

Question:

Write a note on status of gender studies in Pakistan. Give your views on the autonomy versus integration debate in gender studies.

Answer:

I. Introduction:

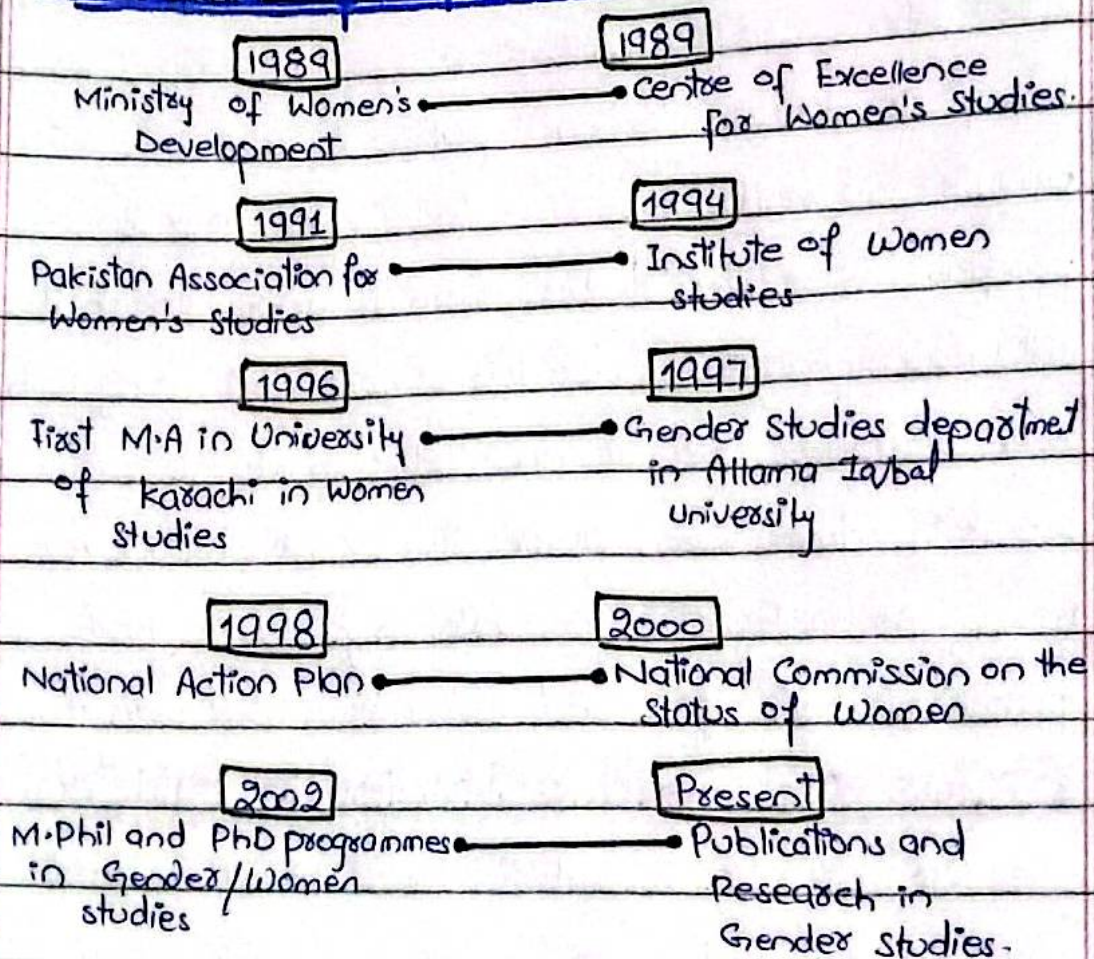
Gender studies is an inter-disciplinary field of study that seeks to study various disciplines such as politics, sociology, psychology, biology; and others from the perspective of gender. In Pakistan, Gender studies introduced as a subject in 1989 by Ministry of Women's Development. Currently, the subject is being taught in various public as well as private universities as a full-fledge degree program. In gender studies, there is a debate that either women studies must be conducted along with other disciplines or women studies must be separated from men studies. This contradiction is known as integration vs autonomy debate. Both approaches have pros and cons associated with them.

II. Status of Gender Studies in Pakistan

In Pakistan, Women and Gender studies took root in early 1990s, and have since become the part of many university programs. First of all, government of

Pakistan took the initiative to establish Ministry of Women Development (M.WD) in 1989 that leads to the establishment of Centre of Excellence for Women's Gender Studies (CEWS). In 1991, Pakistan Association for Women Studies (PAWS) was founded with the objectives of building solidarity for women and a forum for interaction and coordination for women studies. In 1994, Institute of Women studies (IWS) was established in Jamshoro-University of Sindh.

Timeline of Gender Studies Development



With the successful development of Gender

Studies in Pakistan, Masters and Doctorate, in Gender studies, programmes continued to offer by many universities one-by-one. In 1998, Pakistan endorsed Women and Gender studies and acknowledged it in National Action Plan. Furthermore, Benazir Bhutto, being first female prime minister of Pakistan, supported women-friendly policies as she established first women's bank to cater to the financial need of women.

a. Current Status of Gender Studies in Pakistan

World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Report, 2025, ranked Pakistan 148th out of 148 countries in the gender inequality index. Although, government efforts to establish women's studies in both public and private sectors are commendable but women's studies is still in its embryonic stage.

① Development of Gender Studies programmes

The growth and development of Gender Studies in Pakistan is institutionally maturing but remains socially fragile. The subject is offering by multiple universities over the past decade as an undergraduate programme as well as

Doctorate degree programme. Despite this academic growth, Gender Studies has not yet achieved deep acceptance or legitimacy in broader society. Several factors explain this fragility:

- ★ Cultural Misunderstanding and Stigma
- ★ Weak Labour-Market Absorption
- ★ Policy Practice Gap
- ★ Political and Religious sensitivities.

② Gender Studies in Academia and Research

In academia, Gender Studies has shifted from peripheral elective courses to full-fledged BS, MPhil, and PhD programmes—integrating other disciplines as well such as sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and media studies.

Research in Gender Studies has also expanded both in volume and sophistication. In Pakistan, this scholarly growth is visible through the establishment of gender centers at Quaid-i-Azam University, Punjab University, and Karachi University. Gender Studies stands as a maturing academic discipline while still striving for stronger societal integration and policy influence.

b. Critical Analysis of the Status of Gender Studies in Pakistan

Gender studies in Pakistan today occupies a paradoxical state. Higher Education Commission record shows a rise of more than 250% in gender-focused theses between 2015-2023, but research rarely informs policymaking due to weak coordination between universities and government institutions. In Pakistan, gender studies often viewed as anti-religion that hinders the classroom learning and discourage debates. Moreover, gender issues increasingly intersect political contests, such as women's rights movements, that portrays gender discourse as a threat to country's stability. For the discipline to mature fully, Pakistan must invest in curriculum reform, expand job opportunities, improve research-policy linkage, and work to reduce societal misconceptions.

III. Autonomy vs. Integration Debate

Since the first National Women's Studies Association Conference in 1970, scholars of Women Studies have been debating questions of interdisciplinary and autonomy of the discipline. The debate has occupied a central stage

in women and gender studies

a. What is the debate?

- ① Proponents of autonomy side of the argument asserts that women studies must be separated from men studies, sexism, and LGBT.
- ② The integrationists, however, stipulate that women studies must be conducted along with other disciplines in order to produce a holistic analysis.

Both approaches carry advantages and challenges.

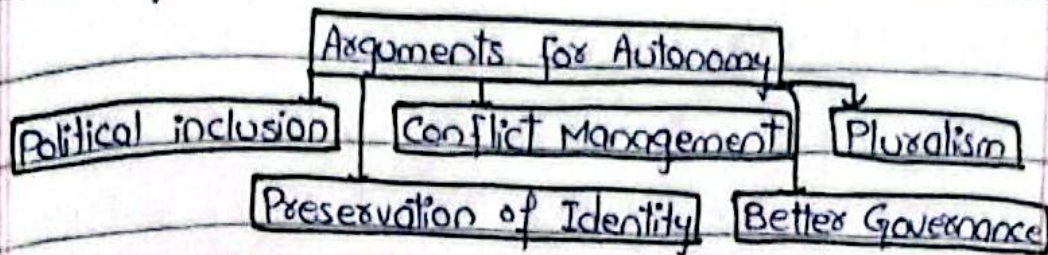
b. Autonomy: The Case for Independent Authority

Autonomy allows critical feminist pedagogy. Scholars advocating autonomy emphasize that Gender

Studies needs its own epistemological framework, that allows to explore topics such as sexual violence, domestic labor, reproductive rights, social injustice, patriarchy, and inequality which are often marginalized in mainstream disciplines.

Catherine Mackinson argued that women's oppression is systemic and cannot be fully addressed within traditional disciplines. In her words, Equality is not simply the removal of barriers; it is the creation of a framework

in which the very structures of power can be challenged.



c. Integration: The Case for National Unity

Integrationists argue that gender should cut across all disciplines rather than exist as a separate silo. It ensures that gender perspectives inform all academic, professional, and policy related fields, from economics and law to science and engineering. Joan Scott (1999, *Gender and the Politics of History*) emphasized:

"Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and as such, it must inform all fields of knowledge."



d. Critical Perspective on debate

According to critical analysis of autonomy vs integration debate in Pakistan, autonomy is visible in universities

and educational institutions where dedicated research and programs exist but integration is still limited.

① Risks of Autonomy:

Critics argue that autonomous Gender Studies programs preserve critical feminist theory and allow in-depth exploration of oppression, patriarchy, and intersectionality. Such complete autonomy risks academic isolation. Isolated programs have limited influence on broader policy, economic law, or STEM fields.

② Risks of Integration:

Critics argue that integrating gender into all disciplines ensures interdisciplinary reach and real-world applicability which dilutes critical feminist analysis, reducing gender to a tokenistic lens rather than a robust framework for societal change.

Hybrid or Dual Model:

Contemporary scholars suggest a hybrid model, combining autonomous departments with integrated modules across disciplines. Sylvia Walby suggested:

"Gender must be both a lens applied across disciplines and a site of ^{autonomous} knowledge production to truly capture the complexity of social relations."

IV. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the status of gender studies in Pakistan is paradoxical. In one way, the research and publications on respective discipline is significantly increasing, on the other hand the subject has not yet achieved legitimacy and cultural acceptance. Pakistan should transform its policies of curriculum, syllabus, and awareness campaigns to portray gender studies as an essential discourse of society. The autonomy vs integration debate in gender studies is also linked with policy practices - either to support autonomy of gender or keep the discipline integrated.