

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Is Scholar-Activism an Oxymoron? Reflecting on the Challenges and Opportunities for Scholarly Activism or Activist Scholarship in the Politics and Gender Field

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Scholar-activism, which we define as scholarship that seeks to contribute knowledge to activism is often underappreciated. From a methodological perspective, the positionality of scholar-activists is too often misunderstood. Yet scholar-activism is a relatively common approach to generating new knowledge about hard-to-access, repressive contexts while also assisting political movements and their strategies. Feminist-informed scholarship necessitates scholar-activism

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because it is driven by an emancipatory purpose that demands critical reflexivity about the power of epistemology, boundaries, relationships, and the researcher's situatedness (Ackerly and True 2020, 22). We argue that a deeper understanding of scholar-activism and lived experiences is vital for furthering knowledge and impact in the politics and gender field.

Despite our different backgrounds, we connected through our common experiences as scholar-activists in a new network that brings together early career scholars whose research is focused on understanding the nature, drivers, and barriers to women's participation and leadership in movements. In the Maureen Brunt Women and Democratic Change Network, we seek to collectively think about, analyze, and theorize about these issues across several countries.¹ Early on we identified a shared "identity puzzle" that situates us in the "borderlands" of academia and activism (Suzuki and Mayorga 2014, 17).

Frequent questions put to us include, are we scholars or are we activists? How can you be both? And what challenges must be overcome? Collectively, we agreed that "as with other hyphenated identities, that of scholar-activist is fraught with tensions depending on which part of the hyphen is privileged and who does the privileging" (Desai 2013, 89). Many of us are scholar-activists not by choice, but because we are living under (trans)national oppression or have been driven into exile or emigration by conflict-affected or politically repressive contexts (Rahbari 2024). Moreover, like Maxey (1999) and Bishop and O'Connor (2023), some of us are also uncomfortable with the term scholar-activism as its meanings are often context-specific and contingent on diverse understandings and underlying assumptions.

In this Notes from the Field, we draw on our collective experiences and knowledge exchange to highlight the contributions and challenges of scholar-activism. We argue that the politics and gender field cannot benefit from the insights and knowledge of multisited, multilingual scholar-activists if the challenges and barriers to their scholarship are not addressed. To this end, we suggest possible opportunities to advance scholar-activism and discuss our Network's approach to supporting feminist-informed scholar-activism.

Contributions of Scholar-Activists

The contributions of scholar-activists to knowledge and political struggles cannot be underestimated. Notable scholar-activists, such as Sara Ahmed (2021; 2023), Angela Y. Davis *et al.* (2023; James 1998), and Ray Acheson (2021), have produced work of immense value by foregrounding their lived experiences as scholars-activists to voice social and political issues at stake in unjust, repressive, and/or violent contexts that constrain gender politics and their emancipatory potential. Their scholarly contributions not only revolutionized their respective fields but also advanced social transformation and justice on the ground. Moreover, they are concrete examples of the power and relevance of scholar-activism.

Scholar-activism is relevant because it documents social and political movements, events, histories, and experiences in real-time. Additionally, by drawing on their hybrid lenses, scholar-activists produce new and cutting-edge

knowledge, both empirical and theoretical. For example, Cynthia Enloe (1990; 2014) scholarly interest in war and anti-militarism led her to produce groundbreaking knowledge on how militarization — language, dress, and household goods — becomes imbued within our societies.

Through such contributions, scholar-activists build bridges between research and practice, while expanding their fields by bringing in new subjects and perspectives. We argue that scholar-activism in the field of politics and gender makes four main contributions that advance feminist principles and improve political science. These include gaining access and establishing ongoing relationships with research participants; promoting knowledge by centering under-represented voices; connecting research, advocacy, and policy communities to better enable the translation of research in ways that have an impact; and informing ethical approaches to research that take seriously the lived experiences, needs, and concerns of those we research for and/or with.

Gaining Access and Building Relationships

Accessing diverse perspectives and nurturing honest, accountable relationships is key to producing rigorous and feminist-informed research. Moreover, they are basic requirements to gain insights into the absences, silences, differences, oppression, and power relationships that distinguish feminist-informed research from non-feminist research (Ackerly and True 2018; 2020). As insiders and first-hand participants in social movements, scholar-activists are well-positioned to gain access and build strong relationships with other participants and leaders of these movements. Although being a scholar-activist does not dispense with the power dynamics and potential for exploitation in the relationships between scholars and participants, we are invested in the long-term relationships needed to transform research and academic outputs into activism “with, not for” others (Chatterjee et al. 2019, 192). However, access and trust are bidirectional. Within the politics and gender field, scholar-activists may draw on their scholarly backgrounds to translate theoretical knowledge into practice. Scholar-activists also catalyze political discussions and social causes within academic spaces, pushing academic spaces to address systemic injustices and inspiring collective action on campuses.

Challenging Paradigms by Elevating Marginalized Voices

Scholar-activists play a pivotal role in advancing knowledge by challenging conventional concepts and paradigms. Scholar-activists foster epistemological innovations and amplify political and social causes, transforming existing paradigms. In her work on complaints at universities, Sara Ahmed (2021) identifies forms of structural violence within universities and challenges conventional academic spaces. Through empirical research, scholar-activists bring the lived experiences of often overlooked groups to the forefront of academic inquiry, enriching and challenging scholarship. Moreover, their reflections on the limitations and privileges of traditional academia offer valuable insights into the potential for emancipatory knowledge production (Routledge and Derickson 2015).

At a time when universities increasingly operate like corporations, have oppressed Palestinian solidarity and voices of other marginalized groups, and may be co-opted by private interests (Zielke, Thompson, and Hepburn 2023), scholar-activism is crucial to the university's original purpose of pursuing truth and justice in service of the community. More importantly, scholar-activism can redirect university resources and academic privileges to these movements through their support for humanitarian scholarships, courses focused on scholar-activism in the curriculum, and scholarly dialogues.

Connecting Communities

Another key contribution from scholar-activists consists of connecting research, advocacy, and policy communities to enable new approaches and actions that can bridge the research-practice divide. Scholar-activists serve as a link between academics, activists, and policymakers; they rely on their roles as advocates of movements and simultaneously leverage academic tools and skills to tackle social justice issues. For example, in her work on Afghanistan, Farkhondeh Akbari has developed feminist research to advocate for Afghan women's rights, challenging dominant narratives and centering the experiences of women and girls under the Taliban regime since 2021 (Akbari and True 2022; 2024). Her insider knowledge and gender and conflict-sensitive analysis have proved pivotal for informing policymakers' and other advocates' understanding of the re-instituting of gender apartheid in Afghanistan.

Ethical Research Approaches

Scholar-activists make significant contributions to ethical approaches to research, innovating how care can be embedded in research practices. Because they are active within the movements they research, scholar-activists prioritize participatory methods within their ethical approach to research. Following feminist collective care, feminist scholar-activists are often especially attentive to the emotional and social reproductive dimensions at the intersections of activism and research (Brannelly and Barnes 2022). Priya Dhanani's research with feminist movements in Fiji, for instance, actively commits to intentionality, accountability, collaboration, transparency, and community-centered practices. Her process involved a pre-briefing during which an initial literature review was shared with local feminist activists and experts whose insights shaped the questionnaire and data collection methods. Consequently, she co-designed information sessions with potential interviewees. Dhanani then innovated storytelling research practices based on a community-driven approach, known as "Talanoa," to enable rich, non-hierarchical dialogues and capture the lived experiences of research participants (Naepi 2019).

Challenges of Being a Scholar-Activist

Being a scholar-activist can be mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting. Suzuki and Mayorga (2014, 19) describe scholar-activists as being pushed to the

margins by the very structures they study, and as a result, finding themselves in politically and emotionally vulnerable positions. Moreover, they are often “rendered illegitimate” by academic institutions. Due to this unique positionality and the compounded pressures of academia and activism, scholar-activists may be disproportionately affected and burdened by anxiety and burnout. These conditions exacerbate the existing financial and structural challenges imposed by university systems.

Within our activist communities and the academic institutions we belong to, several of us have faced increased risks, threats, and backlash at both the transnational and national levels for the advocacy and academic work we’ve conducted. Surveillance is a specific form of intimidation used against scholar-activists. Its digital nature enables repressive tactics to expand beyond national borders and into the transnational sphere. Although many scholar-activists have been forced into exile outside their countries, some of us struggle with surveillance and potential threats against friends and family in our countries of origin or the diaspora. As feminist scholars, many of us have also had to deal with the consequences of gender, racial, and immigration backlashes that have infiltrated activist and university spaces alike, often resulting in online hostility and harassment.

In their work on Belarus, Vasil Navumau and Alesia Rudnik have recounted the repressive tactics of authoritarian regimes to silence dissent, as well as the strategies of grassroots activists to advance their causes and work around (trans) national repression (Navumau 2019; Navumau and Matvieva 2021; Rudnik 2024). Their work, and their lived experiences as scholar-activists, depicts the increasingly challenging landscape. In a different authoritarian context, Ruby Lai’s research has foregrounded the intimate disruptions of the Hong Kong protest movement. These disruptions to private lives and everyday family practices are heightened for high-risk protestors, demonstrating the “interwovenness of family life and political participation” from a feminist-informed scholar-activist perspective (Lai 2024). Together, these challenges can be interpreted in a continuum, traversing from the home to more transnational spaces.

Within academia, scholar-activists are often marginalized due to notions of objectivity, impartiality, and neutrality are essential for rigorous research. However, this notion assumes that our observations and perceptions in the world directly mirror reality and can be separated from our experiences in the world. Feminist-informed research challenges this subject-object divide, emphasizing the importance of reflexivity and critical research methods. For instance, feminist standpoint epistemology highlights how marginalized perspectives offer unique insights into the world (Harding 1986; Hartstock 1983). Rather than dismissing subjectivity, feminist theories embrace it as integral to reflexive understanding and knowledge production.

Scholar-activists whose first language is not English face disproportionate structural challenges rooted in colonialism within universities. The intellectual and linguistic immensity of the non-English world cannot be ignored, particularly within the politics and gender field, which aims to portray and diffuse globally diverse research. Linguistic imperialism has even led to the belief that only English should be used (Phillipson 1992). This phenomenon prevents scholars from appreciating and realizing the full potential of non-English and Indigenous languages (Tsuda 1998). Moreover, it leads to conceptual and

resource dependency as well as the homogenization of scholarship (Aydinli and Aydinli 2024).

A Network Approach to Scholar Activism

We established a network to address the opportunities and challenges of scholar-activism. Networks are a key social force in re-making our world. Networks may be asymmetrical in their divisions of labor or their distribution of production functions, but no single element of the network can survive by itself or impose its diktat. As Manuel Castells argued, “The logic of the network is more powerful than the power in the network” (1996, 500). Hence, networking may be a source of the dramatic reorganizing of power relationships by fostering de-centered, flexible forms of movements. Networking has also brought political and feminist activists together from the grassroots to the national and global levels to share resources and information and to exchange and collaborate on strategies for political change. Transnational feminist networks of various types have linked the worlds of activism, policymaking, research, and education (Moghadam 2005; True and Mintrom 2001).

In April 2024, the Brunt Women and Democratic Change Network convened for the first time. The Network is comprised of 18 feminist scholar-activists who study and/or originate from challenging or authoritarian countries, including Afghanistan, Belarus, Fiji, Hong Kong, Iran, Mexico, Myanmar, Sudan, and Ukraine. Since then, we have met regularly online in a series of workshops. To foster mutual learning and support, we have shared our individual stories and lived experiences within the group while studying and participating in diverse movements.

By presenting and engaging with our recent research, we have sought to collectively address some barriers to the reception of our knowledge in academic communities. Through group work and self-reflection essays, we have collectively identified three issues common to our struggles, despite our diversity of movements, political contexts, and regions. They include the effects of social media and technology on movements and women’s participation and strategies to mitigate the co-option of these tools by repressive regimes; the salience of women’s protest participation and their unique tactics in the context of the backlash against pro-democratic and peace movements; and the vital role of the personal and “intimate” in movements for democracy and peace. Most importantly, we have learned that we are not alone, and that together we can comparatively analyze and strategize about the potential for peaceful and democratic change from below.

Rejecting the Oxymoron: Opportunities for Scholar-Activists

This Notes from the Field aims to underscore the relevance of scholar-activism. To return to the title of our essay, we contend that scholar-activism is not an oxymoron but a vital feminist research approach for examining power dynamics, limitations, and silences that are at the heart of the politics and gender field. To further this line of work, it is important to debunk unfounded assumptions about the rigor and

“subjectivity” of scholar-activism. It is also critical to address the transnational, national, and institutional challenges of being a scholar-activist, especially as authoritarianism, colonialism, racism, and anti-gender backlash spread.

We have proposed a cross-regional network approach to build transnational connections among scholar-activists across countries and contexts to exchange tactics, knowledge, and lived experiences. Networks are particularly important as spaces for collaboration, building community, and collective care. We call for solidarity among scholar-activists by offering these concrete steps forward: increasing awareness and support for visas, creating online venues for the discussion of research results, promoting open access to research, translating research into languages other than English, diversifying knowledge sources from outside the English-speaking world, providing more accessible and flexible funding, and cultivating spaces for collective care.

Note

1. Professor Maureen Brunt was the first female Chair of Economics in Australia and Monash University's first female professor, <https://www.monash.edu/vale/home/articles/vale-emeritus-professor-maureen-brunt-ao>.

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