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THE WOMEN'S COMMUNITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PRACTICE AND CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

The Higher Education system in India has, over the years, witnessed the influx of women as students and teachers for a number of reasons. However, the traditional power structures of the system have operated in ways that have not only replicated the patriarchal social structures of oppression and thus perpetuated the gender bias and inequity in the system but have also consolidated gender unfriendly institutional practices in the guise of institutional traditions and norms. Women in the system therefore have had to struggle for an egalitarian system, which would recognize their worth and allow for positive change. The need for a women's collective in terms of networking, connecting and bonding in order to pool intellectual resources and create a power base has long been felt by women employees in higher education. In this context the emergence and subsequent consolidation of a nationwide movement for women and by women in the higher education system, conceived and initiated in 1997 was a pioneering attempt. The present paper attempts to examine this phenomenon of women's collective in the academia to understand how/whether collaborative efforts by women in the higher education system has been able to foster and engender change. The paper analyses dichotomies inherent in the genesis and practice of such a fostered community, which has its roots in the existing system of governance, which may derive qualities of the same and/or replicate similar structures reconstituting power hierarchies and its pitfalls thereof. The study also posits that the community of women in higher education is a community of practice and more than a natural community, based on networking for change, collaborative efforts and empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION:

The Higher Education system in India has, over the years, witnessed the influx of women as students and teachers for a number of reasons. However, the traditional power structures of the system have operated in ways that have not only replicated the patriarchal social structures of oppression and thus perpetuated the gender bias and inequity in the system but have also consolidated gender unfriendly institutional practices in the guise of institutional traditions and norms. In other words, “the cultural socialization in a patriarchal society is so deep rooted that even the educated are not liberated until special efforts are made in this direction”¹ Traditional gender roles have been re-allocated even in the work premises, so much so that women are almost invisible in the managerial, administrative and decision-making positions in the higher education system. Paradoxically, the increasing influx of women to jobs in universities and colleges as a result of feminization of certain jobs has led to a clustering of women in the lower rungs of the higher education system, thus generating so-called ‘pink ghettos’ of women educationists who have been unable to break the glass ceiling of prejudice and patriarchal assumptions on account of different factors that need to be investigated. The low visibility of women in the influential positions of administrative hierarchy has admittedly impacted the actual working conditions of women in the system and the need for stimulating change in the institutional policies and practices is now long overdue. Power structures are resistant to penetration or restructuring and as such the higher education system is no different in resisting structural changes that could shift the balance of male domination in the hierarchy or jostle the status quo. Women in the system therefore have had to struggle for an egalitarian system, which would recognize their worth and allow for positive change. Individual efforts by sensitized and gender empathetic women were puny fists pounding against an immovable wall of odds. Increasingly therefore, the need for a women’s collective in terms of networking, connecting and bonding in order to pool intellectual resources and create a power base has been felt by women employees in higher education - both at the university and college levels. In this context the emergence and subsequent consolidation of a nationwide movement for women and by women in the higher education system, which was conceived and initiated in 1997 by the then Chairperson of the University Grants Commission Professor Armaity Desai was a pioneering attempt that has gone a long way in revolutionizing the traditional practices in the higher education system, though there is still much to be achieved. The present paper attempts to examine this phenomenon of women’s collective in the academia to understand how

collaborative efforts by women in the higher education system has been able to foster and engender change and how a rare sisterhood and bonding has broken invisible barriers erected by the erstwhile intellectually self-centred ambitions of the academic community to strengthen women's resources and in turn to pave the path for an egalitarian and gender friendly higher education system. The paper interrogates/examines/analyses dichotomies inherent in the genesis and practice of such a fostered community, which has its roots in the existing system of governance, which may derive qualities of the same and/or replicate similar structures reconstituting power hierarchies and its pitfalls thereof. The study also posits that the community of women in higher education is a community of practice and more than a natural community, based on networking for change, collaborative efforts and empowerment.

Genesis of the programme “Capacity Building of Women Managers in Higher Education”

In the 1990's, as the Chair Person of the University Grants Commission, Professor Armaity Desai had the opportunity to focus on an area of “great concern” to the UGC—the invisibility of women in leadership positions in the university system in spite of the fact that women were joining as students and teachers in large numbers. The Higher Education system was no exception to other socio-cultural institutions with their inherent gender bias and deep-rooted patriarchal value systems. It was understood that special efforts needed to be made in this direction. The situation was discussed in the standing Committee of Women's Studies of the UGC. The Commonwealth Secretariat, London, approached UGC to make a presentation of their Manuals, which they had developed under the Commonwealth Higher Education Support Scheme (CHESS) as they had noted the problem of the lack of women in such key positions in higher education in all Commonwealth countries, including the U.K., Canada and Australia. A workshop was held at Delhi in 1997 with participants from the UGC Standing Committee for Women's Studies and some other women academicians including a few women Vice Chancellors. The programme focused on sensitizing women in higher education to the current situation, raising awareness, and motivating women managers to aspire for decision making leadership positions and gender advocacy. It was then decided that UGC would undertake a similar sensitizing activity for which manuals would have to be framed keeping in mind the Indian context. The manuals presented by CHESS were reworked by a group of authors appointed as a sub-committee to the Standing Committee. Five substantive and three facilitative manuals were written. The manuals were field tested at a model workshop organized by the Centre for Women's Studies and Development, Punjab University and the new insights gained

were incorporated in the manuals, which were finalized and forwarded to the UGC for dissemination Subsequently three more manuals were added.*(See Note)

The primary objectives of the training programme has been to prepare women who have the potential to occupy management positions and to potential trainers from among the participants as also to sensitise women holding administrative positions to issues of gender and the 'woman question'. The programme focuses not only on building administrative skills but primarily on motivating women teachers to see themselves becoming managers in the university system. The manuals offer the following rationale, goal, strategies and methodology for the training programme aimed at fostering a community of women in higher education. This reinforces the hypothesis that this fostered community would be a community of practice by definition and by character.

The Rationale: The justification for offering the programme to women only lies in the need to bridge the existing gap between men and women managers in the system. The conceptual content of the programme may be common for both genders but the interpretations given to concepts in an all women group may have a different emphasis when discussed from the gender perspective. A women only activity often facilitates a dialogue on issues, that might not have been discussed in mixed groups as women are reluctant/hesitant to discuss professional insecurities with men for fear of being regarded as incapable. As minority members of the academic community in terms of senior positions, there may also be negative feelings of social isolation and intimidation Training with other women helps the group to network with each other and address issues of gender inequities. Women only groups further help women to share strategies, to increase confidence, as also to lobby and network with decision makers, who may often be men.

The Goal : The movement (as the programme is now called) targets to reach the thousands of women in higher education so as to enable participation of women in the management of higher education and the development of gender friendly policies.

Strategies :- The major strategy is to develop a critical mass of trainers, so that all the universities and colleges of the country can be brought into the fold of this movement of women

for women in higher education. Unlike other UGC schemes, this movement is carried forward through a series of workshops, which are conducted by an organizational structure—Local Coordinators and Trainer Associates, Resource Persons, Regional and Sub- Regional Coordinators, core Group Resource Persons who are the Manual writers and Master Trainers (who have experience as Resource Persons in Several Workshops, skilled trainers and have very good feedback on performance. They train would- be trainers in training of Trainers workshops) Sensitisation and Motivational workshops are conducted at different levels and with various combinations linking a cross-section of colleges and universities. A select group of talented and committed participants who are willing to give their time are identified as potential trainers and trained at the Regional level Training of Trainers workshops. The ambit of the movement is widened with every consecutive round of SAM and ToT workshops and the community of sensitized women in the system grows by ripple effect.

Methodology:- A participatory training methodology is used, which is essentially experiential. The emphasis is on group building, encouraging involvement and initiating dialogue. Methodological tools for unconventional, learner-centred training are used. Ice breakers, case studies, role plays, panel discussions, group exercises, games, brainstorming, group discussions, experience sharing , group reporting are some of the techniques used to draw out the group and facilitate identification and sharing, as also non-threatening, co-operative engagements in the context of higher education. In this context, women’s collective action and collaborative efforts in terms of mobilizing resources to achieve the common goal of fostering gender friendly workplaces could be viewed as an alternative possibility of empowerment.²

The Movement in the North East : My Perspectives :

The programme was initiated in the northeast in 2003 by the Regional Co-Ordinator and Core Group Resource Person Prof.. Archana Sharma, the Director of WSRC, Guwahati and with her team from the centre and a support group of teachers from the university. Since then in the course of five years 12 workshops (10 SAMs & 2 ToTs) were conducted in Assam, Meghalaya and Manipur. Eight more are scheduled to be held in 2009-10.

In September 2004, I received a letter from the Director WSRC, Guwahati University, inviting me to participate in a six day Residential Regional Workshop on “Capacity Building of Women Managers in Higher Education” I had not realized when I decided to join that I was

about to become a part of a nationwide movement of women for women in higher education - a women's collective that was unique and the first of its kind because it sought to combine the experiential with the intellectual. For the first time in my experience, there was scope for intellectual sharing beyond workshop hours. Debates and discussions initiated in the business sessions were extended and carried over to pre and post dinner talks, breakfast sessions, experience sharing, walks and the 'encounters' we had together. We shared, listened and connected, bonded and initiated friendships that were to last. We glimpsed and gained insights into each other's worlds—were inspired or shaken up by personal revelations. We felt pampered and genuinely valued. It felt good to be able to talk about ourselves with the surety of knowing that our experiences would not be devalued or belittled, that we were being listened to empathetically, that nothing was 'too personal' or 'too trivial' to be voiced. There was a freedom in being with each other— a rediscovery of self-worth and an empowering, non competitive participation. For academicians working usually within the structured boundaries of classroom and intellectual platforms—the workshop came as a cathartic release followed by rejuvenation of confidence on our own abilities and mutual respect and trust in the group. In practice it resembled the ritualistic group communions of women's communities and to me, carried with it the cadenza of as many untold 'herstories' as there were participants. I had never before felt such identification with a group or so empowered in being with other women.

The first sensitization workshop was an eye opener in many ways. The sessions were structured according to the conceptual frame work of the programme. The mode of training was facilitative and learner-centered, which allowed maximum involvement of the participants of the several issues that were foregrounded major concerns converged on the "woman question" the positive and negative aspects of a gender neutral approach, the possibility of looking at gender consciousness as an initial practice that needed to be outgrown, whether this could amount to a lack of feminine awareness or contact with reality. Gender neutrality of the women managers had & has often been a point of debate as were statements which exposed stereotyped gender assumption of a patriarchal society. Subsequently, questions were raised as to whether a prioritization of women specific issues mean a reverse bias ? Would gender neutrality mean a concession to patriarchal values? Would it imply a heroic non-concern? Should women's concern about larger social realities eclipse personal experience and the women's perspective ? Debates centered round the issue of women's location in the outside world and how their perceptions and experiences were different from men. Gender governed aspects of personal and professional lives of women were identified and women's life long adjustments and struggles in tune with expectations from them that negated their freedom and individual feminine self were recognized. There were instances where social and familial structures had become delimiting

presences for women while there were also narratives of support from fathers and fathers-in-law, husbands and brothers, which indicated the need for a collective effort to work out solutions of the problems emerging due to professional choices of women.³

My second phase of involvement with the programme began with my training as a trainer where we learnt the methodology of training and sensitizing adult learners. This one formally inducted us into the movement. Since then, as a UGC appointed trainer, I have had the occasion to act as a facilitative Resource Person in several SAM workshops and a Master Trainer in regional TOT workshops. Interacting with more than two hundred women in these workshops has been an unique firsthand encounter with a growing women's community in higher education.

As the coordinator of one of the First Phase workshops held in the state, I had the privilege of carrying forward the movement in Upper Assam. Participants from far flung corners of the state participated in the workshops. I have since witnessed the growth of a community of women who are committed to the agenda of making Higher Education in Assam gender friendly and equitable. At least 60% of participants in each workshop have been motivated to take up research and further studies — to equip themselves with the eligibility criteria required for promotion to higher positions. The emerging paradigm is that in each successive workshop, the number of academically accomplished women have increased, making the task of the motivators easier as already a potential resource group of eligible women were ready to be sensitized and step into roles of decision making and policy implementation.

Critique :

The most challenging part of the workshop strategy is the sensitization aspect. Motivation in terms of equipping women in the system with conviction and confidence to take up academic leadership has gradually been accomplished as women have begun to overcome inhibitions, prioritise their jobs and professional requirements, accepted the positive aspects of ambition and achievement and learnt to network and lobby in order to build support groups. Awareness raising in terms of knowledge about contemporary issues, the situation of women in society, family and workplace, problems of women in society and within the system possible research areas in women's studies. the need to upgrade oneself and enhance the knowledge base, utilize new technological tools as teaching learning aids---has also been achieved to extent. The task of sensitization remains the most formidable as most women academicians arrive with a set of pre-conceived notions, theoretically “enlightened and progressive views” and see themselves as

already sensitized and hence resist deconstructionist perspectives that seek to interrogate and debunk traditional notions. As a facilitator in SAM workshops, I have almost always (barring two exceptions) encountered difficulty in justifying a women-only managerial training programme as many participants are of the view that efforts should be directed towards sensitization of male administrators. Another problematic area is the breaking down of reservations to speak about personal experience. A natural reluctance to bare one's soul to the public eye, even in an all-women group, to speak about insecurities and fears, to admit weaknesses or "rememory" traumatic experiences have held some participants back. It was realized that this experience may not be liberating for all women even though they could be points of entry into enclosures. Even more difficult for women academicians who have reached certain statures and positions of respect is the relinquishing of inherited knowledge and traditional learning. The "unlearning" is often painful and disillusioning and occasionally some women are unwilling to take the plunge. Yet, the therapeutic efforts of this process are startling--pain is exorcised followed by healing, and then transformation --all because of a liberating "bonding" that promises to be the emotional ballast that could keep one afloat. In spite of the fact that the movement had initially originated with the support of Women's Studies Departments of India, there was a fall out in the later stages as this UGC sponsored community building was regarded as activism and not in the true grain of women's studies, which is an academic discipline. In this context, interesting insights offered in Susan Bordo's essay on the "othering" of the female, repression of nature and Cartesian "flight from the feminine" could be cited. She argues that a contemporary revaluation of the feminine could contribute meaningfully to the eventual and inevitable replacement of Cartesian ideal, which underscored the death of nature and masculinization of intellect. ("The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought", p.639-664). She suggests that a feminine perspective could bring into masculine and patriarchal domains (in the present context, governance) the possibility of participatory and inclusive modes and approaches that are more humane, fresher and more hopeful. A women's community in higher education, by virtue of its intellectual and public domain, could, look forward to establishing alternative modes of *knowing* and *doing*, stake its claim in bringing about change not only in terms of entering an exclusive domain, but by turning on its head the very concept of an exclusive pyramidal governance structure to replace it with inclusive, participatory, empathetic, supportive, egalitarian and *feminine* practices of governance.

Locating the movement in the theory of community:

Etienne Wenger says that Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. The development of a shared practice may be more or less self-conscious. In the course of conversations, members may develop a set of stories and case studies that have become a shared repertoire for their practice. (Etienne Wenger, 1998). This is especially true of the community of women in higher education who value their collective competence and learn from each other. Wenger points out that communities of practice develop their practice through a variety of activities like problem solving, requests for information, seeking and sharing experience, reusing assets, coordination and synergy, discussing developments, documentation projects, mapping knowledge and identifying gaps. The methodology used in the capacity building workshops attempts to foster a community of practice of women in higher education. However, the very characteristics that make communities of practice a good fit for stewarding knowledge—autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality, crossing boundaries—are also characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organizations.⁴

This women's community in higher education had not bonded in the usual way in which women's communities are formed. There were no ethnic or community ties, nor existential urges or, traumatic bonding to bring them together. Originating from UGC's intellectual anxiety about the low visibility of women in administrative and decision making positions in the higher education system, the movement swung to action and has gained momentum over the years. Every year since 2004, a series of workshops across the length and breadth of the nation has inducted groups of interested, capable and committed women in the system to the programme, sensitized them to the gender perspective, honed their managerial skill and created a power base and resource pool ready to be promoted into decision making and administrative positions. A woman's collective of a rare kind has emerged out of this pan-national drive to identify talented and potential women managers. Networks have been formed and lobbies created as women role models of the academia have stepped into mentorial roles. Professor Armaity Desai, in a moving account of the movement had once said that a handful of women at the topmost rung of the administrative ladder of higher education looked around one day to identify their support group. They found themselves isolated and working in lone splendour. They peered down and found a big group of women crowding the lowest rung of the academic hierarchy. This set them to think and the movement of women for women in Higher Education was conceived. Ironically, the

intellectual community of women had to learn to put into practice the theories of ‘sisterhood’ and ‘women’s bonding’ that it had hitherto conceptualized. With the initiation and consolidation of department of Women’s Studies in Universities and Colleges and the gradual albeit slow mainstreaming of feminist perspectives, the critical debunking of patriarchal ideologies had already begun to engender changes at least at intellectual levels and in research tools, critical approaches and methodology. However, this had not yet been translated into practical organizing of women in Higher Education to create pressure groups that could actually impact policies and structures. An individualistic and ambitious self-centeredness had hitherto alienated women of Higher Education from each other. They had so far worked to achieve personal ambitions and as such never come together as an organized group or realised the need to create a support groups or realised the need to create a support group to challenge the *status quo*. They had now been called upon to form a community of conscious women who could draw strength from each other— they had to learn to connect, share and form new bonds. Their situation was akin to the middle class white feminist who had begun to talk about sisterhood at a time when they felt confined in their isolation. Bell hooks encapsulates their difference with black women when she says that ‘sisterhoods’ may be a new idea for mainstream white feminists, but for black women, bonding with other black women was an existential reality. They had been always doing so and sisterhoods meant for them survival, alleviation of pain and a wellspring of strength, emotional support and resource.⁵ For women academicians bonding was not as spontaneous. Invisible barriers had to be demolished before these women could bring themselves to admit that they were working within enclosures created due to social acculturizations and patriarchal mindsets, which they had internalized. Unlike other communities of women which are usually formed spontaneously before they politically organize themselves, women in higher education have had to pre-organise themselves as a community with a conscious, clear-cut and deliberate agenda of entering the ‘front yard’⁶ or patriarchal spaces of administrative structures with a view to dismantle discriminatory and biased institutional policies and practices before they could genuinely feel that they were “sisters on the same boat” or connect sufficiently with each other or their own selves to initiate the process of natural bonding. This self-help movement was launched because it had been realized that resources, time included, were few and could not be wasted in appealing for justice and waiting for change.

Vision: Collaborative efforts as a strategy of empowerment:

From the vision of a handful of gender sensitive women academic leaders, the programme has gathered strength as a women’s collective and grown into a movement of

committed capable, gender sensitive community of women ready to take up positions of academic leadership in the system and taken up mentorial roles with a vision of building an egalitarian and gender friendly higher education system. Despite several lacunae and the inherent problematic ingrained in any group mobilized with a transformation agenda, the journey of this women's community from a UGC sponsored programme to a movement within the span of a decade (1997-2008) has been phenomenal and has gone a long way in sensitizing the academia to the needs of having more women administrators. Multiple foci for change need to be adopted. Individual self improvement training, capacity building and sensitization can help in bringing about change in perspective and mindset, which in turn would foster a long term and sustainable change in the work environment. As Barbara A. Gutek puts it, women need to develop economic, political, occupational and legal networks in order to pool their individually gained resources in order to exert pressure in various areas so as to achieve changes towards greater equity.⁷ In this context the positive aspects of a women's community and their collaborative efforts as strategy for empowerment could be reinforced.

Notes and References

1. Armaity Desai's Address to participants of Sensitizing awareness Raising and Motivational Workshops, 2004. p.1.
2. From Compiled Resource Material and Armaity Desai's Address to participants of Sensitizing Awareness Raising and Motivational Workshops 2004,2005,2006,2007 & 2008.
3. Jasbir Jain in her "Introduction" to *Growing up as a Woman Writer* writes about the debates that arose at the two conferences of women writers organized by the Sahitya Akademi in 2001& 2005. Many of the issues foregrounded there struck a familiar chord as these were also issues of debate in the 11 workshops I have attended in different capacities and I wanted to reinforce the similarities of concern in women's communities, pedagogic, empirical or otherwise.
4. Wenger, Etienne. *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

5. bell hooks, *Ain't I a woman ? Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South end Press, 1981.
6. *ibid*, Jasbir Jain quotes U.R. Ananta Murthy's description of male environs.
7. Gutek, Barbara A. "Women in Management: Progress or an Ephemeral Phenomenon?" *Women Employees and Human Resource Management*, eds N. Sastry & Pandey, Universities Press (India) Ltd. Pp. 45-46.

* Note: The manuals can be enlisted as follows:

Substantive :

1. Women's Studies Perspectives
2. Women and Governance
3. Women and Academic Leadership
4. Managing Personal and Professional Roles
5. Women and Research

Facilitative :

1. Facilitator's Handbook
2. Database on Women in Management
3. Bibliography on Women in Higher Education

Participative Methodology :

1. Compilation of Resource Materials for Facilitators
2. Compilation of 101 Group Building Exercises: Warm ups and More
3. Look it up— A Bibliography