

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0235

Methodological reflections from an interdisciplinary, international collaborative research project on teaching and learning in higher education: Experiences, challenges and opportunities for a feminist research team

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**Research Domain:** International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

**Abstract:**

*This presentation will share insights from experiences working on a collaborative international project as an interdisciplinary team of feminist researchers from five different countries and from subject areas that spanned from creative writing to the natural sciences. We brought to this project diverse understandings and embodied experiences contextualised by multiple facets of our identities. While we embrace the potential of such epistemic instability (Lather 2007) to disrupt and enrich research assumptions, processes and hierarchies; this inevitably engenders challenging and sometimes uncomfortable spaces along the research journey. Here we consider experiences and effects of material and ideological differences including those around project resources, wider life contexts, and contextualised understandings and priorities around gender and feminism. We draw from project team reflections from targeted focus group discussion, alongside our wider data collection from higher education staff and students.*

**Paper:**

Here we share insights from the journey of seeking to carry out gender-focused higher education (HE) research in equitable ways, as an international, interdisciplinary team of feminist academics. We draw upon experiences from ongoing research exploring and promoting gender-aware curriculum and pedagogy in HE across sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Gender on the Higher Education Learning Agenda Internationally (GCRF 2021a) includes research teams at universities in India, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Nigeria and the United Kingdom. The research is funded under the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF 2021b), with interdisciplinarity and collaboration as central principles. Within each country context, academic research teams made up of experienced academics and research assistants have led surveys and interviews with university staff and students around experiences and perspectives relating to gender awareness in teaching content and approach. This data has been analysed thematically (Morris et al. 2021) by teams in each country through a collaborative process involving meeting together online to review data and agree themes. Insights will feed into collaborative development of a suite of freely-available resources in multiple languages to include reports, gender audit tools, and online and in-person workshops.

An increasing body of methodological writing in the social sciences is now devoted to the need to democratise research processes including for researchers to build rapport and form equitable

relationships with participants (Hinton-Smith and Seal 2018; Behar & Gordon, 1995, Olesen, 2011). Feminist research has been moving towards collaborative research as a means to more responsibly incorporate and represent a diverse range of participants' voices. However alongside the growth of collaborative research projects within feminist research are critiques illuminating the limitations in collaborative methodologies which attempt to achieve feminist goals (Scantlebury & LeVan, 2006). There remains a need for more work to explore the dynamics by which these ambitions play out within research teams. There is a danger that researchers may be drawn to downplay and gloss over the inequities within their own projects as part of demonstrating their success at equitable practice, rather than taking the riskier route of embracing the opportunity to acknowledge tensions and subject them to interrogation in pursuit of more equitable future practice.

As a feminist team we set out with the goal of working together in equitable ways. However, the lived reality of undertaking research in alignment with feminist principles is a tightrope. Our international team experience has continued to unearth multiple points of difference that traverse our diverse material and ideological standpoints. These have included access to technological hardware, software and internet connectivity (Brewer 2015); timely payment for project work; time, work and family pressures; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in different countries; and divergent feminist beliefs and gender terminology understandings (Temple 2002; Temple & Edwards 2002). Our perspective is to embrace unstable epistemologies and their potential to interrogate power structures (Lather, 2007). We draw upon theories of intersectionality to explore the possibilities of diverse and divergent flows of power and to help us explore categories of difference including ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, university rank, place and indigeneity (Crenshaw 1989; Mohanty 1986).

We set out to learn through interrogating our own understandings alongside analysing our participant data (Hinton-Smith et al. 2021). As we work together to co-produce transferable insights, our increasing sensitisation to the politics of inequalities within our feminist team, engenders increasing focus on research process, and the way in which colonial inequalities persist in higher education relationships (Bhambra et al., 2018). Our personal reflections and reflexive group discussions around these have enriched our insights from data collected from our participants. We problematise ideals of collaborative feminist research, and potential to resist neo-colonial forms of knowledge production made possible through international research.

The spaces and power structures of collaborative research remain a critical site for the interrogation of feminist postcolonial knowledge making (Chowdhury et al. 2016). There is a need for more research which explores what collaboration can mean (Bassett, 2012), how it is executed and its consequences (Rhee, 2013). We see it as vital to make explicit the negotiation of power dynamics between differently positioned researchers in a collaborative project, acknowledging differing privileges of positionality (McGregor et al., 2014; Hinton-Smith et al., 2017). Given that a feminist research ethic is concerned with the ways in which social, political, and economic actions are interrelated with others' actions and lives, we argue for the need for international feminist research to allocate time for developing understandings of the intersectional elements of our identities and multiple roles we carry.

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