

#### **Subtheme 4: Interface between Action and Research Reflecting on the sub-theme abstracts**

##### **Defining Action Research**

Action research is known by many other names, including participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipator research, action learning, and contextual action research, but all are variations on a theme. Put simply, action research is “learning and theorising by doing”. Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus, there is a commitment at various levels in action research to theorize, study a system in collaboration with its members and concurrently to plan for a change in a mutually agreed direction.

The most common usage of action research has been in the context of making focused efforts to *improve practice*. It has gained currency among practitioners who look at research as a problem-solving mechanism. It has also been used as a tool for programme or project evaluations for mid-term corrections.

Kurt Lewin, formerly professor at MIT, first coined the term “action research” in the mid 1940s. He described action research as “a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action” that uses, “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action”.

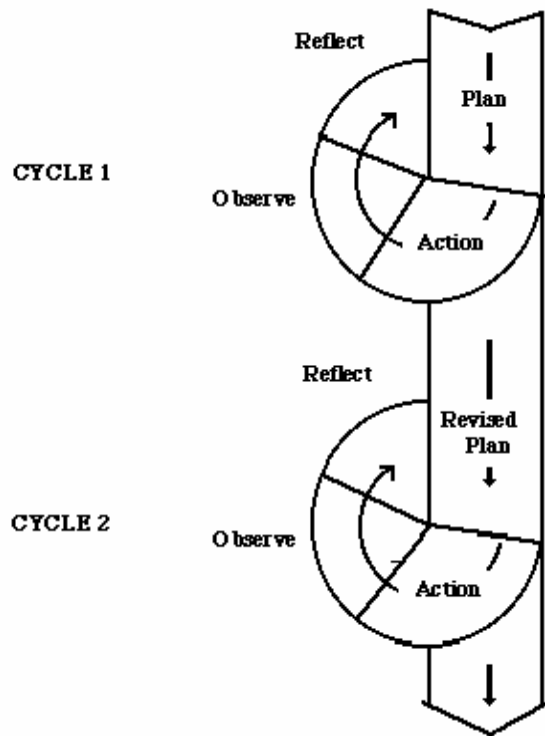
However action research is not only this and this has been amply proved by its various uses across disciplines and primarily amongst women’s studies. Its most important contribution from the point of view of the feminist studies has been the fact that it has challenged the notion that research is the prerogative of academics. Four common characteristics of action research can be seen across the wide body of literature around action research. These are

- an action and change orientation;
- a problem focus;
- an “organic” process involving systematic and sometimes iterative stages; and
- Collaboration among participants [Peters and Robinson, 1984].

Therefore the basic derivations of this definition are that one, it is a multi-disciplinary method--we must here remember that women/gender studies is itself positioned at the intermingling of several discourses and is uniquely multi disciplinary; second the process is an on going, repeated but a progressing one.

That is the researcher/practioner has to move to and from between the research laboratories/libraries and sites of real fieldwork continuously and the end of every previous cycle means the beginning of yet another. In fact this is exactly what the several fascinating abstracts we received have all been pointing towards unanimously.

Stephen Kemmis has developed a simple model of the cyclical nature of the typical action research process (Figure 1). Each cycle has four steps: plan, act, observe, and reflect.



### **Feminist Action Research: A reflection on the abstracts**

As the website of the women's studies center of SNTD states the first women's study centre of SNTD was not constituted as a teaching department. It realized that the growth of the discipline could only be achieved through the translation of research findings into the classrooms. The Centre sought to develop various Women's Studies courses as well as teaching /learning material accordingly.

We think action research has been the needed tool as far as women's studies or feminists movement or women's movements is concerned. When women's movements questioned the paradigm of science and andocentric perspective of history, the need to compile, observe, study, research and understand plural ways of seeing became the foundation of women's studies. And so action-research became the important intrinsic, inclusive aspect of women's studies.

And here we are trying to put down the varied abstracts we received for this sub theme to weave them as a matrix for these coming two days. The sub theme has received the most diverse and rich set of abstracts, which increasingly highlight the need to look beyond a sectoral understanding of women's issues.

### **Organisation of the sessions**

We have tried to make the subgroups within these sub-theme based on women as citizens.

In a democratic country where our constitution believes in equality and fundamental rights, the cultural and social aspects play a vital role in denying these citizenship rights to women. Action research for us should address some of these shortcomings in our context.

We have organized our sessions in *six* broad sessions, which undeniably do overlap in terms of the action research interface. The categorization therefore is based on different areas in women's studies.

**Session 1** deals broadly with issues of citizenship in situations of disaster and political instability;

**Session 2** looks at the area, which broadly covers the arena of health and reproductive rights. Women's reproductive rights were never at the forefront in India due to the overwhelming concern over issues of over population and world politics of population control. However women's health, women's abortion rights and control over fertility were some of the issues raised in the Indian context and we would like to explore these in this session of reproductive rights.

**Session 3** looks at new ways in which action research has contributed to the construction of gender. Construction of sexuality became an issue because of the overemphasis on fertility control and so issues related with sex work, male sexuality have got explored in a major way after fear of HIV/AIDS.

**Session 4** deals with women's work and access to natural resources both in the rural and urban context of organized and unorganized workers.

**Session 5** looks at violence in the urban and rural context both in the domestic and public arena. Violence against women at domestic as well as public sphere has been an issue which never could get addressed adequately and it has been an issue of safety and existence of women.

**Session 6** is the final session, which looks at alternative forms of expression. Research and action have often been looked at in a conventional way even in feminist research, the abstracts in this session look at alternative forms of expression where use of media and cultural forms have been used.

As mentioned earlier there are overlaps as can be seen particularly within the session on violence has no boundaries and the session on alternate forms of expression.

### **Overview of the papers**

In the first session we would address the issue of citizenship and struggles in exercising the fundamental rights which includes not only ownership and access to resources but also issues of peace in most volatile situations. The abstract of the North-east looks at the question of denial of citizenship and the resultant political instability. In this context it looks at the effort made by Naga mothers for peace building. In case of the natural disasters or any calamity the denial of women's fundamental rights in normal circumstances comes as an added burden on women and that has been explored in case of tsunami.

The abstract on peace looks at the Muslim women's question in the post 2002 Gujarat scenario. Since the partition of the country the issue of Muslim minorities and that of Muslim women has remained unresolved. The issue is complicated at various levels- one is the institutionalized religion and its need to keep people together by providing the so called security of the religion. This is done by putting more control over the most vulnerable groups or making everyone to be dependent on the religion. In post genocidal attacks on the community where the control over women is already at stake due to excessive and sexual attacks on women by the majority community to teach the Muslim men the lesson and also assuring that no Muslim progeny flourishes in the region. Women have been losing and gaining their rights and this constant struggles and efforts with its theoretical base has been addressed.

The abstracts in this section look at women's actions informed by research in these situations where there is constant state of unrest either through political compulsions or through natural disasters

Several abstracts look at women's work, their access to resources and here the processes where academicians and the grassroots workers have come together to understand the question and to advocate for change. These abstracts look at processes, limits and strengths of such collaborations. They provide a great learning ground for building an interface between action and research, by recognising the need for complementarity

The abstract on land rights of women needs to be seen as part of an iterative process within the Sanghatana as well as a concerted effort to build a particular identity of a woman as sharing work equally or more in the farm and at home. It looks at land rights and the complicated dynamics of exercising this right where the need was felt to develop sound academic tools to deal with the complexities of reality so that one could come out with actions which has strong bearing in research.

Another abstract looks at the question of devdasis or women given away to the goddesses who often are force-led into sex work. It narrates how construction of the devdasi shaped the demands and articulation of a problem within the movements. It narrates how a feminist understanding led to a different set of demands and articulation emerging.

Abstract on women and work also look at comparative situations of the early industrial period and how powerful studies and actions combined to set up trade unions and point to a need for developing a similar understanding of the new globalisation challenges that can lead to organising of women.

There is a whole set of papers which deal with sexuality and gender: here again the different sub sets of sexuality emerge: dominant images of sexuality, sexuality and reproduction, state, reproduction and gender, dominant, (un) acceptable sexual orientations and practices--and yet in the words of one of the presenters there is an inherent need to "take theoretical tools to field and then combining it with action led feedback resulting in 'new-research' findings. One of the abstracts on construction of masculinities shows how the use of feminist methodology to understand the perceptions of young men and women led to new insights related to a presence of multiple masculinities and feminities and how they compliment in producing unequal power relations.

There are a few abstracts on health and sexuality which look at the need for combining innovative ways of looking at a problem. The campaign for hazardous contraceptives and even abortion rights that women need contraceptives which are safe and which would allow them the sense of empowerment. Here action is not merely a reaction to corrosive forces alone. A feminist understanding of the biological evolution which poses alternative which more biologically rooted in nature is that of co-existence and plentitude and not as the biological evolution as understood by social sciences which is based on scarcity and competition.

A few set of abstracts look on alternative forms of expression where teaching is seen as a form of action research and how the changing socio-political contexts force a change in methods and content of teaching. Similarly new forms of expression using theatre as a form of activism, media campaigns in the context of violence against women, use of women's courts and understanding perceptions of girl children highlight the need for use of different forms of studies. While doing so papers have also looked at research dilemmas and questions of ethics.

A few abstracts deal with the development of new tools of research needed to construct new identities of the marginalised. In the study of urban spaces in Delhi the group took an initiative to develop new concepts in the safety index concept which looked at urban safety

through a gender lens. Similarly the stigma index is a new tool in the area of understanding forms of marginalisation of sex workers.

All these varied abstracts in urban spaces, in conflicts and disaster situations, and their resultant struggle for rights, liberty, articulation of citizenships issues from within these spaces and a space where not only their voice be heard but becomes a part of the institutionalized discourse also harp on the above line of thinking and actions. There is a need to understanding the process, its continued relevance and of research leading to action, giving voice and bargaining power to the concerned individuals and groups. This also leads to the identification of the lesser researched area which simultaneously translates as those which have received minimal to no assistance from the concerned agencies. Like the case of deserted women, women in development. Also the solutions that are suggested and the means of building these through various techniques and innovative literature-like theater etc-- is in itself a pointer towards the new avatar that action-research needs to take in order to accommodate and address and truly fulfill its claims to "comparative research".

### **Final Comments**

While the subject and the issues with which these abstracts have engaged are varied and would confuse one at first glance in terms of their common linkages however, the problems they raise, the solutions they seek to offer, the engagements they desire to make- point towards a common understanding of action-research. Women's actions emerging from research are innovative and constructive in the sense they illustrate the desire which is two ways. The action is to demand for freedom and research based action shows or helps them to find the ways of constructing a new world. This also calls for freedom. These innovative actions also help research to evolve and go beyond dogma. But we also need to be a bit cautious about how action research is used in today's NGO parlance. As part of this there is a large body of research which is coming out as a response to the international discourse introduced by donor agencies.

This has of course contributed to problem solving of issues of immediate concerns, but it also runs the risk of short term planning which often has reduced the feminist cause to mere sectoral issues. As serious feminist action researchers we need to keep a bearing of this and see how action research does not remain a mere tool for problem solving in a sectoral manner, but rather becomes a process for transformative politics. The challenges it is posing due to globalisation and structural adjustment programmes and market economy should be the driving force behind the action research in present situation. The reforms and actions taken over the years needs to be judged on the basis of women's fundamental rights as citizen and their changed status and the parameters of their empowerment are rooted in their non discriminatory existence.

We are at a juncture where there is need for research that would lead to serious theorising that will contribute to action, but not through a fragmented understanding of gender relations. We need to look at synergies between empirical and theoretical work where a coming together of practitioners and academics becomes critical.