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The Academic and Political Project of Women's Studies: (Im)Possibilities of Transformation in Higher Education

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Abstract:

The institutionalization of Women's Studies in Indian universities has been a step towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goal of gender equality. Set against the backdrop of complex discourse on gender justice, the paper draws from a mixed method study of universities in India and South Africa conducted in 2019. I study the insider perspectives of the academic staff of Women's Studies Centres (WSC) in four higher education institutions in India to point to the ambiguities and messiness of endeavors to achieve gender equality. The paper examines how the politico-academic project of Women's Studies with a feminist vision creates (im)possible conditions of transforming HE. From my standpoint as an academic located in WSC, I use feminist methodology of reflexive openness and self-criticality to engage with the problematic of how the 'claiming' of diverse experiences of gender injustice in academic spaces may lead to certain inhabiting and reproducing of institutional power.

Paper:

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are positioned as key drivers of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one of them being SDG5 which addresses gender inequality. The University Grants Commission (UGC), responsible for promoting and coordinating university education in India, had taken important steps towards this through institutionalization of Women's Studies (WS) in universities in the late 1980s. WS was imagined to facilitate the questioning of the present educational system and dominant systems of knowledge such that they can be made accountable to "expand the social concern against injustice, marginalization and oppression of women" (Anandhi & Swaminathan 2006). The WS Centres (WSC) marked the initiation of feminist interventions in academia with the Centres growing rapidly – from 22 across the country in 1991 to 163 in 2017 (Kanagsabai 2018, Datta 2011). From their inception, these Centres have been awkwardly positioned within universities' intellectual traditions, institutional identities and notions of social justice; with minimal infrastructure and fluctuating financing. However, at national level the role of the WSC was affirmed in the UGC guidelines as "help[ing] India achieve her UN Sustainable Development Goal of Promoting Equality and Empowerment of Women". Misalignment in national policy discourses have been a constant feature of the sector, with the most recent emerging the 2020 National Education Policy, where the role for WS is omitted entirely. Though the critical and transformative potential of WS is recognized in guidelines for WSCs, it has still continued to negotiate in the struggle to find legitimacy and has moved back into the marginal status repeatedly on facing the entrenched hierarchy of disciplines within a university and its outside (Srinivas 2015, John 2008a).

I draw from findings of a mixed method study of universities of India and South Africa conducted in 2019. The paper analyses the insider perspectives of the academic staff of WSC in the 4 higher education institutions in India, to point to the ambiguities, messiness and contradictions of endeavors to achieve 'gender equality'. It will examine how the politico-academic project of WS and a feminist vision and praxis create complex, competitive and contradictory conditions of transforming higher education. From my standpoint as an academic in WSC, I use feminist methodology of reflexive openness and self-criticality to engage with the problematic of how the 'claiming' of diverse experiences of systemic injustice in academic spaces and assertion of 'resisting' the academic hegemonic culture, may also lead to certain inhabiting and reproducing of institutional power.

WS has negotiated in the struggle to find legitimacy in HE as it faces institutional pulls and pressures in the entrenched hierarchy of disciplines – not to develop as a separate discipline and yet intervene within HE, show off academic achievements and have activist connections, respond to agendas of international agencies on gender and also to prove what kind of changes they have brought in society. The academics within WSC have the intellectual resources and critical tools in fostering a feminist vision of gender justice at the conceptual and policy levels in universities. However, the dominant tacit perception is that WS academics are 'too political' and 'speak truth to power' to participate in decision-making in universities. This makes the interactional dynamics operative between academic staff and university leaders tensed and disruptive. The chaotic experience of these academics in walking the difficult terrain of balancing between the demands of formal teaching, research and community engagement could rather be used as a setting the way forward for sustainable transformation of the university. However, our findings indicate that this balance is misrecognized.

The policies of WS and gender equality were seen more of a constitutional obligation to social justice "associated with altruism, benevolence and charity" rather than a politico-ethical vision of radical change. WSCs are expected to show off quantified deliverables and transformation indicators for the universities to tick the box of gender performativity rendering invisible the systemic inequalities. The politics of participation of academics are policed by those within the university where practical matters of funding can create the conditions for the undoing of the agency of change agents. The interdisciplinarity of WS is conflated with an eclectic mode of inquiry believed to lack integrity and rigour. WS thus faces derogation and labeling as 'inferior' because of being regarded as 'undisciplined' on the one hand and arising concerns about domestication for 'disciplining' feminism, on the other. However, there are narratives of how those at the helm of WSC feed into and reproduce the institutional logic of hierarchy and exclusion as well.

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