Voice, silence and privilege in the neoliberal university: The 'irresponsibility' of Gender and Women's Studies pedagogies in higher education in India

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we focus on the Indian higher education context, where expansion of Gender and Women's Studies (GWS), as well as institutional and national gender equality policies have not resulted in unsettling intersectional injustices in educational participation and practice. We draw on qualitative data (interviews with staff and focus groups with students) from a mixed-methods study aiming to advance gender equality. Gender and Women's Studies pedagogies were imbued with professionalizing gender, depoliticising criticality and individualising gender equality. Gender sensitising rather than engaging with the affective dimensions of hegemonic power and knowledge, and silencing mechanisms against marginalized groups, implicated in classroom and institutional politics, affirmed privileged subjectivities and diverted from a pedagogical ethic of speaking, listening and participating responsibly in education and society. A shift to pedagogies of discomfort and for democratic citizenship might facilitate intellectual and political activism and alleviate some of the 'irresponsibility' of neoliberalised Gender and Women's Studies in India.

Gender parity versus gender justice: unpacking higher education in India

This paper draws on data from a large research project conducted within the context of the New Education Policy, 2020 and the peculiar problem of Gender Equality in Higher Education (HE) in India aiming to demystify the celebratory narrative of gender parity in higher education by studying 10 institutions across 5 states in India selected on the basis of their socio-economic diversity, Gross Enrolment Ration (GER) and gender parity index. On the one hand, we see that gender parity has been achieved in HE, which is to say almost one out of every two students in higher educational institutions in the country is a woman. GER for women in 2019–20 is 27.3 % as compared to 26.9 % for men (Tsouroufli et al., 2023). This means that more eligible women as compared to men are attending college and university in India. However, the complexity of the higher education system in India, with a mix of public and private institutions, distinction and hierarchy made between 'general' and 'professional' education, needs careful and contextual analysis to

unravel the problem of gender equality in the present context.

The apparent celebratory vistas of gender parity get complicated when one disaggregates data, with wide regional disparities existing. While 'women' as a whole, seem to have achieved parity with men, the disparities amongst women across social groups (caste, urban/rural and class) have sharpened. Disaggregated by disciplines and levels of education, women are concentrated in the humanities and social sciences and natural sciences, with law, management and engineering still showing wide gender gaps. In terms of teachers, women are almost equal in numbers but concentrated at the lower levels of temporary teachers, demonstrators and assistant professors. As one goes up the hierarchy, the proportion of women falls sharply, with less than 7 % Vice-Chancellors being women, more than half of them in women only institutions (AISHE Report, 2018). The other significant context to think about is the linkages between education and employment, which have always been skewed for women. Now, we see expansion of women's participation in HE at a time when their labour force participation is declining (a mere 27 % in 2017–2018) (PLFS Report, 2018).

The landscape of HE itself has seen massive institutional expansion, especially of private institutions and concurrent rise in enrolments of students, including those from hitherto marginalized communities, making first generation learners a large component of the student body. However, this is also in the context of rising costs of higher education, even in public institutions and structural changes with focus on technology, vocational education and a devaluation of humanities and social sciences. The National Education Policy (NEC, 2020) is geared towards addressing this changed higher education sector, but is marked by invisibilization of and absences around gender in policy, more so at HE level.

With respect to the question of gender, it must be noted that the landscape of Indian university system is transforming being increasingly inhabited by socially diverse groups. The gender gaps in higher education are narrowing down. However, there is wide state wise and district wise variation requiring focused intervention. This story of gender inclusion masks the two phenomena which complicate the picture: one is the glass ceiling, i.e. tapering participation of women at research degrees as compared to undergraduate colleges and the other is the horizontal segregation that has ensured that breaching the male bastions of professional education would be difficult for women. The other is the context of the socio- economic disparities amongst women, in terms of caste, religion, income, urbanity which are hugely wide, and narrowing at much slower pace, in the face of reducing gender gaps, which are comparatively less wide even amongst socially disadvantaged groups (John, 2012).

Gender and Women's Studies in higher education in India

The field of Women's Studies emerged in India in 1970s remarkably with the state support, as a response to the diverse socio- political forces: political radicalism of new social movements and feminist movements on the ground, realization of the limits of the modernist social reform through educating women, and developmentalist impulse of the nation-state in the context of UN international decade of women, and subsequent Report on Status of Women in India titled as Towards Equality (Rege, 2011) that has created women as a vantage point to engage with the project of development. Women's Studies then was directed to be a distinct multi-faceted space within university, to produce knowledges and interventions about women that are relevant to the nation- state by undertaking research, community and field work, networking and extension, dissemination and publication of resources, and training and teaching. Emerging disciplines like Women's/Gender Studies, Dalit Studies, Exclusion Studies have pushed for a rethinking of the curriculum and pedagogies of the space of higher education, but they have remained on the margins of the academia and kept in a liminal and vulnerable situation by design (Rege, 2011).

The teaching programmes in Women's Studies came to be nurtured especially since 1990s with the mainstreaming of gender within the university structure. Following the founding mandate about Women's Studies as a critical 'perspective' to intervene in the mainstream 'gender-blind' disciplines and knowledges, the initial approach was of 'engendering' the disciplines. However, the question of gender has been responded to by institutions through 'adding' women/gender in disciplines and also through attempts to institutionalize gender and blunting its radical possibilities. In the only exercise in development of model or common curriculum of Women's Studies in India, it has been noted that the rich feminist research, scholarship and critique that has developed with and against the disciplinary knowledges have not been translated in the emerging curriculum of Women's Studies (Sreerekha, 2016). Even, the mainstream disciplines – their knowledges and curricula - have also been largely dismissive of the feminist challenge, at best accommodative of it and at worst hostile to it. In recent times, the urge to define Women's studies in terms of the action for change has collapsed into a drive towards professionalizing gender in neoliberal times (Roy, 2011). Soon with the institutionalization of Women's

Studies in the university, there emerged attempts to 'discipline gender', to establish Women's Studies as a distinct (inter)disciplinary field within the autonomous institutional setting. This has meant diversity in the curriculum of Women's Studies in India (Tambe & Dyahadroy, 2018).

Women's Studies is considered an academic arm of the women's movement, and as a political project as much as an intellectual one, it constitutes an engagement with the feminist struggles and activism in its curriculum, often with the stages or waves approach. The impossibility of Women's Studies as argued by Brown (1997) is located in its predication upon the object of inquiry, women as an object of its inquiry, rather than the genre of inquiry. The process of disciplining and institutionalizing curriculum involves gate- keeping, building boundaries, inhabiting disciplinary distinction against which it has rebelled at the formative stage. It seeks to 'circumscribe uncircumscribable 'women as an object of study' (Brown, 1997: 120) that is troubled by the attention of different modalities of power working in the subject formation.

The disruption of the coherence of women through theorization as well as radical praxis around multiple oppressions, difference amongst women, and intersectionality more generally has made putting together the curriculum of the knowledge field of women's studies challenging. Albeit, the tremendous success of the concept of intersectionality and its institutionalization in the Women's Studies curriculum in a way has led to the difficulties in enacting intersectionality in the teaching (Govinda, 2022; Menon, 2009). It is the epistemological habits and desires of students and teachers in the Women's Studies courses in the privileged institutional setting that are projected through the self- other relations of the empire (Davis, 2010).

In our analysis we are using Gender and Women's Studies (GWS). In the Indian academia there is a broad shift from Women's studies to Gender and Women's studies that marks the orientation of this field, not to let go its initial political grounding as Women's Studies. In the Indian university, the institutions/departments are mostly recognized as Women's Studies Centres, while the teaching courses focus on gender as category of analysis and are often named variously as Gender, Culture and Development studies, Gender and development studies, or Women's studies. This points out the distinctness of the field that hosts both political and academic orientation. While Women's Studies has emerged as a political field in 1970s and 80s in India, its increasing focus on the academic rigour especially with the institutionalization of discipline and teaching programme has led to the use of Gender studies, often not exclusively, but along with Women's studies.

In this paper we focus on the pedagogies of the Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) Programmes through interviews with staff and focus groups with students in selected HE institutions in India to raise understanding about the challenges of enacting intersectional justice, non-elitist feminism and promoting gender equality. We unravel the silencing and othering mechanisms against minoritised groups and in particular the governmentality of neo-liberalised critical pedagogy and participation operating alongside seductive discourses of democratization and internationalization of HE. In what follows we critically engage with issues of domination, othering, resistance, privilege and disadvantage in curricula and pedagogies, inherent in the white/caste patriarchal bastions of HE.

Complicating voice, silence and privilege through critical higher education

Insurgent gender equality and feminist literature has highlighted how underprivileged groups and trespassing bodies are side-lined, silenced, or misread intellectually and institutionally (Deshpande & Zacharias, 2013; Mizra, 2013; Sukumar, 2022; Tambe, 2019) alongside seductive and muted discourses of diversity and internationalization, decolonizing the curriculum initiatives and a wider culture of equality badges as institutional polishing (Ahmed, 2012; Tsouroufli, 2018, 2025). Complicating gender equality in HE and exposing hegemonic gender subjectivities/practices and silencing mechanisms requires

moving away from romanticized and colonizing sisterhood (Emejulu, 2018; Tsouroufli, 2023), elitist feminism, and selective activism that prioritize certain voices and differences and sustain the non-performativity of intersectionality and diversity (Dhawan, 2017).

Voice has been treated to a large extent as a universal concept (Bell et al., 2011). Rather than grabbling with framings of voice as acts of change (Hirschman, 1970) we concentrate on the liberal and neoliberal tyranny of voice as participation and empowerment closely associated with logocentrism and individualism. We draw attention on the nature of both voice and silence across identity groups that have different historical legacies of inclusion/exclusion, oppression and avenues of resistance (Creed, 2003) in HE and their complex mobilizations within the local politics of the Gender and Women's Studies' classroom and the institutional and societal politics of diversity, democratization and internationalization of HE under aggressive neoliberalism.

Moving away from the understanding of free speech as a means to freedom, truth and authenticity to be achieved by the speaking subject, we draw attention to the intricate relation between speech, power and violence and the hegemonic frameworks within and beyond HE that render subjects illegitimate because of the disadvantaged position they speak from, rather than what they speak about (Dhawan, 2007). Hegemonic norms of recognition permeate all aspects and spaces of (HE) from access to participation, including curricula and pedagogies and determine what might be heard as intelligible rendering non-normative subjects vulnerable to overt and subtle forms of violence (Butler, 2009). Non-normative subjects are vulnerable to violence even when silent. The critique of imperialist feminism by feminist postcolonial theory has exposed the contingency of the notion of the muted and repressed 'Third World' or 'Orient' on the construction of the 'emancipated' Western feminist who has 'voice' (Mohanty, 1988).

HE Democratization discourses are often blind to the exclusion of certain voices and the perpetuation of privilege through enactments of sameness as equality (Karlsson, 2015) by instructors, students and the University both as a political commitment and a mechanism to ease the discomfort of difference. Social privilege here denotes 'a category through which to demarcate certain bodies, subjects, and classes who possess unearned advantages that are systematically created and culturally reinforced' (Kannen, 2013, 1). Not only different interpretive communities are represented in (HE) classrooms, that do academia differently (Essed & Goldberg, 2012), but also texts and syllabi are already "marked by the normative", resulting in comfortable well-worn tracks that most bodies…follow. Yet, while some bodies comfortably inhabit these smoothed by-use contours, some do not" (Niccolini, 2013, p. 17). For those bodies, curriculum can be conceptualized as a 'space of death' (Taussig, 1987) or a symbolic site of 'terror and torture' (p. 5).

Scholars and educators working within critical paradigms have attempted to open up spaces for thinking the effects of trauma of othering and personal and collective violence against non-normative bodies. Reparative curriculum (AparnaTarc, 2011), for example, offers opportunities for thinking the effects of traumatic history on human lives and addressing pedagogically in Judith Butler's (2009) words, 'the grievability of the other's life' (p. 15), which grounds the ethical and political conditions for one's capacity to understand and be with the other. Hooks (1990) argues that understanding of our own and each other's pain is at the heart of radical change. Academic spaces should offer possibilities to normative and non-normative individuals and diverse groups to learn to abandon identity essentialism and understand, through both conflict and coherence, the other's pain and what it might be for them to experience their world (Fullan, 1999). This pedagogical responsibility should not be confused with a nice release of negative energies, leading to a successful psychological intervention but rather a shift from therapeutic to political education (Amsler, 2011) and a pedagogical commitment to the practice of freedom, hope, growth and democratic citizenship (Castoriadis, 1997a, 1997b; Giroux, 2003, 2004, 2007; Hooks, 1994).

Such practices are not and should not be seen as contingent on

projects of student empowerment through unleashing dormant revolutionary subjectivities or some form of false consciousness (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997). Nor should freedom be interpreted here as a relentless pursuit of self-interests, neoliberal self-improvement and a right to exercising consumerism but rather an opportunity to become competent 'to participate in power. … to the greatest extent possible, to participate in a common government' (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 140), 'to be educated in every aspect (of leadership and politics) in order to be able to participate' (Castoriadis, 1996, p. 24), and to be capable as Aristotle reminds us of both governing and being governed (Castoriadis, 1997a, 1997b). Freedom and democracy in this sense come with great responsibility for educators and students to become aware about the forms that silence people, to socially critique the operations of power, including within the institutions they operate, and create possibilities for political action. We argue that GWS programmes in India and internationally should offer radical and creative spaces for staff and students to disrupt neoliberal narratives that champion the student-as-consumer model and attempt to redress the persistent inequalities and exclusions that students from deprived backgrounds face in HE education settings and society.

With neoliberalism corroding all aspects of institutional and personal life including thoughts and desires how can GWS educators open up possibilities for critical subjectivities and learning, that is truly transformative? How and why should privileged identities refabricated and hegemonic practices contested? Attending to emotions and their association with certain habits, values and beliefs can be a powerful way to understand and overcome resistance when people are asked to challenge their positions about 'difficult' issues such as white patriarchy, Islam, or caste privilege and to do so in public (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, p. 121). Emotions here are not synonymous to feelings, things that happen to people but rather discursive practices that constitute one's subjectivities (Tsouroufli, 2012). Critical pedagogies of emotion and discomfort (Zembylas, 2013) attend to the comfort zones of embodied knowledges and identities and interrogate the intertwined relation of power, emotion and praxis in education and society.

In this article, we attempt to expose some of the 'irresponsibilities' of GWS pedagogies in HE in India by examining configurations of pedagogies and the practices of dealing with difference, voice, silence and privilege alongside the operation of popular gender equality discourses and democratization policies and the gender regimes of higher education institutions in different regions in India. Our investigation is embedded within an ethic of care that conceptualises responsibility relationally and politically, as a social and emotional commitment and praxis to repair the world and transform individuals through addressing questions of power and challenging inequalities (Tronto, 1990, 1993).

Project methodology: a study to advance gender equality in HE in India

In this paper we draw on qualitative data from a large mixed-method study in 10 institutions across 5 States (Rajastan, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Jharkhand and Maharashtra) in India aimed to understand the complex and uneven nature of the gender parity achievements in higher education by exploring the different strands of diversity, levels and sites, as well as regions. We aimed for a diversity of institutions (private/public, urban/rural, religious/non-religious) as well as States selected on the basis of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Gender Parity Index (GPI).

The study, funded by the British Council India, explored issues of availability and access to higher education, the issue of completion, retention and drop-out in higher education, the question of social profile of students, especially women students who enter higher education, the gendered nature of the space of higher education and questions of curriculum and pedagogies. Apart from this, the project also explored the policy environment and how different stakeholders responded to the new policy initiatives. Thus, it involved multiple methodologies: survey to understand access and experience of diverse students, life history interviews for issues of access and retention, key informant interviews to

understand policy implications, in-depth interviews for issues of employability, spatial/walking interviews to understand the space of higher education, focus group discussions and group interviews for issues of pedagogy and content analysis for issues of curriculum of 26 stand- alone courses and 4 degree programmes in gender studies. The findings of content curriculum analysis are discussed in detail in our monograph (Tsouroufli et al., 2026). In this paper we focus on staff and students' perceptions of the curricular and pedagogies of GWS shared in group interviews and focus groups' respectively. Besides this, the research involved many informal reflexive team discussions and participatory observation.

Focus groups with students and group interviews with academic staff

8 focus groups were conducted across the 5 India states participating in this study. We conducted focus groups in 2 Universities in Uttar Pradesh, 1 in Rajasthan, 1 in Kerala, 1 in Maharashtra and 1 in Jharkhand. We included a mix of private and State Universities, single and co-educational and rural/urban. The majority of the students who participated in the focus groups were female (64). The low number of male students (20) reflects the wider under-representation of male students in Gender and Women' Studies courses and all 'soft' disciplines at national and international level. Participants came from diverse religious (Hindu, Christian, Muslim) and caste backgrounds (Upper caste, General and OBC) and predominantly from post-graduate programmes. Various disciplines were represented in our sample including Sociology, History, Philosophy, English and Literature, Rural Development Studies, Gender and Women' Studies, Media and Communication and Politics. 8 group interviews were conducted with 18 academics. The staff interviewed were diverse in terms of gender, career grade (Assistant, Associate Professor and Professor), discipline, and University affiliation, from Upper Caste and Santhal tribe and Muslim and Hindu backgrounds. The majority of academic staff interviewed were female (13). Recruitment of participants to student focus groups and staff group interviews was facilitated through our resource persons/collaborators in each institution. Our aim was to secure diverse samples representing various strands of identity and privileges and disadvantages experienced in higher education institutions and the Indian society. Interviews with staff were conducted in English. For the focus group discussions English as well as the local languages were used when necessary and the data was transcribed and translated in English by the field researchers.

The focus group questions focused on the several themes including the ways in which question of gender/women transacted in the classroom, topics that are covered in the classroom, topics/issues that are uncomfortable to discuss, the ways in which teacher-student interaction gets shaped in the classroom and if the classroom interaction is different than other classrooms. Other themes that were deliberated upon during the FGDs were teaching methods specific to gender classroom that helped students, the ways in which gender/women studies students are perceived by other students on the campus and how has their understanding of gender developed after taking course.

The interviews with staff focused on topics covered in the classroom, the ways in which gender is taught in the classroom and whether the pedagogical practices different while teaching other courses. The other themes that were discussed were possible sources used while teaching gender, the ways in which student respond and interact in the gender/women's classrooms, topics that become uncomfortable or difficult to discuss and assessment process of staff to evaluate student learning.

Our initial team analysis was thematic and guided by the following research questions:

- How is gender integrated in the curriculum, and how is it transacted in the classroom?
- Does intersectionality inform the integration of gender in curriculum?

- Does the inclusion of gender challenge/reframe the cognitive structures of the disciplines?
- Does the curriculum (formal and hidden) address how individuals become gendered persons and what are the structural origins of gender inequalities?
- What pedagogies might be configured in the process of developing and resisting curricula of gender and women's studies?

Descriptive coding of the data and constant comparison of emerging ideas were initially employed for data handling and organising. Relevant literature on critical (Apple, 2011; Baviskar, 2008; Giroux, 2003) and feminist pedagogies (Rege, 2011), GWS, intersectionality (Tsouroufli, 2018), as well as research team meetings/discussions of the data generated the following broad themes: hidden curriculum; higher education pedagogies of gender studies; challenges and resistance to gender and women's studies programme; intersectionality; and perceived impact of gender and women's studies. In this paper we draw on higher order themes, including 'professionalization of gender', 'depoliticization of criticality' 'epistemic silences', 'elitist feminism and selective intersectionality', 'comforting pedagogies' 'voice and privilege'.

Epistemic silences in Gender and Women's Studies

Epistemic silences and violences involved boycotting of gender studies from male staff and students in various disciplines either by not promoting and supporting the subject or by ridiculing and pathologizing those taking it; complete absence of intersectional interrogations of gender in classroom, despite GWS formal curricula recognition of intersectionality (Tsouroufli et al., 2026), and/or the prominence of additive isolationist approaches to the intersectional study of gender. The interviews with academic staff and students revealed that the curriculum often pays lip service to the concept of intersectionality without effectively embedding it into the teaching process. This aligns with critiques from scholars like Menon (2009) and Davis (2010), who argue that while intersectionality has gained intellectual recognition, its practical application is limited. In the following excerpt the lack of engagement with issues of caste is pointed out by an academic from an Uttar Pradesh private university with students from all over the country and local marginalized groups. Silences and misinterpretations about caste or other marginalities and injustices, including Hindu nationalism were also observed in public institutions and single sex institutions, which play a major role in producing female majority in higher education in India impacting women's higher educational participation in significant ways (Tambe & Sankar, 2026).

'*Gender allows me to also talk about caste which again, let me be frank. Most colleagues don't deal with it. I have one colleague who has a direct course on caste and I'm caste in Ancient India, in early India. She's getting clear that she wants to talk about caste but all other colleagues only again talk about micro narratives of economy, on polity which is great...*'

X2G1

Elitism of the GWS curriculum and pedagogies resulted from the absence of knowledge generated by and about the marginalized groups (e.g. Dalit women as pointed out by students) and the dominance of gender theorizations in Hindu and lack of available literature in other languages; even in HE institutions without a Hindu majority student population as in the extract below from a university in Jhakard:

'*And a lot of for instance, in the Indian context, a lot of the theorization around gender relations has really come from whatever studies are cast Hindu society in that sense. Now when you teach gender particularly in (name of University) where a lot, maybe a lot of the students who come into the classroom are not in that sense, coming from a caste Hindu sort of*

a context. Not to therefore say that gender doesn't matter in their context, particular arrangements or constellation of gender are different.'

Y1G8

'*One limitation that we have seen with the paper is like it is not specific about Kerala context. No single law from Kerala in the syllabus which we are planning to revise in the next revision. So, we're thinking of bringing in Kamala Das there, probably my story also where we can connect as a Malayalam girl/woman- you can connect much more with her than Maya Angelou*'

Z1G4

In the next section we explore the impact on neoliberalization on GWS through the professionalization of gender and criticality, individualization of gender equality, and the depoliticization of GWS.

The neo-liberalisation of Gender and Women's Studies pedagogies

Neoliberal policies in higher education have exacerbated the depoliticisation of gender studies, steering it towards professionalization and away from its activist roots. This shift is evident in both the literature and participant testimonies. Scholars such as Brown (2015) and Giroux (2004) note how neoliberal agendas reshape academic spaces into marketplaces, where education is commodified and students are framed as consumers. This neoliberal framing permeates GWS programmes, pushing educators to focus on employability and marketable skills rather than fostering critical thinking and activism.

Student participants highlighted that gender sensitisation efforts often emphasise individual empowerment rather than collective struggle. This focus aligns with the critiques of Boler and Zembylas (2003), who argue that such approaches limit the potential for political education and social change. In the following extract from a focus group with students at higher education institution in Kerala, established by missionaries, the discussion centres on gender as an abstract category, disconnected from the lived realities of caste, class, and religion. Moreover, emphasis is given on practising gender as a skill and achieving individual empowerment. This creates a pedagogical environment where the structural origins of gender inequality are discussed in isolation, diminishing the transformative potential of GWS programmes and depoliticizing them.

'*We are from the Sociology department and because of the subject sociology we are taught about marriage as a social institution, and we have discussed the stereotypical roles of husband and wife. How a typical wife behaves at home. What a husband and wife is supposed to do, basically the wife does is, she takes care of the children and looks after the husband, cooks food for the family and the husband goes out of the house… he works hard and he has to provide for the family. These are the stereotypical roles assigned according to gender. But when we study about marriage, we learn how it is important as a social institution to the society and how we don't have to stick to the stereotypical roles. We can do our best, we don't have to stick to one role, like a husband should not take care of the children, they should not be considered as babysitting rather it should be considered as parenting and when the mother does it, it is hailed as parenting and when the father does it… it is called as babysitting.. such types of concepts should not exist. Equality in the sense where both partners should be able to give their best, no one should be defined by any role, both of them should share their roles equally. That's what we are learning.*'

Z1F4

In the following extract from a staff interview at a girls' only institution in Jaipur, again attention is given to gender sensitization through speaking and participation in neutralised classroom discussions. We highlight three issues in this approach. First, the neoliberal framing of voice and participation as act of change (Hirschman, 1970) perpetuates

the operation of logocentrism and individualism rather than promotes gender pedagogies that offer possibilities for critical citizenship and alternative futures to neoliberalized lives (Giroux, 2023). Second, the discourse of voice, participation and gender sensitization as gender empowerment ignores the fact that social groups have different historical legacies of inclusion/exclusion, oppression and avenues of resistance (Creed, 2003) in HE which might influence their participation, (in) visibility and mobilization in the GWS classroom and the wider society; and third the discussion of gender as an intersectional concept, positioned within a truly dialogical pedagogical relationship that promotes ethical and political education, rather than simply knowledge of injustices, is absent (Pradhan & Singh, 2016; Spivak, 2001).

'*So that we can get them more and more involved, I tell them this is about you, I said you would not feel it right now but when you will experience the inequality here because we all are sailing the same boat. You might experience all of this when you get a job. You will experience it when a project that is coming and a male colleague gets it or when you will question why I wasn't given that project. There are spaces and structures which are waiting for you to experience inequality, so it is better to recognize it right now, to talk about it right now, so that you know whatever is there comes out, you know.*'

W2G1

Voice, silence, privilege and responsibility in the GWS' classroom

The dynamics of voice, silence, privilege and disadvantage in GWS classrooms reflect deeper societal hierarchies. Academic literature, such as Mohanty's (1988) critique of Western feminism's universalising tendencies, shows how marginalized voices are often silenced even within spaces purported to challenge inequality. This study's data corroborates this notion. Although students from disadvantaged backgrounds did not explicitly report feeling alienated or side-lined during class discussions, the accounts of both staff and students indicated that limited opportunities to critique the gender, caste, religion politics of institutions and GWS classroom; the centring of normative gendered subjectivities within GWS curricula and pedagogies hegemonic listening and speaking (Dhawan's, 2007, 2017) in the GWS classroom rendered exposing and acknowledging privilege almost impossible.

In the following extract from a staff interview at a State university in Jharkhand where there is a significant tribal population and religious diversity, the universalist notion of student verbal participation as representation and the pathologization of student silences seem to underpin a normative pedagogical discourse that cannot generate GWS pedagogies for dialogical praxis of learning and knowing. Such pedagogies could enable both student and teacher to enter into a learning community and reciprocal relationship which shifts from individual experience and oppression to learning and unlearning hegemonic practices and privilege within the classroom and society (Hooks, 1990, 1994, 2010; Pradhan & Singh, 2016). Creative and transformative pedagogical inquiry engages both students and staff, oppressors and oppressed, in understanding their role and responsibility in power and domination through the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge within institutional contexts and the wider ideological and socio-political contexts of injustice that are lives are embedded in (Giroux, 2023).

'*…listen if I say especially if you ask about my student of my class, what I found actually I always tried to bring them an interactive kind of session. But the representation from my students' side, you know, it's quite very limited. They are not so much vocal to express their experience. This is the problem. Otherwise, we provide every time to ask them to tell us about their experience or other things. If you guys, if you girls and if you guys speak with everyone*'

(Y1G8)

Unlearning hegemonic practices in the context of dialogical practice of learning and knowing and critical, transformative pedagogies for social justice should also involve challenging the discourse of speaking for others as enhancing political representation and empowerment of marginalized groups (Dhawan, 2012, 2017; Spivak, 2001). In the following extract, although gender/caste privilege as advantage granted to certain groups and deprived from others is acknowledged by a student in a private university with students from various backgrounds, it is also constructed as almost an exclusive right and ability to speak for the subaltern rather than a responsibility to engage in genuine listening and (un)learning from each other.

'I think people often do not recognize that, for example, Dalit feminism is very different from my feminism. I come from a very privileged background, so my agenda that I want to put forth is very different, so my priorities, my issues with the world…they are important…but they are very different. And they are of a sophisticated nature. So especially in a private University when we are having such conversations right now, and we have many such discussions with our classmates, I think we often fail to recognize this difference that we are in a better position to bring forth these agendas. And we often do not have enough representation from other communities to bring their agendas, so maybe we owe to them in bringing their agenda and we fail to do that a lot. We do have more resources to understand their plight and problems than maybe they do. So, I think we do not really think about that when talking about feminism, gender or sexuality. These are very privileged topics in themselves. I feel.'

X2F1

Expansion and democratization of HE in India resulting from national and higher educational policies and activism might have brought together students from various backgrounds but it has not yet addressed the pedagogical challenges in terms of dealing with social justice issues in GWS classrooms, where academic staff are predominantly from privileged backgrounds. Our study showed that the presence of women students, especially those from socially marginalized groups is high in public non- metropolitan institutions and in single sex institutions as well as minority, socially homogenous institutions. This points out how the private, professional institutions and those elite institutions defined as of national importance, which are better equipped in terms of educational resources have continued to be male bastions and privileged women bastions thus complicating the celebration of gender parity in HE in India (Tambe & Sankar, 2026). It is within this HE landscape that academic staff struggled to create truly inclusive classrooms and experienced student resistance either through positioning within a discourse of post-caste society, where allegedly such inequalities no longer exist, or by not engaging at all in conversations about caste inequalities even in universities with large numbers of first generation university students in Maharashtra (first extract below) or from marginalized communities in Kerala (second extract below).

"Often, they argue that this doesn't exist now, everything has changed. They tend to assert that times have changed, and caste no longer exists. But this is not true- rather efforts are taken to maintain this caste reality. Because, if caste reality is challenged then what will happen to upper castes? What will happen to their power or prestige? Rather if all start enjoying the same respect, then how can they maintain their separate identity? Where will they go? I mean they want to keep their own identity. So, this gap between 'we' and 'they' is always there".

Q1G6

'It is difficult to talk about a caste because you know in, in Indian scenario most of the times, yeah, the caste people, including the students, they don't want to hear the caste. So, when it comes to gender and caste then it becomes more difficult to talk. Because when I when we when I use the word upper caste woman, or the Dalit woman and sometimes the students that they don't want to hear anything because they don't, especially if it is

about the religion and because you know in (name of institution) the last years so many discussions and debates happened around the Sabarimala issue, the women's entry to the temple, yet so students they show because I am teaching in MPhil also in MA history students so they also some of them showed some problems when I was when I was talking about this kind of issue.'

Z2G5

The affective dimension of Gender and Women's Studies' pedagogies

Some academics admitted to focusing on "comfortable" topics that do not provoke resistance or discomfort in the GWS classroom, aligning with Ahmed's (2012) idea of diversity as an institutional badge rather than a genuine practice. This contributes to what Niccolini (2013) describes as the "curriculum as a space of death," where marginalized students find their experiences rendered invisible or trivialized.

The emotional and affective aspects of teaching gender and intersectional inequalities were often overlooked but played a crucial role in shaping GWS pedagogies. Zembylas (2007, 2017) emphasises the need for educators to engage with discomfort as an ethic of care and address the entangled relationship of power, emotions and responsibility in the praxis of social justice. This study's data indicates that staff 'impossibility' to acknowledge and act on their privileged (ir)responsibility (Tronto, 1990, 1993; Zembylas et al., 2014) as educators and public intellectuals (Baviskar, 2008) might be predicated upon the operation of elitist feminism and romanticized sisterhood (Tsouroufli, 2023, 2025), which ignores the impact of violence and oppression amongst women and inherent condescending notions of the subaltern, masquerading as a commitment to analyse, criticize, improve and save it. In the following extracts the absence of a pedagogy for unlearning hegemonic practices within the classroom and society (Hooks, 1990, 1994, 2010; Pradhan & Singh, 2016) in combination with neoliberalized practice of privileging comfort for students- clients over critical pedagogies of emotion is evident.

'…composed of Adivasi students and the issue of gender it's very sensitive to the issue of religion, is very sensitive in the same way the issue of gender also is very sensitive, when you're talking to a community and when you're talking when you're asking the community to, you know, look inside and you know, you know, you try to identify the gaps that are in your society and the weakness in your societies have to deal it since I am from a non-Adivasi background have to deal, you know, I have to be very sensitive to that to their feelings. So, I did bring out this issue because since I am a woman I have to take this up, so I did ask my students that yes, the Manki Munda system. They are, they are based on the on a self-sufficient village system. Where the Manki they are responsible to look at how their society is being governed so can we really call it ideal when the women are not, you know, participating in this community meeting? I post it as a question I did not give any view of mine, but I did bring this up. So, this is how I try to you know, navigate through the different constraints.'

Y1G8

'Before I take the class, I tell them that nobody should feel offended and when I talk about the concept of Sanskritization, the concept in sociology. So, that concept deals with how people belonging to so-called lower classes imitate the lifestyles of upper castes just to have a better social status, or maybe to protest. So that is something where the students feel uncomfortable and they don't know how to put something into words, because I also observe one beautiful thing that they don't want to offend anyone. And I notice that the moment they use the word 'lower-caste' they are very nervous, when using the word lower caste, so I always use the word 'so-called lower castes' then I try to minimise the impact it can pass.'

W2G1

Towards ethical and responsible pedagogies

In summary, the data affirms that while GWS have made important inroads into Indian HE significant challenges persist. Democratization of HE and the expansion of GWS programmes have created opportunities as well as challenges for staff and students. First, as in other socio-cultural and political contexts (Bird, 2004), GWS in Indian HE, operate within gender and other institutional and societal hierarchies which generate resistance against transformative gender knowledge, pedagogies and justice. Resistance manifested as boycotting of GWS, lack of institutional and collegial support and pathologization of those engaging with GWS.

Second, in this paper we demonstrated how neoliberalism of Indian HE has corroded the nature, knowledge and pedagogies of GWS. Gender and gender equality have been professionalized and individualised, turned into employability skills, along with depoliticized discourse of criticality, fit for purpose in the neoliberal university, which usually welcomes moderate and non-threatening engagements with equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) (Tsouroufli, 2018). Neoliberalism, again as in other geographical contexts (Tsouroufli et al., 2024), has permeated every aspect of academic life and it appears to be mobilized to seal inherent intersecting inequality regimes in Indian HE and legitimize the 'irresponsibility' of GWS.

Third, the analysis presented in this paper has brought to the fore how pedagogies of GWS might actually perpetuate educational and societal inequalities and the role of privileged women in silencing marginalized women (Tsouroufli, 2023). Hierarchical ways of pedagogical inquiry; centring the subaltern as the object rather than the subject of knowledge; and limited, if any, opportunities for non-hegemonic listening and speaking in the GWS classroom did not allow for ethical and responsible pedagogical interrogations of the entanglements of power, privilege, emotion and gender justice praxis that foster critical reflection and participatory learning from both teachers and students. Instead, epistemic silences and violence, elitist feminist engagements with minoritised communities and students, and romanticized sisterhood that largely disregarded or superficially addressed intersectional differences could not generate transformative pedagogies.

We contend that hope in HE's potential to open up spaces for developing critical and democratic citizens (Castoriadis, 1996, 1997a, 1997b)-rather than consumers- lies in embracing, rather than evading pedagogies of discomfort and dialogical pedagogical praxis of care and responsibility (Zembylas, 2013, 2017; Zembylas et al., 2014). Moving beyond tokenistic diversity and neoliberal framings requires a concerted effort to engage with intersectionality, affect, and critical pedagogy, creating a space where education serves as a vehicle for both personal and societal change (Giroux, 2003; Hooks, 1994). The findings from this study highlight the urgent need for GWS programmes to reclaim their political and activist roots and foster pedagogies that shift from disposable empathy to creative and transformative discomfort as the foundation for ethical education.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Maria Tsouroufli: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **A. Tambe:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **O. Filippakou:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. **S. Shankar:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation.

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