

## Women's Studies and the Risks of Transitioning Disciplines: Precarious Academics in Indian Universities

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### Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

### Abstract

The increasing privatisation and corporatisation of higher education in India have brought market-driven logics and profit incentives that question the legitimacy of Women's Studies (WS) programmes in universities. Amid the ongoing erosion of structural support for WS Centres—originally established to inform public universities' contributions to gender justice—WS now faces tensions between feminist praxis and the neoliberal pursuit of 'excellence'. This paper draws on life history narratives of marginalised academics associated with WS to examine how they experience and navigate the ambiguous, layered processes of academic precariousness. It investigates how risks tied to transitioning across disciplines—including entry into and exit from WS—shape their personal aspirations, academic identities, and professional trajectories. The paper also explores how the precarity faced by marginalised academics is deeply intertwined with, and constitutive of, the precarity of WS programmes themselves.

### Full paper

The 1990s witnessed increasing privatization, corporatization, and globalization of higher education, resulting in the widespread casualization of academic labour. Informal, short-term, and contract-based employment became the institutional norm and research explored how a neoliberal, profit-driven approach to knowledge production contributed to the devaluation of academic work. As state funding declined, higher education was increasingly legitimized as a commodity challenging the longstanding conception of higher education as a public good (Smithers et. al, 2025; Vatansever, 2016; Tilak, 2008).

Academic precarity largely influences individuals facing continuing job uncertainty, often leading to their marginalization in institutional decision-making, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of professional reputation. This uncertainty impacts not just employment settings but also their self-esteem, social status, and interpersonal relationships within and outside academia. Yet, many precarious academics do not diagnose these exploitations as systemic

due to a surplus of academic labour, functioning as a “reserve army” (Coin, 2018) and instead make efforts to normalize their struggles, feeling grateful for merely having a job in a university—despite having acquired the highest academic qualifications. Their emotional belonging, passion, and aim to become the “ideal academic” lead them to internalize precarity and morally justify their conditions of work (Leiter, 2017; Atkins et al., 2018). Their passion becomes a mechanism for self-exploitation (Busso & Rivetti, 2014), as many adopt a “sacrificial ethos” to establish their dedication (Gill, 2010). Along with the “privatization of ambivalence” (Bauman, 2000)—where navigating uncertainty becomes an individual problem—there is also a “privatization of suffering” that isolates academics and discourages collective resistance. Thus, the myth of meritocracy masks the precarious employment of academics with institutional inequities attributed to individual deficiencies and failures (Wieseler, 2024).

However, entrenched gendered and intersectional hierarchies (re)produce social inequalities within academic institutions (Dhawan et al., 2023; Tambe, 2019). A feminist analysis demonstrates that academic institutions follow normative frameworks, despite their ostensibly liberal appearances, perpetuate gendered and intersectional hierarchies that determine who flourishes, endures, or is marginalized in academic spaces (Scott, 2008; Dhawan & Belluigi, 2024).

This paper draws on data collected as part of a research project conducted in collaboration with Professor Dina Belluigi in 2024. The project generated diverse life-history narratives of 46 academics and researchers who were/are based in 30 higher education institutions across 10 states in India, spanning the period from 1963 to 2024. We identified the enabling and disabling conditions that shaped their academic journeys, highlighting how they act as critical-ethical agents of change within universities. The research also traces their complex, intersectional experiences as they navigate, participate in, and contribute to academic practice within the hegemonic cultures of the academy. Our research highlights the lived experiences of marginalized academics not as isolated instances, but as relational, affective entities, whose affiliations with individuals, institutions, and ideologies shape their careers. These attachments—referred to by scholars as “affective stickiness”—often elucidate why academics persist in risky positions while experiencing adversity. Their mobility is limited by caring obligations, inadequate institutional networks, financial dependency, and emotional commitments (McKenzie, 2022; Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021; Siekierski et al., 2018).

I apply the feminist lens to study academic precarity in relation to Women’s Studies (WS) programmes in Indian universities. While WS Centres were initially established in public universities to inform their contribution to gender justice and democratise knowledge production, they have increasingly faced systemic delegitimization, threatened by the growing tensions between feminist praxis and the neoliberal pursuit of ‘excellence’ in higher education. Their emphasis on social transformation is often seen as a liability within profit-driven university cultures that reshape institutional priorities (Dhawan & Belluigi, 2024). WS is frequently dismissed as ideological rather than scholarly, and its goals are

reframed as incompatible with market-oriented metrics of success. As universities increasingly conform to narrow indicators of excellence, WS programmes are sidelined or pressured into compliance. Scholars have raised concerns about how these institutional pressures risk depoliticizing feminist praxis and diluting the transformative potential of WS. Meanwhile, WS scholars—especially those from marginalised backgrounds—face persistent career instability, limited opportunities for advancement, and exclusion from mainstream academic networks (Belluigi et al., 2025).

The precarity experienced by marginalised WS scholars is intertwined with the institutional precarity of WS itself. Systemic inequality and structural violence in higher education simultaneously undermine the legitimacy of WS Centres and marginalise those who work within them. This paper therefore reveals not only the multiple forms of precarity experienced by marginalised academics in WS but also examines how these precarities impact feminist knowledge production in neoliberal university spaces.