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Sounds, Silences and Contradictions: Gender Equity in British Commonwealth Higher Education*

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Globalising Inequalities

The history of women's engagement with the academy has been characterised by exclusion and inequality. Seven decades ago, Virginia Woolf asked:

Do we want to join the procession or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?

Many women globally are still asking the same questions about participation and more poignantly why, having decided to join the procession, they are still at the back of the parade. The devaluing of women has become a normalised social relation in the academy. The academy forms part of a matrix of gender relations, with gender inequality omnipresent in the wider civil society. For example, 66 per cent of the world’s illiterates are women. On average, women's salaries are 25 per cent lower than those of men, and politically and globally women represent only 10 per cent of parliamentarians.

The political economy of higher education is changing. Despite potent advocacy and inquiry combined more recently with progressive legislation in many national locations, there is horizontal and vertical segregation in the academy globally. While there have been some equity gains in higher education—particularly in relation to women’s access as students—universal patriarchal power appears hard to denaturalise.

Mapping the terrain has been one strategy for change. Research conducted by the Association of Commonwealth Universities indicates that women are seriously under-represented in senior positions in higher education institutions (HEIs).

Women’s under-representation in senior and decision-making roles is not merely symbolic. It is a form of status injury. It represents both cultural misrecognition and material and intellectual oppression.

Gender equity is not just about quantitative change. A key question is whether there is an ideal morphology of the gender-equitable university and a collective dimension to gender equity globally. We need to consider what is to be equalised when we call for equality. What are the aspects of gender inequality that universally disturb and discomfort? In this article I aim to examine the nature of writing on gendered change in higher education institutions in the British Commonwealth of Nations and attempt to analyse some of the issues that have emerged from scholarship and practice relating to...
women as students and staff in higher education in the Commonwealth. In so doing, I will highlight some of the sounds, silences and contradictions that have emerged around gender equity.

Policy Drivers for Change

The global political economy of higher education is changing rapidly. Moves towards audit, accountability, user-pay and the enterprise culture have been accompanied by debates on democratisation and the relationship of higher education with globalisation and wealth creation. Some Commonwealth countries have experienced major political upheaval, civil war and militarism (e.g. Nigeria and Sri Lanka). Others have had socialist governments sympathetic to issues of inclusion (e.g. Tanzania). The general political trend, reinforced by the international donor community, is towards democratisation. Democratisation is accompanied by an emerging sense of rights and entitlements.

The Commonwealth is a network of largely anglophone countries spanning five continents. These were mostly formerly linked via the colonialism and imperialism of British foreign policy. The emphasis on the Commonwealth for the central sampling frame in this project could be constructed as yet another example of post-colonial power relations. However, strong policy networks and policy borrowing exist in the Commonwealth. Although the contexts of higher education institutions vary considerably in different regions, generally there has been a movement to a more inclusive orientation in higher education in the past 10 years. Policy drivers in the Commonwealth include: public-sector reform, human rights, economic and social development and poverty reduction. Additionally, theoretical influences have challenged gendered hegemonies in the academy. Feminism, postmodernism and post-colonialism have all raised questions about the power/knowledge conjunction in so far as what is taught in universities and disqualified knowledges. So, in the midst of considerable policy and theoretical development, what is happening to gender equity globally?
The Intellectual Beginnings of the Study

The intellectual beginnings of this study were observations that gender, higher education and development have rarely been intersected, leading to a silence in terms of policy, literature and research. The West has produced a sizeable body of published quantitative and qualitative data and critical literature, whereas lower income countries have had to rely on some gender-disaggregated statistics and quantitative studies—often funded by international organisations and lone, unfunded studies remaining in the grey literature domain. The nature of gendered change in higher education has not been systematically mapped across the Commonwealth and there has been an absence of multilateral dissemination. This led to the formation of a partnership with gender scholars in Nigeria, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania to begin to map and evaluate interventions for gendered change in access, curriculum transformation and staff development.

A first step has been to undertake a search of the published and ‘grey’ literature in low-income countries. The transcripts of women experiencing higher education, both as students and staff in the Commonwealth, remain relatively hidden. Lack of published literature does not imply lack of activity or lack of cultural capital. Rather, it can reflect the power relations and gendered and racialised gate-keeping practices embedded in publication and research awards. The lack of sustained published documentation of specific gendered interventions for change means that environmental scanning and widespread dissemination of initiatives for gendered change is impeded.

Lack of Intertextuality: Gender, Development and Higher Education

There are three distinct bodies of literature which are seldom related to each other. First, the literature on gender, development and education rarely considers higher education. Gender has begun to be a category of analysis at basic-level education in lower income countries.

Manuh describes how investment in higher education was downgraded in Africa in favour of basic education in the period immediately following structural readjustment programmes in the early 1980s, whereas the development of learning economies has led to a recent massification of higher education throughout Africa. Gender is considered specifically in relation to rates of return for male and female students on university education. Twenty to thirty children can be educated at primary level for the cost of one year at higher education. Higher education is perceived as the ‘luxury’ end of the educational market. Yet the university has traditionally been a pivotal institution, linked to the reproduction of gender and class privilege.

Second, the literature on higher education in the ‘developing’ world tends to be characterised by a gender-neutral approach. Gender tends to be a category of analysis only in relation to access. While we are informed by World Bank estimates that by 2015 there will be 97 million students enrolled in higher education and that half of these will be in the ‘developing’ world, there is no attempt to gender these students. There is very little research or theory about the qualitative experiences of women, after they have entered university.

Within the Commonwealth new competitions, markets and new sites of learning including the workplace and the community are emerging. The enterprise culture and the rapid expansion of private education are providing opportunities and threats. Yet few questions are raised about the social responsibility of private providers.
mainstream literature in higher education studies, course content, pedagogies and organisational cultures have barely been examined for the extent to which they engage with difference, diversity and strategies for transformation.\(^{15}\)

The third body of literature is that on women in higher education. There are few qualitative studies in the public domain denoting women’s experiences and engagements with higher education outside the West. There is some literature on equity and higher education in, for example, the United Kingdom: Bagilhole; David; Howie and Tauchert; Leonard; Morley; and Deem and Ozga;\(^{16}\) in Australia: Blackmore and Sachs; Brooks and MacKinnon; Burton; Chesterman; Howie and Tauchert; Currie \textit{et al.}; and Probert \textit{et al.};\(^{17}\) in Canada: Acker; and Wyn \textit{et al.};\(^{18}\) in New Zealand: Brooks;\(^{19}\) in South Africa: De La Rey;\(^{20}\) and in Singapore, Hong Kong and Thailand: Luke.\(^{21}\) All confirm the difficulties at the policy, institutional, organisational and micropolitical level of putting into place strategies for social inclusion in higher education institutions.

The failure to relate the literature has created a policy gap and limited opportunities to theorise structural and cultural barriers or indeed to analyse qualitative experiences of women in higher education on a transnational basis. Writers across the Commonwealth draw attention to how lack of qualitative data means that the complexities of organisational culture and gendered relays of power are unrecorded. These factors led the project to undertake a search of ‘grey’ literature, that is, semi-published or unpublished literature in the field.\(^{22}\) This has been analysed alongside some of the published studies. A methodological challenge has been how one reads the traces of what gets spoken in diverse socio-cultural contexts without degenerating into orientalism and objectification.\(^{23}\)

Themes have emerged which demonstrate that inclusivity has qualitative as well as quantitative implications. The emergent sounds are reminiscent of Young’s exploration of five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence.\(^{24}\)

**Counting Women In: the Access Agenda**

Low participation rates are an example of marginalisation.\(^{25}\) Throughout the Commonwealth, the university is frequently constructed as an institution complicit with social divisions. Certain social-class cultures facilitate the crossing of gender positioning and ease women’s entry into elite organisations.\(^{26}\) Jayaweera indicates how the heavy investment in higher education in South Asia has allowed benefits to accrue to the affluent and middle class.\(^{27}\) This raises questions about whether widening access and participation are redistributive measures.\(^{28}\) More recently, human capital theory and economic competitiveness have driven the access agenda which is now both democratising and economistic.

There are at least four trends in the literature relating to the access agenda and incorporating practical and strategic approaches. The first documents and berates under-representation in higher education in general and in certain disciplines, including science and engineering. These arguments are framed in human rights or economic rationalities.\(^{29}\) The second deconstructs the barriers.\(^{30}\) The third identifies strategies for inclusion and the fourth links access to wider social transformation and detraditionalisation.\(^{31}\)

It is questionable how far access is linked to social and organisational transformation and resource distribution. Sexual differences are social practices and there are varying accounts of the impact of higher education on social change and detraditionalisation. New constituencies in higher education can still be formed by traditional gender power relations. Furthermore, there is an interconnection between the social and the psychic.
The psychic operation of norms can impede political change. Oversocialisation can ensure social reproduction. Jayaweera points out how, in spite of being university educated, many Asian women continue to internalise negative gender norms and passively accept oppressive social practices including dowry deaths, female feticide and infanticide. Joshi and Pushpanadham, by contrast, describe how educational opportunities for women in India have brought transformational change in social and domestic relationships.

Successful access policies mean that there might be some small expansion of numbers of particular kinds of students. However, there is still the notion of a particular ‘body of knowledge’, or canon, to be transmitted to an elite ‘student body’. Gender equity is only within set frameworks. It is concerned with women, not gender inequalities or feminism as theory or political practice. Women are included as students, teachers or managers, but the different forms of knowledge or practice they or any similarly subordinated group might bring is not given epistemic recognition. Power is not redistributed, even though the potential space for access to power might have been widened. As Lovell suggests, we need ‘to challenge the terms of the game itself and not simply secure entry for women as legitimate players’.

It Comes with the Territory: Gender Violence and Sexual Harassment

Symbolic capital leads to symbolic power, which can also lead to symbolic and actual violence. Gender violence incorporates exploitation and powerlessness. The Panos Institute report observes that sexual, physical and psychological violence causes as much of a burden of ill-health and death among women aged 15–44 as cancer—and more than malaria and traffic accidents—and that sexual violence in the educational sector is an unaddressed issue. Further, it can impede participation and achievement and contribute to drop-out, illness and in some instances suicide. Gender violence takes on different forms across the Commonwealth. At one end of the continuum is the serious violence of cults, gangsterism or rape cultures. At the other end are the initiation rituals involved in ragging in India and Sri Lanka that are more serious than they appear.

Sexual harassment is a ubiquitous area of gender power. It marks out and reinforces gendered territory. Power accrued through time and the historicity of force makes sexual harassment possible. It problematises women’s bodies and sexuality in organisations traditionally dedicated to the life of the mind and the pursuit of abstract knowledge. Sexual harassment is rife on campus, and is either mentioned or specifically studied in reports from across the Commonwealth. Yet action to combat it is uneven. Speech in relation to sexual harassment remains a dangerous act. In Zimbabwe, Zindi’s study recorded that every one of the 2,756 respondents knew lecturers sexually exploiting female students. But 93 per cent said that they would not report sexual harassment and no person had ever been disciplined for sexual harassment. Sexual harassment was frequently cited as an explanatory factor for women’s reluctance to make themselves visible in the academy.

Organisational Culture and Micropolitics

Commonwealth gender scholars frequently note how organisational culture, negative micropolitics and informal practices impede parity of participation. The hidden curriculum, gendered networks and homosociality are repeatedly seen to exclude and disadvantage women. Power imbalances in the academy are both structural and played
out in micropolitical struggles. Like many aspects of racial and gender oppression, bullying and sexual harassment at work, micropolitics can also be subtle, elusive, volatile and difficult to capture, leaving individuals unsure of the validity of their readings of a situation.

Informal practices contribute to women’s marginalisation. In Onongo’s Kenyan study, 69 per cent of women and 92 per cent of men felt encouraged to apply for promotion. This could be related to socialisation, with career ambition considered ‘unfeminine’, that is, it is greedy, pushy, individualistic and competitive. In other words, it is agentic rather than communal behaviour. It is worth noting that in some non-Commonwealth countries, such as Finland, in spite of evolved policies and codes of practice for gender equity, a highly gendered invitational system for promotion exists. Micropolitical relays of gendered power are notoriously difficult to capture.

Women as Managers: Serving Whose Interests?

Strenuous efforts to facilitate women’s entry into management are accompanied by doubts as to whether this serves women’s collective and long-term interests. In the context of the neo-liberal political economy and the rise of the audit culture, the token inclusion of women as managers accompanied by the absence of feminist politics may stand in the way of more profound equity transformations. It can be seen in what writing exists on women’s aspirations for senior positions that difficulties with the gendered nature of the institution are not overcome as women progress professionally.

Questions have been raised in the West about women’s access to and engagement with power within hierarchical structures. There is qualitative as well as quantitative lack, with women in leadership positions being perceived as impostors, second-rate and fraudulent. The psychic life of power means that negativity can get internalised. For example, the women managers in De La Rey’s South African study frequently attributed their career success to luck, chance and factors external to themselves.

Shah observed how, in Pakistan, the discourse of equality encouraged women to enhance economic independence, career progression and social mobility, but a counter discourse of gender difference imposed constraints. Women’s institutional power was constantly undermined by the powerlessness associated with their gender.

It is often around leadership issues where the naturalisation of power is most visible. Odejide argues that Nigeria’s history of militarisation means that leadership is linked with authoritarianism and control, qualities that are not conceptualised as feminine. Odejide observes that the volatile nature of staff and student politics in Nigeria, which often involves physical and psychological violence, makes it easy for the community to designate university management as masculine territory. In Sri Lanka, Gunawardena notes how discriminatory questions are often asked at appointment boards for senior posts including ‘Can they control trade unions, student unions?’ While many women do not occupy leadership positions, those who do face many forms of discrimination.

Silences

It appears that the dominant concerns across the Commonwealth are access, the absence of women in senior academic and management positions, gender violence, the changing purpose of the university, transformation and gender mainstreaming, and the perception of hostile organisational cultures and negative micropolitics. My analysis of the literature
also suggests some major silences in terms of what is not discussed nor offered as explanatory frameworks.

The concept of masculinities is rarely problematised outside the West.\textsuperscript{54} There have been major conceptual shifts from the women in development (WID) approach to the gender and development (GAD) approach that problematises gender relations rather than women.\textsuperscript{55} However, much of the literature on gender in higher education focuses on women, sometimes to the extent of creating a remediation ethos around them. I am not suggesting that we close down hard-won spaces for women and replace them with concerns about men and boys at risk.\textsuperscript{56} In Western Europe and the Caribbean there is now considerable concern about failing boys and the possibility of the feminisation of the higher education system as disaffected young men become more socially excluded. My concern is that gender sensitisation programs might not be enough to dismantle and challenge deeply entrenched patriarchal practices. We need a theory of male privilege rather than female disadvantage.

A further silence is the uneven intersection of gender with other structures of inequality. Whereas some studies mention social class, race, religion and ethnicity, there is little on disability or sexuality outside the West and South Africa. Even in the transformational policy context of South Africa, there has been a struggle to incorporate sexual orientation into equality policies.\textsuperscript{57} In countries with progressive institutional initiatives for gender equity, like Uganda, for example, lesbians and gays are still at risk.\textsuperscript{58} Homosexuality is also illegal in Tanzania. Studies are full of normalised discursive framings of women in relation to their construction within the traditional Western family. Jeffery and Jeffery report a belief in India that women’s acquisition of a higher education degree is seen as adding to their value and hence their commoditisation in the marriage market.\textsuperscript{59} Challenging the normativity of women in familial roles is such a powerful gesture and is itself a form of impropriety that there are few attempts to denaturalise traditional lifestyles.

**Contradictions**

There are also contradictions and tensions in the literature. One is whether it is possible to ‘do’ gender work without a feminist analysis. A further question is whose feminist analysis? There are multiple interpretations of gender inequalities across the Commonwealth, with different entry points into critical discourse and different understandings and engagements with the political economy of gender. For some, feminism is providing new critical tools for evaluating and promoting gender equity in Commonwealth HEIs, and for others gender can be abstracted from a political analysis of power.

A dilemma is what theoretical tools are appropriate to interest representation and the analysis of injurious acts. For example, sexual harassment is widely reported and cited as a force that silences and disempowers women. On the other hand, while women in Africa express outrage at sexual harassment, some also feel that the vocabularies for naming these negative experiences are Western.\textsuperscript{60} This is evocative of Nussbaum’s observations that attempts by international feminists to use a universal language of justice and human rights ‘is bound to encounter charges of Westernizing and colonizing’ (p. 51).\textsuperscript{61} As soon as feminists in ‘developing’ countries express criticism of patriarchy in their own cultures, or advocate processes of detraditionalisation, they run the risk of being accused of ventriloquism.
Summary: Theorising Gendered Change

The changing political economy of higher education suggests a logic of iterability, but certain aspects of universities as social institutions seem static. While policy drivers for change are diverse, there is stability in women’s under-representation in academic posts in general and senior posts in particular. Women are entering the academy in some locations as students, but the academy is slow to change in terms of equity whereas it has been rapidly transformed in relation to new managerialism and neo-liberalism.

The literature suggests that there have been both openings and closures. Gender equity work, while focusing on exclusion, can also exclude. This is noticeable in the Western domination of the literature. Yet writers on gender equity in the Commonwealth are beginning to explore and expose the hidden conditions of existence and conditions of labour of intellectual communities. There is a strong sense of limits and counter-hegemonic challenges operating within powerful hegemonies. It is assumed by many writers and development assistance agencies that gendered change entails understanding women constructed within a norm-referenced framework. Many studies tend to perpetuate hegemonic, normative constructions of women and families. This is sometimes accompanied by an engagement with liberal feminism and the belief that bringing more women into senior positions is the ultimate equity goal. The destabilising of conventional gender relations in the academy on very limited levels is not always accompanied by wider social and political transformation.

Women are often discursively framed as problem areas. With the exception of gender-sensitisation programs, men and masculinities are rarely problematised, or perceived in need of development and training. There are silences about the forms that masculinity takes for initiatives to change higher education and the way in which resistance can constantly mutate. There are many essentialised observations about women’s qualities and preferred styles of working. Sometimes a social constructionist approach is taken, particularly in relation to women’s career development. Career progress, ambition and self-interest are sometimes seen as ‘unfeminine’ as they imply desire, greed and attention to the self.

So what is the way forward? There is always a tension between feminist change agency and feminist deconstruction. It is not my wish to render all action so problematic that we collapse into powerlessness. Nor is it my intention to offer colonial certainty and authoritarian blueprints for action. I merely wish to make some modest suggestions for attention. First, I suggest that advocacy needs to be accompanied by inquiry. Producing data and critical discourse legitimates women’s lived experiences in higher education. The lack of sustained qualitative data in virtually all the studies analysed means that the complexities of alienating organisational cultures are not always recorded. There are major issues about the gendering of research opportunities. Many studies, while pointing to important areas for future work, were unfunded, lone-researcher investigations. There is an urgent need for studies in micropolitics, the hidden curriculum, networks and homosociality, giving epistemic privilege to women’s voices in Commonwealth universities. Furthermore, studies that do exist need better dissemination mechanisms. This could be achieved, in part, via more effective global networks of gender scholars that include low-, middle- and high-income countries.

While there are different discourses justifying change to be found in most accounts, there is very little work that utilises statistics to look at intersecting inequalities, or to track longitudinal processes. Gender is one modality in which class, race, etc. are lived and there is a tendency not to intersect gender with race, ethnicity, disability, class and caste, or
sexuality. We need to continue to develop theoretical frameworks for understanding the interlocking relationship of emancipatory struggles of various kinds in different national locations.

The accountability so beloved by neo-liberal audit culture needs to be extended to equity and social inclusion, with more effective monitoring of international, national and organisational policies, research agencies and professional organisations.

In terms of higher education, we need to keep posing the question about social reproduction and/or transformation. Elite formation can function to produce multiple higher educations, with differential educational experiences and exchange rates for qualifications in the labour market for different social groups. Gender equity needs to go beyond cultural recognition and focus on the redistribution of resources inside and outside of the academy.

NOTES

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35. Terry Lovell, ‘Thinking Feminism with and Against Bourdieu’.


39. Jayasena, *Ragging and Female Students in the Universities*.


44. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

45. Onsongo, ‘Publish or Perish?’


50. De La Rey, *Women and Management*.


60. Tete-Mensah, ‘Effective Implementation’.


