

CSS Gender Studies: the growth of women's and gender studies in Pakistan

The CSS Gender Studies paper asks how gender studies became an academic discipline, how it moved from "women's studies" to "gender studies", and where it stands in Pakistan today.

1. From women's movements to an academic field

1.1 Activism before scholarship

Women's studies did not begin in universities. It grew out of women's movements that first asked political questions (votes, property, education, work) and then asked why universities taught so little about women.

- **First wave (late 19th to early 20th century):** campaigns for suffrage, legal personhood, access to education and property rights.
- **Second wave (1960s to 1980s):** moved from legal equality to the "personal is political": family, sexuality, violence, unpaid work and representation in culture. Activists noticed that most disciplines reflected men's experience.
- **Third wave and after (1990s onwards):** stressed differences among women by class, race, religion, region and sexuality, and questioned whether "women" could be treated as one category.

1.2 Women's studies enters the university

From the late 1960s, feminist teachers and students in North America and Western Europe began offering courses on women. The first full women's studies programme is commonly dated to San Diego State University in 1970, and a national association of women's studies in the United States followed in 1977. Programmes spread worldwide during the 1980s.

Women's studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that makes women's lives, experiences and contributions the centre of study, and examines the causes and consequences of women's subordination, with the aim of correcting the male bias of existing knowledge.

Early women's studies had three aims that examiners often ask about:

1. **Recovery:** making women visible in history, literature and the economy ("adding women in").
2. **Critique:** showing that disciplines claimed to be neutral but were built on men's experience.
3. **Transformation:** changing theory and method, for example by valuing personal testimony and studying unpaid domestic work.

1.3 The United Nations decade and development thinking

- **1970:** Ester Boserup's *Woman's Role in Economic Development* showed that development projects often ignored or harmed women. This inspired the **Women in Development (WID)** approach.
- **1975:** International Women's Year and the first UN World Conference on Women in Mexico City.



- **1976 to 1985:** the UN Decade for Women, with further conferences in Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985).
- **1979:** the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).
- **1995:** the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which made **gender mainstreaming** a global policy goal.

These commitments created demand for research and trained staff, and so for university centres, including in Pakistan.

2. The shift from women's studies to gender studies

2.1 Why the name changed

During the 1980s and 1990s many programmes worldwide renamed themselves "gender studies" or "women's and gender studies".

Sex refers to biological differences between males and females. **Gender** refers to the socially and culturally constructed roles, behaviours, identities and power relations that a society assigns to women and men, which vary across cultures and change over time.

The sex/gender distinction was popularised in the early 1970s (for example by Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society*, 1972). In 1986 the historian Joan Scott argued that gender is "a useful category of historical analysis", meaning that relations of power between the sexes shape all social institutions, not only those that concern women directly.

Gender studies is an interdisciplinary field that studies how gender is socially constructed and how gender relations, in interaction with class, ethnicity, religion and other identities, shape power, institutions, knowledge and everyday life for women, men and gender-diverse people.

2.2 Main reasons for the shift

1. **Relational analysis:** women's subordination cannot be understood without studying men, masculinities and the relations between them.
2. **Development policy:** the move from WID to **Gender and Development (GAD)** in the late 1980s focused on unequal power relations rather than simply adding women to projects. Donors and governments began to ask for "gender analysis" and "gender mainstreaming".
3. **Intersectionality:** the recognition that gender interacts with class, race, caste, religion and region.
4. **Institutional acceptance:** "gender" sounded more neutral and academic to some university administrations, which made funding and approval easier.

2.3 Criticisms of the shift

- Some feminists warned that "gender" could depoliticise the field and hide the fact that women remain the main disadvantaged group.
- In donor-funded settings, "gender" sometimes became a technical checklist (counting women in projects) rather than a challenge to power.

- Critics in Muslim-majority societies, including Pakistan, have sometimes treated "gender" as a Western import. Scholars reply that the field studies local realities with local evidence.

2.4 The autonomy versus integration debate

A standing debate in the field concerns where it should sit in a university.

Autonomy (separate department)	Integration (mainstreaming into all disciplines)
Own faculty, degrees, budget and research agenda	Gender perspectives taught inside economics, law, sociology, medicine and so on
Protects the field from being ignored by other departments	Reaches far more students and avoids a "women's ghetto"
Risk: isolation and low status	Risk: dilution, with gender content cut when interested staff leave

Most writers recommend a **dual strategy**: a strong autonomous department that also supports gender content across the curriculum. Pakistan has largely followed this model since the 2000s.

3. Women's studies in Pakistan: background

3.1 The women's movement before 1989

Academic women's studies in Pakistan grew directly out of activism, especially in the 1980s.

- **1949**: the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) was founded under Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, focusing on welfare, education and health.
- **1961**: the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance regulated polygamy, divorce and registration of marriages, after pressure from women's organisations.
- **1975**: Shirkat Gah, a women's resource centre, was set up in Karachi. It later became a major research and advocacy organisation.
- **1979**: the Hudood Ordinances were promulgated under General Zia-ul-Haq. In the same year a Women's Division was created in the federal government.
- **1981**: the **Women's Action Forum (WAF)** was formed to resist laws and policies seen as discriminatory.
- **12 February 1983**: women lawyers and activists protested in Lahore against the proposed law of evidence and were baton-charged by police. The date is now marked as National Women's Day in Pakistan.
- **1983 to 1985**: the government's Commission on the Status of Women produced a report recommending reforms, including attention to women's education and research.
- **1984**: the Qanun-e-Shahadat (law of evidence) Order was promulgated.
- **Mid-1980s**: research and publishing groups such as Simorgh (Lahore) and the Aurat Foundation (1986) began producing material on women, as did activist scholarship such as Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed's *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* (1987).

This activism produced the research and the women who later staffed the first university centres.

4. Women's studies centres from 1989

4.1 The 1989 initiative

In 1989, under the first government of Benazir Bhutto, the federal Ministry of Women's Development (upgraded from the Women's Division) funded the establishment of **Women's Studies Centres** in several public universities. They are commonly listed as the Universities of Karachi, the Punjab (Lahore), Peshawar, Sindh (Jamshoro), Balochistan (Quetta) and Quaid-i-Azam University (Islamabad).

Exam point: the 1989 centres were a state initiative linked to the women's ministry and to Pakistan's international commitments after the UN Decade for Women, but they rested on a decade of activism by WAF, NGOs and women academics.

4.2 Original mandate

- Teach courses, at first mainly postgraduate diplomas and master's programmes in women's studies.
- Conduct research on women's status: education, health, work, law and political participation.
- Build a documentation and data base on women in Pakistan.
- Advise government on policy and train officials.
- Link the university with the community and NGOs.

4.3 Growth in the 1990s and 2000s

- **Allama Iqbal Open University** introduced women's studies courses through distance learning, reaching women who could not attend campus.
- **Fatima Jinnah Women University** (Rawalpindi, 1998) and other women's universities added gender studies teaching.
- After Pakistan acceded to **CEDAW in 1996** and endorsed the Beijing Platform, the **National Plan of Action for Women (1998)** and the **National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002)** called for research and gender training.
- The **Higher Education Commission** (set up in 2002) approved a national curriculum for gender studies and funded new faculty, MPhil and PhD programmes.
- Through the 2000s several centres were upgraded to **departments of gender studies**, offering BS, MSc, MPhil and PhD degrees. Private universities and some colleges also introduced courses.
- Gender studies was added as an optional subject in the CSS examination, which raised its profile among students aiming for the civil service.

5. The shift from women's to gender studies in Pakistan

Pakistan followed the global trend in the 2000s, adding masculinities, gender and development, and gender analysis tools.

5.1 Drivers

1. **Donor and policy language:** the GAD approach and gender mainstreaming after Beijing. Government projects such as the Gender Reform Action Plan (early 2000s) needed staff trained in gender analysis.
2. **HEC curriculum:** the national curriculum used the term "gender studies" and set a broader syllabus.
3. **Academic debate:** faculty trained abroad brought in relational and intersectional approaches.
4. **Acceptability:** "gender" was sometimes seen as a less confrontational term than "women's" or "feminist" studies in a conservative environment.

5.2 What changed and what did not

Course titles and theory widened, but in practice most teaching and research in Pakistan still focus on women's disadvantage, because the evidence of inequality (in literacy, health, labour force participation and violence) remains strong. Men and masculinities receive growing but still limited attention.

6. Curriculum and research themes

6.1 Typical curriculum

Area	Typical content
Foundations	Sex and gender, patriarchy, socialisation, gender roles and stereotypes
Feminist theory	Liberal, Marxist, radical, socialist, postmodern and postcolonial feminism; Muslim feminist approaches
Gender and development	WID, WAD, GAD, gender mainstreaming, gender analysis frameworks
Gender and law	Constitution, family law, criminal law reforms, CEDAW reporting
Gender and society	Family, education, health, media, religion, culture
Research methods	Feminist methodology, qualitative and quantitative methods, gender statistics

6.2 Main research themes in Pakistan

- **Violence against women:** domestic violence, honour killings, acid attacks, harassment at work, and the effect of laws passed in 2006 to 2016.
- **Law and religion:** the Hudood Ordinances and their reform (Protection of Women Act 2006), family law and inheritance.
- **Economy and work:** low female labour force participation, informal and home-based work, the care economy, microfinance.
- **Education and health:** girls' schooling, maternal health, fertility.
- **Political participation:** reserved seats (restored in 2002), women in local government, voter registration gaps.
- **Media and culture:** representation of women in television, film and advertising.
- **Masculinities, sexuality and newer movements:** studies of men's roles and of movements such as Aurat March (from 2018).

7. Institutional and funding challenges

1. **Funding:** centres began with small federal grants, then relied heavily on international donor projects. When projects ended, research and staff often went with them. After the 18th Amendment (2010) devolved women's development to the provinces, central support for the original centres weakened.
2. **Staffing:** few teachers had degrees in gender studies, so many staff came from other disciplines; contract posts made careers insecure.
3. **Status within the university:** small departments with few students struggled for space, budgets and respect, and were sometimes seen as a "women's subject" with weak job prospects.
4. **Social and political resistance:** the field has been labelled Western or anti-religious by some critics, which makes outreach harder and encourages self-censorship.
5. **Research gaps:** much research is donor-driven consultancy rather than long-term scholarship; publication in English limits its reach; gender-disaggregated data are often poor.

8. Links with the women's movement and policy

- **Movement to academy:** activists of WAF, Shirkat Gah, Aurat Foundation and Simorgh supplied the first research, the first teachers and the first documentation.
- **Academy to policy:** university researchers have contributed to the National Commission on the Status of Women (2000), shadow reports to the CEDAW committee, and the drafting of laws such as the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and provincial laws on domestic violence.
- **Policy to academy:** state commitments (CEDAW, Beijing, the 2002 national policy) created demand for trained gender specialists in government and NGOs, which in turn sustained student numbers.
- **Tensions:** activists may find academic work slow; academics guard their independence.

9. Key dates

Year	Event
1970	Boserup's study; first full women's studies programme (San Diego State)
1975	UN International Women's Year, Mexico City conference; Shirkat Gah founded
1979	CEDAW adopted; Hudood Ordinances; Women's Division created
1981	Women's Action Forum formed
12 Feb 1983	Lahore protest; later National Women's Day
1985	Nairobi conference; report of the Commission on the Status of Women
1986	Aurat Foundation; Scott's "useful category" essay
1989	Women's Studies Centres in public universities
1995	Beijing conference and Platform for Action

1996	Pakistan accedes to CEDAW
1998	National Plan of Action for Women
2000	National Commission on the Status of Women
2002	HEC founded; National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women; reserved seats restored
2006	Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act
2010	Workplace harassment law; 18th Amendment
2018	First Aurat March

10. Model outline answers

Model outline 1: "Trace the evolution of gender studies as an academic discipline and evaluate its status in Pakistan."

- 1. Introduction:** define women's studies and gender studies; thesis that the field grew from activism into a discipline, and in Pakistan is established but under-resourced.
- 2. Global roots:** first and second wave movements; first programmes around 1970; aims of recovery, critique and transformation.
- 3. International push:** Boserup and WID, UN Decade for Women, CEDAW 1979, Beijing 1995 and mainstreaming.
- 4. Shift to gender:** sex/gender distinction, Scott 1986, GAD, intersectionality, masculinities; criticisms of depoliticisation.
- 5. Pakistan origins:** Zia era laws, WAF 1981, 12 February 1983, NGOs; 1989 centres.
- 6. Expansion:** CEDAW accession 1996, 1998 plan, 2002 policy, HEC curriculum, departments and PhDs, CSS optional subject.
- 7. Evaluation, strengths:** trained graduates, research feeding laws from 2006 to 2016, policy influence.
- 8. Evaluation, weaknesses:** donor dependence, devolution after 2010, staffing, resistance, data gaps.
- 9. Way forward:** stable public funding, dual autonomy and integration strategy, research in local languages, gender data.
- 10. Conclusion:** real progress from almost nothing in 1989, but the field still depends on the strength of the women's movement and the state's commitment.

Model outline 2: "Discuss the autonomy versus integration debate with reference to gender studies in Pakistan."

- 1. Introduction:** state the debate: separate department or gender content across all disciplines.
- 2. Case for autonomy:** own faculty, degrees and research agenda; protection from neglect; visible career path. Pakistani example: centres upgraded to departments with MPhil and PhD programmes.

3. **Case for integration:** reaches every student; avoids isolation; gender matters in law, medicine, economics, engineering.
4. **Problems with each in Pakistan:** small isolated departments with funding gaps; integration cut when interested staff leave; resistance from some faculty.
5. **Dual strategy:** strong departments that also run courses for other faculties and train teachers; HEC curriculum guidance as support.
6. **Conclusion:** the two are complementary; Pakistan needs both, backed by stable funding.

Quick check

1. Define *women's studies* and *gender studies*, and state one difference between them.
2. Distinguish between sex and gender, with one example of a gender role that varies between societies.
3. State the three aims of early women's studies.
4. Explain how the UN Decade for Women and CEDAW encouraged women's studies in developing countries.
5. Describe the difference between the WID and GAD approaches, and explain how this change affected the naming of the field.
6. Evaluate the criticism that the shift from "women's" to "gender" studies depoliticised the field.
7. Describe the events of the early 1980s in Pakistan that led to demand for women's studies.
8. State when the first Women's Studies Centres were set up in Pakistani universities, which ministry funded them, and list four of their functions.
9. Explain three reasons why many Pakistani centres became departments of gender studies in the 2000s.
10. Describe four main research themes of gender studies in Pakistan.
11. Evaluate the institutional and funding challenges facing gender studies in Pakistan.
12. Explain how the women's movement and gender studies in Pakistan have influenced each other.

1. Women's studies is an interdisciplinary field that makes women's lives and experiences the centre of study and examines the causes of women's subordination, to correct male bias in knowledge. Gender studies studies how gender is socially constructed and how gender relations, together with class, religion and other identities, shape power and institutions for women, men and gender-diverse people. Difference: women's studies focuses on women; gender studies is relational and also studies men, masculinities and the relations between the sexes.

2. Sex is biological difference between males and females. Gender is the socially constructed set of roles, behaviours and power relations a society assigns to each sex, and it varies across cultures and over time. Example: in some societies farm work is mainly men's work, while in many rural areas of Pakistan women do much of the livestock care and harvesting; the biology is the same but the role differs.

3. Recovery (making women visible in history, literature and the economy), critique (showing that disciplines were built on men's experience while claiming neutrality) and transformation (changing

theory and method, for example valuing testimony and studying unpaid work).

4. The Decade (1976 to 1985) and its conferences in Mexico City, Copenhagen and Nairobi put women's status on government agendas. CEDAW (1979) committed states to remove discrimination and report on progress. Governments therefore needed data, research and trained staff, and donors funded research and training. This created demand for university centres that could supply them, as happened in Pakistan in 1989.

5. WID (1970s) aimed to include women in existing development projects, treating women as an overlooked group. GAD (late 1980s onwards) analysed unequal power relations between women and men and aimed to change the structures that cause inequality. Because GAD and later gender mainstreaming used "gender" as the key concept, governments and donors asked for gender analysis, and academic programmes renamed themselves gender studies to match this broader, relational focus.

6. For the criticism: "gender" can sound neutral and hide the fact that women remain the main disadvantaged group; in donor projects gender became a technical checklist; funding sometimes moved away from women-focused work. Against: gender analysis explains women's subordination better by studying the whole system of relations, including men; intersectionality made the field more accurate; in Pakistan most gender studies research still focuses on women's disadvantage. Judgement: the shift widened the field without abandoning women, but the risk of depoliticisation is real where gender becomes a box-ticking exercise.

7. Under General Zia-ul-Haq the Hudood Ordinances (1979) and plans for a new law of evidence raised fears of discrimination. The Women's Action Forum formed in 1981 to resist these measures. On 12 February 1983 women protesters in Lahore were baton-charged, which drew national attention. The Commission on the Status of Women (1983 to 1985) reported on women's disadvantage. NGOs such as Shirkat Gah, Simorgh and Aurat Foundation documented women's lives. Together these showed a lack of research and created pressure for academic study.

8. In 1989, funded by the federal Ministry of Women's Development, during Benazir Bhutto's first government. Functions: teaching (diplomas and master's programmes), research on women's status, building documentation and data on women, advising government and training officials, and linking the university with NGOs and the community.

9. First, policy and donor language changed to GAD and gender mainstreaming after Beijing 1995, so government programmes needed people trained in gender analysis. Second, the HEC curriculum used "gender studies" and a broader syllabus, and HEC funding supported new departments and degrees. Third, faculty trained abroad brought relational and intersectional approaches. A further reason was that "gender" was sometimes more acceptable to university administrations than "women's" or "feminist" studies.

10. Violence against women (domestic violence, honour killings, harassment and the effect of new laws); law and religion (Hudood Ordinances, the 2006 Protection of Women Act, family law and inheritance); women's work (low labour force participation, home-based work, the care economy); political participation (reserved seats restored in 2002, local government).

11. Challenges: centres began with small federal grants and then depended on donor projects, so research stopped when projects ended; devolution after the 18th Amendment (2010) weakened central support; staff were few, often from other disciplines and on insecure contracts; small departments had low status and were seen as having weak job prospects; some critics call the

field Western, which encourages caution; research is often consultancy rather than long-term scholarship; data and local-language materials are limited. Evaluation: the field has survived and expanded through HEC support, departments and PhD programmes, but without stable public funding and better data its quality and reach remain uneven.

12. Movement to academy: activists from WAF and NGOs such as Shirkat Gah, Aurat Foundation and Simorgh produced the first research and documentation and many became early teachers; protests of the 1980s created pressure for the 1989 centres. Academy to movement and policy: university research supported the National Commission on the Status of Women, CEDAW shadow reporting and laws such as the 2010 workplace harassment law and provincial domestic violence laws; graduates work in NGOs and government. Tensions remain: activists may find academic work slow, and academics value independence from campaigns and donors. Overall the relationship is mutually supportive.