an academic discipline at Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), Pakistan. The research objective of this article was to document the students' experiences, perceptions, misconceptions, and anxieties regarding Gender Studies. This research is the result of a continuous journey in this field where we have actively engaged and interacted with students studying in various semesters. The research was qualitative in nature and in-depth interview guidelines were employed to conduct interviews with the students of the Center of Excellence in Gender Studies (CEGS) at QAU, Islamabad. The sample size consisted of 20 students who hailed from different geographical areas of Pakistan and belonged to diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Additionally, the sample was purposely selected to include only students in their final semester. The study revealed that the instructors teaching Gender Studies were accused of propagating Western theories, and this had become a cause of concern and provocation for many students. A large number of students have indicated that they were unaware or ignorant of this academic discipline and were familiarized only after securing admission based on merit. The research demonstrates that these students were unsure of the scope of the subject and the employment opportunities it offered upon completion of their degree in Gender Studies. The respondents were under the impression that this academic discipline is not only antagonistic to their Pakistani culture but also promotes a Western agenda. A few respondents shared their experiences and pointed out that feminism faces a strong backlash in Pakistani society; hence, they found it difficult to see the relevance of feminism in Pakistan. The research also revealed that studying the discipline of Gender Studies has helped the respondents to introspect, deconstruct, and criticize their preconceived notions about gender and women. While Gender Studies as an academic discipline has equipped the students to deal with gender-based issues, it has also stirred arguments with their families. Lastly, Gender Studies created awareness related to gender issues and helped the students to overcome their misconceptions.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Student perceptions, Pakistan, Higher education

Introduction

Women's Studies and Gender Studies not only challenge traditional knowledge imparted by the mainstream social sciences (Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, and International Relations), but these disciplines also aim to bring about change within society. Conventional or

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traditional knowledge from an epistemological perspective has been built not only to exclude women from the domain of attaining and imparting knowledge, but to marginalize them as well. The new and emerging gender lens aims to develop strategies to shift social power relations and bring about intellectual change. Gender Studies focuses, in particular, on alternate ideologies and the intersections of gender, race, and class over a range of disciplines, nations, times, and cultures.

The Gender and Women's Studies curriculum grew out of the struggles of second-wave feminism (from the 1960s to 1980s), particularly in the West. This wave of change reached Pakistan almost a decade later. It not only appraised established practices but also provided a clear vision for a more just society and developed enabling and empowering practices that resulted in an increased enrollment of girls in institutions of higher education (Davis et al., 2006). This discipline—variously named Women's Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, and Gender Studies—acts as catalysts for promoting and strengthening gender streamlining through teaching, research, action, and fieldwork (Hemmings, 2006, as cited in Davis et al., 2006). As an academic discipline, it also intends to develop a holistic view for the analysis of the various dimensions of women's status in the context of development agendas.

Women's Studies as an academic field contributed to already existing discursive practices in various fields and helped to analyze the marginalized status of women in society. Moreover, theoretical perspectives provided critical insight into various dimensions of empowerment. One of the most pragmatic utilizations of the subject was the creation of alternative concepts and distinctive ways of looking at the world based on critical inquiry. This discipline established methodologies and theoretical paradigms to contextualize women and gender as distinctive variables in a wider intellectual framework of existing social sciences. The discipline has also provided alternative spaces for the academics of social sciences who have examined their subjects with a feminist appraisal (Louise, 1990). Therefore, the growth of Gender Studies in Pakistan can be considered a part of a growing global trend in both the Global North and Global South (Aslam & Khan, 2021).

In the last few decades, every public and private sector institution has focused on involving women in the process of national and economic development and laid emphasis on gender mainstreaming. Therefore, the importance of and demand for Women and Gender Studies has increased manifold. This discipline, as envisioned at the time of its inception, could play a vital role in society and act as a catalyst of change that could potentially pave the way for the attainment of development goals like Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly those related to gender equality, and the implementation of international legal instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Besides bridging these gaps, the understanding of indigenous gender perspectives is also crucial for the effective implementation of these agendas (Haque, 2008).

Women's Studies and Gender Studies as disciplines have an evolving history all over the world, which poses a challenge to the traditional social sciences, both in research and teaching pedagogies. By the same token, the discipline aims to integrate a gender perspective in the world of academics and, most importantly, to impart a sensitive and holistic understanding of gender and related issues to the students. Moreover, as part of their core objective, Gender and Women's Studies aims to inform policy makers about the relevance and significance of gender and women's issues.

In the past 15 years, Women's Studies has come of age in Pakistan. The emergence of this discipline in the country was not based entirely on the Women's Movement, as has happened in the rest of the world. In 1989, the Ministry of Women's Development inaugurated Centres of Excellence for Women's Studies at five public sector universities across different parts of Pakistan,

including Islamabad, Karachi, Quetta, Peshawar, and Lahore. These Centres were created as autonomous academic bodies to be governed and administered by an Act passed by the Parliament. The main objective of this project was to promote the discipline of Women's Studies in Pakistan. The project reflected the need, at a policy level, to create awareness about the conditions and problems of women, along with the recognition of their productive roles and contribution to society. These Centres were established as five-year projects at the five major public sector universities in Pakistan and broadly aimed to attain certain objectives. The objectives included developing academic courses related to Women's Studies, promoting academic and action research, replicating and translating materials from other languages, critically examining concepts, theories, and methodologies for scientific investigation and development, and redefining curricula with a view to incorporating viewpoints and information generated by women scholars and to acknowledge their contribution. Since then, the Women and Gender Studies departments have been established in different parts of Pakistan, and currently, 10 universities are offering various academic and research programs in Women and Gender Studies, including B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. programs.

Rationale

The present research explored and documented the experiences of students who are enrolled in the Gender Studies discipline in one of the leading public sector universities in Pakistan, i.e., Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. It has been observed that the students (mainly youth with diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds) who are enrolled in the Gender Studies discipline demonstrated varied experiences and attitudes, from defending the subject to being highly critical of the curricula. On the one hand, they face criticism from their fellow students of other departments, and on the other, they encounter challenges and disapproval from their families. Throughout their stay on campus, the students remain engulfed in feelings of guilt and are in a continuous state of confusion, specifically concerning the scope and future prospects of this particular discipline. While the Centre, on many occasions, has tried to highlight the scope and mandate of the discipline, it continues to remain unacknowledged. This present research documents the experiences, perceptions, narratives, and misconceptions of the students studying Gender Studies.

Although the department has attempted to highlight the scope and market viability of the discipline on several occasions, there have been very few policy initiatives by the Government to highlight the importance of Gender Studies as an academic field, and this has raised the question of the discipline's visibility. This research is a case study of the QAU Gender Studies department, concerning the myths, perceptions, and prevalent narratives among students coming from different parts of Pakistan.

Methodology

In order to explore and document the experiences of students studying this discipline, the qualitative research method was employed, supplemented by feminist research ethics. The process of research was initiated to examine the thought process of students who had enrolled in the Gender Studies program, their motivation to study this discipline, and their intended strategy to implement what they had understood and absorbed from the theory and practice of gender in their personal and professional lives. Moreover, the article unearths the perceptions of students about this discipline by employing qualitative feminist research methods. American philosopher Sandra Harding argued that there is no distinctive feminist method of inquiry and insisted that instead of

discussing the feminist contribution to the practice of research, it should call attention to the interrelatedness of method, epistemology, and methodology (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 100-50).

The purpose of this research is to document how Gender Studies as an academic discipline is considered less important when compared to other recognized social science disciplines, reflected through the experiences and perceptions of students. A total sample of 20 students enrolled in Gender Studies was purposively selected for this research. These students hail from diverse urban and rural backgrounds in Pakistan, mainly from the Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Baluchistan.³ The sample comprises responses from 10 female and 10 male students, all between the age of 20 and 26 years. Only students studying in the last semester who had been in the Gender Studies department for several years were included in this research. The number of students selected for this research was based on purposive sampling; only final semester students were chosen, since they have undergone a two-year journey in the discipline and were about to graduate. The sample size is only 20 students, but it is a demographically diverse one. Bernard (2013) suggests that “10–20 knowledgeable people are enough to uncover and understand the core categories in any well-defined cultural domain or study of lived experience” (p. 175). Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that there should be between 12 and 20 participants in interview studies.

The willing respondents were requested for an interview after being informed about the study. The primary data was generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were conducted in person, depending on the location and convenience of the respondents. The data was analyzed by employing a thematic analysis of the interviews.

Literature Review

In this section, we attempt to highlight various perceptions related to Gender and Women's Studies that have existed across the world. There is significant information available about the establishment of the Gender and Women's Studies departments within highly male-dominated or male-centric universities across the globe. The available literature highlights the negative perceptions of the discipline that have existed since its inception.

The publication of the classic book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, is often cited as an initial point for women's official entry into communal, administrative, and academic spaces. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Women's Movement and broader socio-political movements set a new path, resulting in the emergence of several schools of thought within it. Furthermore, it addressed the socio-cultural and economic roles of women in various social landscapes, especially during the age of imperialism, and incorporated women's perspectives and gender issues into the disciplines of philosophy and social sciences. Initially, this discipline gained its strongest footing within the humanities disciplines, including philosophy, literature, and history. Later, it expanded to other disciplinary spaces of social sciences and ultimately played a significant role in advancing the spirit of inquiry in these disciplines.

The growth of Women and Gender Studies as a discipline varies significantly across cultures. The discipline emerged in Britain during the 1970s, registering the voices of women across various fields. This expansion as a separate field of study within humanities, and particularly in social sciences, has contributed significantly to the emancipation of women in economic, socio-cultural, and political spheres. Broadly speaking, the discipline grew in Europe in the 1980s and matured during the 1990s. The roots of Women and Gender Studies can be traced

³ Provinces of Pakistan

to second-wave feminism during the period of the 1960s to the 1980s (Davis et al., 2006). During this time, evidence-based studies were conducted to point out the issues faced by marginalized and subordinated women in the world.

Women's Studies was initiated as a discipline at various universities in all five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) during the 1970s and '80s. Following the strong second wave of feminist mobilization in this period, the pressure to develop scientific methods of teaching and conducting research on women's position in society was growing. As late as the 1960s, university students in the social sciences did not receive any education on women's position and gender relations as part of their studies. In the initial years, the opposition to Women's Studies as a university subject was severe. Women's Studies was labeled political and unscientific. Feminist scholars responded by stating that male-dominated science was itself prejudiced and gender-blind. Feminist scholars pointed out that traditional gender-blind research is not only biased, but it is also unable to understand the complexity of society (Dahlerup, 2015).

By the same token, when the Research Centre for Women's Studies was established in 1982 at the University of Adelaide (Australia), the University was an acutely male-dominated institution in terms of its recognition of gender issues and research. Since then, feminist academics have worked to educate their university colleagues in academia, as well as the administrators and students, about feminist and gender studies scholarship. While the university has not been completely transformed, there has been a gradual degree of recognition of feminist and gender studies scholarship. Women's Studies and Gender Studies have placed the University of Adelaide on the international map, forging links with leading national and international scholars. During the last three decades, Women's Studies and Gender Studies have made significant contributions to the success of the university in attracting grants and conducting world-class research (Magarey, 2012, as cited in Harvey et al., 2012, p. 209-34).

On the other hand, the discipline has had to face resistance in terms of its legitimacy in the realm of higher education across the globe, and the 2018 attacks in Europe on its relevance are worth discussing. In 2018, the Hungarian government decided to take a drastic step by withdrawing accreditation for the country's Gender Studies programs. Zsolt Semjen, a deputy to Hungary's Prime Minister, stated that Gender Studies is "an ideology, not a science" (Redden, 2018). In defense of the field, Dr. Linda Marie Rustad, director and editor of *Kilden*, a Norwegian news magazine on gender research, argues that "Gender studies as an academic discipline has been developed from a critical tradition in the social sciences and humanities" (Rustad, 2015).

Gender Studies is an emerging academic field, geared to establish itself as a discipline in its own right. However, a chain of criticism has been leveled against Gender Studies, which may, in turn, be related to claims that it is ideologically and politically motivated (Söderlund & Madison, 2017). Academia has been distrustful of Gender Studies and its forerunner, Women's Studies, with claims that it is biased (Baumeister, 2015), overly political, and not sufficiently scholarly (Zalewski, 2003). This field of study has also been riven by internal conflict, to a large extent related to various strands of French poststructuralist theory, and the conflation of academe and politics (Brown, 1997). This is an important element of criticisms launched in the "science wars" that raged in the USA in the 1990s, a period of controversy and heated debate that was strongly associated with Gender Studies and related ideological streams in academia, derived from postmodernism, relativism, and critical theory (Brown, 2001).

This discipline was marked by a multifaceted mix of different epistemological and philosophical positions, debates about objectivity and bias, and discussions of whether science should be impartial or have an activist agenda (Brown, 2001). Many of these nonconformist positions criticizing mainstream science are incorporated under the label of "feminist

epistemology,” which was reviewed, along with its main thrusts of criticism, by American philosopher Elizabeth Anderson in 2015. Ideology is often thought to obstruct the search for truth and scientifically based knowledge, owing to the reasoning that it tends to limit the search for explanations, distorts the interpretation of data, and favors methods that provide the answers one wishes to get (Klein & Stern, 2009). From this perspective, it has been observed that Gender Studies is closely related to the feminist movement, activism, and associated ideologies, with influences from postmodernism, relativism, and critical theory (Benjamin, 1992).

The National Women's Studies Association in the USA provides additional evidence that it remains committed to advancing a specific and political agenda. The National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) recognizes that Women's Studies is broader than what happens in the classroom and acknowledges the staff of Women's Centers as feminist educators (National Women's Studies Association). Campus-based women's centers have a long history of working together with Women's Studies to transform the curriculum, the campus environment, and society at large (Lukas, 2019).

Despite extensive studies and explanations, myths about the discipline of Women's Studies have also persisted. One of the most common myths is that Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGS) is philosophical, not an actual discipline. In reality, WGS uniquely brings together theory, vision, and action in its examination of the role of gender in all facets of society and the resulting inequalities and differences in power. It provides a framework for students to address real-life issues in areas such as the workplace, home and family life, politics, the media, gender-based violence, and globalization.

It is also assumed that WGS is about and for women. However, WGS is, in fact, a broad area of inquiry that seeks to understand the significance of gender in all aspects of society, exploring what it means to be a woman, man, or transgender person.

Another widely prevalent myth states that WGS is a white, middle-class, Western agenda. This is not accurate because WGS courses examine the meaning of difference through the intersection of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, ability, and nation through an array of diverse perspectives and experiences.

It is further presumed that one has to be a feminist to be a student of WGS. Though feminism is the prime lens utilized in a WGS classroom, students are not obligated to be feminists to take WGS classes. As one University of Maine WGS instructor states, “They just need to learn to think like one” (“5 myths,” 2015).

A widespread fear amongst students is the apprehension that they will never find a job with a WGS degree. In reality, graduates of the WGS program at the University of Maine are working in diverse fields, including law, domestic violence advocacy work, media production, conservation, and education. WGS students develop valuable skills such as critical thinking, fluency in gender-related issues, and understanding diverse perspectives; these are all assets in today's marketplace and applicable to multiple career paths (Littrell, 2015).

One of the objections raised to pursuing Women's Studies as a discipline is that it categorizes women as a group. It has been documented since this discipline gained momentum that “woman” is not a unitary category. However, this is not a reason to abandon Women's Studies or the idea of women-centered knowledge (Jackson, 2016).

Paula Caplan (1993) has argued that Women's Studies is regarded as the illegitimate offspring of academia: ambiguous in methods and lacking in discipline. The feminist scholarship and feminist pedagogies are disregarded precisely because they are seen to lack discipline; they are too narrow and too broad, unscientific, unprofessional, lacking in rigor and biased, not enough and too much, much too small and much too loud.

Our Case Study: Pakistan's Quaid-i-Azam University

Quaid-i-Azam University (previously known as Islamabad University) was established in July 1967 under the Act of the National Assembly and initiated teaching and research programs for PhD and MPhil degrees. It was gradually decided by the University to offer the Master's, Graduate, and the more recent undergraduate programs. The University, owing to its international reputation, faculty, and programs, attracts a large number of students from all regions of the country, being a federal public-sector university. There is a regional quota for bachelor's and master's programs at QAU; this includes a 50% quota for federal areas. For Sindh, including Karachi, the quota is 60% rural and 40% urban. Amongst the rest, it is 11.5% for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 6% for Baluchistan, 4% for Gilgit Baltistan and FATA, and 2% for Azad Kashmir. Candidates are selected for any of the courses of study according to their stated priority (top 3 choices) and are accepted either through the Regular (admission based on merit) or Self Finance (paying an additional fee for admission) schemes.

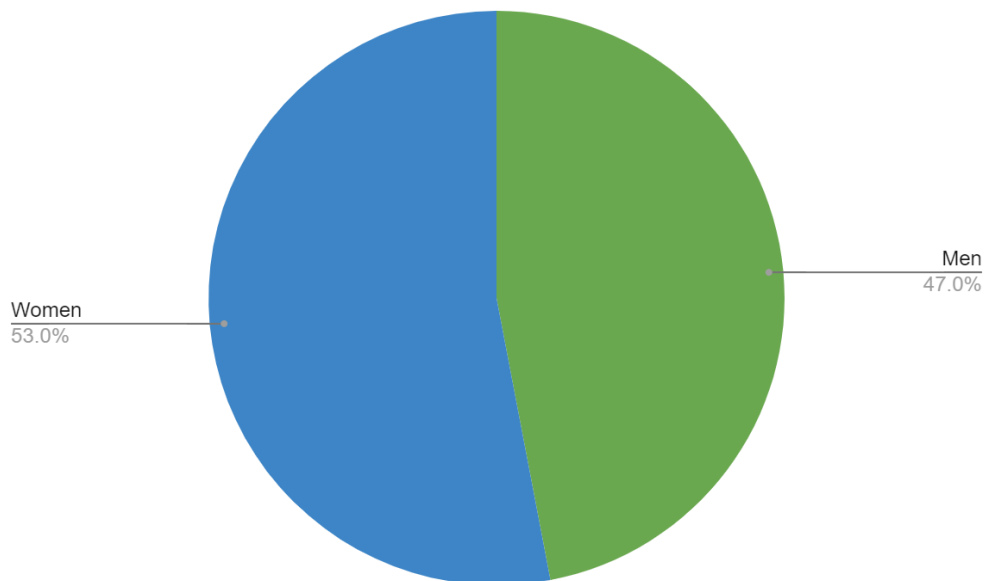
In 1989, the University Grants Commission issued a letter to the Planning and Development Division of Quaid-i-Azam University to establish the Women's Study Center. Simultaneously, similar letters for the establishment of the discipline were issued to the University of Karachi, the University of Punjab, the University of Peshawar, and the University of Baluchistan. The Center at QAU was established under the Center of Excellence Act, 1976. It is an autonomous entity working through its Board of Governors (BOG), chaired by the sitting Vice Chancellor of QAU, and funded by the Government through the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC). On April 8th, 2002, the Ministry of Education held a meeting to decide on converting the Women's Studies Center into a regular department of Women's Studies. This Center initially offered certificate courses that were interdisciplinary in nature and content. It was established through the efforts of Dr. Farzana Bari, a known academic, activist, and practitioner in Gender Studies. The Center of Excellence in Women's Studies was renamed the Center of Excellence in Gender Studies (CEGS) at Quaid-i-Azam University by the Government of Pakistan and the Ministry of Education through a notification issued in 2004.

Gender and Women's Studies is a comparatively new discipline in Pakistan. Therefore, there is a dearth of qualified individuals who can be a part of this department. A limited faculty of seven academics at CEGS-QAU face the challenge of improving the standard of education of students, arranging and conducting workshops, and leading research projects. Additionally, they have the responsibility to keep policy institutions informed, respond to student queries, identify books for the library, and review the scheme of studies. This list is not exhaustive and the concern here is that the quality of work gets affected, along with the fact that the faculty's personal research work and growth are jeopardized.

Demographic Profile of the Students in the Gender Studies Program

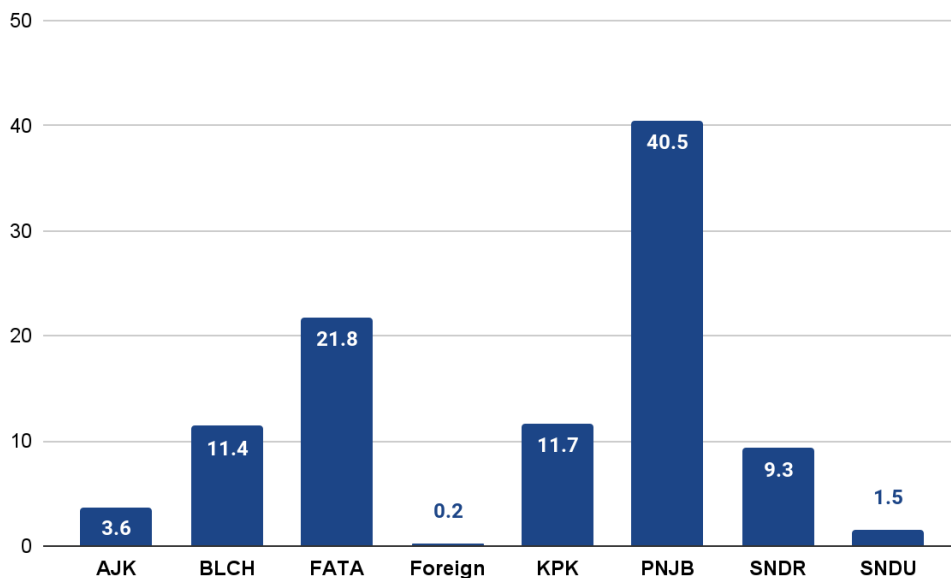
Figure 1 below indicates that the women's admission ratio is higher than that of male students. Between 2008 and 2020, 47% of the students admitted to the Gender Studies Master's Program were men and 53% were women.

Figure 1: Admissions by Gender



Source: University Admissions office

Figure 2: Percentage of Students from Different Areas of Pakistan

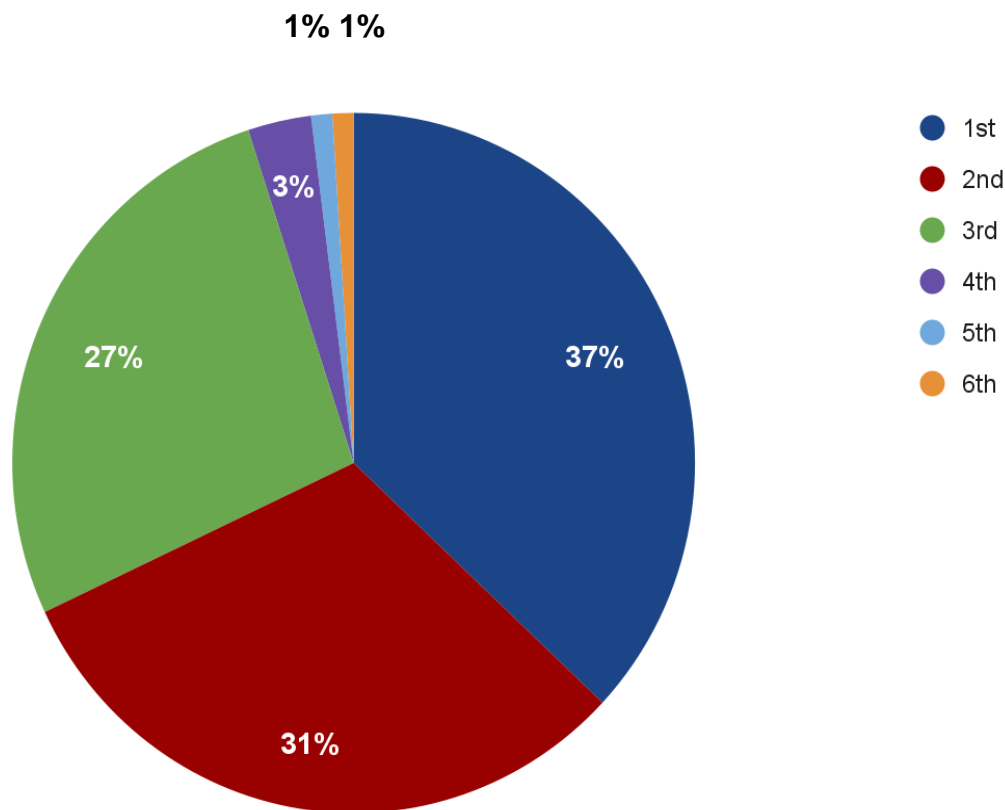


Source: University Admission Office

Figure 2 shows that between 2008 and 2020, QAU received the highest percentage of students from the Punjab (40.5%). The second-highest number was enrolled from the erstwhile

Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), and the third highest was from Khyber PakhtunKhwa. The regions with a lower enrollment rate include Baluchistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

Figure 3: Applications by Priorities



Source: University Admissions office

Figure 3 indicates that between 2008 and 2020, 37% of students selected Gender Studies as their first priority for the Master’s program, 31% indicated it as their second priority, and 27% chose it as their third priority. At QAU, all students must list their subject preferences in the admission form.

Background of the Study

Curriculum

The scheme of studies gets its lead from the Higher Education Commission (HEC) curriculum guidelines for Gender Studies, revised by the HEC, Pakistan in 2017. The courses were conceived while keeping the indigenous perspective in view. Since there is a dearth of local and original research, epistemologies, and reliable statistics on gender and women’s issues in Pakistan, the reading material available to the students is often Western or Euro-centric. Nevertheless, students are instructed and encouraged to view, relate, and apply the material in their local context, particularly when they have to prepare assignments on issues related to their culture and society.

For teaching, regular as well as visiting faculty members are chosen on the basis of their expertise, experience, and exposure to gender issues in classrooms or the work environment.

Teaching Gender Studies

Scholars such as Sandra Harding (1986) have pointed out that in the construction of knowledge, so-called objectivity is in fact limited to a male viewpoint. Women's Studies provides an opportunity to redefine objectivity and give space to the feminist standpoint. Methodologically, the voice and narrative of the observer, the student, and the teacher become as important as that of the object of study.

In Pakistan, there are very few faculty that are qualified to teach this subject. It is not only the meager financial package that deters individuals from joining the profession, but also other issues that create difficulties; these include the academic environment, academic growth, and an unfavorable attitude of the administration. The Women's Studies discipline may hire more instructors, but this could potentially harm the quality of teaching as the teachers may not have sophisticated understanding of gender. Hence, teaching methodology and content analysis are areas of concern. A lack of critical thinking and indigenous feminist scholarship at the time of conception of the Gender Studies departments has exposed these prematurely created Centers to tremendous unseen pressures. There are no pressure groups of women that can fight the backlash and neglect faced by the Gender and Women's Studies departments in the academy.

In the same spirit that Vikki Bell intellectually interrogates and accepts feminism, we are attempting to engage critically to discuss the subject of Gender Studies. Revolutionary movements run the risk of losing their radical possibilities after the initial momentum. This is especially the case when questioning the movement and its practices is discouraged. To make a relevant transformative curriculum for interdisciplinary scholarship and learning, Gender and Women's Studies has to rise to the challenge (Bell, 1999). Currently, CEGS-QAU is offering M.Phil. and Master's programs but cannot offer Ph.D. programs due to a limited pool of faculty.

Research

Research is exceptionally significant in order to encourage indigenous viewpoints and for evolving theory. Within academic circles, research emphasizing gender perspectives has emerged in the disciplines of Anthropology, Psychology, Sociology, Linguistics, Economics, and Health and Population. Some government institutes and independent resource centers for women are also involved in conducting gender-relevant research and are responsible for informing those heading the policy planning and development projects about their progress in the research.

The research initiatives taken up by the students of Women and Gender Studies can be considered a promising and welcome addition that could strengthen the local feminist standpoint. Therefore, research, which is an important component of the scheme of studies, can be built up gradually, as very limited trained expertise is available in feminist research techniques. Students are being encouraged to take up various issues for their Master's research in areas such as gender and politics, health, female participation and experience in politics, and harassment in the workplace. This research would normally take place in small towns and villages, which is important for diverse and comparative perspectives.

Clientele/Students

The students enrolled at the Center include both men and women who belong to different age groups. There were 472 students enrolled between 2008 and 2020 in the Master's program; this included 252 women and 220 men. It is pertinent to note that more women than men were

enrolled in the program. The students studying here come from all over Pakistan, but the concentration is from the Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, and Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT). Most of these students have recently received their bachelor's degrees, while some have a Master's degree in social science disciplines. Quaid-i-Azam University allows flexibility when it comes to the acceptable age for enrolling in the Master's program in the Gender Studies department. As a result, a few students are from various public and private sector organizations that work on gender and development agendas. Due to their previous work experience, these students are sound in terms of experiential knowledge and their interaction with fresh graduates allows them to stay in touch with the theory and practice of the subject.

On the other hand, most of the students enrolled in various social sciences programs such as History, Defense and Strategic Studies, International Relations, and Anthropology opted for optional courses in the Women and Gender Studies degree program because they wanted to develop an understanding of the subject and enhance their qualifications. It is encouraging to note that the students of other social sciences find the course demanding and value-added. This is a useful challenge for academia to devise a scheme of studies that caters to the needs of a multi-talented group of students.

Results and Discussions

QAU is the largest public-sector university in the country. It is also the most diverse, allowing admission to students who have been through the country's dismal state education system (a result of decades of colonialism and rampant capitalism), and who bring with them poorly understood concepts and difficulty understanding new concepts and theories on their own. More importantly, they bring with them cultural barriers and no working understanding of the English language. Primarily from *petit-bourgeois* backgrounds, they have not been exposed to outside influences beyond the areas they have lived in, nor have they had the opportunity to do enough in-depth reading.

Motivation and Reasons for Studying Gender Studies

In the first six months of the semester, most students reported that they have no motivation to learn or to gain an understanding of Gender Studies. The primary reason cited for this disinterest is that they were inducted as per the merit criteria of the University and only three students listed Gender Studies as their priority when they applied for admission. The three respondents in the sample of this research said that they had a genuine interest in the subject and hence wanted to seek admission to pursue this degree.

One of these respondents explained that working on women's issues at an NGO "made me realize that for a solid framework and clear lens on the subject, studying in this discipline would be useful." The second respondent stated that she was "inspired to study this subject after working on a CEDAW project." The third respondent explained that her professional experience and exposure to the issues of gender-based violence led her to study the course. Students who were aware of what the degree entailed before applying for admission belong to a different socio-economic background, and/or have professional experience in the field, and were interested in learning more about the subject. However, there are very few such cases.

All the other students maintained that though they knew this was a new field of study, they were unaware of what the discipline entailed or required. They admitted that they enrolled simply to get a degree with the QAU tag. A few students indicated that their family members have asked them to give up this degree course and apply again to study another subject next year.

At the start of the semester, the students were asked by the instructors to explain why they had chosen this discipline; most of them said they had listed Gender Studies as the third priority in their admission form, in response to QAU'S requirement of indicating three choices in order of preference. One of the respondents admitted that she would hide the course's reading material from her family because they would question her about what she was studying: "they did not understand what Gender Studies was all about."

Responses to Pedagogy and Curriculum

At QAU, when students are introduced to the feminist theory course, various topics such as Marxist theory are explained to them. Few of the students have a working understanding of this theory and their worldviews were constructed on their previous limited understanding of these concepts. Even when introduced to such concepts in the classroom, they find it difficult to make a connection with their social world since they have been socialized to see learning only as an endeavor to get grades and degrees rather than creating social change. Moreover, as observed by the researchers, most of the students seem ready to learn in the classroom but remain hesitant to practice Marxist and feminist precepts in their daily lives. This is a dilemma, in that the theoretical and conceptual teachings are relevant for students only within the boundaries of the department. Even when they know the theory of the topics being taught and the criticism essential to discuss these topics, they are often unable to contribute anything meaningful to a class discussion. It appears that the students of Gender Studies seem to take this discipline as a means to portray themselves as rebellious. Marxist/Feminist critique in its essence and its *weltanschauung*⁴ provides a meaningful way to understand the world around them, but they must be willing to adopt and apply these ideas in their own contexts and daily lives.

It is interesting to highlight here that though students are mostly challenged when initially introduced to the discipline, over time they start to understand the relevance of the discipline in their societies. When they are being taught about human rights and gender justice they can relate to such concepts. Therefore, it can be concluded that feminist teachings do impact individuals in a way that they start thinking and believing in social equality for all individuals in the society.

The concepts and language of this course are completely unfamiliar to most of the new students. However, some believe they can easily attain an average or just below average grade to pass the exams if they mention certain key concepts such as "social construction," "patriarchy," and "women's oppression." Since they believe that Gender Studies is essentially summed up in these three words, many of them do not make an effort to do any in-depth study of the subject. Another perception prevalent among students is the belief that women's oppression is the sole basis of all feminist projects. Hence, they believe that if they focus on problems faced by women, then they would be called feminists, but this is an incomplete understanding of the term.

Students of the Gender Studies department disclosed that most of them feel that their fellow students in other social sciences departments ridicule and mock them due to their views and the course content they study, and it is often assumed that only issues pertaining to sexuality are being taught here. A standard assumption is that since "it is a Western agenda; it does not resonate with the issues in our daily lives." Students believe that if the research and theory are not revised in relation to their local context, and if the entire exercise is detached from the society they live in, it is less relevant to them. Another common misunderstanding revolves around the perception that gender concerns only women. Over time, it was revealed that another misconception amongst the students pertained to the fact that they believed everything is socially constructed.

⁴ The worldview of an individual.

Though such misunderstandings are common, the students develop a better understanding of the subject with the passage of time. While engaging with critical methodologies and pedagogies they expand their worldviews. Moreover, some of them also revise their orientation and outlook towards issues like heterosexuality or normative culture. One of the students shared her experience:

I had the idea that in Gender Studies I would only be learning about issues and challenges about females and women, but I came to know that gender is not only about females or women but about how individuals are being produced and placed in a society on the basis of what we call as gender. This idea has changed my entire way of understanding life. It made me realize how women, men, and even other genders have been produced as gendered beings in a society. Through this discipline I feel more critical and at the same time empowered.

Therefore, as faculty, it is important that we first clarify to the students that Gender Studies involves the study of men, women, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people. However, in practice, it is seen to be almost entirely focused on women. It needs to be understood that gender is about a certain performance of identity, and gendered roles and norms are intrinsically woven into and practiced in our daily lives. Only after this clarification of Gender Studies can a proper dialogue take place. On the other hand, it is ironic to note that although people practice gender in their everyday lives, they feel awkward talking about it.

Anxieties and Questions Related to Scope of the Discipline

The students often have questions and worries related to the scope of the discipline throughout the course of study at the university. They are anxious about the job market and the opportunity to find work after completing their degree program.

What is Gender Study? Is Gender and Women's Studies an academic discipline? And why opt for this degree? These questions are asked not only by laypersons but also by learned scholars and members of the faculties of various traditional disciplines at the university. One of the students reported concern about employment opportunities:

Where will we find a job after this degree? The development sector is already disappearing in Pakistan. Gender Studies is not being offered at the college level, so we cannot opt for the teaching profession, either. Our degree is not considered equivalent to Sociology and Anthropology degrees so we cannot apply for relevant jobs. Our primary concern is finding employment; after all, our parents will not provide for us throughout our lives. We have seen that most of our seniors in this field are unemployed after earning this degree.

Such responses are telling examples of how disciplines like Gender and Women's studies, despite being extremely significant, are constantly faced with the threat of becoming irrelevant for the students. Job prospects, market placements, desirable professions, and lucrative financial benefits are some of the genuine concerns that most of the students have when they join this discipline. To counter or tackle such issues, our department has offered career counseling to the students. Several workshops, orientation sessions, and lectures series have been organized over the past several years. In addition to that, case studies of successful alumni of the Gender Studies department were

shared with the students to make them realize that the situation is not bleak and they too can make a successful career out of this discipline.

Regrets and Cultural Conflict

The students predominantly indicate feelings of regret after enrollment and throughout the degree program. As this discipline was not offered at the graduate level in Pakistan before 2018, there is no awareness of its scope or market utility. Though the program was initiated in 1989 at QAU, the first batch of students studying in the Master's program graduated in 2007. While this degree program has a 20-year history in Pakistan, there are several misconceptions about its market utility and visibility, compared to the mainstream social sciences at the University. After being enrolled in the degree program, one of the students reported:

I became more aware of the rights of women. I try to treat the women in my personal and professional life with respect and a sense of equality, but people around me ridicule me, even within my family, especially when I stress on the rights of my sisters in instances of inheritance and their choice of a life partner. I feel like an alien because we are not on the same page, and it often results in family tension and frustrations.

Another respondent admitted that he did not feel satisfied studying this subject. "I want to change my degree program because it was my third priority at the time of admission." A few of the respondents regret that when they go back to their areas of residence, it would be difficult for them to stand up for the women in their families within that system due to their shared cultural values. A respondent working towards a Master's degree offered a different insight:

After I became aware of the subject of study, my family refuses to accept me, they are torturing me. Seriously, I have really negative reactions from my family. In our society, if someone tries to fight for their rights, they are constrained from doing so. For example, there are a number of cases where women are killed in the name of family honor. Our awareness about gender rights will not be of any use to us as it will not be accepted in the areas we live in.

Conclusion

The results of the study on Gender Studies as an academic discipline in Pakistan are presented in the form of verbatim responses from the research participants under each theme, encapsulating the journey of motivation, regrets, and perceptions of the students of the Gender and Women's Studies department. The data collected revealed that a few respondents were aware of the content of the course syllabus owing to prior professional experience and exposure to the issues of gender-based violence, and this led them to study the subject. A small number of the respondents were keen to become more aware and explore the gaps between the theory of Gender Studies and its reality when applied to Pakistani culture. Some of the respondents decided to pursue this line of study because they were genuinely interested in educating themselves about this field.

A large majority of the respondents indicated that though they got admission to QAU on the merit of their grades, they are not motivated or aware of the advantages of pursuing Gender Studies as an academic discipline. They expressed confusion when discussing its scope and employment opportunities. Moreover, they admitted that they had been told that only sexuality issues are taught in this degree program. Two male respondents mentioned that their course

discussions on feminism and Gender Studies made them question if there is any presence of feminism or gender equality in Pakistan.

Hence, studying in this degree program helped students to understand and deconstruct their attitudes, beliefs, and thought processes. Furthermore, it created new possibilities and a positive change in attitude as the students tried to redefine their thoughts and beliefs toward certain social issues. One of the respondents mentioned that “studying about gender equality has definitely increased my consciousness about my rights, but at times I wonder whether it has actually benefited me or, instead, increased difficulties in my personal life. I think the change is only limited to me; my environment is neither very welcoming nor accepting of this change.”

Lastly, it can be said that there are plenty of misperceptions and regrets among the youth enrolled for the degree in Gender and Women’s Studies. During their years at the University, the students’ perceptions and opinions were contested narratives because of their own cultural barriers and lived realities. Is it possible to work with these paradoxes and contradictions to make Gender and Women’s Studies a viable field that can provide a platform for voices of dissidence, inclusion, and diversity within the patriarchal system? It can be concluded that struggles with disillusionment and self-transformation are important for the relatively new discipline, but it now has a history of 30 years in Pakistan. It is imperative to explore indigenous methods that would aid the Women and Gender Studies discipline in becoming more relevant in Pakistani society. One way of doing so is through curricular reform, to include Pakistani voices that have significantly contributed to gender justice and human rights. Though we teach theories borrowed from the Western world in a manner that students can understand and apply to their own contexts, it would make a greater impact to include indigenous literature and scholars who understand issues related to women and gender. The transformative potential of this discipline can only be realized through collaborative efforts both within and outside of academic spaces. Students along with the teachers and staff of Gender and Women’s studies, through praxis, can significantly contribute to their respective communities. Gender and Women’s studies as a discipline is not only part of academia but also a source of transformative change in society. Only through practical application can ideas like feminism potentially pave the way for gender justice for all.

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