Article

Fostering Gender Just and Emancipatory Campuses in HEIs: Interrogating the Role of Gender Cells and ICs

Sociological Bulletin
72(4) 405–419, 2023

DOI: 10.1177/00380229231196712
journals.sagepub.com/home/sob
Sage

Leena Pujari[1]

Abstract

This paper is a reflexive essay that engages with the vexed question of gender equity on campuses of higher education. I argue that though our campuses are mired in complex hierarchies and inequalities, they are also sites of immense possibilities. These are spaces where critical conversations can emerge around gender and sexuality including an engagement with questions of caste, class, ableism so on and so forth. However, a transformative vision and an intersectional frame must inform these conversations. Two institutional mechanisms that can enable this radical re-imagination are Gender Cells and Internal Committees. However, this imagination has fallen far short of expectations. What might one possibly do to reinvigorate these mechanisms? Is there any way we can repose the trust in these bodies that were badly shaken following #metoo? Can we build alliances and forge solidarities with different constituencies on campus to work towards emancipatory campuses? This paper throws light on these and related issues.

Keywords

Campus, pedagogy, gender cell, policy, feminism

Introduction

The paper emanates from my position as a savarna, cis-gender, middle-class feminist sociologist located in a South Mumbai college and my attempts to create gender-just and enabling spaces in my role as the Convener of the college Gender

[1] Department of Sociology, Kishinchand Chellaram College, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Corresponding author:
Leena Pujari, Department of Sociology, Kishinchand Chellaram College, Mumbai, Maharashtra 400020, India.
E-mail: leena_pujari@hotmail.com

Cell and during my brief stint as the Presiding Officer of the college IC. This paper also draws substantially from my conversations with WDC Conveners and IC Heads from affiliated colleges of University of Mumbai at workshops and seminars and students across disciplines.

To be able to interrogate and re-imagine lived social realities is unique to educational campuses. While the classroom has the potential for transformation, it may be somewhat limited given the constraints of time, power hierarchies, exam schedule and syllabus completion. However, the space outside the classroom can be quite liberatory. From committees and associations to canteen and sports room, the possibilities of dialogue and conversation in these sites, among students and between faculty and students are immense. But in many ways, though not always, this is not the case. Students encounter conflicting ideologies, mixed messages that are both enabling and disabling, empowering and disempowering and require a complex set of negotiations.

There has been a phenomenal increase in universities and colleges since independence and a significant jump in the enrolment of girls. The All-India Survey of Higher Education 2020–2021 (Department of Higher Education, GOI, 2021) puts female enrolment in higher education at forty-nine per cent. From less than ten per cent in the 1950s to forty-nine per cent in 2020–2021, we have indeed travelled a long distance. However, we need to ask whether the increasing number of women in higher education translates into better opportunities for them and those in gender-marginal locations. Does gender parity in higher education translate into gender equity? This begs an answer since the argument around numbers can be quite misleading.

In an interesting essay on Women and Gender Equality in Higher Education (2015) Miriam David speaks about how gender balance in undergraduate courses in higher education does not mean gender equality has been achieved or that all contradictions have been resolved. She argues how the numbers game is a mask for continuing power play whereby the rules of the game are still misogynistic. One of the most insightful and incisive reports that engaged with the question of gender in higher education in India is Saksham (2013), the task force set up by UGC in the wake of the gang rape of Jyoti Singh in 2012 in Delhi, to review measures of safety on Campus and Gender Sensitisation. According to Saksham report, this closing gender gap in higher education hides ongoing inequalities. Saksham has been scathing in its indictment of higher educational institutions and their lack of gender sensitivity, calling it the 'weakest link' in our educational institutions. The report flagged the widespread presence and normalisation of sexual harassment on campuses and the failure of redressal systems to deliver justice to the survivors.

The #metoo campaign that unfolded in academia six years later in 2018 further punctured the idea of campuses as 'safe' and 'inclusive' and exposed the deep fault lines in the academic world. The campaign that followed the Harvey Weinstein scandal in Hollywood led to an outpouring of testimonies on social media, of women who recounted traumatic incidents of sexual abuse. In the midst of this raging controversy came a young lawyer Raya Sarkar's crowd-sourced list of alleged sexual harassers in Indian academia. The publication of Raya Sarkar's list on Facebook was followed by a statement by veteran Indian feminists who pointed

towards the dangers of an unsubstantiated list with an appeal to withdraw the list and to follow institutional mechanisms of 'due process'. This led to a fierce controversy and a divide with strong opinions being expressed on both sides. The sheer volume of writing on the subject points to the rage, anguish and hurt on both sides of the divide. (Jha, 2017; Roy, 2017; Shukla, 2018). Despite the polarisation of feminist politics and strategies, the emerging discourses were unanimous in acknowledging the presence of sexual harassment on our campuses and our gendered academic cultures. Suneetha et al. (2017) write about how the list of sexual harassers in academia signals a new kind of politics born out of a compelling desire for equality in our heterogenous campuses and supported by new media.

This paper is organised into three sections. The first section 'Gender and Higher Education: Complexities and Nuances' delves into the complexities and nuances of gender in higher education and asks whether we can have an alternative imagination of our campuses? The second section 'Institutional Mechanisms and Accountability: A Brief History' traces the trajectory and efficacy of institutional mechanisms to address issues of sexism on campus. The third section 'Quest for Gender Justice: Some Experiments' documents some of my (Gender Cell) experiments to spearhead a gender consciousness on campus and the humongous struggles that accompany such attempts.

Gender and Higher Education: Complexities and Nuances

Campuses of higher education are highly differentiated not just internally with a diverse mix of staff and students across different social locations but also geographically. Metropolitan, central universities are different from regional universities. Further, scholars have pointed out how institutes of higher education are not just professional spaces but also affective spaces for peers and teachers. Learning is an emotional activity. Fraternal relationships in these institutes are unlike any other professional space (Geetha, 2019).

Our campuses are located within the larger society and therefore will reflect the schisms and inequalities of the outside world (Bhushan, 2016; Saksham, 2013). These conflicting ideologies and contestations can be highly disabling and exclusionary for students. It is therefore important to understand how multiple identities of caste, class, sexuality, ableism, religion, language and gender, intersect to produce experiences of marginalisation and privilege for the students.

What is also alarming is a culture of misogyny and sexism that sits quietly on our campuses. In some, it is glaring and, in many others, it camouflages itself in benevolent ways. While there may not be overt instances of sexual harassment, covert and implicit instances of sexism continue unabated. These are mostly manifested as loaded comments, demeaning jokes centred on women and those in gender-marginal locations, stereotypical observations about gender roles and performances. Cultural festivals are rife with sexual innuendos and pass off as 'normal' and 'humorous'. The subtext of everyday conversations is gendered. The bigger challenge, therefore, is countering these benevolent forms of sexism. It is important to map and understand how the gender regime with its focus on

savarna, able-bodied and cis-het students is constructed and reinforced through routine, taken-for-granted activities on campus (Pujari, 2017).

How Do We Imagine Higher Education Campuses?

Given this reality, one is tempted to ask how do we envision our universities and campus spaces? What are they for? Do they exist to simply disseminate the received wisdom or is it also about constructing a non–normative discourse that not only sensitises students to multiple axes of marginalisation and discrimination but also encourages them to raise questions, however, disturbing or uncomfortable that might be (Pathak, 2021). Our campuses should be enabling and empowering spaces that propel students to re-think and re-imagine the 'standard, the norm and the given' and construct a transformative vision of the world. Safe spaces, free-flowing conversations and a non-hierarchical campus that values students' voices and privileges their social, emotional and mental well-being along with academic growth are what make for emancipatory campuses.

While power hierarchies and inequities characterise our campuses, they are also placed in a strategic position to be able to thwart, correct and mitigate regressive influences of casteism, sexism and communalism by institutionalising a set of practices that respect diversity and differences and make the campus a space for equal opportunities for all across diverse social locations. Thus, they are sites of immense possibilities. They can nurture critical thinkers and create enabling and safe spaces for students to confront unequal social norms that are deeply embedded in our families, neighbourhoods and communities. They do provide a space for self-reflection and critical engagement with ideas that seek to challenge the status quo (Deshpande, 2016; Nair, 2017).

The Women Development Cells/Gender Cells provide one such platform where such conversations can emerge. The role of WDCs and ICs assumes tremendous significance in thwarting attempts at reinforcing gendered ideas and nudging students and staff towards a process of unlearning and relearning. They were designed to establish institutional accountability and to be responsive to the needs of students, thereby institutionalising principles of care and ethics. My engagements with students within the Cell have brought home the idea of how the cell can be a space for 'healing and therapy'. For me as a feminist pedagogue, conversations with students within the cell have been enriching and educative and have made me reflect on the disjuncture that characterises our educational institutions. Do our systems with their rigid structures, make space for and accommodate mental health concerns, the everyday struggles and unaddressed trauma in the lives of our students, which certainly impact their academic performance?

Institutional Mechanisms and Accountability: A Brief History

It was in the year 1999, after the Vishakha judgement in 1997, that UGC directed that Women Development Cells be constituted (hereafter referred to as WDCs) in

the universities and the affiliated colleges with clear guidelines on the nature and purpose of these cells. They were assigned the twin responsibilities of prevention of sexual harassment through gender sensitisation programmes and dealing with sexual harassment cases, if any. In 2013, came the Saksham committee report, a landmark in many ways, putting in place not just the lacunas and loopholes but also wide-ranging suggestions on making campuses gender-just and enabling. In 2015, UGC issued fresh guidelines on the Prevention of Sexual Harassment in colleges and universities.

These guidelines were based on 'The Sexual Harassment (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013' commonly known as POSH Act. Under these guidelines, every university and college had to constitute an Internal Committee (hereafter referred to as IC) for inquiring into sexual harassment cases. The IC would function like a Civil Court and there were clear guidelines on how the inquiry was to be conducted based on principles of fair trial, interim relief, confidentiality and justice to the survivor. With the constitution of IC, complaints and redressal of sexual harassment came under the purview of IC, while WDCs had a wider mandate of gender sensitisation.

The Gender Cell/WDC exists as a mandated body as per Section 3.2 (15) of UGC Guidelines (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of women employees and Students in higher educational institutions) Regulations, 2015.[1] The Gender Cell/WDC works in close association with Internal Committee which addresses all complaints of sexual harassment within the Institute as per Section 4 of the UGC Guidelines (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of women employees and Students in higher educational institutions) Regulations, 2015.[1]

Both WDC and IC were envisioned as autonomous bodies with an explicit commitment to fostering gender-sensitive campuses and being responsive to any violations that might be reported. However, over the years their functioning has come in for sharp criticism. They have become tokenistic affairs with little understanding of how gender discrimination is a systemic issue and why therefore the approach to gender within campuses must be a sustained process aimed at dismantling deep-rooted prejudices and providing an alternative imagination of lived social realities. Primarily seen as perfunctory in nature, they are constituted to meet statutory demands and to fulfil the requirements of accreditation agencies like NAAC. They face humongous challenges in their attempts to forge democratic and gender-just campus spaces. At a National Seminar, Symposium and Outreach Programme titled 'Gendered Academic Cultures and Sexual Harassment in Academia: #Metoo and Beyond', jointly organised by the Women Development Cell, University of Mumbai and Gender Cell of KC College in March 2019, IC Presiding Officers across colleges in Mumbai spoke of unsupportive administration and management, about not being taken seriously, not being well informed about IC procedures and a complete lack of autonomy. The perception of gender cells and ICs on campus is largely binary, swinging between two extremes of either belittling their work and dismissing them or seeing them as a threat or too radical an imagination. There is a distrust of institutional mechanisms to address sexual and gender-based violations. They are perceived as pro-women and anti-men and as potential spaces for misuse.

The respondent (as per the guidelines can only be a man) feels he is being 'targeted' and the survivor is reluctant to engage with the 'due process' for fear of being maligned and shamed. Such a situation does not augur well for the institution.

There is a fuzziness that surrounds the understanding of gender and sexual harassment on university campuses (John, 2019). Sexual and gender identities are easily conflated and the understanding is largely binary. The discourse is more about protecting and policing girl students than creating safe spaces on campus. In a context where there is so much ambiguity about gender identities and a benevolent kind of sexism that pervades the campus, how does one sensitise the different constituencies on campus. Both the Gender Cell and IC including policy documents stress a lot on 'gender sensitisation'. A pertinent question here would be, what does sensitisation essentially entail? Is it simply about raising awareness of gender issues by putting together a few programmes every year? Or does it involve a deeper process of reflection, one that enables an interrogation of privileges and leads to hopefully a profound behavioural change. Sensitisation is certainly not about organising a few programmes that can be mentioned in the annual report of the college or for accreditation purposes. Charity events, baking classes and classes on nutrition, treasure hunt and self-defence workshops alone[2] without an interrogation of our gendered identities will not have the desired impact. This is largely an exercise in tokenism rather than acknowledging and addressing systemic exclusions, unequal power relations, intersecting vulnerabilities and complex hierarchies.

Fundamental to the sensitisation process is an understanding of how gender bias is a structural issue and how it intersects with multiple marginalities of caste, class, ethnicity, ableism, language and geography to produce disabling and enabling experiences for each one of us. It is about subverting the established gender roles and thus involves a whole lot of unlearning and relearning. Feminist insights are integral to the sensitisation process and hence need to be integrated. Policies will not change things on the ground unless we interrogate the gendered processes which is why sensitisation becomes extremely important. This has to be a sustained and ongoing process and not an isolated and fragmented one.

One is of course confronted with a host of questions in this regard. Can Gender Cells and ICs enable this? How open and receptive are our institutions to these ideas? Or will they be perceived as too radical? Can they provide emancipatory spaces where these conversations can happen, enabling a process of reflection and introspection? Can they alone take on this burden? Or should they build alliances with other statutory bodies on campus? As Sen (2017) asks, can we not have a culture of conversations between different constituencies on campus so as to move beyond a complaint culture. All matters pertaining to gender discrimination cannot be left to committees alone. Given the backlash and distrust of WDCs and ICs especially in the context of #metoo how does one imagine a politics of transformation?

Quest for Gender Justice: Some Experiments

While being fully cognizant of the fact that each campus is different and thus as pedagogues and gender practitioners our approaches to integrating a gender

consciousness are bound to be different, what I proffer here are some of the practices that we (faculty and students) at the Gender Cell have adopted in our attempts to create a gender enabling campus. My college is located in South Mumbai, which in itself is considered an elite location. Our students come primarily from the middle class and from different religious backgrounds with a substantial number coming from the religious minority groups, such as Muslims, Parsees, Jains and Catholics. However, these groups do not constitute a monolith. There is considerable diversity in terms of sect, village and community affiliation.

Barring a few exceptions, most of them come from extremely patriarchal joint or nuclear households where either the father or some male member is the head of the household with complete decision-making power. The existence of multiple and overlapping patriarchies of class, caste, gender and religion further complicate their lives. However, the classroom dynamics change in the unaided sections (self-financed courses with either a regular commerce or science or Arts degree in the traditional courses such as Economics and Psychology or professional courses like Banking and Insurance, Finance and Accounts or Computer Science and Information Technology) where most of the students, barring some, come from economically well-off homes. The enrolment is heavily skewed towards girl students in the faculty of Arts with a male-female ratio of 0.2:1. In the case of sciences, traditional subjects like Chemistry, Life Sciences and Statistics attract a high proportion of girl students. On the other hand, the proportion of male students is higher in self-financed courses like BSc IT, BSc Computer Science and Film and Television courses.

Back in 2003, when I was made the faculty in charge of what was then known as WDC, the challenges were immense, since there were very few conversations around gender on campus except in subjects like Sociology or English or Foundation Courses where some discussion happened in the classrooms, because of the demands of the syllabi. We faced numerous obstacles, formidable among them being the struggle to enrol student volunteers in the cell. Some girl students were willing but were often teased by the boys who told them 'The cell exists for your development' and this was perceived as 'belittling'. Boys were not ready to be part of the conversations. In due course, we faced some troubling questions from students in gender-marginal locations who asked if the WDC was only for cis-women? What about our complaints they asked?

We soon realised that the nomenclature of the Cell had to change if we are to make the cell inclusive and embracing of all genders. While I fully understand that there was a certain politics in naming the cells as women development cells, as they were meant to be enabling and empowering spaces for women on campus but we felt that it was not achieving the desired purpose and it was leading to a kind of ghettoisation. We named ourselves Gender Issues Cell to reach out to a larger audience and we also co-opted faculty from all streams and all courses as far as possible and oriented them on the nuances of gender.

While we were active within the cell, organising a series of programmes aimed at subverting common sense perceptions of culturally prescribed gender roles, somewhere along the way, some of us including student members flagged the need for more student-led initiatives. The approach was becoming 'top down' with faculty members on the cell conceptualising and executing most of the

programmes. We felt the need for a more critical engagement with gender issues, sustained pedagogic involvement and a more robust theoretical base among our student volunteers so that they could lead from the front. In 2014 we introduced a Certificate Course in Gender Studies (hereafter referred to as CCGS). One of the main objectives of the course was to build a critical feminist perspective.

Unlike 'mainstream' certificate courses that focus on the dissemination of information and knowledge, this course aims at enabling shifts and building conversations around gender and sexuality through an intersectional lens. Built on feminist pedagogical practices that necessitate an intensive, face-to-face dialogue, this course provides an immersive experience for students. It attempts to create a feminist classroom, a collaborative and egalitarian space by disrupting the hierarchy between teacher and students with an emphasis on participatory approaches and experiential learning which helps in knowledge production within the classroom (hooks,1994; Shrewsbury, 1987).

Spread over two months and eighteen sessions, this course draws the best of resource persons from diverse fields of inquiry and includes social and transgender activists, lawyers, academics and filmmakers who bring to the course their rich experience from the field and a certain dynamism and passion.

The course is structured around six core themes, Gender and Sexuality, Multiple Patriarchies and Feminisms, Gender violence, Laws and gendered courtrooms, Visual and Performative bodies and the dangers of essentialism and dichotomies. The entire course is administered by senior students who have already completed the course.

At the end of the course, we have a session titled 'Reflections' where I ask students, in small batches of five to six each, to reflect on the sessions and whether the course enabled a re-think of the received wisdom. I ask them to list down ways in which the process of 'unlearning and relearning' has happened and whether they take these conversations forward to their friends and families. I also ask them if there was anything in the course that they did not like or did not agree with and if there are any suggestions for improvement. This is a very important component of the course since it focuses on transformations beyond the classroom and within families, communities and neighbourhoods. They are also asked to present a written assignment on the same. This session has been very revealing and has brought to the fore multiple things. The trauma of abuse and violence in homes and the inability to comprehend these or not finding ways to address them all through their school years, anxiety and confusion regarding one's sexuality and gender identity and deeply held prejudices about sex, gender and feminism.

Ria, a first-year student of Arts from the class of 20–21 talks about her perception of feminism before and after the course.

> The portrayal of feminism and a feminist in social media always shows the negative aspects which is why society has a negative outlook towards feminism. The course has given me a better view about feminism but I still would not call myself a feminist because the role and responsibility of a feminist is huge and once, I am sure I will be able to do justice to the word feminist I will call myself a feminist.

Writing about her takeaway from the course Priya, a second-year student of Arts writes

> One of the most important takeaways from these sessions was how important it is for us to check our privileges. I realized the extent of my privilege as a cisgender, fully abled, upper caste Hindu, and I realized how often the voices of those who do not have the same privileges as I do are sidelined.

Very few cis-boys enrol for the course and even fewer from Commerce. Amir, from the class of 2019–2020, the one student that we had in Finance and Management all these years wrote

> The course has changed my perceptions beyond imagination. I did not even know that there are multiple genders. There was a time when I used to mock Hijras and would get petrified of them if I would see one in the trains or on the roads. I would just close my eyes and hope that they would go away from me. That's how insensitive I was. But after I met Urmi (transgender resource person) and came to know about the various aspects of their lives, I'm surely going to greet any Hijra that I come across henceforth and probably offer them a chilled bottle of water.

During the pandemic, the course moved online. While I was very apprehensive about whether we could create safe feminist spaces in the digital medium we were quite surprised at some of the responses of the students who wrote about how some family members sat through the sessions and how this triggered interesting conversations within the family.

Some wrote about the discomfort they experienced. Harini, from Life Sciences, said

> I personally come from a very conservative family and hearing what each resource person had to say really inspired me. The sessions, if overheard by my family members, would tend to make them really uncomfortable which I feel is a good thing as you can't get out of your comfort zone unless you are uncomfortable.

On completing the course, some of the participants join the cell and are passionately involved in spearheading a gender consciousness among students. Over the years they have drawn our attention to problematic guidebooks and textbooks, inappropriate and stereotypical comments by teachers, sexism manifest in other cells and associations on campus. The course has provided a safe space for conversations around gender and sexuality especially for students with non-normative gender identities. While some of them choose not to 'out' themselves in their regular classroom, they are open about their sexuality in CCGS classrooms and are eager to learn more.

Rohit, a trans student from BSC IT said

> Being assigned male at birth, there are a lot of expectations of being just masculine and nothing else. This course enabled a feminist perspective and gave me the confidence to embrace my femininity and fight toxic masculinity.

In fact, this course triggered the idea of 'Kweers of KC', a support group of queer students on campus. Students from across disciplines are part of this group but many among them choose not to self-identify for fear of a backlash. Wagh (2022)

writes about the antinomies that characterise our campuses. While trans identity is recognised as a marginal identity and there is a discussion around this in courses and classes, the rights of trans students to identify, own and use this space are limited.

There are other challenges too. Many students, especially from Commerce and Science remain beyond the purview of the course. While some students from the science do opt for the course, commerce students seem highly disinclined. I often wonder what is it about gender courses that commerce students by and large (there are exceptions) find so repulsive? One of the student heads of the cell who pursued Commerce in her 11th and 12th before switching to Social Sciences for her bachelor's degree had this to say

> We never heard of feminism in a good light. It was always associated with aggression. Also, the curriculum in Commerce is centred around competition and the market. A course on gender does not seem to fit into their scheme of things.

It is indeed challenging to talk about gender to students whose understanding of gender is largely derived from celebrity influencers on social media even speaking about why gender matters is a fraught idea, let alone telling them about feminism. How does one engage with these students? My experience tells me that we need to pitch things differently. I generally turn to bell hooks and Ahmed (2017) whose writings on Feminism have helped me to break the ice and initiate discussions on gender and feminism with a recalcitrant bunch of students. bell hooks (2000) writes about how feminism is not a movement of women against men nor is it about gender equality. Rather it is a fight against institutionalised sexism and holds a vision of a better world. Similarly, for Ahmed (2017) feminism raises questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world and how to create relationships with others that are more equal. When I am addressing students of Banking and Insurance or Finance and Management, if I begin by saying that we all can be patriarchal and that feminism is not about gender equality but a vision of a better world, it certainly puts them at ease. This gives me the space to then engage with more complex issues.

We realised that many students may not be able to do the course. Sometimes a course can be perceived as 'heavy' and 'theoretical' and some students might not engage with it. We explored the idea of performance and whether we could use creative and popular cultural mediums like art, poetry, dance, photography and music to spearhead gender consciousness among students. One such programme is 'Creative expressions', an annual event that questions everyday forms of sexism that are sought to be normalised. The events are spread over a month and are centred around a theme to create awareness as well as provide a platform for students to express their views and opinions.

The event begins with a series of pre-events that are aimed at orienting students to the nuances and complexities of the theme for that year to ensure effective and meaningful participation in the programmes ahead. Some of the themes over the years have been 'Sexual harassment, Representation of gender(s) in media, LGBTQI Pioneers and Pop Culture and Shadow pandemic' among many others. Open Mic

competition witnesses scintillating performances by students that include slam poetry, monologues, singing and dancing. In 2018 there was an Art installation on sexual harassment along with a Photo-Series of stories depicting struggles and resistances. The pre-events and competitions culminate in a fundraiser that showcases the artwork of students. Each work of art comes with a gender message.

While we have worked reasonably well with the students, one constituency that remains by and largely indifferent to gender issues, save a few, are the pedagogues. Sexist comments and stereotypical attitudes among faculty members and their refusal to acknowledge the same remain persisting challenges. Statements like 'your dress is an invitation to others', 'homosexuality is a disease' or 'everything starts from the dress' do not augur well for the institution. A question that was asked in one of the papers of a very popular course read 'Describe the phenomenon of rape and what are its causative factors'? One wonders how does one 'describe' the process of dehumanisation that constitutes rape. Gender sensitisation is not a matter for students alone but is required for all constituencies: students, faculty, and administration. While the gender cells organise a series of activities for students, similar programmes for faculty and administrative staff are rare. While the newly inducted faculty members are open to the idea of learning, senior members often pose a hurdle.

Similar concerns exist about faculty members who hold positions in gender cells and ICs. A nuanced and multi-layered understanding of gender still eludes us. With a total freeze on the appointment of permanent staff members by the government and an increasing presence of contractual and visiting faculty, the task of a sustained dialogue with teachers has been getting increasingly difficult. Contractual nature of appointment with its reductive and quantitative nature of work leaves very little time to explore questions of gender. A community-building exercise that is fundamental to the process of re-imagination is certainly at stake.

Management and administration are supportive of our endeavours but at times we find ourselves pushing from the margins. The use of words like 'feminism' and 'sexual harassment' is particularly resisted. While it is easier to talk about raising a gender consciousness, to say that I am raising a feminist consciousness may be perceived as intimidating. Interestingly, gender sensitisation measures on campus have the support of management and administration but complaints of sexual harassment and redressal mechanisms come under scrutiny. There is certainly an anxiety about protecting the reputation of the college. Complaints of complainants with mental health issues are trivialised. Complainants are often judged by the company they keep and their attendance and performance in classes. It appears there is an image of an 'an ideal complainant' whose story can be believed and every complainant must fit into that 'ideal' to make her narrative convincing.

Slippages and Dangers

Challenges are varied and many. They are never the same at any given point in time. There are newer challenges that have come to the fore in recent times. The rise of cultural nationalism and neo-liberalism pose a threat to the way the question of women's rights is being articulated today. The discourse is no longer about

autonomy and emancipation but about safety and protection. From being largely absent and silenced on campus and being thought of as not worthy enough to now being everywhere, gender has indeed become a buzzword, a popular discourse. There is a certain danger in this proliferation because we really do not know whether feminist insights, struggles and discourses underpin the proliferation (Anurekha, 2022).

The neo-liberal context with its obsession with standardisation and uniformity and reductive processes leads to depoliticised educational spaces, devoid of debate and critical thinking, aimed at creating, not conscious individuals and citizens but people who can just fit into the capitalist market who would not challenge any existing status quo (Nair, 2017; Pathak, 2019). The neoliberal and meritocratic logic that drives higher education today focuses on the individual and not the oppressive social structures. So, there is no reflexive process, no questioning of privileges or talk of intersecting vulnerabilities.

I have noticed this tilt towards neo-liberalism in the activities being organised by the cell and a certain dilution of its radical fervour. For instance, 'Fundraiser' is an event that marks the culmination of a month-long activity, Creative expressions (referred to above) aimed at confronting and dismantling gender stereotypes is being showcased as an entrepreneurial skill, shorn of its radical imagination. I receive requests from several groups who call themselves 'startups', want to collaborate and do workshops around gender with neither a feminist imagination nor any grassroots experience. The intent here is not to trivialise their work or put them under a scanner but simply to delineate how these might be survival strategies in an intensely competitive and market-driven world that we inhabit.

Building Alliances and Forging Solidarities

Fostering gender-sensitive campus spaces cannot be the task of gender cells or ICs alone. A sustained attack must be mounted at different levels and in multiple forums if we are to make a difference. This includes curricular reforms and pedagogic shifts across disciplines and integration of gender concerns within different committees, cells and associations on campuses. Gender cells must collaborate with each one of them to ensure that a gender component is integrated into the programmes with the necessary feminist insights to get the 'messaging right'. Curricular reforms and the necessary pedagogic shifts are imperative in our quest for gender justice on campus. Rayaprol (2011) in the context of autonomy versus integration debate with respect to gender courses argues in favour of integration, since autonomy invariably leads to ghettoisation. However, she cautions that with integration there is also a danger of dilution of gender concerns. Thus, mere inclusion of gender-related topics would not by itself generate a feminist consciousness. What is also required is a pedagogical shift and the necessary feminist insights with an emphasis on critical and self-reflexive approaches to inquiry. The quest for gender justice cannot be a fragmentary and isolated approach. It requires a sustained dialogue both inside and outside the classrooms and within every cell and committee on campus.

Policy Initiatives and Accreditation

National Education Policy 2020 or accreditation frameworks like NAAC do not make gender the focus of policy initiatives on campus or accreditation, though they do talk about gender. The revised assessment and accreditation framework of NAAC for instance, launched in 2017 does not mention gender as a core value. It does not talk about gender equality parameters/indicators or accreditation. It is primarily a box-ticking exercise except for some questions related to gender equity. With its focus on numbers and quantitative metrics, the emphasis is on the number of gender equity programmes organised rather than the kind of programmes. This propensity towards numbers and figures is reductionist. Neither NEP, 2020 nor NAAC guidelines talk about internalised misogyny, systemic exclusions, or structural limitations. There is just a token reference to the need for sensitisation. It is a typical 'add and stir' approach rather than a reconceptualisation from a gender perspective. This sense of tokenism is writ large in all policy measures and systems of accreditation. This gap between policy and practice is embedded in our everyday lives. These policy documents and accreditation agencies imagine a typical student as a savarna, able-bodied, cis-het student.

The only exception is GATI, which is Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions of the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, and is modelled largely on ATHENA Swans programme in the UK which is a gender equality accreditation scheme under which educational institutions are accredited on gender equity principles. Gati speaks about systemic exclusion and structural limitations that impede women and other marginalised genders progress in society. However, despite this, its expression of interest is largely binary with no mention of other gender categories (Department of Science and Technology, GOI, n.d.).

Conclusion

Gender justice on campus cannot be delinked from larger structures of misogyny and inequality and how they impinge on structures and processes within HEIs. This recognition would enable a more inclusive and nuanced approach to making our campuses gender-just and emancipatory. We must ask how and why campuses that are meant to be enabling spaces become entrenched in different layers of casual and benevolent sexism. Is casual sexism unrelated to violent sexual assault or does it feed into the larger canvas of misogyny and patriarchy? How does one deal with power imbalances in academia and the obsession with structures of hierarchy and ranking? Can we possibly explore alternatives to address intellectual misogyny?

Critical classroom pedagogies, co-curricular and extracurricular programmes and activities that subvert common sense perceptions of culturally prescribed gender roles and enable a reflection of our gendered experiences and the interconnected nature of oppression can help refashion society in significant ways. If we

can take these critical conversations forward to our families, neighbourhoods and communities and enable a kind of interface between the 'cultural' and the 'academic' then we can look forward to a more compassionate and empathetic world.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the editors of this volume Professor Aparna Rayaprol and Dr Anurekha Chari Wagh for the time spent on reviewing this piece and for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I am grateful to my colleagues in the Gender Cell, Dr Shalini R Sinha, Dr Nandini Sengupta, Jade Carvalho and Ayeshna Dutta and the student representatives over the years, for the enriching feminist conversations and the spirit of camaraderie and solidarity within the cell.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. https://www.ugc.ac.in/pdfnews/7203627_UGC_regulations-harassment.pdf
2. These were listed as activities of the cell on the website of a prominent college in Mumbai.

References

Ahmed. S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.

Bhushan, S. (2016). Public University in a Democracy. *Economic & Political Weekly*, *LI*(17), 35–40.

Department of Science and Technology. (n.d.). *Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions (GATI): The GATI Charter (Provisional)*. Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India. https://www.gatiresources.in/gati-framework/gati-charter-journey

Department of Higher Education. (2021). *All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020–2021*. Ministry of Human Resource Development. https://aishe.gov.in/aishe/viewDocument.action;jsessionid=58AB570C1AFE7BCF162E38A760E007F6?documentId=352

David, M. (2015). Women and gender equality in higher education? *Education Sciences*, *5*, 10–25.

Deshpande, S. (2016). The public university after Rohith–Kanhaiya. *Economic & Political Weekly*, *LI*(11), 32–34.

Geetha, V. (2019, 6–8 March). *Sexual harassment in academia and gendered academic cultures: #Metoo and Beyond*. National Seminar, National Symposium and Outreach Day, Women's Development Cell, University of Mumbai and Gender Issues Cell, K C College

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom.* Routledge.

hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate: Politics*. Pluto Press.

Jha, N. (2017, 10 July). *List naming and shaming alleged sexual harassers in Indian universities sparks a debate*. Scroll. In. https://scroll.in/article/855438/name-and-shame-list-indian-women-students-explain-why-they-dont-trust-official-sexual-abuse-panels

John, M. (2019). TIF: *Sexual Violence 2012–2018 and #MeToo.* India Forum. https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/sexual-violence-2012-2018-and-metoo

Nair, J. (2017). The provocations of the public university. *Economic & Political Weekly*, *LII*(37), 34–41.

Pathak, A. (2019, 26 June). Youngsters are you ready to re-think education. *The Wire.* https://thewire.in/education/youngsters-are-you-ready-to-rethink-education

Pathak, A. (2021, 5 September). Teachers should be seen as carriers of 'emancipatory education'. *Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/teachers-emancipatory-education-bookish-knowledge-7487839/

Pujari, L. (2017). Sexual harassment is endemic in academic spaces: An insider's perspective. *Economic & Political Weekly*, *52*(50), http://www.epw.in/engage/article/sexual-harassment-endemic-academic-spaces-insider-perspective.

Rayaprol, A. (2011). Teaching gender in Indian universities: Reflections on feminist pedagogy. *Sociological Bulletin*, *60*(1), 65–78. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23620996.

Roy, S. (2017, 1 November). Whose feminism is it anyway. *Wire.* https://thewire.in/192999/whose-feminism-anyway/

Suneetha, A., Bhrugubanda, U., Nagaraj, V., & Kutty, L. (2017). The 'List' and the task of rearranging academic relationships. *Economic & Political Weekly*, *52*(47). https://www.epw.in/engage/article/list-and-task-rearranging-academic-relationships.

Sen, R. (2017). Sexual harassment and the limits of free speech. *Economic & Political Weekly Engage*, *52*(50), http://www.epw.in/engage/article/sexual-harassment-limits-speech.

Shukla, M. (2018, 25 January). *At IIT-Bombay, your day starts with casual sexism and ends with chauvinism*. Quartz. https://qz.com/1189017/at-iit-bombay-your-day-starts-with-casual-sexism-and-ends-with-chauvinism/?utm_source=parSC

Shrewsbury, C. (1987). What is feminist pedagogy? *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *15*(3/4), 6–14. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003432.

University Grants Commission. (2013). *Saksham: Measures for Ensuring the Safety of Women and Programmes of Gender Sensitisation on Campuses*.

Wagh, C. A. (2022). Bringing back the 'Classroom': Feminist pedagogy in a sociology classroom. *Society and Culture in South Asia*, *8*(1), 7–29.