Learning Gender Academically

In this blog, Nimisha Mittal reflects on her experience with the range of approaches used in teaching and learning in the MA Gender and Development postgraduate program at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, United Kingdom.

CONTEXT

I grew up in a small town in north India in a middle-class family with a fairly nonconformist paternal grandmother who encouraged me to read, to question, and to be self-reliant. After studying forest management as part of my postgraduate studies, my work in the agrifood sector attuned me to barriers faced by fellow Indian women and girls, especially in being denied equal spaces, opportunities, and aspirations as men and boys. In my personal life, I was juggling with care responsibilities as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law and able to draw parallels with the multiple roles women play within the household without much help from anyone. Though, I still enjoyed many privileges that millions of others didn't.

My work with the Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (www.crispindia.org), a policy research organization, in the last 15 years brought a deeper insight into the key role played by women in agriculture, especially from the most marginalized communities in South Asia. I also gained an understanding of how imperative it is to integrate a gender perspective within projects and policies at the design stage to be able to implement gender-responsive programs, whether it relates to extension, analysing value chains, or promoting technologies and tools.

Gender was at the heart of the work I was doing, though I had not studied it academically. However, in 2023, I was at a crossroads where I felt that I needed a more formal immersion into theories and practices of gender and development to take my work forward more effectively. Hence, I decided to 'go back to school,' though I wasn't too sure how it would pan out at my age and with my experience. I was hesitant about being able to bond with younger students and those probably more attuned to

newer methods of learning. However, my quest for learning helped me overcome the initial fear and pursue my dreams. My family and my colleagues also helped me arrive at this decision.

I explored admission into the Gender and Development postgraduate course at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, as the course curricula resonated with my work and my needs. I believed that I had the requisite experience to harness the learning from this course, and it would help me develop an all-rounded understanding through exposure to the latest global discourse on gender and debates in feminist thinking, the application of an intersectional lens to political economy, the environment, and feminist mobilization for social justice, among many others.

Me with my classmates

A GLIMPSE INTO THE COURSE STRUCTURE

The course comprised three terms, beginning in October 2023 with an induction week for familiarizing one with the university, school, and course convenors. For the MA GADders, as we were referred by the faculty initially and that's the identity we embraced at IDS and beyond, we had two core compulsory gender modules in the first two terms and one in the second term(30 credits each).

The first term comprised two core modules called Theories of Gender and Development (TAG) and Gender Identity and Inclusion (GII), which laid out a foundation for the next two terms. We were at liberty to either choose one elective of 30 credits (there were limited options depending on what was your core) or two electives of 15 credits each in the second term. We also had a core module on research design in term 2, which was common for all MA students at IDS. The third and penultimate term was dedicated to dissertation writing and submission. Each module has specific learning outcomes and assessments attuned to the former.

CORE MODULES THAT BUILD A ROBUST UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

Theories of Gender and Development (TAG)
TAG, while it was more theory-based, took me on a journey of the evolution of feminist theories vis-à-vis that of development and ideas of development and was a trajectory of revelation from Women in

Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD). This is a foundational module for all the subsequent learning throughout the course and introduces conceptual tools for building an understanding of gender and its interlinkages to the way development is perceived, designed, and implemented. It helped me unravel different connotations of gender and its implications for framing gender and development.

As the name suggests, insights from feminist theory guide the learners in understanding the complexity inherent in conceptualizing gender identity and gender relations. It also took me on a path of discovery on how feminist theories shaped and influenced rethinking of gender through a lens of power and empowerment, identity, and lived experiences. The module helps the learner challenge conventional understandings of the household and the economy and helps us find our own voice and positionality on GAD.

Gender Identity and Inclusion (GII)

At the same time, GII unpacked practical aspects of development programs and policies through a gender lens and helped me gain a nuanced understanding of the intersection of gender with sexuality, disability, ethnicity, caste, race, and geography. One delved into concerns embedded within sectors such as education, sexual and reproductive health, migration, and information communication and technology. The module helps the learner dive deeper into the complex relationship between the state and the market forces or the economy that influence developmental programs and, in turn, impact and influence social change and gender relations.

This module begins by introducing intersectionality as a concept, and then in the subsequent sessions, the learners are able to discern its various manifestations across different sectors in the development programs and policy. The learner comes to appreciate how gender identity and gender relations are fluid and not uniform across the dimensions of space and time and can be understood only when the learner is able to contextualize these and apply these differently to different time frames, spaces, and situations, even when for the same communities. GII is an optional/elective module for students from other cohorts, though it was compulsory for us.

Politics of Gender (POG)

For me, personally, this module was an immense learning experience. Though the earlier two modules were critical to building a basis for engaging with the concepts this module brings forth, this module helps the learner apply the learning of the first term and comprehend what this complex module brings to attention. This module encompassed the social, the political, and the economic aspects of empowerment. It delved into the state (the political and the bureaucracy), the market, the household, and the individual, all the various gatekeepers of patriarchy. This module begins with discussions on women's political representation and the biases in formal political institutions and systems. It helped me assimilate the concept of substantive representation and how merely women's quotas do not mean that the goal of gender equality could be attained.

We also explored the role and history of women's movements in civil society and the nature of their relationship with the state. Theories of the state and of organizational change are reviewed in relation to development institutions for institutionalizing gender-sensitive approaches to development policy. Above all, this module also elucidates the drivers and constraints of the gap in policy and implementation through concepts on feminist bureaucracy and street-level bureaucracy to understand how states and institutions are not monoliths but are complex, gendered institutions and how policies are interpreted and implemented in different situations and contexts.

A DIVERSE AND LIKE-MINDED COHORT

We were 28 women in the course, mostly international students from all parts of the world (mostly the developing world), curious to expand their understanding of gender and development. We also shared our space with other cohorts in shared electives.

This was my first time as a learner in a space that I shared with so many like-minded individuals from different parts of the world. We shared many woes and weal together. Generally, in my experience, people working on gender find themselves isolated and not heard and sometimes have to raise their voices to be heard or learn the harder way how colleagues will skirt these issues. However, it was different here, where we had the space to learn from each other as much as we had from our numerous readings and our course convenors.

A diverse cohort with our course convenors

We also realized how similar yet so different each of our worlds and our understanding were related to similar issues and concepts. This was greatly conducive to learning. What was academic became more real and more nuanced in this way of learning together. Most of us felt it was a safe space where we could speak out, and there was no silly question or answer'. And similarly, there were no right answers either.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE WAY THE COURSE IS DESIGNED AND TAUGHT

Online learning platform

Canvas was used for sharing learning resources and promoting self-paced learning in students. The taught classes were recorded and uploaded to the canvas under each session. This aided in continued access to learning resources and materials. We also had access to Microsoft Office and all its applications with this platform. We had access to virtual collaborative platforms such as Teams, Zoom, etc., which was a great help in working on group assignments and provided more flexibility in fixing meetings with supervisors for term papers and dissertations.

It also came in handy during the research and review phase of the dissertation and storing data. Each module with all its resources can be accessed with the unique IDs given by the university to the students. All the faculty and teaching staff used emails for communicating with students. The assignments (group and individual) were uploaded on the Canvas platform online, and each had clear deadlines for doing so.

Additional access to shared resources at the University of Sussex

There are various opportunities to tap into shared resources and the activities at the university, such as the library, the language courses, etc. Some are free while others have nominal fees. The library at the University of Sussex holds sessions throughout the year to build the skills of students and are interactive and practice-based. I learned how to use Zotero in one of these sessions, which is a referencing software, and it was quite useful for compiling research material and using it for citations in the papers.

Emphasis on self-learning and self-discovery

The design of the course emphasized self-learning, though it is taught through classes. Each session had a lecture of an hour and a half, followed by a tutorial of another hour and a half. Though the classes were optional, the tutorials were compulsory. Each module
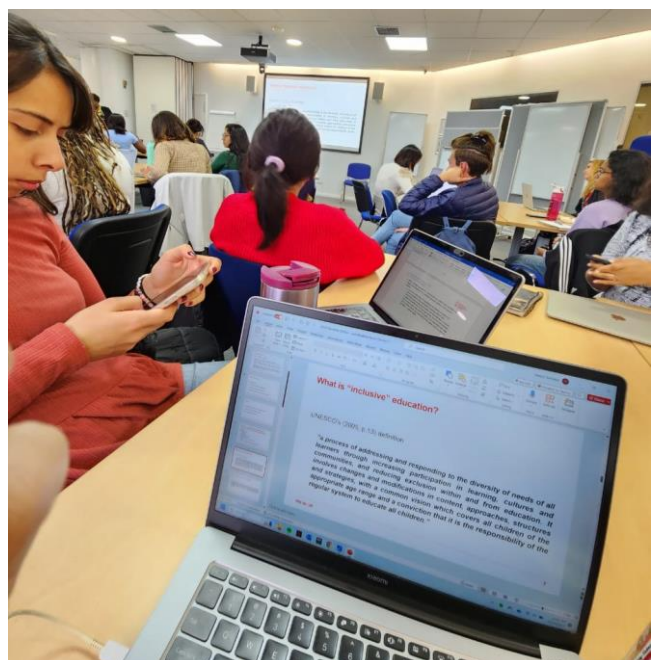
One of the group work plenary sessions

convenor designed the tutorial differently. Sometimes, within the module, each session had a different style of tutorial. Some were focused on individual reflection, while the others were on group work and peer learning by organizing case work and collective reflection. This also helped students in learning to research together and collectively reach a shared understanding, collaborate with each other, and

distil it for presentations in wider groups. Some faculty brought archives from the library and helped understand certain issues historically as well.

At the end of term collectively reflecting out in the sun on a cold day

The students are expected to prepare for the classes by reading all the essential readings. Some of the faculty also gave quizzes and made the taught sessions interactive and reflective to help comprehend the complexities of the readings. Though some of the readings seemed quite dense, these types of sessions helped unpack concepts and their underlying essence. The course is designed to enhance a sense of discovery and inquiry in students. Students are encouraged by course convenors and faculty to critically analyse the readings, reflect, and apply it to their own contexts and situations. This, in our case, led to a rich exchange of ideas, agreements, and sometimes disagreements between students, all of which was quite instrumental in learning.

Emphasis on student well-being

There was a great emphasis on student well-being. We had course convenors, and we also had module convenors. Both our course convenors placed great importance on student well-being and made us feel at home in a new learning environment and with new learning methods. We were repeatedly told to not keep silent and share our concerns and problems and also respect each other at the same time.

Both our convenors were quite approachable, and they were the embodiment of the spirit of Gender and Development. Some of the complex and possibly disturbing issues were delved into differently. Students had the space to refrain from sessions they found personally disturbing, and the course conveners were available to discuss and counsel students in helping them come to grips with it.

Learning aids and assessment methods

Videos, podcasts, pictures, stories, and role play were all used across the course. There was also a huge compilation of additional readings for a broader contextualization. This gave a vast exposure to the spectrum of available learning resources to aid future learning. We were encouraged to reflect on the application of the theories, development policies, and programs both from our own experience and from the literature.

Assessments are designed to promote learning and foster writing skills. One of our course convenors told us at the beginning of the course that by the time the course ends, we all will 'love writing' as we would have written copiously throughout the year. The course helps the learner in linking theory to practice, and that is emphasized and reemphasized throughout the term in all our assessments.

During this period, I wrote four term papers, one dissertation, one policy brief (in a group), a research proposal, and an impact evaluation design. For a term paper, we were asked to pick up a theme from one of the sessions in the module, and based on that, we were allotted a supervisor who guided us in narrowing our research questions and gave us insights into more learning resources and nudged us in sharpening our thinking.
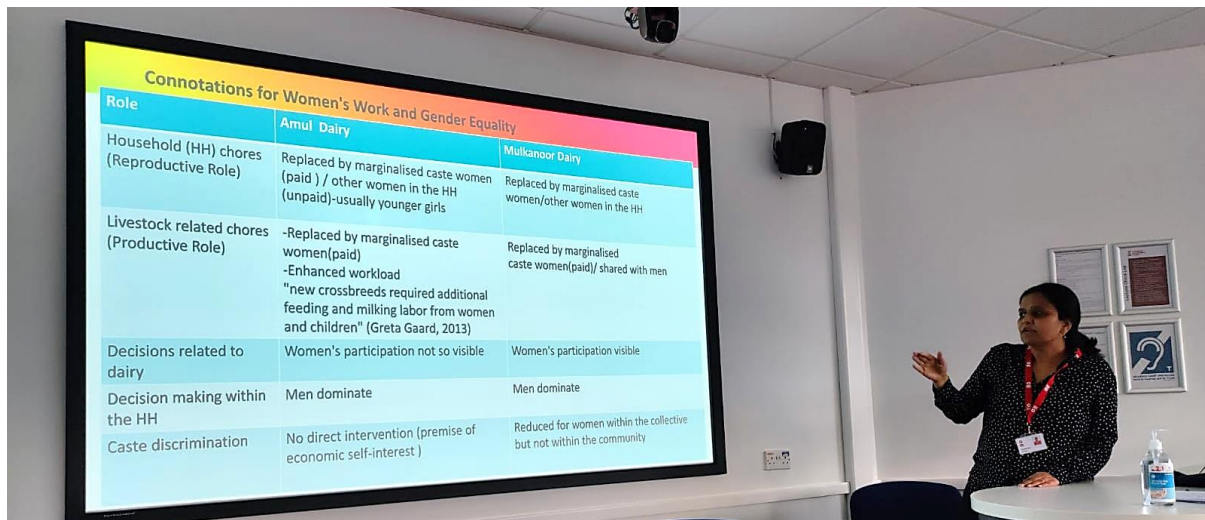
My first individual presentation at IDS

This was quite a systematic process, which seemed daunting at the beginning but seemed to work well along with the progress of the term. We could pick up issues we felt were close to our hearts, though choosing a topic for a term paper itself was a learning experience for most of us. It remained one of the most challenging aspects of the course, though there is some degree of flexibility if a student is struggling with it.

Most of us picked broader topics, which became narrower and more nuanced after research, analysis, and discussion. The focus of each assessment was finding a puzzle or framing a problem/policy or a program, defining a conceptual framework, and critically analysing the problem or the policy within the framework. The assessments had an emphasis on style, structure, and clarity, among other aspects. Citations to scholarly literature were encouraged, which made these papers sometimes more academic. Hence, it was often challenging to do justice to these papers when there was more grey literature.

I really enjoyed writing a paper on 'Discretion of street-level bureaucrats (SLB) hindering gender equity in maternal health interventions in Ghana.' Since I have experience in agricultural extension, I was keen to unpack this topic with respect to extension workers; however, the paucity of literature was a deterrent for doing so. Writing term papers was an opportunity to conduct exploratory research through desk review in new geographies and on novel topics and deepening my understanding of various unexplored dimensions and their manifestations for gender equity.

Engaging in discussions is a norm during lunch breaks at IDS

END NOTE

This course helped me gain the skills required to participate effectively in gender- and development-related research, policy-making, and program implementation and benefit from international research faculty's expertise. As a feminist from the global south, this course also enabled me to contribute to gender research and practice and push for a gender-transformative agenda within programs and policies with additional rigor.

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