

ISST: 1980 - 2005 Twenty-Five Years

Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) was set up as a Trust in 1980, and the initial years of its existence were part of the excitement of the first decade following the First World Conference on Women in 1975. Research in the area of women's studies, setting up programmes, practices and institutional machinery, and activism, were all closely intertwined in these early years. As one of the first organizations to undertake systematic research in women's studies, ISST was a leader in developing a research and planning agenda for women.

In mainstream research organizations, the natural cycle of research, publication and dissemination, does not always find itself accompanied by advocacy or even activism. As a corollary, theory plays a stronger role than in organizations like ISST which seek to 'bridge research and action'. Here, research leads easily and naturally into advocacy and activism, and publication becomes a secondary objective. The constant attempt to confront, understand, document and change the practice of things places a heavy burden on the researcher, and theoretical rigour often loses out to the need to show immediate impact. It is not surprising, therefore that many people have left ISST for more activist, grass-roots and field oriented organisations. It is not surprising also that a large part of ISST studies remain unpublished. And also to find that the organization, time and again, has attempted (perhaps even unconsciously or half-consciously) to find ways of bringing activism within its ambit, in different ways. Similarly, advocacy with national governments at the state and the centre was very much part of ISST's purpose of being. Internationally, too, it was able to carry the voices of Indian women to many forums, enabled by the Special Consultative Status granted by UN-ECOSOC in recognition of its contributions in placing women's concerns higher on the agenda of development initiatives. Another example of its international status is the role it played in the development of a forum such as DAWN (Development Alternatives with women in a New Era).

A review of ISST studies over the last 25 years shows on the one hand that the issues or themes of the research itself have not changed very much; on the other hand there are equally notable changes reflecting only partly internal organizational factors, and to a greater extent changes in the external environment. ISST's focus has been on a range of issues relevant to concerns of gender, poverty and development, and most of the research undertaken has been in four broad areas, women and work, governance, health and economic reform.

Studies that can be grouped under the broad theme of 'health' were mainly concerned initially with service delivery aspects, gradually being replaced by more analytical studies and greater concern with the macro policy framework. This has included studies on population policy, reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. The element of 'activism' in this area of work is seen both in the setting up of a Family Counselling Centre which functioned over a period of sixteen years, and where the concerns included mental health and well-being. It is also seen in the gender training undertaken and handbook prepared in relation to HIV/AIDS and gender concerns.

In the area of governance, defined broadly to include institutions of governance and development approaches, the initial work was almost entirely supportive of government efforts, consisting mainly of developing catalogues and directories of agencies working with poor women, and also including working with the government to engender state planning in Karnataka. Some studies were undertaken critiquing development paradigms from a gender perspective. Studies of institutional machinery for women's advancement and policy tools such as gender budgeting can also be included here. More recently analytical studies have been undertaken to understand the meaning and implications of 'engendering governance'. In this area, activism took the form of a sustained and pioneering effort to train elected women representatives primarily in Karnataka and also in neighbouring states with the eight-year-long UMA project activity. The training manuals developed under this project continue to be widely used in the country.

In the area of women's work, early studies were descriptive and many were in the form of case studies and sectoral studies, seeking to document women

workers in a range of little known activities and to highlight their role and contribution to both the household and the wider economy. Several project development activities were undertaken. A major and pioneering thrust was engendering statistics and the measurement of work. ISST's Time Allocation study was the first of its kind, and had a major influence on the accounting of women's work. At different times, studies on skill development / vocational training have also been undertaken. Programme reviews, including a seminal analysis of the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme, have also been undertaken. A number of studies have been done on the general theme of informal economy, poverty and women's work. In this area, activism took the form of setting up a Women's Resource Centre to document and disseminate information with special focus on women's work; and the Mahila Haat project (now an autonomous organization).

Finally, an impressive and wide range of studies have been undertaken under the Gender Network, an umbrella project extending over eight years and including studies undertaken by partners across South and South East Asia. This wider network was enabled both by sustained research funding support and new technologies of communication. This programme moved a step beyond the more descriptive and advocacy efforts to undertake theoretically rigorous and carefully designed studies in a number of related areas to map the impact of reforms on gender. As it comes to a close and moves into a dissemination phase, we expect this to yield valuable lessons for policy.

In the early years, the studies undertaken at ISST were largely funded by government directly or, in a few cases, by international organizations working closely with the government. Today, however, the bulk of ISST work is funded by bilateral or multilateral agencies, although work continues to be done for government agencies. However, the interaction with the government was undoubtedly much closer in the first half of the period being reviewed than in the second half. The change in funding sources is also associated with an expansion in the scale of work and size of the organization. Today, there are a large number of organizations concerned with women's studies / gender studies. The link between activism, policy and planning and research is today more tenuous in comparison

to the late '70s. Over the years, there has been the growth of an autonomous civil society, of which ISST is a part, and which seeks a kind of independence which has perhaps not visualized twenty-five years ago.

Another element of continuity in ISST's work is found in the manner in which it has always chosen to work closely with local organizations to ensure the appropriateness and applicability of the work done. The communities and families involved have been kept aware of the purpose of the research and been able to input into its design so that the outputs have as much direct relevance to their lives as possible. This aspect of its research ethics and participatory methods is drawn from Gandhian methods, a strong influence on most development research in India upto the '70s. In this, too, ISST can be considered a pioneer, having internalised techniques and values long before they became an accepted part of social science research *vide* PRA techniques, institutional ethics, etc. The fallout of this has been a wide network with field organisations and activists in many different parts of the country, not always 'activated', but present nonetheless as a part of its inheritance.

More recently, since the mid-90s, ISST has become active in regional / South Asia studies, something that has been facilitated immensely by the Internet and computer technology, and which has allowed a new perspective on old problems. In fact, ICTs form an integral part of its latest effort at activism, the Community Outreach Centre and the extension centre of the Habitat Learning Centre.

In summary then, ISST research has been influenced by the external environment in many ways, and the internal compulsions have likewise influenced its choices and directions. As a small organisation with insecure and fluctuating funding, it has not always been able to tie up loose ends or to enable continuity between projects and people. But that drawback has been amply compensated by new energies and new commitments that have ensured that it remained a healthy vibrant organization.