

Transforming Gender Attitudes through Higher Education: The Ethical and Epistemic Role of Female Scholars

Transformando as Atitudes de Gênero por meio do Ensino Superior: O Papel Ético e Epistêmico das Pesquisadoras

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ABSTRACT:

Female scholars in universities provoke important philosophical questions of justice, equality, and knowledge generation in academic institutions. The paper will consider how women in higher education contribute to changing the education system to achieve sustainable development, not as a goal that is an instrument and thus relevant to one of the policy goals, such as SDG 4, but as an ethical and epistemic one. Going beyond descriptive narrations, the research provides a normative and conceptual study of female academic agency and its relevance in inclusive and equitable education. The paper, based on the feminist philosophy, political philosophy and epistemology critically evaluates the moral duty of the institutions of higher learning to respond to gender inequality and acknowledgment of the marginalized epistemic input. Exemplifying experiential knowledge is used to put philosophical reflection of the structural barriers, epistemic injustice and institutional responsibility into perspective without making empirical or statistical assertions. The discussion shows that structural and epistemic injustice of marginalization of women scholars in the teaching, research, leadership, and policy making processes is a practice that degrades the moral authority and intellectual integrity of higher education. The paper concurs that the gender equity in higher education is not only normative, but also ethically and epistemically obligatory to the establishment of just, sustainable, and inclusive knowledge systems.

KEY WORDS: Higher Education, SDG 4, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development, Feminist Philosophy

RESUMO:

Pesquisadoras nas universidades provocam importantes questões filosóficas sobre justiça, igualdade e geração de conhecimento nas instituições acadêmicas. O artigo considerará como as mulheres no ensino superior contribuem para a mudança do sistema educacional para alcançar o desenvolvimento sustentável, não como um objetivo que seja um instrumento e, portanto, relevante para um dos objetivos políticos, como o ODS 4, mas como um objetivo ético e epistêmico. Indo além das narrações descritivas, a pesquisa oferece um estudo normativo e conceitual sobre a agência acadêmica feminina e sua relevância em uma educação inclusiva e equitativa. O artigo, baseado na filosofia feminista, política e epistemologia, avalia criticamente o dever moral das instituições de ensino superior de responder à desigualdade de gênero e o reconhecimento do input epistêmico marginalizado. Exemplificar o conhecimento experiencial é usado para colocar a reflexão filosófica das barreiras estruturais, da injustiça epistêmica e

da responsabilidade institucional em perspectiva, sem fazer afirmações empíricas ou estatísticas. A discussão mostra que a injustiça estrutural e epistêmica da marginalização de pesquisadoras mulheres nos processos de ensino, pesquisa, liderança e formulação de políticas é uma prática que degrada a autoridade moral e a integridade intelectual do ensino superior. O artigo concorda que a equidade de gênero no ensino superior não é apenas normativa, mas também eticamente e epistemicamente obrigatória para o estabelecimento de sistemas de conhecimento justos, sustentáveis e inclusivos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ensino Superior, ODS 4, Igualdade de Gênero, Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Filosofia Feminista

INTRODUCTION

Education has been conventionally viewed as practice not only concerned with skill development but also with development of critical thinking, moral judgment and social responsibility. Philosophers such as Martin Luther King Jr. emphasize that education must enable individuals to think critically and make moral actions to introduce the moral dimension of the society. According to the philosophical perspective, education presents a structural area where human agency, autonomy, and civic responsibility are developed. In this normative perception, education gains the ethical meaning as the justice-oriented, fair and person-recognizing practice. This insight is consistent with the modern philosophical perspectives that understand education as being a morally responsible and world-oriented practice and not necessarily an instrument-based one (Casas Bañares, 2022).

Higher education plays a rather prominent role in the modern societies, not only as an economic development instrument or a global competitiveness tool, but as an institution that has ethical responsibilities, with regard to equality, inclusion and knowledge generation. Higher education is a determinant of the way social, cultural, and moral queries are investigated and the validation of knowledge in society. Being a knowledge production site, it is also a place of reproduction or challenge of power relations, and philosophical issues concerning epistemic authority, recognition, and exclusion arise (Officer, 2024; McArthur, 2022). In this sense, higher education is not instrumental, but normative, that is, it has an impact on who is listened to, whose experience is being validated, and whose input is marginalized.

The global agendas of education such as those reflected in the international strategies such as Sustainable Development Goals have remained on quality and inclusiveness in all levels of education. Even though this kind of structure can be formulated in terms of policy, the philosophical grounds of such structures rest on the principles of justice, moral equality, and the right to take part in the social and

epistemological life. Higher education is therefore seen as a moral arena where the provisions of equity, accountability, and equality must be questioned rather than being operationalised with respect to policy objectives. Gender equality in higher education is an emerging standard expectation that is founded on the implications of justice and equal moral value (Rosa & Clavero, 2022).

In this regard, the role of women in the post-secondary education raises some philosophical alarm. The epistemic and structural imbalance of disproportionate representation of women scholars is not only statistical imbalance but also an indication of structural and epistemic injustices of the academic institution (Dunne, 2023; Berenstain et al., 2022). Both feminist philosophy and feminist epistemology have been employed to emphasize the fact that the women's knowledge, testifying and intellectual work has been diminished or not factored in the past that has resulted in what theorists refer to as epistemic injustice. This omission questions not only the validity of academic institutions, but also the validity of knowledge production in its own right.

The agency of women is transformational not just in terms of the personal or social, but also of their capacity to become recognized as knowledge and policy discourse and moral argument contributors in the academic field. Where the structural mechanisms of marginalization of women scholars, such as discriminatory practices, unequal recognition, or lack of access to leadership, are practiced, the damage is not only personal but also covers the state of epistemic and moral quality of higher education in general (Rosa and Clavero, 2022).

Although there is an improvement in the access of women to education around the world, there are still some enduring obstacles especially in the low and middle-income setting. These obstacles are usually covered sociologically or policy-oriented, but they require philosophical analysis as institutional justice and moral duty failures (Crozier, 2023). In normative terms, this kind of barrier is not only a social barrier, but also a moral injustice that curbs the agency of women and suppresses their epistemic input. It is on this basis that the current research fits into the category of a normative and conceptual investigation into the position of female scholars in higher education. The paper does not view the participation of women as a tool to realize the external development agenda but rather looks at the ethical imperative of academic institutions to provide justice, inclusion of women in epistemic matters and acknowledgement of women as equal partners in the production of knowledge. Through the reflexion of the discourse in the context of philosophies especially feminist, political and epistemic philosophy the study aim to add to the better comprehension of gender equality in higher education as an issue of moral, epistemic and institutional justice. This location places the institution of higher education as a moral and epistemic institution, which has its legitimacy based on justice, inclusion, and recognition (Darder et al., 2023; McArthur, 2022).

Research Objectives

1. To explore the philosophical implication of the agency of women scholars in the production of knowledge in the higher education
2. To critically assess ethical and epistemic aspects of structural barriers of female scholars in academic institutions
3. The justification of institutional practices and responsibilities in relation to the participation of women in academic leadership with regard to normative justification

Importance of the Study

The significance of the research is that it has made a philosophical contribution to the current discussion of justice, equality, and knowledge in higher education. The study anticipates the ethical and epistemic context of gender inequity in academia, instead of concentrating on the policy outcomes only. Feminist philosophical work has been focusing on the idea that knowledge production is not value-neutral and that the academic structures of exclusion recreate social and epistemic hierarchies (Acker, 1994). In the same way, the topic of gender-diverse leadership reflects the ethical significance of including a variety of individuals in decision-making that allows the inclusion of different types of intellectual input (Blackmore, 2014).

This analysis of the relationship between gender equality and quality education as a normative concept can inform the philosophy of education by explaining why gender equity is not only an admirable concept but also an ethical one. It further highlights the applicability of epistemic justice in providing assurance that higher education plays its moral part as an arena of equitable engagement, inquisitive inquiry and integrative knowledge generation. Such perspectives are especially important to academics, educational institutions, and policy-makers who want to find philosophically based strategies to gender equality that go beyond instrumental or policy-based explanations.

LITERATURE REVIEW & RESEARCH GAP

Literature Review

Modern debates on higher education and sustainable development have been primarily placed in terms of empirical, policy-based, or developmental paradigm. Although these methods have provided useful descriptive information, they usually ignore the more philosophical questions, as to justice and moral responsibility and epistemic inclusion in the academic institution. An increasing amount of

philosophy has provided conceptual resources to critically analyze these aspects especially concerning the involvement of women in higher education.

The capability approach offered by Martha Nussbaum offers a basic ethical perspective of education as a question of justice, and not utility. Nussbaum (2011) believes that education should be measured by the ability to increase substantive freedoms and agency of individuals. In this view, the accessibility and the involvement of women in higher education are not only the developmental indicators but human dignity and equal respect which should be regarded as moral rights. The fact that women are excluded or marginalized as scholars therefore represents the inability to attain the necessary capabilities to be able to engage in social and intellectual life to the fullest.

Feminist epistemology goes even further to elaborate this analysis by covering how the process of knowledge production itself can become unjust. The notion of epistemic injustice developed by Miranda Fricker brings attention to the fact that people can be harmed in a particular way their ability to be a knower. Whereas the results or behavioral change are the most empirical studies on education to sustainable development tend to focus, epistemic injustice attracts attention to the systematic silencing, discrediting, or devaluation of women academic contributions in academic institutions. This discussion is furthered by Sherman (2016) with a critical view of virtue-based solutions to epistemic injustice, stating that structural and institutional responsibility is necessary. This criticism has been especially pertinent to higher education, where gender relations of power influence which knowledge is authorized.

Political philosophy can also provide more information on the institutional aspects of inequality. The theory of responsibility of justice by Iris Marion Young is the theory which reverses the situation of blaming the individual to the structural processes which contribute to injustice (Young, 2011). When applied to the field of higher education, this framework can help understand that the differences between the genders among scholars are not the result of discrimination by individual actors but the outcome of the institutional norms and governance systems as well as the practice of evaluation. This type of understanding puts the issue of gender inequality in a new perspective as a shared moral issue that needs a systemic change.

The historical and symbolic aspects of the marginalization of women in intellectual spaces are also explained with the help of foundational feminist philosophical texts. The examination of the woman as the Other by Simone de Beauvoir reveals how the patriarchal system has traditionally determined the identity and abilities of women regarding the male standards (De Beauvoir, 2016). This reasoning is reflected in the continued under-acknowledgment of female academics and their intellectual work in the academic field. The same can be said with Judith Butler's work on gender performativity which is also based on the fact that the fixed notions of identity are challenged and that institutional norms control

who is viewed as a legitimate academic subject (Butler, 1990). A combination of these views demonstrates that higher education is a place where gendered power relations are produced and struggled over.

This conceptual terrain is further enhanced by theories of justice and communicative rationality. Despite the fact that Stammler theory of justice is based on the normative legal principles, it is important because it adds to the understanding that institutional arrangements should be judged in terms of fair and moral legitimacy (Stammler, 2000). The theory of communicative action created by Habermas puts great emphasis on the moral significance of participatory conversation and mutual acknowledgment in the social institutions (Habermas, 2001). The communicative bases of scholarly legitimacy are undermined when women scholars are sidelined in decision-making, leadership or scholarly talk.

The discussion of power and knowledge by Michel Foucault offers a critical approach to the knowledge production regulation in academic institutions. Gordon and Foucault (1980) prove that power does not simply work through coercion but it works through epistemic norms that stipulate what is considered as valid knowledge. The implication of this insight in higher education is that gendered hierarchies are entrenched in disciplinary practices, systems of research evaluation, and institutional cultures, and thus, influence the conditions of female scholars to engage.

Combined, these philosophies permit revisiting the literature on education and gender presently available. Instead of considering the involvement of women in higher education as one of the ways of attaining sustainability objectives, the literature may be re-conceptualized to present basic ethical, epistemic, and political questions on issues of justice, recognition and institutional responsibility. This change of theoretical approach transforms the debate into one that is not concerned with policy effectiveness but with a more in-depth analysis of what higher education owes to women as equal contributors to the production of knowledge.

Research Gap

Although the current literature recognizes the necessity of higher education to sustainable development and gender equality, a serious deficiency in philosophical research on the moral, epistemic, and political aspects of the place of women in academic institutions exists. Recent literature covers access, participation, and outcomes in most of the cases in the empirical or policy-based frameworks with limited critical normative questions being addressed.

In particular, little is done to explore how structural obstacles in higher education are a form of epistemic injustice, how institutions can be institutionally irresponsible and unfair, and how the agency of women scholars in the production of knowledge is ethically and politically limited. Lack of continued

conceptual scrutiny makes it difficult to identify the normative underpinnings of gender equality in post-secondary education and undermines the argument of institutional change.

This gap indicates the need of a justice-grounded argumentation, clarity in conception, and normative appraisal that prefigures the women scholars as not only the beneficiaries of the educational systems but also as moral and epistemic agents. By filling this gap, it will be possible to reconsider higher education as an ethical institution that must rely on an inclusive approach, epistemic fairness, and the acknowledgment of marginalized voices to legitimize it.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study assumes a normative and conceptual research design, which is based on the philosophies of epistemology, political philosophy, and feminism. It does not focus on generating empirical generalization and statistically verifiable outcomes, but instead critically analyzes questions of justice, epistemic inclusion and institutional responsibility in higher education. The experiences and statuses of female scholars are treated as ethically and epistemologically important phenomena, which need to be explained philosophically, but not statistically. Although the study is involved in working with descriptive material, this material is only used to justify conceptual analysis and normative reasoning. The study considers experiential references as explanatory situations that guide philosophical thought process about agency, recognition, and equality in academic institutions, but not as factors to draw empirical findings. The research is, therefore, not aimed to test hypotheses, draw up causal relationships, or to operate as a quantitative social-science investigation.

Data Collection Methods

The study utilizes both primary and secondary sources to present a philosophically situated study. The primary data will be made up of surveys, questionnaires, and interviews with female scholars. They are not applied to produce statistically generalizable results, but to exemplify and put into context lived academic experiences that pose ethical and epistemic challenges. These kinds of experiential narrations contribute to the foregrounding of repetitive challenges of structural barriers, marginalization, recognition, and epistemic injustice in higher education. The secondary data will consist of the literature and theoretical materials on the topic of feminist philosophy, political philosophy, and epistemology. These sources are used to present the conceptual frameworks required to decipher the experiential material, and to place it in larger normative discussions regarding the issue of justice, equality, and knowledge production. The primary data is thus only used as contextual and illustrative information. It

is not addressed as empirical evidence in a statistical sense, but as a way of making abstract philosophical arguments to a basis in concrete academic realities.

Sampling and Interpretation

The sample was selected on the basis of a particular institutional setting and it is not designed to be representative or to be used to make any empirical generalization. The appeal to the female scholars is not directed to the numerical prevalence or measurement, but to the fact of the philosophical inquiry being anchored into the real academic context, which makes it possible to reflect on the structural conditions that influence the agency and the partaking of the female scholars in higher education. The analysis does not use any statistical instruments and quantitative methods. Any mention of tendencies or patterns in the responses is philosophically but not numerically understood, as a sign of larger ethical and epistemic problems. The survey content is not stated as empirical results, and is merely utilized to encourage and aid normative thinking about institutional justice, epistemic inclusion, and moral responsibility in higher education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of Respondents

The results of the survey indicate that the participants were mostly early-career scholars, especially those in the first years of their academic career. Conversely, there was a relative lack of scholars at higher stages of their careers meaning that there was a lack of representation of older academics in the sample of respondents. This trend is part of a wider trend whereby voices of those in early-career are more visible in the discourse about gender equality in higher education, whilst those of senior academics are less visible.

This unfair representation, philosophically speaking, brings some critical issues of epistemic participation and institutional acknowledgment in the academic setting. This relative lack of older and senior scholars can be an indicator of structural circumstances that limit the continuity of participation throughout the academic life, especially when it comes to women. These limitations are not just demographic but they represent more profound problems of institutional justice, recognition, and distribution of epistemic authority.

Feminist views on philosophy also underscore the fact that the imbalance that arises as a result of some groups being systematically underrepresented or marginalized in knowledge-producing spaces is a type of epistemic injustice. The underrepresentation of older women researchers in the literature, then, might be indicative of the institutional design that does not endorse long-term academic agency and

acknowledgment. Such trends, according to the arguments of the feminist philosophy, question the moral legitimacy of educational institutions that present themselves as fostering equality and reproduce exclusionary schemes (De Beauvoir, 2016; Butler, 1990).

Academic Backgrounds and Career Stages

The survey responses indicate that the majority of the respondents were at the early or intermediate stages of the academic life, with relatively fewer at the advanced or postdoctoral positions. This trend represents the disparity in the distribution of academic opportunities in various levels of academic development. To the philosophical perspective, such stratification indicates institutional circumstances that determine access to recognition, stability and long-term academic agency. Normative theories of justice focus on the fact that institutions of higher learning have an ethical obligation not only to enable one to access the academic fields but also to enable one to continue making progress. With the limited number of women who eventually ascend to senior academic positions, it is an indicator that there is structural restriction that weakens equal opportunity and participation of epistemology (Nussbaum, 2011).

Representation in Academic Field

The survey data show that female scholars are more represented in the social sciences and humanities with a relatively low representation in science and engineering among other technical sciences. This disproportional distribution of discipline is a larger structural trend in higher education which conditions access, recognition and belonging in disciplines. Philosophically, the feminist epistemology can be used to understand why some fields of knowledge remain structured in such a way that the involvement of women is implicitly sidelined. These disciplinary exclusions do not simply exist in a form of preference, but they are epistemic injustices, and inequalities in recognition of women as full-fledged knowers in specific academic disciplines (Sherman, 2016).

Academic Positions & Hierarchical Representation

Responses to the survey indicate that the majority of the respondents were in early academic jobs specifically doctoral and junior teaching jobs, with relatively few in senior or decision-making jobs. This trend shows the hierarchical nature of the academic set up where the number of women is less as one goes further up the institutional hierarchy. Philosophically, this stratification brings out the existence of structural barriers that limit the advancement of women in academic power systems. These obstacles are not the consequences of individual failure but they are entrenched in the institutional practices of

promotion, recognition, and leadership. Structural theories of injustice help to highlight the fact that such inequalities are caused by systemic structures that unequally allocate power and access, which restricts the ability of women to have agency in the long-term in terms of academic achievement (Young, 2011).

Academic Responsibilities and Activities

The survey data shows that women scholars were mostly involved in research and publication work with relatively little participation in leadership, policy-focused work and institutional decision-making. Although there was involvement in mentorship and administrative duties, these roles were not seen to be major compared to work on research. Philosophically, inequality in the distribution of academic duties is called to question in terms of ethical considerations on institutional recognition and even distribution of academic power. Normative theories of communicative and institutional justice focus on the fact that equal epistemic agency requires meaningful participation in the process of leadership and policy making. When the efforts by women in academics only focus on research, their impact in the greater systems of governance is equally limited (Habermas, 2001).

Influence of Female Scholars in Policy Making

The results of the survey show varying views concerning the role of female scholars in higher education policy. Although a significant number of respondents considered women scholars to play a significant role in the institutional and policy level decisions, the degree of this impact was not seen as credible by others. Philosophically, these conflicting views indicate that there have been epistemic conflicts on matters of authority, credibility, and recognition in the academic governance systems. Feminist epistemology stresses the importance of women policy input being disproportionately credited and hence the loss of their position as legitimate epistemic agents. These dynamics demonstrate the moral duty of institutions to make sure that women are included in the decision-making process and that they are perceived as authoritative figures in the policy discussion.

Structural Challenges for Female Scholars

The survey responses indicate the presence of repetitive issues that affect female scholars in the sphere of higher education: harassment and discrimination, as well as the lack of a proper work-life balance. Although some improvements are reported in some areas of the institutions, these issues still linger and they are structural. Philosophically speaking, these experiences amount to different types of moral and epistemic injustice, in which institutional settings are not able to maintain the values of dignity, safety, and equal participation. Feminist scholarship points out that in cases where the academic settings

permit or poorly deal with such conditions, they erode the epistemic agency and professional legitimacy of women. These trends indicate institutional ethical breakdowns, and not individual ones, which supports the idea of institutional responsibility (Acker, 1994; Morley, 2013).

Institutional Support for Gender Equality

The results of the survey indicate that the institutional support of gender equality is viewed as existing but in an uneven distribution within the academic settings. Whereas several participants were able to recognize the supportive policies or initiatives, others were not certain or doubtful about their feasibility in practice. Normatively, this biased support brings out a discrepancy between institutional promises of gender equality and their moral actualization in the daily academic existence of academics. The philosophical perspectives on institutional justice underline that even symbolic approval cannot be effective unless it is followed by some real structural transformation. The inconsistent nature of institutional support can only serve to strengthen epistemic marginalization, as opposed to encouraging women scholars to become truly included and feel equal.

Effectiveness of Workplace Programs

The survey results show the different perceptions about the effectiveness of the workplace programs to support women scholars. The steps connected to the flexible work arrangements and work-life balance were mostly perceived in a more positive way, whereas the measures like leadership training, mentoring, and anti-discrimination policies were rated in a more neutral way. Philosophically, these perceptions pose questions on the way that institutional support mechanisms are structured and executed. Normative explanations of institutional justice stress that the support programs should not just be there on paper, but they should be substantive in their effect on the structural inequalities. The fact that some of the initiatives are viewed as less effective implies that it is necessary to rethink the manner in which the institutions can translate the pledges made towards equality into the pragmatic and ethically responsive action.

Participation in Leadership Development Programs

The survey results indicate that women scholars are still underrepresented in leadership development programs. A large proportion of participants noted that they had not participated in such initiatives, citing the potential reasons of inaccessibility, unawareness or a lack of institutional support. Philosophically, the lack of such involvement begs the question of the institutional responsibility and ethical obligation in the development of non-discriminatory academic leadership opportunities.

Normative theories of educational justice underscore the fact that development of leadership is to be systematically facilitated so as to provide equitable access to leadership role. In the case when the number of women scholars in the leadership training is too low, an institutional practice will only recreate the hierarchies but do not create an inclusive and fair system of academic governance (Blackmore, 2014).

Female Scholars' Impact on Higher Education Reform

The responses of the survey can be summarized as having diverse views on the role of female scholars in the reform of higher education. Although a good number of the respondents acknowledged the role of women scholars in the process of reforms, others were either uncertain or ambivalent on how much the women scholars have influenced reform. Philosophically, these ambivalent perceptions emphasize the current issues of visibility, recognition, and epistemic power in the institutional reform agendas. Feminist view and the normative approach implies that the transformative potential of women is limited when their input in reforming does not get considerable recognition or endorsement. This highlights a necessity of institutional practices more explicitly identifying and enhancing the contribution of women scholars in the development of equitable and sustainable changes in higher education.

Female Scholars' Influence on Policy for Sustainable Development

The responses obtained in the survey indicate that female scholars are being more seen to be leading to the formulation of education policies that are geared towards sustainable development although the appreciation of this role is not evenly spread. Even though most of the participants admitted the importance of the role of women in formulating sustainability-oriented policy agendas, others said that they were not sure or were not that aware of their role. Philosophically, this biased acknowledgment is connected to the current struggles associated with the epistemic visibility and power in policy-making procedures. Normative theories of justice point to the fact that to achieve sustainable development in education, inclusive epistemic participation is needed. The ethical and transformative opportunities of sustainable development efforts are also limited when the policy contribution made by women is only taken into consideration selectively.

Gender Bias and Challenges Faced by Female Scholars

The results of the survey show that there is a high perception that most of the problems faced by female scholars in higher education are directly related to gender bias. The most common theme that was indicated by the participants was that professional challenges were connected to gendered norms, expectations, and unequal treatment in academic institutions. Philosophically, these perceptions are in

line with gendered power relations theory which recognizes bias as a structural and not a personal phenomenon. Feminist philosophy focuses on the fact that in the academic evaluation, recognition, and opportunity, which is developed by gender bias, there is a limitation of the epistemic agency and professional legitimacy of women. These trends are symptomatic of systemic injustices that are institutionalized in the cultures of higher education and this supports the imperative of redressing the issue of gender bias as a core ethical and epistemic issue in higher education.

Importance of Policy Interventions for Female Participation in Leadership

The results of the survey show that the significance of policy interventions to increase the number of women in academic leadership is highly appreciated. The majority of the respondents considered the policy-level interventions as the means of tackling the existing gender gaps in the leadership roles, yet the diversity in the opinions was also noticeable. With reference to philosophy, this awareness highlights the realization that gender inequality in leadership is not just a personal matter but a structural and institutional problem. Normative theories of justice focus on the fact that fair participation of leadership entails institutional responsibility and policy intervention. In the absence of these interventions, power imbalances that exist will probably continue to restrict the potential access of women to authority and epistemic power in institutions of higher education.

Necessity of Policy Changes to Improve Female Representation in Leadership

The results of the surveys indicate that there is a general recognition of the necessity of policy reforms to increase the number of women in terms of leadership in higher education. A large number of respondents considered structural changes as a key element in curbing the long-term gender imbalances in academic governance, and some respondents were unsure of the extent or success of structural changes. Conceptually, this acknowledgement is indicative of the realization that inequality in leadership is based on institutional set ups, as opposed to personal ability. Normative theories of justice stress that to achieve any meaningful advance to gender equality, a purposeful policy intervention must be made that will reorganize access to authority and decision-making. Without these alterations, the current hierarchies will probably keep restricting women in taking up leadership roles and their effectiveness in epistemological matters.

Significance of Structural Barriers in Hindering Female Scholars' Advancement

The survey data suggests that there is a considerable awareness of structural barriers as a major issue that hinders the progress of female scholars in the higher education system. Discrimination, lack

of access to mentoring, and reduced leadership opportunities were often cited by the participants as some of the barriers that women struggle to overcome in order to attain senior academic and decision-making positions. Philosophically, these obstacles are examples of structural injustice, that is, institutional practices that restrict the agency of women in academia in a systematic way and do not indicate any personal constraints or inabilities.

Feminist and political theories of justice are keen to note that these impediments are institutionalized in organizational culture, standards of evaluation and power structures that govern access to power and status. Academic institutions that are unable to deal with these systemic limitations reproduce inequalities in professional development and epistemic involvement. The continued existence of these obstacles negates these fundamental equality, accountability, and fairness ideals through which higher educational institutions purport to exist. The presence of structural barriers is not just a policy issue, but a moral imperative, and the institutions must make efforts to eradicate the exclusionary behaviors and establish an environment in which women scholars can engage in academic leadership and knowledge-making on an equal and comprehensive basis (Young, 2011; Gordon and Foucault, 1980).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study has limitations that cannot be ignored regardless of its conceptual and philosophical contributions. To begin with, the sample size is relatively small and is confined to a group of young scholars particularly in the social sciences as well as in the humanities and as such, restricts the generalizability of the findings. Representations of older academics and scholars are also underrepresented in the STEM disciplines and may restrict a full-fledged image of structural and epistemic barriers in the whole spectrum of higher education. The geographical coverage of the study is also lacking since it is only an expression of experiences within a specific regional context. Given the fact that academic organization and institutional practices of gendering are very diverse in various cultural, political and social settings, the information presented in this paper is to be approached cautiously when being transferred to other settings or educational systems. The self-reports characteristics of the data also introduce a threat of subjective bias as the information that is offered by the participants could be influenced by the personal perceptions, social desirability or unawareness of bigger institutional processes. Moreover, the perceptions and the accounts of the study are largely foregrounded as opposed to offering an objective analysis of the measurable impact of women scholars on policy making or the result of leadership, as this narrows the empirical coverage of the study findings.

The limitations can be overcome in various ways in future research. To make it more inclusive and representative, it would be more appropriate to expand the sample to include scholars in other areas,

at various points of their careers, and in other institutional contexts. The longitudinal studies could reveal valuable data about the evolving trends of academic journey of women, career opportunities and organizational limitation in the long term. International or inter-regional comparative studies would also assist in better explaining how cultural norms, government structures and institutional practices affect gendered academic experiences in one way or the other. The qualitative case studies, document reviews and policy appraisal may also be included in future research since it will assist in filling the perceptual accounts with more objective signs of impact. Finally, the consideration of the opinions of male scholars and academic administrators can potentially assist in acquiring even a better understanding of the gendered institutional processes and practices and construct a more welcoming and justice-oriented academic leadership and governance.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to the development of a philosophically-based explanation of the role of women in higher education through the prism of reconsidering gender equality as not a tool to an external development agenda, but a concern of fairness, moral duty, and epistemic inclusion. Based on the feminist philosophy, political philosophy and epistemology, the analysis reveals that the current gender disparities in academic leadership and knowledge production are forms of structural and epistemic injustices that weaken the normative bases of higher education. Women researchers are not just stakeholders in the educational systems, they are key epistemic agents whose marginalization undermines the legitimacy, inclusiveness and moral authority of academic institutions. The disruption of the epistemic power of women and the moral foundations of higher education as an epistemic space are caused by structural conditions that restrict women with recognition, authority, and leadership positions. The lack of institutional ambivalence to gender equality and the ongoing underrepresentation of women in leadership must then not be perceived as gaps in the policy, but as the institutional failure of responsibility and acknowledgment. Ensuring gender equity in higher education is not only a good idea but also morally and epistemically obligatory. To make higher education more aligned to the principles of justice, the equality, inclusion, and recognition need to be viewed as values and not as the results. This kind of a normative repositioning establishes women scholars as equal partners in academic leadership, government and generation of knowledge, which allows institutions of higher learning to meet their ethical obligations to intellectual integrity, social responsibility, and emancipatory possibility.

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