Feminist Struggles in the Academy in India and the UK

Edited by: Kamya Choudhary, Cat Wayland and Radhika Govinda

Artists: Shazleen Khan & Samia Singh
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Foreword

As feminists we seek to create ‘useful knowledge,’ and it has long been recognised that we often do so in collective spaces and collective moments of co-production: in conversations, roundtables, panels, and ‘on the margins’ of meetings. There have been productive debates about how to attend to power dynamics, for example between feminists in the global North and global South, and to centre our understandings of who are the knowledge-makers, and what constitutes knowledge. However, questions as to how knowledge is curated, translated, preserved and communicated has perhaps had less attention. Whilst we disseminate our work through conventional channels such as articles, books and blogs – what happens to the more ephemeral thoughts, ideas and theorising created in our comings together?

Seminars and roundtables are often recorded, or key points summarised but seldom revisited. This web comic of Feminist Struggles in the Academy, and its print versions, provides a novel and exciting alternative of how we might capture the energy and knowledge-in-the-making of these collective endeavours; how we might enrich our understanding through acts of re-presentation by new collaborations (in this case with social scientists and visual artists); and how our ideas might reach broader audiences. As genderED – the University of Edinburgh’s interdisciplinary hub for gender and sexualities studies – we are delighted to support the project.

Fiona Mackay, Director genderED
Introduction

In 2017, the research project Teaching Feminisms, Transforming Lives (TFTL), led by Radhika Govinda (Edinburgh) and Krishna Menon (Delhi), began as a collaborative endeavour between scholars based at the University of Edinburgh and Ambedkar University Delhi. A unique series of panel discussions and roundtable conversations, involving established and emerging feminist academics and activists, were held in both locations. During these events, participants had the opportunity to reflect collectively and comparatively on the transformative potential of feminist classrooms at the university level. Exploring questions of identity and positionality in two differently diverse, yet hierarchical, neoliberal contexts in Northern and Southern locations, these discussions allowed the project to cover exciting ground: the obstacles and pitfalls associated with teaching and researching as a feminist in academia as well as the strong optimism that drives students and academics towards building their versions of feminist futures.

Feminist Struggles in the Academy emerges as part of the legacy of this research project, carrying forward the original vision of creating more open and inclusive spaces for feminist discussions. It features twenty-four pages of beautiful original artwork by Shazleen Khan (London, UK) and Samia Singh (Punjab, India), based on the panel discussions and roundtable conversations that were documented between 2017-2018 as part of the TFTL project. Each piece of artwork can be taken as a standalone piece that relates a crucial moment that stood out to us in the transcribed content from the panel discussions and roundtable conversations. The illustrations highlight these moments and capture the spirit of the room when the dialogue was happening. We have taken the creative leap of bringing dialogue that took place on different occasions in Delhi and Edinburgh onto the same page in some instances to get our speakers interacting with one another around themes.

Conceived with the goal of transforming our collective thoughts on resisting patriarchy into an artistic venture, the comic, we hope, offers an insight into the key debates and struggles that make up the diverse experiences of feminist academics and students within higher education. It features contributions from a range of participants: established feminist academics, early career scholars, and postgraduate students from higher education institutions as well as activists from women’s organisations in Delhi and Edinburgh. It focuses on expressing feminist, intersectional, and decolonising perspectives on a panoply of themes, including pedagogy, positionality, neoliberalism in the academy, and sexual violence, all of which emerged at the events held as part of the research project. Although its themes can also trace their roots to academic literature and scholarly debates, we wanted the comic to represent and communicate these through an artistic medium, so that their sensitivity and complexity can be addressed and captured in a way that may sometimes go unexpressed in academic writing.

We remain committed to making these ideas and debates more accessible, and using comic book illustrations to achieve this is a conscious choice, in line with the feminist and decolonial approaches we take in our own scholarly work, which is committed to creating democratic and decentralised forms of knowledge production and circulation. We have been especially keen to ensure that access to the comic is not barred behind publisher paywalls. Throughout the process of commissioning and editing the comic, we actively questioned what constitutes knowledge, how it is produced, and whose knowledge counts. We have made an attempt in the comic to de-centre knowledge production from the ‘white masculine western-centric’ core that we are accustomed to. By tapping into a rich history that sees art as an expression of protest and politics, we hope the comic continues a legacy of much-needed disruption.
Artist location and positionality was one avenue through which we hoped to ensure that we put our decolonial aims into practice. From an early stage, we knew that we wanted to work with artists based in the UK and in India. It was important to us to ensure that women of colour artists are a key part in giving this project life and that we pay close attention to giving equal platform to the art and knowledge developed in both the UK and India. We were familiar with Shazleen and Samia’s portfolios when we reached out to them and looked forward to seeing how their unique styles would come together in the comic.

The iterative process of developing the transcribed content from the panel discussions and roundtables into captions and making sure the illustrations are multi-layered in meaning and do justice to the text, has helped us think through the consequences of choosing one anecdote over another, one visual representation over another. It has also brought to the fore many of the questions that sit at the heart of the comic: how does one express one’s feminist commitments most effectively, most accessibly? What do we hope to achieve through communicating a feminist message or feminist principles through this comic? Each decision was beset by questions about whether the representation was fair or accurate, whether we were capturing adequately the point we wished to convey. The process challenged us to put our politics into practice, and to really think about how intersectionality and decolonisation can be brought to bear practically on our decisions regarding which excerpts to work with, whose words to convey, and how to represent them artistically. The images and text are drawn from individuals and composites of contributors at the panel discussions and roundtables. The text was developed by distilling detailed transcriptions into concise captions, and this remained a true test of our writing skills!

One place where we struggled was with respect to how the text of the comic would be attributed. Should we anonymise the contributions? If so, how to attribute the text so that it is clear ‘who’ is actually speaking? Would every speaker describe themselves as feminist? Would ‘academic’ be enough, or should we state the intersecting identities they embody, such as their class and gender? Positionality and location are such important themes in the comic that we did not want to simply leave it to the reader to discern ‘where’ the speaker is located. In the end, we chose more general labels, such as ‘Academic, India’, as this conveyed role and location and recognised that every person may not want to disclose each facet of their identity. The process of editorial judgement in that sense was a deeply reflective one for us, and has pushed us to consider how individuals’ embodied intersectionality should be represented. We are still not convinced that we managed to get it all right. But we have tried.

The learning curve continued for us across several different domains beyond editorial decisions about content, attribution, and anonymity. It also included the process of collaboration that constituted the production of the comic, and figuring out how to ensure that our political commitments make it into our project management style as well as onto the page. This collaborative aspect to the comic, between the academic and artistic worlds, between students and staff, has been both invigorating and challenging. We have worked across time zones and in virtual space, developing each illustration based on an equal, non-hierarchical footing. This constant negotiation has taught us valuable lessons about the workings and logistics that surround such a unique initiative: we have learned to balance deadlines across multiple schedules, amplify voices, and hold space for one another. The process of developing the comic has made us reflective of our own respective privileges and personal limitations, but this recognition has been a powerful
opportunity for us to contribute to destabilising Western-centric white male scholarly and managerial practices. Ultimately, managing the project as it has grown from the kernel of an idea into a fully formed hybrid of artistic and scholarly work is a matter of huge pride, and the slew of new skills we have learned along the way have helped to cement this sense of achievement.

Having the illustrations emerge and seeing how they capture the heart of the debates has been a real delight. Each anecdote and image that made their way into the comic are incredibly rich in the themes they express. A major question that the comic deals with are the challenges that scholars face when bringing feminist pedagogies into the classroom. What we find emphasised across a number of the vignettes presented in the comic is the emphasis on identity and positionality: how does one’s gender, race, ethnicity, caste, ad religious background shape one’s participation in academia? What inclusions and exclusions operate around the figure of the scholar of colour, the scholar from a minority religious background, or the scholar whose gender makes them an unanticipated guest at the feminist table? Another key concern is the way in which feminist scholars not only shape but are shaped by the institutions in which they work. This dynamic influence is what illuminates our transformative horizons while simultaneously reminding us that even in struggle and resistance, we often find ourselves complicit with the structures and processes of the institutions we inhabit.

The potential for transformation is a recurring theme in the comic as this idea is central to the possibility and practice of a feminist politics. We were particularly taken with the idea that feminist spaces in universities help to ‘hatch’ and incubate new generations of feminist thinkers, scholars, and activists, who don their first pair of feminist ‘goggles’ and develop new and critical perspectives on the world.

Nonetheless, we are conscious that while these spaces are integral and revered components of feminist movements, they are not immune to the influence of the patriarchal world. Feminist spaces, then, are always spaces of negotiation, which can never be purified or disentangled from the constellations of power that shape the broader contexts of our lives. Frustration at the lack of straightforward answers or solutions to the problems that feminists have identified is also an inevitable dimension of the feminist experience in higher education. In relation to questions of feminist pedagogy and the role of women’s and gender studies, we see how teaching feminism is itself a fraught and contradictory notion: is feminist knowledge truly something that can be taught by having students digest the appropriate reading list? The institutionalisation of women’s and gender studies, as such, plays a major role in how we think about being feminists and pursuing feminist struggles in the academy. We are useful insofar as we push new research agendas and bring in funding opportunities off the back of the latest buzzword, but simultaneously, we often find ourselves in the position of having to do ‘twice the work for half the reward’. These challenges can become toxic and overwhelming at the individual level as they become embedded and insurmountable in institutional contexts.

We have tried to creatively capture in Feminist Struggles in the Academy some of these ongoing and sometimes seemingly intractable debates. We invite you to flip through the following pages and explore the big and small moments of learning in these collective feminist struggles, to identify, reflect, enjoy, and reenergise.

Kamya, Cat, and Radhika
Edinburgh, 17th February 2020
Shazleen Khan is an Award-Winning Illustrator and Designer based in London. She specialises in Comics and Narrative Illustration.

Shazleen graduated from with a First Class BA (Hons) degree in Illustration in 2017 and achieved an MA in Children’s Books and Graphic Novels in 2018. She is currently pursuing an Associate Fellowship at Middlesex University for her ongoing Academic work.


Her comics have previously been published by BHP Comics, 404 Ink, Post Script Magazine, MCM Comicon and Neo Magazine.

Her Illustrative work has been recognised by both the 2017 Bridgeman Studio Awards as well as the 2018 Folio Society Book Illustration Competition. In 2019 she was awarded the Broken Frontier Award for Best Webcomic.

Aside from her commercial work, Shazleen continues to self publish her own comics.

You can find her work at:

www.shazleenkhan.com
THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM
A PARADOX

WHAT WE SEE SO OFTEN
IN FEMINIST CLASSROOMS IS THE
FRAUGHT ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE
ESTABLISHED ‘TEACHERS’ OF FEMINISM
AND ‘STUDENTS’ OF FEMINISMS, WHO
MAY ALREADY BE ACTIVISTS IN
FEMINIST ORGANISING.

TEACHING FEMINISM IN
THE INSTITUTIONALISED CONTEXTS
OF THE UNIVERSITY CAN MAKE IT
DIFFICULT TO ADDRESS THE CONFLICT
BETWEEN THE ‘PERSONAL’ AND
THE ‘POLITICAL’ ADEQUATELY IN
FEMINIST CLASSROOMS.

WE HAVE SUCH
HIGH HOPES THAT BY
LEARNING FEMINISM WE CAN
RESOLVE THE DILEMMAS OF
LIVING FEMINIST LIVES...

I TEACH FEMINISM
BECAUSE IT’S MY JOB TO
TEACH FEMINISM. I GET A
PROFESSOR’S SALARY TO
DO IT. ISN’T THAT INTERESTING
AND PROBLEMATIC?

WE’D NEVER THOUGHT OF
FEMINISM AS SOMETHING TO BE
DELIVERED AS A TEACHING PROCESS.
WE THOUGHT IT’S SOMETHING TO BE
STRUGGLED OVER, THE STUDENT
TELLING THE TEACHER WHAT’S
MISSING IN THE CURRICULUM, RATHER
THAN THE TEACHER SIMPLY
DELIVERING A CURRICULUM.

THE FEMINIST CLASSROOM
IS A SPACE WHERE PERSONAL
PROBLEMS AND POLITICS SHOULD
BE NEGOTIATED. AND WHAT DO
WE GIVE STUDENTS?

LONG LISTS OF
READINGS!

ACADEMIC, INDIA
THE 'AHA' MOMENT

I think there's something in the air that's different in feminist classrooms.

These spaces can be powerful, enabling, and transformative. The power of feminist air was felt by students alike.

I too see the transformations, the 'aha-moments', when a student re-emerges from their shell.

I still remember this student's essay on how the patriarchy affects men as much as it does women. In it, he reimagined an entire world where current power dynamics were overturned, and neither men nor women face limitations and discrimination.

Children are allowed to exist beyond the gender roles and norms accorded by our society. His essay began with the line 'let's imagine...', and by the end I knew he saw what we strove to teach.

In him, the feminist imagination was ignited; our discourse now unleashed.
LEARNING FEMINISM IN AN INDIAN CLASSROOM CAN BE AN EXPLOSIVE EXPERIENCE. WE HAD NO IDEA WHAT HIT US. IT WAS TRANSFORMATIVE, EMOTIONAL AND EXHAUSTING. THERE'S AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF CONFLICTS AT HOME.

A PEACEFUL BREAKFAST WAS NO LONGER POSSIBLE! EVERYTHING WE HELD SAFE AND SECURE WAS DESTABILISED. FAMILIES MAY NOT ALWAYS BE SO UNCONDITIONALLY ‘LOVING’ AND CRITICISING THE IDEA OF CARE OR THE HOME IN GENERAL WAS BECOMING THIS BIG IDEA FOR MOST OF US.

EVERYTHING STARTS LOOKING ALIEN, THE THINGS YOU LOVE, YOU BATTLE APPROVAL, YOU BATTLE PRIDE, YOU BATTLE SHAME.

THEN AS A TEACHER IN BA PROGRAMS, I FOCUSED ON TEACHING THEM HOW TO THINK, RATHER THAN WHAT TO THINK, TO SHOW THEM FEMINISM EXISTS IN THE EVERYDAY.

THE CHALLENGE FOR ME AS AN EDUCATOR, IS TO CONSTANTLY COME UP WITH EXAMPLES FROM LIVED REALITIES, BECAUSE THAT CONTEXTUAL TRANSLATION IS NEEDED FOR OUR THEORIES.

LIKE HOW FEMINISM IS ABOUT THE FOOD ON YOUR PLATE AND WHY YOUR MOTHER DOESN'T GET THE LEG PIECES OF A CHICKEN DISH.
Transformation Beyond the Classroom

Who Is Learning?

When we teach in universities or schools, we assume a kind of neutrality of the context that we're working with.

But, in reality, in fields like education, even when there's feminist training and pedagogy, students, teachers and curricula will always reflect the prevailing social norms.

The problem we're tackling is often one tiny cog, while the overarching machine is still flawed. When we fail to bring feminism into our teaching at the earliest stages, it becomes an obstacle to bringing feminism to the wider society.

For example, in the domain of law, the courts, judges, juries, police and lawyers are often dispensers of patriarchal judgements if they have not been exposed to feminist ideas, or if they place themselves in opposition to such ideas. They are un-reconstructed members of the patriarchy.

Imagine instead the impact feminist knowledge can have if it is absorbed over time, beginning at primary school and extending all the way through so that key actors in society across law, culture, economics, politics, medicine have learnt to develop their feminist consciousness!
WHO MAKES UP THE CLASSROOM

When I moved here, I suddenly realised that I am BAME, but what is it? I had to actually go look it up... 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' as a term is not what we use in the Indian or the American context.

FACULTY MEMBERSHIP AND FACULTY REPRESENTATIVENESS IS SO IMPORTANT. FOR ME TO SEE THAT REPRESENTATION IS KNOWING THAT ONE DAY, I TOO CAN BE THERE.

For students and staff, wanting to 'specialise' in Latin America, South Asia or Africa, it can be frustrating to have a predominantly all-white faculty and student population, wanting to 'specialise' in Latin America, South Asia or Africa.

Academic, UK

PhD Scholar, UK

For students and staff, wanting to 'specialise' in Latin America, South Asia or Africa, it can be frustrating to have a predominantly all-white faculty and student population.

Decolonising primarily white spaces is emotionally laborious, especially when students believe 'Oh that only happens outside the UK, in XYZ country, it doesn't really happen here'.

This places an unfair burden on non-white students and academics to sensitise people about differences, to form the experience of and embody ideals of 'diversity' within the university. This process of 'epistemic exploitation' makes students and faculty of colour do all the work to help white colleagues and peers learn and understand.

Student, UK
The question is, where are feminist transformations taking place today?

Our universities are increasingly feeling the impact of neoliberalism and its toxic processes. How does this affect feminists in the academy and the work we’re trying to do?

In academia, we have a culture of “publish or perish.” Academic quality is re-framed as how many products you produce; how profitable those products are… and this changes what is possible within the university. Suddenly, decisions are all profitability-based.

When feminism is viewed as profitable, it’s encouraged within the university. Scholars working in otherwise sexist or hostile environments, find themselves under pressure to be hyper-productive and publish on feminist subjects.

And so, they do work hard. Because they care, they want to create more feminist classrooms and open more spaces of dissent.

But this comes with a price in a neoliberal university. Because the other important work is sometimes not seen as profitable!

The curse of the neoliberal university.
ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES BANNED ALL ACADEMICS IN THE DEPARTMENT WORKING UNDER HER FROM DOING ANY PEER REVIEWING BECAUSE ‘IT’S NOT PRODUCTIVE’ WORK. WE NOW HAVE A SITUATION WHERE PEOPLE CAN’T READ, CAN’T PEER REVIEW, THEY DON’T HAVE TIME TO GO TO EVENTS OR TO MENTOR...

SO WHAT ARE WE DOING IN ACADEMIA?

THE MYTHICAL FEMINIST SCHOLAR

IN THIS ENVIRONMENT, A FEMINIST ACADEMIC IS AN ASPIRATIONAL ROLE; ONE WHO WORKS TIRELESSLY TO CREATE GROUND-BREAKING WORK, ALL WHILE BEING STRUCTURALLY PREVENTED FROM ACTUALLY DOING COLLECTIVE WORK AND BUILDING COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS.

WE EXPECT A SUPERHERO.

WE INSTEAD HAVE AN OVERWORKED FEMINIST ACADEMIC IN THE NEOLIBERAL ACADEMY.
DURING MY RESEARCH ON WOMEN ACADEMICS, MY INTERVIEWEES APPEARED DRAINED AND DEPLETED.

EVERY ANSWER THEY GAVE WAS FAST AND FRENZIED; THEY WERE ANSWERING MY QUESTION WHILE RESPONDING TO EMAILS, OR ADDRESSING QUERIES THAT SOMEONE ASKED WHEN POPPING IN THROUGH THEIR DOOR. ONE DESCRIBED A SENSE OF RUSH.

I CAN’T EVEN FOCUS ON THIS IDEA BECAUSE I’M CONSTANTLY THINKING OF ALL THE OTHER THINGS THAT I NEED TO BE DOING.

BUT ACADEMICS ARE DOING THIS SO THAT IF THEY GET SOME MORE FUNDING, THEY CAN CREATE MORE JOBS FOR EARLY CAREER ACADEMICS THROUGH POST-DOCTORAL POSITIONS.

THE WOMEN I SPOKE TO WERE EXHAUSTED. I FOUND THAT THEIR HEARTLINES, THINGS THEY WERE PASSIONATE ABOUT, WERE BEING BURIED UNDER DEADLINES. THIS WAS IMPACTING THEIR HEALTH. THEY DESCRIBED CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITIES AS HAVING A SICK CLIMATE THAT ‘MADE US ALL ILL’.

THEY TOLD ME ABOUT DEPRESSION AND PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS, CHRONIC PAIN, ISSUES WITH SLEEP AND THAT PEOPLE ARE AT THE LIMIT OF THEIR STRENGTH, OF THEIR CAPACITY.
This very powerful description of what appears to be individual problems in individual bodies emerges instead as a larger, more systemic depletion of the spirit and capacities of academics. We end up normalising ever-receding horizons of productivity, promoting an ableist and able-bodied culture within academia. Compulsory productivity leaves us with a feeling of catastrophe – burn-out.

We need to acknowledge institutional context and legacies. In the UK, universities have sustained legacies of racism, sexism and homophobia; these spaces were meant only for the elite, cis-gender, heteronormative white men, but also only for the able-bodied.

In academia as much as elsewhere, the able body is seen as the default, the norm, as the ideal.

Academic jobs end up being 'un-doable' because the 'ideal' model of the academic was a man with a partner at home, a wife, who not only did the reproductive and domestic labour, but also did some of the research work for him too.
Beyond Diversity: Let’s Decolonise
How can our discussions in this comic be applied within classrooms?

For starters, don’t limit gender studies and feminism to specific disciplines or courses.

It’s much more than simply studying it only in week nine at university.

It forms a scholarly tool worthy of every kit. It’s a way of deconstructing the world around us, let’s take an example of how we could teach concepts within queer studies in a more inclusive manner, moving towards a decolonial understanding.

Pre-colonial knowledge systems can still be located in what we work on today.

Homosexuality, for example, is a western concept. The LGBT or queer movement a western creation. Yet these categories and identities are pushed through western neoliberalism as a part of ‘international’ human rights discourse and LGBT movements.

Academic, UK
This means that autochthonous, localised, indigenous forms of same-sex love, same-sex identities and same-sex relationships or non-binary gendered figures, individuals and communities are totally subsumed in these kinds of much more powerful categories.

It’s important to complicate this conversation about feminism between North and South.

We can already see it in our language: why is it that working class, low caste, non-CIS gendered individuals in South Asia call themselves hijras, but English speaking, middle class, upper caste, cis-gendered men call themselves gay?

Why might it make sense to call a course at the University of Edinburgh an ‘Introduction to Queer Studies’ but question that same name and structure in a curriculum set in India or Bangladesh?
There is a clear domination of some countries in global academic relations, and it is terrible and stifling. We could draw on this hegemony, the affluence and influence of the West as a powerful resource to advance the institutionalisation of feminist scholarship locally.

But it's possible to deploy it critically, to make it disruptive.

Feminism is about progressive politics; our contributions will shape the future and present of its ever-expanding field. What does this expansion mean?

I think the main shift we need is in how universities value marginalised voices.

Universities aren't apolitical spaces; we need to start de-centring the idea of Western knowledge as 'truer' or the more valued one. This type of critical interrogation is not dismissive of ideas, we're not removing white men in the curriculum but prioritisng different voices and lived experiences and through that, trying to dismantle the elite, white, cis-het, able-bodied male hegemony.
**Samia Singh** ([https://samiasingh.com/](https://samiasingh.com/)) is a freelance illustrator, graphic designer and artist based in India. She enjoys integrating analogue and digital techniques with a touch of humour.

Samia studied Visual Communication at Srishti School of Art, Design & Technology (2009). After working as the Associate Art Director at India’s leading political weekly, Tehelka magazine (2010 - 2012) she was awarded a scholarship to study Printmaking at Il Bisonte Instituto de Arte Grafica, Firenze, Italy (2013). She was the Creative Director at No. 3 Clive Road, a tea brand based in New Delhi (2016 -18).

Samia is currently the Creative Director at Preet Nagar Residency ([http://preetnagarresidency.in/](http://preetnagarresidency.in/)), a writers', researchers' and artists' retreat in an intended community in rural Punjab, near Amritsar, India, which was started by her great grandfather in 1933.

Samia also focuses on how design thinking can help Tsunami affected communities in Tohoku, Iwate prefecture, Japan and other small and medium enterprises facing contemporary challenges in Asia through community design with Door to Asia ([https://door-to.asia/](https://door-to.asia/)), a Japanese think-tank based in Tokyo.

Samia’s work has been exhibited in India, Italy, the UK and Japan.
On their way to class one day, several students of gender studies noticed some graffiti on a university wall at their institution in New Delhi, criticising the discipline. They decided to write back...

Then we stuck a timetable of our curriculum on the wall, “If you think it’s a time waste then you should come and attend our classes instead of just accusing or falsely claiming it’s a time waste.”

They wrote back, “It’s an elite course, this is something that you’re reading because you are elite girls who are just talking about feminism and not practising it.”

We painted over it saying we are the shameless, loitering women who do not care about your accusations and allegations. If you really think it’s a time waste, come and talk to us.

Student, India
The Mystery of the Disappearing Gender Lecturer

How can we embed feminism when institutions have a way of 'forgetting' feminism exists?

If I don't show up to do my guest lecture at the end of the semester, the lecture disappears from the syllabus.
Parachuting Gender into Mainstream Courses

Time and again, we see that feminist academics are ‘parachuted’ in to give the gender lecture right at the end of the course. The attendance is lower, and the students who do turn up are less prepared. Consequently, students don’t take gender and feminist studies seriously.

Academic, UK

As tutors who have no part in designing the curriculum, we have to decide to what extent we’re going to insert feminist theory and critique into our lesson plans. It’s simply not enough to just ‘add feminism and stir’ into the curriculum in this way.

PhD Scholars, UK
Do you belong here?

I started my career in women's studies at an Islamic Studies Institute. I was there for nine years before getting the opportunity to go to university. I asked to pursue women's studies. I wanted to learn feminism. I was in the minority in that class, there were nine girls and just me. People have always questioned me about it. Initially I thought it was out of curiosity, because I'm a religious person. But I feel the question is kind of an exclusion - why are you here? You're a man, especially a religious man, a Muslim. How can you locate yourself in women's studies? So many assumptions are made about me and for me. This has led me to ask some questions of my own: who is the ideal student of a gender studies class? Is there such a thing at all? What are the ways in which my subjectivity enables or disables me from doing gender studies properly?
WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM?

It's actually very funny that throughout my Masters in Delhi, the repeated question I would get is 'Are you in the Department of Persian, Arabic or Urdu?' Obviously, they assumed it couldn't be otherwise. And later, as a teacher, it's also the first thing that happens. Students look at you and they ask: 'Where are you coming from? Who are you to be teaching feminism?' They question your appearance, your clothing, and with it, your assumed politics. When you encounter a set of students who challenge your position and your authority as a teacher of feminism what do you do? They see an inherent contradiction with your visibility, your presence as a Muslim with feminism. They're asking for your locus, 'Do you really think you could be someone who knows what feminism is about?'. There can be space for everyone in feminism, and equally, a space for feminism in our belief systems. Surely our religions, genders or geographical locations don't disqualify us from feminist politics?

Academic, India
OVEREDUCATED BRIDE
WHAT HAS FEMINISM GOT TO OFFER?

My colleague's student, Seema, stopped coming to class. She asked the other girls why Seema hadn't attended in so long and they told her she had married into a well-off family. She said okay, congratulations, but Seema is only a few months away from getting her degree. She asked Seema to come in and when they met, she told her they would figure out a way for her to attend and sit her exams. She started coming to college erratically, but then she disappeared again. So again she asked the other girls, and they said she was helping her husband prepare for his class twelve exams. The family had a shop and business, so the husband would only study to class twelve. The family didn't want Seema to go to college because she was already 'over-educated'. When you encounter such things, all your theoretical knowledge collapses. What do you end up doing? My colleague called the girl in. She told her that in a couple of years' time, when she has a child, she will need her qualifications to make sure the child gets through school admissions. She was invoking the idea of compulsory motherhood, of patriarchy, of being a good mother, of thinking ahead for

ACADEMIC, INDIA
UNDER EDUCATED GROOM

YOUR CHILD AND NOT FOR YOURSELF.

I HAVE TAUGHT FOR SEVEN YEARS AND WE HAD GIRLS FROM A RELATIVELY ORTHODOX AND DEPRIVED BACKGROUNDS, AND WHEN INEVITABLY THEY CAME UP AGAINST PROBLEMS, WE ENDED UP TELLING THEM, CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES, CHOOSE WHICH BATTLES YOU WANT TO FIGHT AT THIS POINT, AND WHICH BATTLES YOU CAN DEFER, UNTIL YOU'RE IN A BETTER POSITION TO FIGHT AND WIN. BARGAIN WITH PATRIARCHY, GIVE IN ONE AREA AND GAIN IN ANOTHER. AS A TEACHER, AS SOMEBODY TEACHING FEMINISM VERY WHOLESOME, IT RAISES A LOT OF SELF-DOUBT AND IT DOESN'T HAVE ANY EASY ANSWERS. WHAT DO YOU TELL?

ALTHOUGH THEY CAN PROVIDE SOME RESpite, FEMINIST SPACES WITHIN UNIVERSITIES DO NOT EXIST INDEPENDENTLY OF THE INEQUALITY AND HIERARCHY IN THE REST OF THE SOCIETY. IN THESE FEMINIST EDUCATIONAL SPACES, WE ARE STILL CAUGHT UP IN OTHER ROLES AND DUTIES THAT WE TAKE ON OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM, AS THE STORY OF SEEMA, A STUDENT AT AN ALL-WOMEN COLLEGE IN DELHI, INDIA, ILLUSTRATES. AS FEMINIST TEACHERS, WE MAY FIND OURSELVES UNABLE TO CHANGE THOSE STRUCTURES FOR OUR STUDENTS, AS WE ARE ALSO CONSTRAINED BY THE REALITIES OF THE IMPERFECT WORLD WE ASPIRE TO TRANSFORM.
The Paradox of the All-Women Campus

PINJRA TOD फिन्जरा तोड़

The paradox of the all-women campus is that the women who will benefit most from accessing that feminist educational space are also the women whose parents only agree to them attending the college precisely because it's an all-women space. They won't be allowed to attend unless the college keeps certain conditions in place for their ‘safety’.

There's a way in which women's colleges then end up reproducing a patriarchal submission to authority; through curfews and dress codes, it's time to break open the cages.
WE ARE NOT PRECIOUS BIRDS WHO CAN BE LOCKED UP.

ACADEMIC, INDIA
I've taught gender studies in a sociology department and feminist sociology in a law school. In both, I've experienced marginality, a sense of being on the fringe. For instance, in the law school, not having a law degree while having to teach law students was extremely marginalising. For the students too, taking courses on gender and law was seen as a threat: putting these courses on your CV and getting jobs in the corporate sector was seen as 'dangerous' because you would become more rights-claiming citizens and not just rights-bearing ones. You'd be the troublemakers in the corporate space!
All-Women Campuses: An Empowering Space, a Space of Our Own

When you’re in this all-women space, everything that needs to be done has to be done by you. It automatically demolishes naturalised divisions of labour that might happen in the society outside. For example, if you’re organising an event or a festival at college, it’s no longer that the men will deal with the finances and the women will do things like hospitality. Women take on everything. We have to enter these spaces and venture into territories that we might not otherwise have had the chance to go into.

Academic, India
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**Bio-notes on editors:**

Kamya Choudhary ([@KamyaChoudhary](https://twitter.com/KamyaChoudhary)) is a PhD researcher in International Development at the University of Edinburgh, her research focuses on the impacts and the sustainability of renewable energy applications within agriculture in rural India.

Radhika Govinda ([@GovindaRadhika](https://twitter.com/GovindaRadhika)) is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh, UK. She has a keen interest in intersectionality, gender and development, and feminist knowledge production, and is the overall project lead on the ongoing North-South, UGC-UKIERI-funded research and teaching collaboration, TFTL ([https://edin.ac/32U0wWd](https://edin.ac/32U0wWd)).

Cat Wayland ([@cat_wayland](https://twitter.com/cat_wayland)) is a PhD researcher in Politics at the University of Edinburgh, working on methodology, intersectionality and the politics of knowledge production in contemporary political theory.