

## Feminist epistemology: the gendered politics of knowledge-creation

Any discussion of epistemology, the study of **knowledge** and **knowledge-creation**, must begin with Enlightenment thinker René Descartes, a philosopher and mathematician whose contributions to physics, mathematics, physiology and astronomy bear testimony his position as one of the tallest figures in Western intellectual history. His postulation of objective truth as constituted of varying degrees of belief, to be approached with scepticism and tested for “deniability”, created the foundation for modern “scientific method”.



"If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things."

Rene Descartes

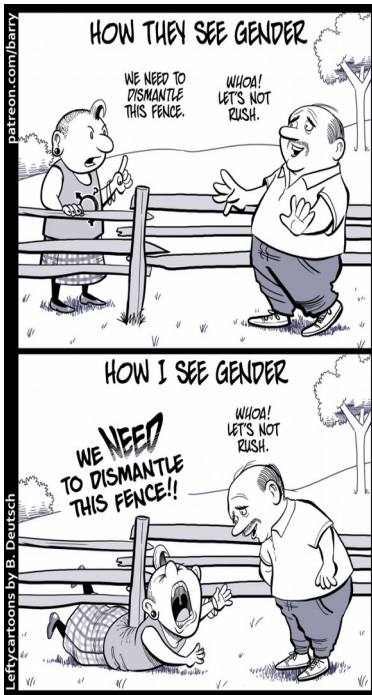
His assertion that all human beings are equally endowed with the “natural light of reason” and are therefore capable of creating knowledge, and the importance he placed on reflection on his personal experience as the starting point for the discovery of philosophical truths sound startlingly like the basic principles of feminist learning.

It is surprising then that the term “Cartesian” carries negative connotations for many feminists. This disquiet stems from Descartes' best-known assertion: “Cogito, ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) encapsulating his postulate that matter and consciousness are separate and distinct from each other. Like all of Descartes ideas, this notion of **mind/body dualism** has had a profound and lasting effect on Western thought. The idea of “pure reason” uncontaminated by emotion; the depiction of the ideal “knower” as an impartial and objective being unaffected by the subject of enquiry; the perception of nature as an inanimate object of knowledge; the notion of absolute and universal truths that apply across contexts, the valorisation of rationality and abstraction over emotion and materiality – all these have their origins in Cartesian dualism.

Feminist epistemology explores the impact of knowledge and knowledge-production on the lives of women, and investigates the relationships between knowledge and patriarchal power structures. By subjecting knowledge and systems of knowledge-creation to scrutiny through the lens of power, feminist analysis has expanded the understanding of the social dimensions of knowing.

**Standpoint theory** is perhaps the most influential of feminist contributions to epistemology. Standpoint theory challenges the idea of absolute and universal truths, asserting instead that knowledge and knowers are both **socially situated** – what we know and our ways of knowing are both shaped by our locations within various power structures. Standpoint theory holds that those who are situated at the margins and intersections of oppressive hierarchies of power are uniquely privileged in terms of knowing, and can see and know some things better than those who are privileged. For instance, Dalit women, by virtue of their daily experiences of both caste and gender oppression, are able to build a deeper and more grounded understanding of the workings of institutions and ideologies of both caste and patriarchy, than Dalit men or *savarna* women. Standpoint theory thus brings an epistemological dimension to intersectionality theory<sup>1</sup>, with a rich body of narratives that “brings the margins to the centre” and provides the empirical basis for theorising knowledge and power.

1 [Link to “Intersectionality” section to be inserted here.](#)

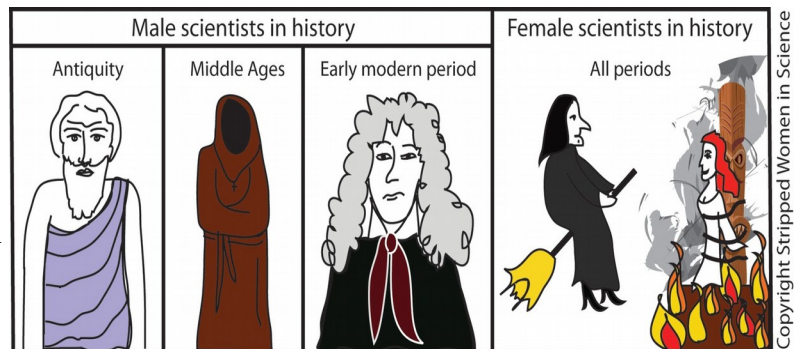


Standpoint theory is grounded in feminist political practice - it is no coincidence that it entered academic discourse more or less in parallel with the feminist consciousness movement within feminist activism. A standpoint is not just a synonym for a “perspective” - women's narratives are only the starting point. Feminist scholars emphasise that a standpoint is an “**achieved stance**” growing from a political process - analogous to Freire's concept of conscientisation - in which those who are powerless and marginalised become aware of the shared nature of their experiences of oppression and understand the systematic structure of power relations.

Standpoint theory therefore challenges the idea of the “atomised knower”, cut off from the world while engaging in the single-minded pursuit of knowledge. Feminist epistemologists hold that individual claims, belief and theories can only achieve the status of knowledge by going through a public process of critical scrutiny, in which individuals engage with each other as “**communities of knowers**”.<sup>2</sup>

Feminists have also built on the idea of **embodied knowledge** first articulated by existentialist philosopher Merleau-Ponty<sup>3</sup> who rejected the Cartesian mind-body dualism and asserted that thinking is a product of an active relationship between “embodied humans” and the world. Feminists have described how power relations inscribe themselves onto the body. Feminist practitioners have explored the ways in which situated and embodied experiences - “knowing with the body” - can contribute to a deeper understanding of the self and its relationships with other people and with nature.<sup>4</sup>

Feminists have shown how the **androcentric architecture of science** excludes the bodies and perspectives of women and other marginalised and powerless groups. Scientific discoveries made by women are taken less seriously. There have been several instances where papers submitted to prestigious journals are rejected when sent in under a woman's name and accepted when submitted under a man's name. The frequency of acceptance of women's papers for publication increases many-fold when they are reviewed “blind”, without disclosing the name of the author. Plant geneticist Barbara McClintock discovered the phenomena of genetic recombination and genetic transposition during the 1940', but was met with scepticism from the international scientific community. Her work was recognised only after it was confirmed by male scientists in the 1970s.



Androcentricism in the field of medicine has had serious consequences for women's health, for instance in terms of **medical responses to “women's diseases”**. Because women's reproductive functions are defined as central to their biology, the emotional distress of women in unhappy

2 For more on feminist standpoint theory see <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/fem-stan/>>  
 3 For more on embodied knowledge, see <<http://www.thegreenfuse.org/harris/notions-of-ek.htm>>  
 4 Barbour, Karen (2004) “Embodied ways of knowing”. Waikato Journal of Education 10:2004  
 <<https://core.ac.uk/download/files/677/29200009.pdf>>

marriages was framed as a physical disease – hysteria – to be 'cured' by removing the uterus. On the other hand, dysmenorrhoea (painful menstruation) was until very recently not recognised as a disease at all but was dismissed as attention-seeking or malingering. In both these cases, the decision to treat the condition as a disease or dismiss it as a figment of the imagination actually rests on the conviction that women's own accounts of their bodily experiences are not trustworthy.

Feminist academics and practitioners across the world are contributing to building a body of principles and practices for knowledge-creation that can advance feminist goals. **Feminist research** draws its agenda from women's struggles and is grounded in feminist values and principles. It seeks to bring women's standpoints to the centre of the discourse even as it challenges the patriarchal hegemony of institutions of knowledge-production. Feminist research is by definition interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, informed by diverse voices and perspectives. Feminist methodologies consciously seek to make visible and address the power imbalance between the researcher and the subject.

## Feminist epistemology in learning spaces

All learning spaces are arenas for knowledge-sharing and knowledge-creation. For feminists, learning spaces are also opportunities for demonstrating the power of feminist methodologies in challenging and transforming power relations.

Thus, feminist learning spaces need to be designed for the actualisation of some of the basic principles of feminist epistemology.

- **Bringing the margins to the centre** - ensuring space, respect and validation for the voices and standpoints of those who have been excluded and silenced by various power structures and systems of oppression.
- **Interrogating power** – making power visible and destabilising power hierarchies within the process.
- **Making context explicit** – recognising and validating the standpoints of knowers in terms of their locations within systems of power and powerlessness.
- **Rejecting hegemonic dualities** – questioning traditional categories (subject/object, expert/non-expert, mind/body) and making them irrelevant to the learning process.
- **Making connections visible** – surfacing and exploring the interlinkages between personal experience and larger systems of oppression, between patriarchy and other systems of oppression and between diverse issues and domains of knowledge.
- **Advancing feminist goals** – building synergies between the learning process and the larger feminist agenda of social transformation for gender equality.

Feminist processes of knowledge-creation demand democratic spaces, where knowers from diverse standpoints can engage with each other in an atmosphere of **openness, trust and respect**, challenging each others' background assumptions and validating co-created knowledge through **critical questioning**. The process of creating safe and democratic spaces is discussed [here](#)<sup>5</sup>

## Tools and exercises

Feminist practitioners are drawing from a range of different disciplines to develop tools and methodologies that can transform learning spaces into sites for knowledge-creation. The few examples presented below are taken from our own practice to illustrate how tools and exercises can

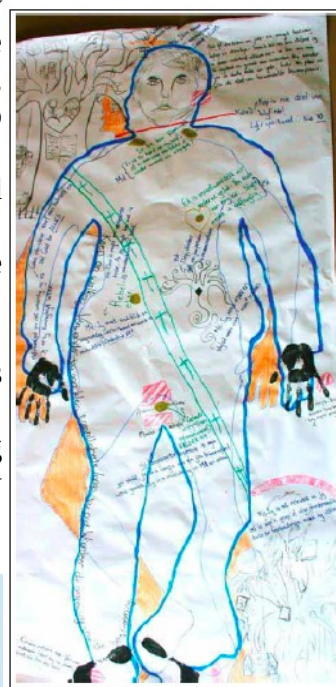
5 [Insert link here to "Safe space" sub-section.](#)

be restructured by grounding them in feminist principles.

**Re-readings and re-tellings** of familiar stories and folklore, a familiar activity in creative writing and communication workshops, can also be an engaging way to open up discussions about standpoints. Inviting learners to re-construct a story from the standpoint of a marginal character can lead to a layered conversation on the biases and preconceptions linked to the actual as well as the imagined social location of the each narrator. To be effective, stories should be understandable in the cultural context of learners, should have a rich cast of characters and should depict a complex picture of reality. For Indian feminists, stories chosen from classical epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are ideal for the purpose of exploring standpoints and locational power.

**Body mapping** was originally developed by occupational health researchers as tools for data-collection on work-related injuries. Body-mapping has also been used by feminists as a tool to surface mind-body connections and facilitate exploration of “body truths” that cannot be easily articulated in words. The exercise described below shifts body-mapping out of these traditional domains, into the realm of policy analysis. Using body-mapping as an entry into discussions on macro-policies can be impactful in several ways.

- It exposes the patriarchal underpinnings of policy-making and brings policy impacts under scrutiny.
- It surfaces the unstated assumptions and biases that shape the policy process.
- It visibilises the differentiated impacts of policies .
- It demonstrates that individual experiences and material realities can be a valid starting point for policy analysis.
- It helps learners to understand the concept of embodied learning and acquire the skill of using embodied experience to create new knowledge.



Source: Photo of bodymap of participant seven (August 2009)  
PHOTO 1

### ***Understanding how the state controls women's bodies***

- Provide each learner with a sheet of paper large enough to lie down on. Ask people to pair up and trace out the outlines of each other's body on the sheet using a thick marker.

- Ask each learner to think about all the different ways in which the state tries to exercise control over women's bodies. You might need to give one or two examples to trigger the reflection (eg state-sponsored media aims to control women's thinking).

- Ask people to mark the points of control onto the outlines of their bodies on the paper, with a dot and a few words of explanation, or an image.

- Now bring learners together in groups of four or five to look at the individual body map and create a common map marking only the spots that apply to every individual in the group.

- Ask the group to study the completed maps. Invite people to speculate on the reasons for the differences between the individual maps and the common map. - Use questions to move the discussions forward. Who are the women whose bodies are most vulnerable to state control? Who are the women who appear to be most free from these controls? Why? Which are the controls that constrain women's rights and freedoms? Are there any controls that are necessary to secure rights for some groups of women even though they may disadvantage others (laws restricting women's participation in hazardous industries could be one example of this kind of “well-intentioned control”).

- To conclude the exercise, ask each small group to select one form of control and suggest a strategy for opposing (or reinforcing) it.

*- Invite the group to validate each strategy through critical questioning to identify and weed out unjustified assumptions and exclusionary biases .*



Quantitative data and statistics are particularly significant for feminists who are challenging the basis of “evidence-based” policy-making. Most often, the ways in which official data is processed and presented is consciously opaque and designed to obscure the connections between issues and processes in different domains. Statistics are also seen as highly technical and beyond the grasp of ordinary citizens. Learning to unpack and question statistics to expose the reality behind the data is therefore a political project for women and marginalised groups. Statistical analysis through a feminist lens also demonstrates the transformatory potential of feminist epistemology. “What lies behind the numbers?” is an exercise designed to demystify data and “bring the margins to the centre” by subjecting statistics to scrutiny and questioning by those whose stories and interests are silenced in official narratives.

### ***What lies behind the numbers?***

*- Choose an area that is relevant to the group's work and collect the latest relevant statistics. For instance, for a group working on women's reproductive rights, you could put together national figures for maternal mortality, infant mortality, age at marriage and anaemia incidence. For groups working on education, you could collect data on school enrolment and drop out, age of school completion, levels of achievement at school leaving and incidence of child labour.*

*- Prepare handouts with the data to be analysed. You should try and present the data in an easily understandable form. Simple visuals such as bar graphs and pie charts (annotated with numbers as necessary) are ideal for the purpose, and can usually be found on the websites of government departments or in documents such as MDG reports and Human Development Reports.*

*- Explaining the purpose of the exercise and some examples to make the objective clear. You can also prepare a handout to back up your briefing.*

*- Walk the group through the statistics that you have selected for analysis, and make sure that everyone understands what the figures mean.*

*- Ask participants to work in groups to go through the statistics and speculate on how well the national data match their own experience. What are the areas where there is divergence? What are the reasons for the divergence? Invite groups to share the highlights of their discussions with each other.*

*- In the second stage of the exercise, ask groups to identify at least ten new elements/parameters that they would like to add to the national statistics. How should this data be collected? Who are the best informants? What are the questions they should be asked?*

*- After the groups have shared their questions, you can close the exercise by inviting their reflections on what they think would change if the new statistics was to become the basis for policy formulation.*

### **Sample handout text**

*Data can be a useful starting point to assess levels and track trends, but analysis ought to begin – and not end - with numbers. It is important to understand the truths behind the numbers – what they reveal about the circumstances of people's lives, and the freedoms and choices they enjoy.*

*Statistics cannot always be taken at face value. For instance, employment statistics can tell us what work a woman does and what she earns. By these criteria, two women working at the same job and earning the same amount of money are statistically identical – deemed to be equal. But very different realities may lie behind the numbers. A little probing might reveal that these two women actually exist at opposite poles of freedom and security. One woman may have no choice but to work in order to keep her family from slipping into destitution. The other woman may be pursuing an interest she values even though she is under no compulsion to work. The first woman will cling to her job, even if the wage is small, because every little bit of money she earns is important for her survival. The second woman might also cling to her job, but it is because she loves what she is doing - her wages do not matter to her.*

*Similarly, two women who are not working have the same statistical status, but may exist at very different levels of security. One may be unable to work because custom and tradition prevent her from stepping out of the house. The other may have had all the opportunities, but may have chosen not to work. There are other unfreedoms that lie hidden behind labour statistics. Economists often talk about a “free market wage rate” - a rate that is determined by the demand and supply of labour. But how “free” is the market wage rate? A woman whose only source of livelihood is the sale of her labour, with nothing to fall back on if she does not get work, may be forced to accept unjust wages and oppressive working conditions. Is she free in this market? Or a woman who is forced to continue in a low-paid job because she has been denied education and opportunities – is she a free agent?*

*In assessing progress, one must also examine the inter-connections between the various factors that affect women’s lives. Social customs and attitudes, levels of literacy and health, patterns of economic growth, structures of private and public decision making, political commitment - all these combine to define the functional boundaries of freedoms and choice, equality and exploitation in our society.*

## References and readings

- **Feminist social epistemology.** **Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy** <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-social-epistemology/>>
- **Feminist standpoint theory.** <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/fem-stan/>>
- **Feminist methodologies and epistemology** <<http://www.andreadoucet.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Doucet-Mauthner-2005-Feminist-Methodologies-and-Epistemologies.pdf>>
- **Feminist method** <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist\\_method](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_method)>
- **Tools: Training for Change** <<https://www.trainingforchange.org/tools>>