ENGENDERING THE ACADEMY:
BUILDING PARTICIPATIVE PATHWAYS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

August 20 – September 10, 2026
Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi, New Delhi

Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP), in partnership with the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC), Sri Venkateswara College (SVC), University of Delhi, conducted a 4-session workshop series on gender justice in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) for the college's senior management, faculty, and students between August 20 and September 10, 2026.

The series was organized as part of WISCOMP's work on participatory Gender Audits for HEIs and based on learnings from its unique and innovative pan-India program HAMSA: Campus Equity Initiative. It sought to open a reflective context for the college community to consider how gender justice can be embedded in the administrative and academic practices and daily rhythm of an institution, beyond anti-sexual harassment protocols and one-off sensitization workshops. The WISCOMP team and gender experts from WISCOMP network facilitated the sessions, that included presentations, group exercises, and discussion. This report draws on the deliberations and provides an overview of the initial Gender Audit at the college.

Acknowledgements

WISCOMP is grateful to Prof. Vajala Ravi, Principal, and Prof. Nandita Narayanasamy, Vice Principal, SVC, for their support and for welcoming the WISCOMP team to the campus. WISCOMP is indebted to the IQAC of the college, to the Gender Audit Coordination Committee, and to Prof. Sharda Pasricha, IQAC Coordinator and Professor, Department of Chemistry, and Dr. Arpita Kaul, Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, for their engagement, advice and the care with which the series was planned. A baseline assessment of the college was carried out using the WISCOMP's Gender Audit questionnaire, and WISCOMP gratefully acknowledges the team that adapted and circulated the survey online and analysed its data, including Dr. Haokam Vaiphei, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Dr. Nagendra Kumar Kalaparthi, Assistant Professor, Department of Statistics, and Dr. Hari Singh, Assistant Professor, Department of Electronics. WISCOMP thanks the student volunteers, the technical team and the administrative and support staff of the college, and all the faculty and students whose participation enriched the deliberations.



Workshop participants with the WISCOMP team.

Gender Equity and Inclusion Pathways: Exploring the Terrain

The inaugural plenary opened with welcome remarks and an overview of the Gender Audit initiative, followed by a keynote address by Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, Founder-Director, WISCOMP. Reflections on the college's existing initiatives on gender sensitization, a presentation of the findings of the pre-workshop survey of college's faculty and students on campus safety, redressal of sexual harassment, gender sensitization, vulnerability and gender justice, and an outline of the audit framework by WISCOMP completed the session.

Welcome and Context

Welcoming the participants and the WISCOMP team, **Prof. Vajala Ravi, Principal, SVC**, described an audit as an exercise of assessing oneself, but not through one's own eyes. "Our eyes will always tell us we have done a splendid job", he remarked, and an assessment by someone who does not know the college directly can point to lacunae and loopholes. The college had tried to implement as many provisions for gender sensitization and equality as possible, as mandated by law and rules, but also as mandated by its own collective conscience. The question was whether these measures were good enough to ensure that every stakeholder on campus was able to recognize prejudices and gender stereotypes and at the same time felt secure and heard.



Prof. Vajala Ravi, Principal, SVC

He observed that the term 'gender perspective' is often understood as preferential treatment towards women, when in fact the framework and the analyses of experts' point towards non-discrimination and equality for all genders. If the rules appear biased to some, this perception has itself emerged from a social context in which such biases are seen to operate. These very biases need to be unlearned by all of us. He also underscored the importance of a fuller understanding of the existing law on gender equality. Misinformation or half-information gleaned from social media can lead people to misspell the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act as "POSCO", or to mistake the Internal Committee (IC), the quasi-judicial body that implements the mandate of the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act), for the Act itself, contributing to a lack of nuanced understanding of gender justice and laws that support it. He urged colleagues to receive the findings of the assessment team, both the appreciation and the criticism, in a positive and constructive spirit.



Prof. Sharda Pasricha, IQAC Coordinator and Professor, Department of Chemistry, Prof. Vajala Ravi, Principal, SVC, Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, and Prof. Nandita Narayanasamy, Vice Principal, SVC (L to R). Prof. Vajala Ravi felicitating Dr. Gopinath.

Introducing the gender audit initiative at the college, **Prof. Sharda Pasricha, IQAC Coordinator and Professor, Department of Chemistry**, noted that the excellence of an institution is not only about academic performance, infrastructure and policies but also about creating a workspace where all stakeholders are respected, feel secure, and are able to contribute. Institutions may have good policies on paper, but it is important to reflect periodically on how they work in practice. The workshop series would help the college identify where it was doing well and where there were gaps, and move from identifying gaps to working on solutions to embed gender justice into practices and policies of the college.

Keynote Address

Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, Founder Director, WISCOMP thanked the college for its warmth and commended the work being carried out in terms of gender equality, especially by the Women Development Cell (WDC) and IQAC. She remarked that WISCOMP came to the campus in a spirit of learning, hoping to take the college's good practices to other institutions of higher education as part of its work. She opened by reading a poem titled, 'Silence,' written by a student in 1995 about the inherited silence of women across generations, to mark the distance travelled since then. That progress, she said, was owed in large measure to institutions such as SVC, and it deserved to be acknowledged and celebrated. **Gender work, she stressed, is a collaborative enterprise of women and men** working together, aimed at a vocabulary that is not only emancipatory but expansive, and that helps people move out of their own mental prison houses. It does not need to be an enterprise fuelled by anger. It is about celebrating difference and inclusion, and about thriving with passion and compassion. It is this space between silence and thriving, between Niti and Nyaya (legality and justice), that the workshop seeks to bridge.



Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, Founder-Director, WISCOMP

She described the workshop space as one where the college community leads the process and identifies its own needs. WISCOMP does not carry a predetermined agenda or a one-size-fits-all framework to be implemented by outsiders. This gender audit, she said, is not a conventional audit. Centres of excellence provide aspirational, dialogic, creative, inclusive and democratic spaces, and also 'engendered' spaces. Such institutions also nurture the minds of the future: the synthesizing, creative, respectful and ethical mind, which is able to **connect the microcosm to the macrocosm**, and can put itself in the shoes of another, in an age of technical advancements and Artificial Intelligence that has made it difficult to sustain connections.

Numbers, Voice and Agency

Dr. Gopinath recalled that women account for almost half of the student enrolment in Indian higher education (49.7 per cent in 2023-2024, as per All India Survey of Higher Education), yet this numeric presence does not necessarily translate into voice. What matters is not only how many women come to the table but what they bring to the table, and whether that is heard or not. Both voice and agency are essential in the structures of power of any institution. She pointed to the experience of women leaders in universities across India, whose authority is often tested in ways their male counterparts' is not, and to structural discrimination that manifests in less visible ways, such as publication-dependent yardsticks for career advancement or grants distribution being delayed or unfair for them. Or in other ways, the penalizing of dissent, normalizing of uniformity or regressive practices sanctified by the administration in the name of ensuring 'women's safety' on and around campus. These practices emanate from the expectation that women be docile in private and public spaces, and both patriarchal men and women are complicit in this. For instance, the prevalence of culture of impunity and silence on campuses after the 2012 Nirbhaya Case (gang rape, torture and murder of a 22-year-old physiotherapy intern in New Delhi) constrained the mobility of female students across campuses. Those who ask for gender justice, she added, are sometimes dismissed as complacent with, or disruptive of, the status quo, when what is being asked for is simply justice and the freedom to exercise their rights.

Gender and Power

Gender, she said, is about power: about how men, women and other genders access the resources of society, and how they deliver them. The power dimension of the gender binaries we construct in our daily lives should never be forgotten. She illustrated the **gendered nature of knowledge production** through examples of women whose work was erased or credited to others: Rosalind Franklin, whose X-ray diffraction work was integral to the discovery of the structure of DNA but was recognized only through the Nobel Prize awarded to her male colleagues; and Dr. James Barry, who lived as a man to be able to practise as a surgeon, and whose identity became known only at death.

Even today, women often make themselves less visible in academic work, and in co-authored papers the name of the senior male partner routinely appears first. Which forms of knowledge are included in the curriculum, and most importantly what is left out and not taught, and whose contributions are recognized, are therefore questions of epistemic justice for a Gender Audit to explore.

Representation of females at SVC:

- Visiting Faculty: 61% women
- Regular Faculty: 49% women
- Student Body: 42.8% women

An important note is that a Gender Audit is not about sexual harassment alone. The IC is only one part of the whole gender enterprise, and a Gender Audit is not a count of the cases of sexual harassment on campus that were or were not reported. She noted that although the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) framework mentions gender audits, many institutions have little idea how to go about them and equate them with submitting the number of harassment cases reported and resolved. **Gender justice, she argued, also requires attention to power distance, language, patriarchal practices, and unconscious biases that seep into institutional culture.** "We are not bad-intentioned people," she said, "but we are often unconscious about our biases", and use language that seems perfectly normal but normalizes subtle forms of exclusion. She raised the issue of intimate partner violence and sexual harassment of students pursuing natural sciences streams on campuses, which is not confined to labs, and asked where students go for counselling and how mentorship works in practice.

A Participant-led Process

The audit, she explained, would be an ongoing and participant-led process, with WISCOMP facilitating and the college identifying gaps and priorities. It is a work-in-progress and not an event that is over in three or four days. The challenge is to sustain it and to go beyond the immediate moment, looking at institutional practices through a new lens and re-scripting them. She invited the college community to walk together with the WISCOMP team and concluded that those who wish to sing will always find a song and speak truth to power.

Initiatives of the College



Prof. Rina Ramdev, Convener of WDC and Professor, Department of English, SVC

Prof. Rina Ramdev, Convener of WDC and Professor, Department of English, spoke about the ways in which the college is shaping the aspirations and everyday realities of its community. The university, she said, is more than a site for teaching, as students learn in it how to inhabit the world. Questions of gender are therefore not abstract concepts but everyday negotiations that surface in classrooms, societies, festivals, forums and in the practices through which campus culture is produced. Gender concerns, she noted, rarely stand alone: a discussion on mobility may involve social class or disability, a conversation on safety may intersect with community identity of individuals, and questions about participation may reveal linguistic or regional exclusions. Approaching gender as one among several interconnected structures, and not as a stand-alone category, is therefore essential.

She outlined the statutory function of the IC, which exists to ensure that members of the institution are protected against sexual harassment. Alongside this responsibility, through the WDC, the college also undertakes educational work through workshops, orientation programs, reading groups, campaigns, film screenings and public lectures, in which student engagement is considerable. These create spaces in which issues of power, consent and digital behaviour can be explored before they become problems, and help faculty and staff handle complex situations in an informed manner. A challenge is to ensure that differences in linguistic proficiency, particularly in English, and in the confidence with which people can articulate their experience do not determine whose concerns are heard and addressed.

Drawing on her training as a student of literature, she observed that institutional change, like the process of reading, works slowly and cumulatively. Students encounter ideas at orientation, in classrooms and in workshops, and over time these begin to shape ways of thinking and conduct. She recalled Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's understanding of education as an 'uncoercive rearrangement of desires'. Universities also train young people for democratic participation: how to listen across disagreement, negotiate differences, exercise rights and recognize the dignity of others. A Gender Audit, she suggested, will help the college document their policies, procedures, infrastructure, representation, accessibility and institutional mechanisms, and create opportunities for self-reflection.

Findings of the Survey



Dr. Haokam Vaiphei, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, SVC

The college's Gender Audit Coordination Committee had, in the three months preceding the workshop, adapted questionnaires shared by WISCOMP into an online form circulated to faculty and student groups, which drew 87 responses from students, a majority of them female, and 58 from faculty members. **Dr. Haokam Vaiphei, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science**, presented the analysis of the responses, organized under seven themes. He cautioned that a response of 'no awareness' is itself a finding, as it does not mean that problems are rare but that awareness and information are limited. The analysis also showed that students and faculty see the campus from different positions. This did not necessarily mean that faculty underestimate problems or that students exaggerate them, but that the two groups occupy different positions within the institution. Students experience the campus at night, during commuting, in hostels and in informal social spaces, and more often reported everyday concerns such as restrooms, lighting, transport and accommodation. Faculty experience the institution primarily through classrooms, offices, meetings and formal administrative structures, and tended to view it through its policies, committees and mechanisms, while also reporting low workplace discrimination. The two groups also diverged on self-defence training: students strongly supported martial arts and self-defence programmes for female students, whereas faculty respondents were strongly against them. Both perspectives, and the points where they diverge, are needed to understand the college's gender climate. The main findings were:

1. Safety, transport and infrastructure: Students reported that commuting itself feels unsafe, particularly on shared autos and the metro. Incidents of violence and harassment were reported during rallies and college elections, and by people standing outside the campus, especially during University exams that are conducted in later slots of the day. Lighting on campus was considered good, but student respondents asked for more security personnel and police presence at times such as election rallies. Washrooms emerged as a concern for staff and students alike, owing to blocked facilities, structural design problems and intrusion from outside.

2. Accommodation and health: Hostel capacity was described as extremely low, and paying guest accommodation nearby as expensive, so that students from distant areas struggled. Some students reported falling ill with water- and food-borne diseases and missing exams. No specific issues were raised on health facilities by students, while students asked for more counselling support.

3. Reporting and redress: The survey revealed that information on policies and procedures for dealing with sexual harassment is not reaching everyone, and reporting is seen as difficult, which could be the reason for very small number of reported cases. Respondents asked for a simpler and more visible process.

4. Sensitization and access: Faculty respondents (71%) felt that their campus needs more holistic gender sensitization programs. Equal access to facilities was rated well overall, though gaps in accessibility, including in libraries, were noted, as were concerns about hostel rules and night-time access.

5. Vulnerability: Identity-based and regional vulnerabilities were reported, including those of students from marginalized communities (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe), LGBTQIA+ and the fetishization of women students from north-east, as well as first-year students and those who commute long distances.

6. Measures for gender justice: Students and teachers suggested self-defence training, police patrolling or presence on campus, greater funds for seminars and programs, and better support for vulnerable groups. 31% of students also admitted to family's safety concerns preventing them from going on field trips.

7. Voice in professional life: Several faculty members reported that they felt voiceless and were interrupted while speaking at forums meant for sharing grievances.

When campus-wide patterns were tracked in the responses - infrastructural concerns dominated, and the prevalent culture of silence due to invisibility of support systems and lack of confidence in existing sexual harassment redressal mechanisms was noted. Dr. Vaiphei concluded that the bottom-line is safe spaces and informed people, with a shift in understanding of gender injustice as a women's issue to institutional responsibility.

The Gender Audit Process

Shilpi Shabdita, Assistant Director, WISCOMP, described two ways of imagining a Gender Audit: through a zoomed-in view, it is a time-bound activity that helps fulfil the mandates of bodies such as NAAC, and through a wide-angle view, as an ongoing, dynamic work in progress that is part of a larger social audit and becomes an internally driven process of reviewing an institution's policies and practices. She outlined the **five-phase Gender Audit process** that WISCOMP has evolved. These phases include:



Shilpi Shabdita, Assistant Director, WISCOMP

- **Preparation:** Setting the context of the audit, identifying constituencies, initiating buy-in with the senior management, faculty, non-teaching staff and students, and planning reflection activities.
- **Reflection and Prioritization:** The campus community collectively unpacks unequal practices, policies and processes and asks what needs to be done, which issues to prioritize, how, by whom and within what limits.
- **Consolidation:** Development of an institutional Gender Audit map, with research questions on the prioritized issues, a data collection methodology and a feasible timeline, so that concerns are backed by data and not just based on perception of few individuals.
- **Roll-out:** Conducting the Audit collectively, analysing the data and preparing a report with recommendations.
- **Embedding the process:** Building buy-in and consensus through a dialogic, democratic process, and tracking immediate, medium-term and long-term signs of transformation, such as a deeper understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) across the campus, or faculty in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields engaging with how gender shapes their disciplines.

Prof. Nandita Narayanasamy, Vice Principal, SVC, thanked Dr. Gopinath and the WISCOMP team for appreciating the gender sensitization initiatives of the college and for offering a framework for the road ahead. The term 'Gender Audit', she observed, is a misnomer, as it creates the impression that the exercise is about numbers, when it is really a process and an assessment of where the college stands in its understanding of gender equality and inclusion. She noted that about forty per cent of the faculty were present and interested in moving forward, which was a good sign, and that more people needed to be brought in.



Prof. Nandita Narayanasamy, Vice Principal, SVC

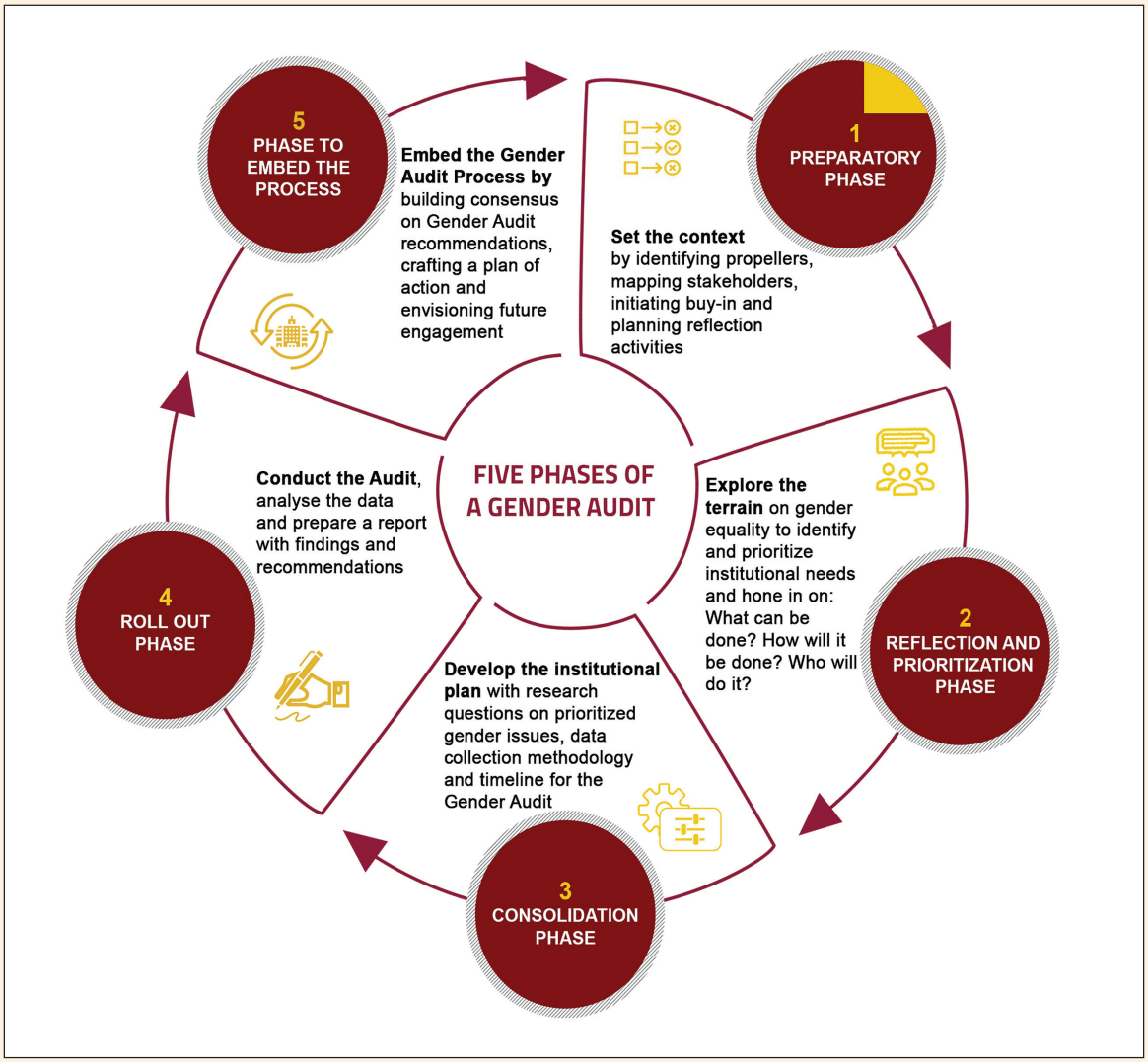


Figure: Five Phases of Gender Audit

Visually Speaking: Texts and Contexts Reflection on When Women Write Exhibition

Built around WISCOMP's exhibition-in-a-bag *When Women Write*, that brings together stories of exclusion and violence that unfold in diverse circumstances for women and gender minorities throughout their lives, the second session was facilitated by Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, Seema Kakran, and Shilpi Shabdita. The session comprised of reflection and discussion on a subset of the exhibition, wherein each poster combines a photograph with an excerpt from writing by a woman in the Indian context. Each poster in the exhibition shows how women and sexual minorities negotiate the terrain of institutionalized patriarchy and discrimination in their everyday lives. It also brings to the fore that writing can be a deeply political act. The posters served as triggers for participants to reflect on what the stories evoke in the context of college and higher education and talk about gender issues.

Dr. Gopinath asked the participants why they had chosen to teach and what the higher education space offers that other workplaces do not, and invited them to share what came to mind when they heard the word 'audit'. Participants said they had chosen teaching to contribute to society by teaching and learning from students, for the freedom it gives them to go beyond the printed word in the classroom, and,

in one case, because it was a comfortable and socially acceptable career, which now motivates them to help their students explore opportunities of their choice, not limited by gender. Common responses to 'audit' included verification, investigation, assessment, evaluation and quantitative analysis. She then introduced the purpose of the reflective exercise through the following points:

- Women, men and people of other genders face a **spectrum of violence, structural and overt**, which is often normalized, invisibilized and sometimes institutionalized. A commitment to 'zero tolerance' for violence needs to reckon with the tacit practices through which it is sustained, and with the fact that people can be perpetrators with the best of intentions. She described this as unconscious bias and 'benevolent patriarchy', in which everyone is implicated.

- Reading the posters is a hermeneutic exercise, one that involves excavation and a conversation with the text that takes the reader from the violence seen to the unseen. The aim is to move the college from a safe space, which one hopes it is, to a brave space, where everyone feels that their articulation, dignity and equality matter.

- Women and gender minorities negotiate institutional patriarchy differently depending on **intersectionality and fluid identities** of class, caste, region and other locations. A Dalit or tribal woman in a remote area is doubly or triply disadvantaged, whereas a teacher in a Delhi college may face one level of disadvantage in specific contexts. 'Women' cannot be treated as a homogeneous group, yet a heuristic commonality of experience remains useful. People also move in and out of identities, and contexts determine which identity is foregrounded. It is the fluidity of identities that enriches human experience.

- Dr. Gopinath invoked two feminist mantras: that the **personal is the political**, since everything that concerns power is political, and that **biology is not destiny**. Participants were asked to consider how much agency they have in a given context, how free they are to make a considered choice and act on it, and what they concede or abdicate to others that they should own.

- Gender, she said, is as much about men and gender minorities as it is about women. We cannot have gender equality if we conveniently exclude the LGBTQIA+ people. She referred to the hegemonic, complicit and subordinate masculinities, and asked whether the burden and privilege of masculinity are equally distributed.

- The **college is nested in a community and in a larger social environment,** and what transpires in a campus touches everyone it comes into contact with. Education spaces allow a transformative vision, and Dr. Gopinath asked the participants to step out of their comfort zones and engage in 'soft activism' through their classrooms and existing committees at the college.

Seema Kakran, Deputy Director, WISCOMP, then explained why participants had been placed in six mixed groups, with each having six to seven members. The groups correspond to the six pillars of a HEI that WISCOMP suggests for a Gender Audit: organizational structure and culture; administrative practices; curriculum, both formal and hidden; campus infrastructure and the surrounding public space; media and communication, internal and external; student life and professional development. These are not watertight compartments but heuristic devices for unpacking how an institution may become more gender-just. Each group received a different set of three to five posters along with guiding questions for discussion. Groups first discussed whether the issue/story in the poster resonated with their own experience, then selected one issue to discuss in greater depth, and finally shared their reflection on why the issue was selected and how it applied to their campus community.



Seema Kakran, Deputy Director, WISCOMP



Participants reading and discussing posters from the Exhibition.

Reflections from the Groups

The plenary discussion that followed brought out both personal narratives and institutional concerns. The following points were raised:

Aspiration and expectation. A faculty member recalled how, as a child, she was taught by her father to say that she wanted to become a District Collector, and how the expectations placed on her continued into adulthood. Seema Kakran observed that many girls are asked to pursue paths they did not choose, and many men are pushed out of fields that are considered too feminine. Another faculty member noted the deep embedded bias for STEM fields in our society which tells children that they have failed in life if they do not enter medicine or engineering and rather choose Liberal Arts or something of their liking.

Everyday harassment. A participant recalled being groped on crowded buses during her student years in Delhi, and shared how she had always spoken up. Prof. Rina Ramdev pointed out that harassment is often dismissed as harmless 'eve-teasing', which trivializes the issue and puts the onus on women for violence carried out against them and not the underlying patriarchy. We should not have to learn self-defence to begin with. The complainant who report such violence is victimized twice: first by the harassment, and again by the reaction that she is making a big deal of it and by the procedural labyrinth of a complaint.

Women and women's expectations. She continued that the notion of women being 'women's worst enemies' overlooks how patriarchy works and how it simultaneously glorifies men's apathy: it appoints some women to police other women, much as a class monitor appointed by a teacher polices the other children. The behaviour is a product of the system, and not of women themselves.

Burdens on men. A participant observed how patriarchy burdens men with financial responsibility and teaches to suppress emotion, which may find expression in violence. Dr. Gopinath agreed that men are equally constrained by social expectations, and recalled how difficult it is for a man to take up dance. Boys Don't Cry, a short film by Vinil Mathew, screened during the session made the point that toxic and violent masculinity diminishes men as human beings as well as harms women, and that gender is not only about women but also about men and the entire spectrum of gender identities.

Sexual division of labour on campus. One group reflected on stereotyped assignment of tasks such as hospitality, event decoration and minute-taking to women, and on student societies where presidential roles go to one gender and secretarial roles to another. It picked up the faculty question of an institution that tries to be 'gender-blind' and so overlooks the unequal burden of care that women carry at home. Seema Kakran noted that the college's questionnaire too had identified work-life balance as a major concern among faculty. Dr. Gopinath suggested that the stereotype could occasionally be reversed, and shared how, in another college that had recently recruited its first male faculty member, the hospitality role fell to him. It was also highlighted that the Gender Audit Coordination Committee of the college assigned the responsibility of hospitality to a male faculty member, a decision that spoke for itself and reflected the Committee's commitment to challenging gender stereotypes and promoting gender inclusive practices.

The law and the university. Another faculty member, reading the posters as a man, said that what appears neutral or harmless in a patriarchal society, such as street harassment, is not universal in experience, and that a university, as a space where anything can be debated, cannot make anyone unwelcome on the basis of gender. He suggested that such conduct should be treated as seriously as

financial irregularity, and that it be criminalized. Dr. Gopinath responded that it already is: the recommendations of the Justice Verma Committee made clear that there is no such thing as 'eve-teasing', and stalking, verbal abuse and online harassment are punishable offences. The task is to move from legality to justice, from Niti to Nyaya, and to keep dignity and bodily integrity at the centre. She also drew attention to the stereotyping of students from the north-east and other tribal regions in Delhi University spaces.

Rituals and stories. Participants noted that many everyday superstitions, such as a wife not calling her husband by his name because it is said to shorten his life, or the preference for a first-born son, are so deeply internalized that they seem natural. Others shared instances of a brother being sent to a private school while an equally capable sister was not, of families continuing to have children in the hope of a son, and of the greater visibility of women who are both homemakers and workers than of men who are homemakers. Dr. Gopinath suggested that in classrooms these questions can surface without preaching, by asking students what their sisters and brothers are doing, and asked how teachers who celebrate popular festivals like Karwa Chauth, seen by many as inherently patriarchal and reinforcing gendered power dynamics and subservience in marriages, can try re-reading the stories associated with them in a way that is not innately regressive as they teach feminism or gender in class or converse with students.

Campus infrastructure. A faculty member reported that the college is on good terms with the local police, that late working hours in labs have not raised any safety concerns, that no complaint about access to washrooms had come to the IC, and that ramps, lifts and washrooms for differently abled persons exist, with more lifts under construction. The college's facilities for students with visual impairments were commended, and accessibility for visually impaired persons was suggested as an area to take forward in the Gender Audit. Facilitators responded with instances from other campuses where excellent infrastructure was undermined by time constraints and access: a well-designed washroom block that students could not use because break times were too short and queues too long, and locked toilets. Infrastructure, they said, is not only about buildings but also about access and time, and what is seemingly fine might not always be true.

Marginality, mentoring and the pandemic. A poster on a girl from a stressed economic background, deprived of online classes and discriminated against on grounds of caste, also mentioning the figure of about 12,500 student suicides in India in 2020 (more than 34 a day), prompted a reflection on how disasters most affect the disadvantaged groups. The state provided little support in the form of laptops, connectivity or infrastructure to students, or to teachers in public universities, and students went to homes of neighbours and friends to attend classes. Inclusion and exclusion are visible in the classroom in the way students huddle in groups. Support structures such as the mentor-mentee system, which places the onus on teachers, the grievance redressal cell, equal opportunity cell, IC and counsellor are all post hoc mechanisms that act after an event has happened. On paper, institutions have inclusive practices that count as best practices for accreditation, but how much is being done to change mind sets before a complaint arises remains an open question. Fruition is only possible when the ground is fertile, and educators who help students realize their potential need to attend to the ground.

From victimology to agency. Marginality is not automatic and can be experienced across caste and class, depending on who one is marginalized from and in which context. The **transformative role of the academy is to help students move from victimology to agency and from scarcity to abundance.** Teachers can do this through simple pedagogical choices, such as coming down from the podium, arranging seating in a circle and changing who sits next to whom every day, so that cliques of privilege and non-privilege are broken. People fear what they do not understand, and teachers also stereotype students before trying to break the barriers. The language that teachers themselves have used about 'quota students' is highly objectionable, and students look up to teachers as role models and mentors. Students and teachers are only freed from victimology when they refuse to give anyone the power to make them feel inferior.

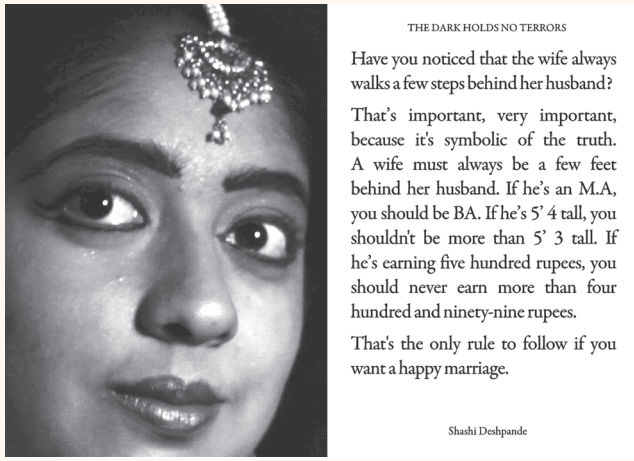
Language and the missing men. Some participants suggested that sessions of this kind should also be conducted in Hindi, and a workshop on gender should include men among its resource persons. The facilitators acknowledged the gap, said that WISCOMP has many men in its network, and undertook to persuade them to join. Prevention, and not only dependence on the IC and other institutions where the process begins, is central to the approach of a safe, equitable HEI.

State and society. The role of governments in reducing gender inequality was raised. Dr. Gopinath shared that while several initiatives exist, from the Vishaka Guidelines to national initiatives on gender audits, they have not percolated into practice, as nothing changes simply because a policy is formulated on paper. A participant voiced a related concern regarding how social practices that exclude or discriminate against women legitimize state negligence in implementation, which in turn reinforces those very practices. For instance, society assigns certain roles like nursing as gender-specific, yet families actively discourage their daughters from pursuing them because of safety concerns and late-night shifts. This conveniently places the onus on individual women rather than holding the state and society accountable for ensuring a safe, non-exploitative workplace. The pervasive social norm of expecting women to change their surnames after marriage was also challenged. Responding to this, Dr. Gopinath shed light on how naming practices vary across societies: in Iceland, a woman can take either parent's name, while in South India, women often keep only initials referring to their ancestral home. Ultimately, **real transformation depends on what transpires in classrooms and everyday interactions.**

Compliance culture and dialogue. Bodies such as the University of Delhi's Ordinance 15B and JNU's GSCASH (Gender Sensitisation Committee Against Sexual Harassment) were stronger than the Internal Committees that followed them. Education is increasingly about ticking boxes and uploading assignments, and teachers have no time to read, converse or engage in dialogue, which enriches educational process.

The facilitators noted that a safety audit is only a part of the larger gender audit, and that the gender audit is itself part of a larger social audit of the organization and its surroundings. The purpose of the exercise was for the college community to arrive at its own priorities. It is easy to assume that gender equality has been achieved once many girls are enrolled, female faculty numbers are large, promotions extend beyond the rank of assistant professor and every sexual harassment complaint is addressed. The conversation sought to open minds and hearts to what lies beyond mandated ICs and numbers, and to what needs addressing in the college, whether for students or for the whole community. Participants were asked to begin thinking about themes and initiatives for the final session, in which the college would arrive at a methodology, decide who will do what, and work out how to convince the senior management team of why it needs to be done.

Student Reflection



This poster beautifully captures the patriarchal hierarchy embedded within socially accepted gender norms. The image of the wife literally walking behind her husband, combined with the rules governing her education, income, and behaviour, exposes how seemingly ordinary expectations can establish and reproduce a hierarchy between men and women. It shows how gender hierarchy can become normalised through everyday expectations surrounding marriage, femininity, and a woman's place within the household.

— Aditi, President, WDC, SVC



Glimpses from the When Women Write Exhibition and faculty members sharing their reflection.

Cultures of Silence and Violence: Dignity at the Workplace and Redress Mechanisms for Sexual Harassment on Campuses

The third session examined sexual harassment at the workplace through the frameworks of dignity, rights and institutional responsibility. **Prof. Krishna Menon, Professor of Gender Studies and Former Dean, School of Human Studies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi**, set out the social and legal history of the issue, followed by WISCOMP team's presentation on the legal framework, the mandate and procedure of the IC, and the concept of consent and power that shape how complaints are heard.

Between Community and Citizenship

Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath opened the session by returning to a gap in the previous session: the perspective of minority women, who face what she called 'double and triple disadvantage' through the complicity of the family, the community and the state. **She asked the participants to 'think like a minority', an essential habit of a global citizen.** She used heuristic posters from the *When Women Write* exhibition on landmark moments in the evolution of rights of Muslim women in India to show how women from minority communities have negotiated patriarchy within their communities and the state, to reclaim their rights as citizen in the state. She recalled the debates around the Shah Bano and Shayara Bano cases, and the entry of women into the Haji Ali dargah, as instances of courts intervening on behalf of women, and of how these interventions were read differently, as the state overreaching into community rights or as a long-overdue recognition of equal rights. She noted that many women within the community welcomed them, and that harmful stereotypes about religious practices persist because public understanding of them is limited. The 2020 CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) protests in Shaheen Bagh, she said, showed women at the helm of a movement who invoked the Constitution and claimed their identity as citizens, beyond their community identity. These protests were part of a long history of movements led by women, from Chipko to the right to information. She reiterated the point about moving from victimhood to agency. Reminding participants of the distinction between legality and justice, she noted that **what happens after a judgment is as important as the process of reaching it,** and that reported cases of sexual harassment have risen sharply in the last two years, possibly because more women are reporting.

Gender-Just Citizenship



Prof. Krishna Menon, Professor of Gender Studies, Dr.B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi

Prof. Menon said the conversation was not only about sexual harassment at the workplace but about the constitutional principles of equality, liberty, justice and dignity, and the building of a gender-just citizenship. She traced the legal milestones regarding sexual harassment that brought the country to the present.

From modesty to workplace rights. The Indian Penal Code of 1860 had no concept of sexual harassment, only vague provisions on 'outraging the modesty' of a woman. This gap persisted until 1992, even after independence, when Bhanwari Devi, a grassroots government worker in Rajasthan, was gang-raped after trying to stop a child marriage. The trial court acquitted the accused. Women's groups, led by Vishaka, filed a public interest litigation, and in 1997 the Supreme Court laid down the Vishaka Guidelines. For sixteen years, until the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act), the country worked with judge-made guidelines and not a statute.

The 2012 movement and the Verma Committee. The Act followed the brutal gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in Delhi in December 2012 (the Nirbhaya case), and the report of the Justice Verma Committee, submitted within thirty days. It led to the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 and the POSH Act, which mandated Internal Committees and extended the definition of workplace well beyond the physical office and the organized sector.

Limits of the Act. The POSH Act is focused on women and does not address sexual harassment faced by men and by trans and non-binary persons. The MeToo movement in 2017–18, which took the form of the List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA), brought to campuses hard questions about power, sex and justice, and exposed the limits of a complaint window that excludes allegations that are years old. The post-COVID world has posed new challenges of dealing with Sexual Harassment faced in digital space and remote work. The session throughout underscored the need for institutions to go beyond the mandated framework and include the groups not covered under the purview of existing mechanisms.

Justice should not be conditional. Prof. Menon noted that when high-profile men who are otherwise labelled liberal are accused of harassment, the argument is sometimes made that acting against them would hand ammunition to political adversaries, and that black feminist scholars have long documented how women were asked to stay silent about sexual harassment by black men so as not to strengthen white supremacy. Justice, she said, cannot be conditional on political convenience.

Power and silence. She observed that organizations often dilute redress mechanisms, for example by putting up posters about the law and taking them down for fear that women would 'take undue advantage', or by constituting committees only to fulfil a requirement. Women often minimize the harassment, wait to be sure they were not overreacting, or blame themselves. Behind such silence lies a fear of stigma.

Consent, not morality. Prof. Menon called for sexual conduct to be judged on consent and not morality, and for a consent culture to be built in families, institutions and communities. She noted that the tea consent video, later screened for participants, is useful but that a cup of tea has no boss, and so the metaphor does not capture the role of power. She named three myths that need to be busted: that a little unwelcome flirting is harmless, that women provoke harassment by their dress and conduct, and that complaints are usually vengeful, when they are in fact chronically underreported. The law does not prohibit flirting that is based on consent.

A note of caution. She ended by cautioning against over-reliance on the law and on naming and shaming, which risk reinforcing the script of aggressive men and passive prey that feminists have worked to dismantle, and which turn misogyny into individual monstrosity instead of a structural problem. Feminist engagement with the state has always been ambivalent, seeking legal protection while criticizing state violence. She suggested that healing also needs to make room for those who cause harm, and that feminists should remain 'killjoys' (a phrase coined by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed) without repeating the injustices they seek to undo.

The Legal Framework and the Internal Committee

The WISCOMP team began with two points. First, feminism cannot make victimhood an identity for women, and **members of ICs need to keep questioning the binary of victim and perpetrator.** Second, in an educational setting, the approach to

redress cannot be punitive alone and should be educative for all stakeholders, including the members of the committee. Drawing on Spivak's phrase, the team said that law should work as a 'non-coercive rearrangement of desires'.

The framework. Sexual harassment is addressed through a civil redress mechanism under the POSH Act, 2013 and its Rules, and separately as a crime under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (earlier the Indian Penal Code). The procedures are different and need to be kept distinct. In universities and colleges, the Act must be read with the UGC (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2015, and the UGC's SAKSHAM report, which explains how the law is to be understood and applied in their context. It is important to take note of this report by the IC as a hierarchy exists between the Act and the regulations, the statutory mandate comes first, but many institutions overlook the regulations.

Unwelcome conduct and consent. The key word in the definition of sexual harassment is 'unwelcome', and the central concept is therefore consent. Legal definitions of consent are contractual, in the form of an unequivocal voluntary agreement, and such a model does not fit **sexual consent, which is 'messy', ambivalent and shaped by power** that people themselves may not recognize. The team, making a reference to Judith Butler's work on consent, psychoanalysis and law, observed that when a complaint is made, decision-makers often assess consent through stereotypes about how a 'good woman' behaves, such as how she dressed, whom she was friendly with, or how she acted after the incident. A dissenting opinion of a CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) Committee member in *M.S. v. The Philippines*[1] had cautioned against this tendency. The team distinguished sexual harassment from sexist speech, which must be resisted but is not necessarily sexual harassment, and noted that the **aim is not to 'sexually sanitize' workplaces and campuses,** and that sexual rights matter as much as sexual wrongs.

Teachers, students and power. The team discussed a Delhi High Court judgment concerning a professor who argued that his relationship with a student was consensual. The court described the teacher-student relationship as a sacred one that requires the teacher to maintain high moral ground[2]. The reason for teachers to keep away from relationships with students should not be morality but power: teachers grade students, and can show favouritism. Consent is not irrelevant in universities, as it is in laws on children, because students are young adults, and so the question of power has to be taken seriously.

Who can complain, and where? The Act speaks only of an aggrieved woman, while the UGC Regulations acknowledge that male and third-gender people in HEIs are also vulnerable. Some countries have gender-neutral laws, but a petition to extend the Supreme Court's guidelines to LGBTQIA+ persons in India was rejected. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 offers limited recourse. The team emphasized that a complaint should be taken on board by the IC irrespective of who makes it. The definition of workplace has been read broadly: in a case, the IC held that interactions by WhatsApp with students fell within the workplace since the teacher had shared his phone number, and the UGC Regulations extend to field visits, excursions and transport[3]. The UGC Regulations, however, are not uniformly followed across universities.

Composition of the IC. Citing the SAKSHAM report, the team said that the committee should be composed in such a manner so that power hierarchies are not replicated. There should be representation from all sections of the campus community and a principled and transparent basis for membership. The UGC Regulations require three student members, elected through a transparent democratic process, when a complaint involves students. The team noted a court decision that had rejected an inquiry because the presiding officer was not a faculty member[4].

Procedure. The procedure for complaints and investigation is as follows:

- Complaints must be in writing, within three months of the incident, extendable by another three months for reasons recorded in writing. A friend, colleague or associate can file a complaint if the aggrieved person cannot, and must state why.

- Conciliation may take place only before the inquiry, only at the request of the complainant, and cannot involve any monetary settlement. It should not be used to wrap up a matter quickly, and should be educative and transformative for both parties.

- There is no 'preliminary inquiry' to decide whether to accept a complaint, and every complaint must be accepted. A copy goes to the respondent within seven days, who has ten days to reply. Both parties are heard, and witnesses are examined. Cross-examination should be sensitive, for example through a woman appointed for the purpose or through a questionnaire.

- The **standard of proof is the preponderance of probabilities**, not proof beyond reasonable doubt. The inquiry must be completed within ninety days. Courts have taken a flexible view of this limit and have interpreted it in favour of the complainant. The administration must act on the recommendations within thirty days after issuing the respondent a show-cause notice.

- Due process must be followed for both parties, in accordance with the principles of natural justice. The team discussed a recent Supreme Court case in which an inquiry conducted 'in a tearing hurry' was set aside as unfair to the accused, and where the Court observed that the committee's anxiety to be fair to victims had ended up causing harm[5].

- The SAKSHAM report reads the recommendations of the IC as binding, and requires written reasons if the administration does not accept them, but some High Courts have treated them as mere recommendations, which could be problematic.

- The IC can recommend interim measures to ease the intimidating and hostile environment for a complainant, such as changing teaching responsibilities in mid-semester. Where the IC has not acted, relevant academic departments can take such steps themselves.

False and malicious complaints. The Act has a provision on false complaints, which reflects the stereotype that women must prove they are not lying. The team suggested reading it progressively, in recognition that falsely accused persons can suffer serious harm. Malicious intent has to be established through a separate inquiry, and an inability to substantiate a complaint, a misinterpretation of conduct, or an unpleasant encounter that does not amount to harassment does not make a complaint false. The team noted that if the same yardstick were to be applied to rape cases most would be labelled false as the conviction rate in rape cases is below one per cent as per National Crime Records Bureau. Confidentiality of both parties must be maintained, and a recent High Court decision calls for screening the identity of both – complainant and respondent[6].

> I was a witness in one of these cases when I was a student at the university. A close friend of mine had filed a complaint against a professor, and the case was heard by a retired High Court judge. For me, it took six years, with my entire PhD on hold, because I was the only witness left. All my classmates had gone abroad for various reasons.
>
> Then I became the victim. The professor started filing random complaints against me, like saying I had stolen things from his lab. But my entire department and my former batch mates kept writing emails whenever it was required.
>
> The evidence was basically the statements we had all written. The hearings were held every six months or a year, and each time they were just trying to verify that our statements matched, so we had to recreate everything every time we went in front of the judge. In the end I was the only witness left, because the girl who filed the complaint had gone abroad and could not keep coming back for the hearings
>
> *— A faculty member, recalling his experience as a student witness in a harassment case against a professor at the University of Delhi*

Questions and Discussion Points

Men, women and intimidation. Whether men can be harassed, and whether women in authority can intimidate, were also considered. 'Intimidating' in

the Act refers to an environment created by unwelcome sexual conduct, which prevents a person from doing her work, such as a research scholar who cannot present her work to a supervisor. An authoritarian supervisor who is not sexually inappropriate raises a grievance, not sexual harassment, and the college's separate grievance cell is meant for such cases. The law has its conundrums: as the definition stands, a male supervisor can create a hostile environment for a woman, but a woman supervisor cannot. However, concerns about misuse are raised more readily about laws for women, and reflect an assumption that women cannot be trusted.

Evidence. Where a conversation escalates from light to unwelcome and no one records it, the complaint must first be heard and accepted. In the absence of documentary evidence, the committee hears the respondent and witnesses such as classmates. It often does come down to whose word is believed, but in such situations the IC can also use the process to educate the parties and the class, and not only to recommend punitive action.

Complaints that fall between forums. A complaint that does not amount to sexual harassment should not be rejected outright by the IC, and should instead be referred to the grievance committee, since complainants, and students in particular, often do not know where to go. The pre-workshop survey carried out at the college showed that the visibility of the IC in the college is low, and there was a need for more workshops and sensitization sessions, in addition to posters around the campus.

Counting cases. The UGC's early gender audit parameters asked institutions for the number of complaints received and resolved, which led many to report zero cases to protect their reputation, and some women's colleges claimed that harassment did not arise in an all-women workspace. Institutions should instead ask how many complaints were addressed and whether an environment exists in which students and faculty come forward. The 2013 Act is more punitive and juridical; the UGC Regulations expand the parameters of justice, and SAKSHAM has the broadest vision, and it is for institutions, through the audit, to decide how they want to confine their actions to the minimum legal mandate or expand the definition of rights and justice.

Sex positivity. The labels 'sex-positive' and 'sex-negative' feminism have become caricatures of what they meant in the 1970s and 1980s, when they reflected a more complex view of sexuality in which desire carries both pleasure and danger. Used today, they split women into those who enjoy sex and those who complain of harassment, as if a complainant could not also enjoy sex, and this binary should be avoided.

When students bring conflicts to teachers. The first instinct of teachers should be to sensitize, listen and explain, and to support students if they then wish to approach the IC. A student observed how the prevalent bodies were not as approachable, accessible and safe. **Reporting systems need to account for the hesitation, fear, stigma and power dynamics that may prevent students from approaching institutional authorities** in the first place. Teachers who share their own vulnerabilities and mistaken assumptions build trust with students, and students coming to a teacher is itself a sign that something is being done right. Students may not know the members of the IC, and the college should pay closer attention to students' awareness.

Extending the awareness to support staff. A student observed that how a gender-sensitisation session on gender and the POSH Act, conducted for the college's support staff the previous year, was meant to introduce basic concepts of gender and workplace sexual harassment. Much of the three-hour session had to be spent establishing a foundational understanding of gender itself. Discussions on rape and sexual violence were met with assertions about "false cases" and questions about women's responsibility for their own victimisation, which pointed to a significant gap between institutional conversations on gender and the understanding of these issues among sections of the support staff. It was therefore felt that future gender audits and sensitisation programmes should not be restricted largely to students and faculty. Support staff, including security personnel and others who interact with students daily, should also be meaningfully included, and gender sensitisation should be understood as an institutional process rather than an intervention directed at a single section of the college community.

Working through Case Studies

To ground the discussion on redress mechanisms, participants had been given seven case studies and a few "conundrums" on sexual harassment, each of which they were asked to consider and respond to, including how they would respond and what the solution might be. The participants discussed one of these in detail. A male professor asked a female student to stay back in the laboratory late in the evening and offered to drop her home, insisting when she hesitated. During the drive, he placed his hand on her thigh for a few minutes while continuing to discuss her lab work and grades. She told a classmate that night but felt powerless to complain against her supervisor and would rather let it go.

The discussion on the case centred on how WDC or IC should engage more and more students as they often hesitate to approach the authorities to report, and on the need for such bodies to make themselves sensitive to cases of this kind. The professor's continued talk of lab work and grades during the incident showed the power he held over the student. It was observed that he may well not have realised that his behaviour amounted to harassment, so addressing such cases involves tackling unconscious bias and human fragility, rather than relying on punishment alone. **Zero tolerance was described as something that has to be worked on through mutually supportive processes**, extending beyond what is formally specified to the subtler behaviours. Participants described an annual gender-sensitisation session for first-year students on what is and is not acceptable, but a single session is not enough since sensitisation has to be a continuing conversation at different levels, kept alive through creative means every day. The POSH Act was described as providing only the "bare bones", with gaps that include the fact that a man cannot file a complaint, which is a particular problem for people with other sexual identities. It was emphasised that these gaps should not stop institutions from opening conversations, since not everything can be dealt with punitively, and that the WDC has to give the framework its substance through continuous engagement.

Dr. Gopinath concluded that universities are not typical workplaces: they are places for restorative and not only retributive justice, where the **dignity of both parties needs to be safeguarded,** which is why the terms 'complainant' and 'respondent' are used rather than 'victim' and 'perpetrator'. IC members, she said, who sit on the committee should educate themselves and become mindful of their own power in the system. The law, the UGC Regulations and the SAKSHAM report should be read together for a holistic approach to addressing sexual harassment on campuses.

About the Cases

[1] **M.S. v. The Philippines (CEDAW Committee, 2014).** A senior employee of a telecommunications company alleged sexual harassment by the company's Chief Operating Officer and, after she resigned, lost her unfair dismissal case when the Supreme Court of the Philippines, applying a 'common human experience' test, found her account not credible. She complained to the CEDAW Committee that this reasoning rested on gender stereotypes. The Committee declared the communication inadmissible as insufficiently substantiated, but in a dissenting opinion, Committee member Patricia Schulz found gender stereotyping in the judgment, including the assumption that all women respond to assault in the same way.

[2] **Prof. Ajay Tiwari v. University of Delhi (Delhi High Court, 2023).** In 2008, an M.Phil student in the University of Delhi's Hindi Department complained of sexual harassment by a professor of the department, and the university's Executive Council compulsorily retired him in 2011. A Single Judge dismissed his writ petition in 2019, and a Division Bench dismissed his appeal in 2023, upholding the penalty. The Court described the teacher-student relationship as a 'sacred one' and held that the existence or otherwise of consent on the part of the other party 'paled into insignificance'.

[3] **Dr. Amit Kumar v. University of Delhi (Delhi High Court, 2025).** In February 2018, four students alleged sexually suggestive messages sent through WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger by an Assistant Professor of Political Science. The Internal Committee found all four charges proved and recommended compulsory retirement and ₹ 10,000 compensation to each complainant. The teacher argued that the chats took place on social media, outside any 'workplace', and the Committee held that since he had shared his phone number with students, interactions on phone media such as WhatsApp fell within the definition of workplace. The High Court dismissed his writ petition, and the compulsory retirement was not disturbed.

[4] **Abhilash T. v. Anamika Prajin (Kerala High Court, 2024).** Following sexual harassment complaints by B.A. Political Science students, the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) found the allegations unproven and recommended action against the complainants, leading the Principal to issue show-cause notices barring them from campus. The students challenged these actions in a writ petition, and the Kerala High Court quashed the ICC's report due to procedural infirmities, specifically because the Presiding Officer was an advocate rather than a faculty member and ordered the ICC to be reconstituted strictly in accordance with UGC Regulations, 2015.

[5] **Aureliano Fernandes v. State of Goa (Supreme Court of India, 2023).** Addressing seventeen sexual harassment complaints against an Assistant Professor, the inquiry committee concluded its entire proceedings in a "whirlwind" 39 days while denying the appellant reasonable time to participate. The Supreme Court set aside the inquiry and subsequent termination, observing that in its keen anxiety to be fair to victims and wrap up complaints expeditiously, the committee acted with undue haste and severely compromised procedural fairness and natural justice.

[6] **The Research Scholar v. Research Guide/Professor (Madras High Court, 2024).** In a case involving allegations of harassment within an educational institution, the Madras High Court stressed the critical need to preserve the dignity and confidentiality of all parties in judicial proceedings. The Court urged the formulation of Standard Operating Protocols to screen and mask the identities of not just victims of sexual, emotional, and mental harassment, but also alleged perpetrators and institutional names, noting that unproven allegations inflict a torturous stigma that is nearly impossible to erase.

Gender Audit at Sri Venkateswara College: Next Steps

The concluding session of the workshop foregrounded prioritization of concerns and planning action. Its purpose, Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath explained, was to initiate a process through which the college community would decide collectively and collaboratively the pathway it wishes to take to carry out its own Gender Audit. The session included an overview of the six components of the audit, a presentation on time use by Seema Kakran, examples of Gender Audit plans from other campuses shared by Shilpi Shabdita, and group work to prioritize the issues that the college would take forward.

Dr. Gopinath restated what a Gender Audit is and is not:

- **A part of a larger social audit.** It is a process through which an institution reflects on its own processes, culture, vision and goals, and decides which roads to take, how far to go, how sustainable initiatives are likely to be, and how to generate



Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, Founder-Director, WISCOMP, reinstating what a Gender Audit is.

human and financial resources for ensuring inclusion and justice for everyone on campus.

- **Not an external audit.** Unlike a financial audit in which people from outside 'paratroop in' and award grades, it turns the searchlight inward, because nobody is better placed than the community itself to identify its silences, gaps, vulnerabilities and aspirations.
- **Owned by the institution.** It must be crafted and nurtured by the institution, keeping its history, context, student and faculty demography, capacities and vision in mind. India's higher education space is heterogeneous, and pluralism has to be the approaches are desirable.
- **Uniquely possible in higher education.** HEIs send signals to society from a space of integrity and intention and not of commerce, and, with women making up roughly half of the students, they are the sector with the best numeric record on inclusion, and therefore a good place for this work to begin. HEIs also enable continuous conversations on everyday contexts.

Myths about Gender Audits

She shared myths that recur with regard to gender audits at HEIs:

- **That gender audits benefit only women.** They also benefit sexual minorities and men, and address discrimination across intersections of caste, class, region and religion. Women from different communities face different intensity of harassment, some structural and others overt. Workshops on masculinity often begin with resistance by men who feel that a discussion of sexual harassment is an assault on their masculinity, and this calls for gradual transformation.
- **That an audit is about counting cases of sexual harassment.** The UGC's framing of gender audits in terms of the number of cases of sexual harassment has led institutions to report zero cases, since to report otherwise means washing dirty linen in public.
- **That all-women's colleges are naturally gender-sensitive.** WISCOMP, in its work on various campuses over the years, has found that women administrators can replicate patriarchal structures of power and exclusion in women's colleges.
- **That high literacy and education mean gender-just processes.** She recalled campuses in states with highly educated populations where patriarchal practices are deep rooted. In some institutions there is separate seating for men and women, differential library hours, and student union leaders harassing women students.
- **That gender is the business of the WDC and IC alone.** The work extends to curricula, administrative practices, brochures and the other pillars of the audit. It must be owned by teachers, students, non-teaching staff, principals and senior management, and become reflexive. Like yoga, she said, its benefit lies in the effect on how one thinks, and behaves and not in a ritual performed for ten minutes a day or in the case of gender audit a one-time assessment that ends with preparation of a report.

She also spoke of the concerns of students, including intimate partner violence and revenge after break-ups, anxiety about body image, and the absence of anyone with whom young women feel comfortable to talk, and asked participants to think about how these concerns are addressed through counselling and mentoring. Framing the issues with sensitivity and providing emotional support along with infrastructure becomes really important.

The Six Components: Questions for the Participants

Dr. Gopinath walked participants through the six components of the Gender Audit, and posed questions that could help the college identify which issues were relevant for their campus and needed to be prioritized. The components are not watertight and overlap. The main questions were as follows:

- **Organizational Structure and Culture:** Are there sufficient budgetary allocations for gender justice programs? Do adequate numbers of women serve on committees, especially those that allocate resources? Are anti-ragging practices inclusive of Sexual Orientation and Gender

Identity? Who is assigned which tasks at events, and does the sexual division of labour, in which women present bouquets and men manage the sound system, reinforce stereotypes? Are there crèche and nursing facilities for mothers and fathers? In hostels, do rules on timings, dress code and mobile phones differ by gender? She suggested that hostel heads of residence not be called 'wardens', a term that suggests custody and control. Student representation need not mean only elections, and can take other democratic forms. She underscored that ideas must be institutionalized so that they survive changes in leadership, and that this requires democratic buy-in from the whole community.

- **Administrative Practices:** How is faculty workload, time and the burden of care distributed? What support is provided for female faculty to balance their research work with their care work responsibilities at home? Which faculty is taking the bigger responsibility of mentoring and student care versus teaching? Are timetable allocations sensitive to parenting needs? Are meetings scheduled at times which exclude those with care responsibilities? Are women disproportionately represented among part-time and ad hoc faculty? She suggested that the audit be an occasion to move from a uniform yardstick of fairness to 'from each according to ability, to each according to need', keeping in view career stage and personal circumstances, and communicating with colleagues with empathy and not suspicion of favouritism. She also called for collegial acknowledgement of colleagues who do additional work, and for men to share the work of caregiving, mentoring and trauma healing.

- **Curriculum, formal and informal:** What texts are included, and do STEM subjects include the contributions of women scientists? Are gender studies given space and status? What values are transmitted in the classroom outside the syllabus, and are evaluation methods diverse, given that students come with different abilities and backgrounds? She noted that spaces for interactive conversation such as those in tutorials are shrinking for both students and teachers alike due to extra courses and reduced number of lectures and tutorials, and urged teachers to use whatever autonomy they have to move beyond formal curriculum in classrooms and to trust their colleagues.

- **Campus Infrastructure and Surrounding Public Space:** Are some spaces within the campus gendered or unsafe for the campus community, especially female faculty and students, to access? How is safety, lighting, transport and commuting provisions assessed, and can a safety audit be undertaken? Are toilets for trans persons available on campus and specially demarcated? Which departments/centres/offices are large and which are small? Are there sufficient ramps, Braille books, and I.T. facilities available for the differently-abled? The infrastructure does not include merely building structures and facilities but also require periodic assessment whether these facilities are accommodative, sufficient, and equally accessible to all stakeholders of the institute.

- **Media and communication.** What values do the website, brochure, outreach material, and social media of the college convey? Do gender programs and events feature prominently on these? Whose images and voices usually feature on them? Is information on the purpose and functioning of the Internal Committee on sexual harassment optimally communicated to everyone on the campus along with the names and numbers of its members, given that the pre-workshop survey pointed to low awareness of the IC and its members in the college community? Is signage with emergency helpline numbers to be used in the events of violence or sexual harassment adequately displayed around the campus? Language and communication used for formal communication, with the outside world as well as within the campus, is also vulnerable to perpetuating exclusion and inequality, leading to cultural violence that often goes unnoticed. Thinking along this parameter also draws attention to the values foregrounded in an institution's vision and mission and if they, along with the commitment to gender equality, are reflected clearly.

- **Student life and professional development.** How are gender and equity factored into co-

curricular activities and field trips? Is there a gender balance in the students' access to mentoring and support for career opportunities across disciplines? When planning off-campus field trips and activities, what considerations are taken into account? What factors impact the participation of female students in off-campus programs? Is there a process whereby campus recruiters are filtered for the gender sensitive/inclusive policies of their organizations? A gender-just and safe working environment for women, she said, matters as much as the salary package offered by the recruiters. As institutes have significant impact on futures and behaviour of its students, aspects of campus experience such as student interactions through representative bodies, participation in clubs and societies, professional development opportunities, and counselling are important questions for a Gender Audit.

Time Use

Seema Kakran introduced the concept of time use, which is central to understanding organizational culture and administrative practices. She drew on the 24-hour time-use sheets that participants had filled in after the first session. Time-use analysis helps unpack the sexual division of labour at home and at work, and shows how gender relations are organized within families and social structures and through the interplay between gender, the market and the family.

Productive and reproductive work. Productive work is paid work counted by economists in the GDP, while reproductive or care work is unpaid work in the family and community that sustains people and institutions. Because women do most of the care work, they have less time for paid employment. India's female labour force participation fell to around 20 per cent in 2018 and has since risen to about 34 per cent, against about 77 per cent for men.



Seema Kakran, Deputy Director, WISCOMP, presenting her analysis of time-use sheets filled by the faculty members.

National data. India's time use survey, first conducted in 2019 and most recently in 2024, found that women spend far more time on unpaid domestic work than men (4 hours 49 minutes a day as against 1 hour 28 minutes) and on caring for household members (2 hours 17 minutes as against 1 hour 15 minutes), while men spend more time in paid work. **Time use is also shaped by class, age and social location.** Families with means can outsource care work, often to other women, while unpaid work tends to fall for women and rise for men as they age.

What the college's time-use sheets showed. Because the responses were not collected from a representative sample, the WISCOMP team noted that trends could not be generalized to the college. However, some observations could be made about gendered patterns of time use. Among faculty with children, men reported between zero and one and a half hours of care work a day, and some fathers did not mention their children at all. Married women reported between two hours forty-five minutes and more than seven and a half hours. Men reported up to four hours of leisure. A senior woman faculty member with grown children reported three hours fifteen minutes, while women with young children reported almost none, with one mentioning that her only leisure was driving to work and back. Women tended to multitask, reading the newspaper while cooking or buying groceries on the way home from college.

Time poverty and its consequences. Because household work and childcare fall largely on women, along with their professional work, they suffer from time poverty. It affects their health, sleep, exercise, career advancement and income. More broadly at a societal level, time poverty pushes women into lower-paying and more precarious work and contributes to the gender pay gap. Dr. Gopinath added that women also "time loop", picking up vegetables or a relative's medicines on the way to college, while a man goes straight from home to office. She noted that time poverty also means women turn out research papers at a lower rate, which is never factored into assessments. Women also carry a heavier share of emotional labour. Sleep and rest then become gendered.

Implications for institutions. "Gender-neutral" policies make these patterns invisible and ignore the double burden of women faculty and students. Time-use analysis can show which faculty have leisure for self-development such as research, grant applications and publications, who invests more in mentoring, counselling and volunteering, and which students have time for student organizations, volunteering and research assignments, which can also affect their grades. It can also show how patterns differ across phases of life, such as between younger and older faculty, married and single staff, and those with children or elderly dependants. Institutions also need to ask who does the work that keeps them functioning, such as curriculum design, assessment, co-curricular activities, mentoring and committee service, and whether that work is recognized. On one campus, meetings scheduled late in the afternoon had excluded women from committees that allocated resources, and changing the timings led to more representation and better outcomes. As Seema put it, if half the population is kept out, there are half as many solutions.

> A lot needs to be rectified in the world for a woman to be able to sit on a chair on her porch with her feet up on the table, reading a newspaper, sipping her morning tea: enough time, less labour, less judgment and more mind space for encouraging self-actualisation.
>
> *— Surabhi Yadav, Creator of Basanti: Women at Leisure, as quoted by Seema Kakran*

Data-driven Change and Best Practices from Other Campuses

As the participants moved from the Prioritization Phase of the Gender Audit process to the Consolidation Phase, Shilpi Shabdita foregrounded the need to evolve a Gender Audit framework with research questions and data collection instruments around the prioritized gender issues on campus. She spoke of the importance of a data-driven approach when addressing gender inequality. Data helps dispel myths, challenges assumptions such as the belief that all-women's colleges are 'naturally' gender-just, builds a common vocabulary between senior management and the wider campus community, and strengthens the institution's credibility before accreditation and review committees. She shared a range of instruments that campuses have used for collecting data to make informed decisions about changes in policies and practices:



Shilpi Shabdita, Assistant Director, WISCOMP, sharing best practices for gender justice from other campuses.

- document analysis of policies, handbooks, orientation material, annual reports, formal curriculum and codes of conduct
- media analysis of websites and social media handles
- interviews and focus group discussions; time-use surveys
- participant observation
- questionnaires

She shared three examples from HEIs that WISCOMP had previously worked with to demonstrate both best practices and some challenges while evolving a Gender Audit framework:

- **Professional development of women faculty.** At an all-women's college, situated in a context in Punjab, where women live in joint families, negotiate traditional gendered care responsibilities, and often need family permission to travel, the group prioritized the challenges that female faculty face in professional development. A 12-question online questionnaire was designed and analyzed to be completed within a two-month timeline. The questions asked, over five years, how many papers the faculty had presented and published, how many refresher courses they had attended, how often they had visited libraries outside the institution, what familial or professional constraints they face, whether they had sought support for research, where they see themselves in five years, and what support they desired from the senior management for their professional development and academic growth.

- **Access to toilets.** At a denominational college in Kerala, where female students often arrived late or left classes early and a large number of cases of urinary tract infections were reported, students and faculty prioritized access to sanitation as part of the Gender Audit. Students designed a questionnaire, held focus group discussions and used stopwatches to record the patterns of time spent in queues outside the toilets. The findings led the senior management to agree to build additional facilities and to install mobile toilets as an interim arrangement to support the health and well-being of the students. The Audit process also had several unintended results, showing how simply participating in a Gender Audit process can influence changes in the institutional ethos. The faculty realized they had very little awareness about SOGI, and in response the college organized lectures on LGBTQIA+ rights, training in queer-affirmative counselling for college counsellors, partnered with local NGOs to organize night walks and a pride seminar with prominent regional activists and a film festival and national seminar on gender and representation of queer communities in Indian cinema with the Women in Cinema Collective.
- **A scope that was too large.** A partner all-women's institute set out to analyse college and university websites of twenty same-sex colleges and co-educational colleges as a sample to get insights into how gendered the Media and Communication strategies of their own institute were, within three months. Post the workshop, the core team realized that they had set an unachievable target for itself as the scope of research was too broad and beyond their capacity in terms of resources and the time they could devote. They then decided to limit the content analysis to their own website and take it up only after the team gains more experience and have more doable research designs. She stressed that the college should be realistic about timeline, finances, teaching commitments and institutional priorities, and that learnings from a first audit can feed into subsequent ones.

Group Priorities

When an institution initiates a Gender Audit process, it becomes important to watch for signs of transformation along the way. The process is a constantly evolving work-in-progress that expands its own mandate as it goes, makes new discoveries and attempts to push the envelope on gender justice. The WISCOMP team shared **signs of transformation** that had been witnessed at various institutions, both all-women's and co-educational, categorised under the six parameters of the Gender Audit. Going back to their respective groups, participants worked on 'signs of transformation' cards for each component, noting what the college has already achieved, what needs addressing, and which issue to prioritise, using three questions: why the issue matters, whether it is doable, and what resources it would need. Each group recorded its immediate priority, with a checklist for later development into research questions, data collection methods and timelines. The following priorities were shared during the plenary:

Group 1: Organizational Structure and Culture

- **Rethink ways on how approaching the administration** for redress mechanisms by both faculty and students can be **simplified and made less intimidating**.
- **Revise timetables to be sensitive to needs of faculty with children**.

Group 2: Administrative Practices

- **A workshop on the POSH Act for IC members,** using the dedicated funding for gender sensitization that the college now has.
- **Regular gender sensitization and sexual harassment workshops for students,** and a short survey via a Google Form to find out how many



S. Krishnakumar, Bursar, SVC, sharing his reflection and suggestions for the college and faculty members.

students know that the college has an IC and understand what it does, with departmental coordinators asked to encourage responses so that the sample is representative.

Group 3: Curriculum

- **Introduction of short courses for students on gender**, gender-based violence and relevant themes, constitution of **gender forum** in each department and organization of departmental seminars to raise awareness on these mechanisms.

Group 4: Campus Infrastructure and Surrounding Public Spaces

- **Crèche facility and construction of feeding rooms** for the faculty, along with a refrigerator to store breast milk, and continue practices like using the Head of Residence's office by faculty to breast feed infants since the crèche facility was not feasible in the immediately.

Group 5: Media and Communications

- **Display women scholars on department notice boards** who have made significant contributions to the respective disciplines, encouraging periodic classroom discussions on the same.
- **More visibility of IC and Grievance Cell on college's website,** to spread awareness among students and faculty.

Group 6: Student Life and Professional Development

- **Acquaint students about existing policies on Sexual Harassment** and support systems like the mentor-mentee system through sessions and during department orientations.

A participant suggested that sanitary napkins be kept accessible on a shelf in washrooms and the college health centre and not only in vending machines. Extending awareness on gender-based violence and unconscious biases beyond the University, he emphasized that participants also see how the power dynamics pan out in their personal lives, including their relationship with the domestic helps that they employ.

In conclusion, Dr. Gopinath stressed how a need is being felt by all groups on enhancing a zero tolerance policy on sexual harassment and gender sensitization on campus. With the methodologies, infrastructural and curriculum priorities already spelled out, the focus should now be on how to not only get started but also sustain the process over time, starting by eliciting information from all stakeholders on the prioritized concerns.



Glimpses of participant groups discussing areas to prioritize to evolve a Gender Audit framework.