Swimming Upstream: System-wide Constraints of Policy Relevant and Politically Engaged Feminist Research

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ABSTRACT

The inherently political orientation of feminist scholarship calls for careful examinations of how feminist knowledge is co-generated, interpreted across broader scholarly and policy debates, and mobilized across the policy and political arenas. Efforts to politically situate feminist research and articulate standpoints that prioritize the lived experiences of the most marginal subjects of observed political emancipatory projects are not enough to avoid research extractivism and tokenism of marginalized identities. Feminist researchers have the responsibility to ensure careful knowledge translation between research participants and the broader scholarly community, as well as key policy arenas in which feminist political projects are implicated. However, politically deploying feminist agendas towards emancipatory struggles requires resources that are generally unrecognized in traditional academic settings and research excellence frameworks. To support collective thinking about pre-requisites for decolonial and policy-oriented feminist research, this article highlights the triple burden of feminist researchers involved in this work: decolonial knowledge co-production, scholarly and policy knowledge translation, and political knowledge mobilization. Drawing on a case study of a two-stage research project conducted with Indigenous women resisting large-scale mining in Guatemala, I highlight the complexities of feminist scholarly engagement in overcoming the epistemic dissonance of decolonial knowledge and mainstream policy debates.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism emerges as an inherently political field of scholarship and practice. Given the emancipatory direction of feminist projects, in all their diversity, feminist scholarship has been reckoning with the ethics of scholarly engagement over the past five decades. Being interdisciplinary, feminist research has been affected by disciplinary interrogations of related fields of scholarship (such as anthropology, geography, international relations, development studies, etc.), particularly around research extractivism[1] and epistemic justice questions of knowledge generation and mobilization[2] (1–8). Scholarly debates around feminist epistemology, standpoint, and situated knowledge have further problematized the ethics of feminist scholarship as an inevitably political process of knowledge construction (6, 7, 9–11). Lastly, calls to decolonize higher education, to resist the cooptative pull of liberal feminisms, and to re-valorize scholarly activism, have expanded the debate on feminist knowledge production to include knowledge mobilization, understood as an integral part of feminist praxis (9, 12–15).

Ethical considerations for feminist scholarship are broad. Scholars must consider the onto-epistemologies and methodologies deployed to construct feminist knowledge, understood as a necessarily collective endeavour. Alongside this, feminist researchers are held responsible for interrogating the power dynamics of knowledge creation. These dynamics can be reflected in the research questions that are being asked or ignored, but also broader interrogations about how they are answered, who is answering them, and who and how is interpreting the answers. All of these choices mediate epistemic authority over scientific knowledge (6, 16–20). Greater focus on feminist reflexivity, which demands researchers' awareness about not only their positionality[3] within a given system but also their intellectual and personal (ethical) engagement in the epistemic and political contexts in which their research projects are imbued (6) is critical. Overall, discussions about feminist research ethics have prompted productive interrogations about strategies for conceptualising, deploying, and politically mobilizing feminist research (12–14, 21). While strategies of ethical feminist research auspiciously remain under interrogation (as even ongoing efforts to address them often stir institutional disagreements), the challenges of translating generally agreed-upon principles, such as efforts to avoid research extractivism and effective political engagement in favour of emancipatory projects remain challenging to apply in the current context of what Bob Jessop has called academic capitalism (22, 23).

In fact, the efforts to align feminist scholarship with the inherently political feminist goals of social justice often clash with institutionally-imposed targets of research excellence (24–26). In an effort to ensure the integration of scholarly discussions in broader public discourse, research excellence frameworks have been incentivising 'policy impact' (27). However, research impact and effectiveness incentives, as defined in most higher education frameworks, have generally yielded perverse effects. They promote outcome-oriented interventions likely to contribute to quantifiable or otherwise measurable and short-term results (26–30). In the context of feminist scholarship, our neoliberal research excellence frameworks do not necessarily reflect the ethical questions of feminist solidarity between feminist researchers and their research participants (such as activists or historically marginalized groups). This is the case even when research agendas, methods, and researchers' personal and professional backgrounds reflect the political realities and agendas of their research participants. Such a division exists because of the sharp separation between knowledge production and knowledge translation.

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1   Research extractivism refers to practices of knowledge production (through what is traditionally considered 'data collection') grounded in uneven relationships between the researchers (often affiliated with Global North institutions) and researched communities, with the latter group contributing time, intellectual insight, and emotional labour to the benefit of the researcher (and their institution) alone (60).

2   These debates relate to questions such as: who wields authority over what gets labelled as 'academic knowledge,' what processes of data collection and interpretation are deemed scientifically rigorous, what kind of writing is considered in line with academic standards, and which knowledge is later mobilized for the purposes of research generation (e.g. priority areas of grant schemes) and policy impact (acceptance across public and private institutions), as well as the broader public discourse. For further references, see Jana Bacevic (61).

3   Here, positionality refers to a researcher as socio-politically embedded in the context in which knowledge is generated, interpreted, and mediated. Critical categories of difference (such as gender, race, class, sexuality but also other factors such as age, institutional status etc.) impact not only researcher's possible bias but also those of research participants, which is why feminist scholarship underlines the importance of reflexivity, as a critical consideration of researcher's positionality across all stages of research.

Existing higher education frameworks for policy impact incentivise academics to orient their scholarship towards contributing to high-ranked journals (owned by multi-billion-dollar companies), publishing books (often owned by the same publishing houses, with the terrain of academic university presses becoming ever more desolate (23, 24, 26, 29)), and teaching (which is also often standardized, surveilled, and policed in the pursuit of neoliberal incentives of student experience (8, 29, 31–35)). Even if we consider the recent incentives towards research impact, we note strong inclinations towards mainstream debates, media outlets, and policy initiatives (which are often directly or indirectly opposing radical feminist emancipatory agendas). At the risk of stating the obvious, high-impact publications, presentations across high-level policy arenas, or even short-term policy change are more likely to affirm or advance existing power structures than to radically challenge them (36–38).

For feminist researchers who prioritize political engagement as a part of their research projects, the challenge becomes meeting externally mandated standards of academic excellence while participating in significant intellectual, but also emotional and administrative labour of political organizing (25). Politically engaged work is also rarely, and insufficiently, if at all, recognized by academic institutions (24, 25, 36). Yet understanding the complexity of politically engaged and policy-relevant feminist research is critical for questions of social justice in academia, both in terms of the division of resources and fair treatment of scholars and of the policy structures for academic policy impact.

This article aims to contribute to the scholarly debates around politically engaged feminist policy research. My focus on the question of politically engaged feminist research (as opposed to research on gender equality) is informed by the emancipatory heritage of the field of feminist studies. This heritage has been concerned with the praxis of knowledge-generation, knowledge-sharing, and knowledge-mobilisation in pursuit of emancipatory agendas (8, 31–33, 39). While many social science disciplines share the objectives of societal improvement (or have in the last few decades radically shifted towards undoing the harm of their disciplinary traditions), more radical strands of feminist studies emerged as a direct response to patriarchy, as a political project of social organization that constructs, reifies, and continuously re-shapes hierarchies of gender, race, class, age, disability, religion and other contextually and historically situated categories of difference (39–42). In this regard, I am referring to the emancipatory objective of decolonial feminist research, but I recognize that not all self-described feminist research agendas are necessarily oriented towards emancipatory politics and that many, if not most, arguments I propose in this article are likely to also apply to critical research without an explicitly feminist focus (e.g., such as critical race theory, Indigenous studies, area studies etc.).

My decision to speak about feminist research is informed by the feminist scholarship on knowledge production and the scope of the empirical case study onto which I constructed my arguments. As a cis-gendered, White woman from a middle-income country who is a first-generation university graduate and was brought-up in a non-Western culture but also received higher education in the West and accrued critical experience in international policy arenas, I recognize that my experience of navigating academic or policy arenas is far from universal. I am outlining structural limitations for politically engaged decolonial feminist research based on the existing feminist scholarship and an empirical case study without claiming to represent specific individual or collective experiences or outline a finite set of challenges this scholarly orientation entails. Instead, I hope to instigate an open-ended and future-oriented discussion about co-constructing enabling research environment for social justice-oriented research.

To cast light on the specific types of work that need to be recognized and more strategically deployed, this article will draw on an empirical case study of a feminist research project on Indigenous women's resistance of the Fenix mine in Guatemala. I outlined this case study in my co-published paper with Rebecca Tatham (43), highlighting the complexity of policy-oriented and politically engaged feminist decolonial research. Drawing on this case, I will point to the 'triple burden' of feminist decolonial policy research: (i) decolonial knowledge co-generation; (ii) translation of decolonial knowledge into mainstream disciplinary and policy arenas, and (iii) mobilization of policy-relevant research in support of Indigenous feminist activism. Next, I will identify the problems within the structural frameworks of research excellence frameworks, which widen the gap between institutional incentives and *bona fide* feminist efforts to contribute to Indigenous political projects. In this way, I intend to highlight the under-recognized labour of decolonial feminist researchers' critical policy interventions needed to ensure more supportive scholarly conditions for politically engaged and policy-relevant research.

2. THE ICEBERG OF FEMINIST LABOUR FOR POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH

As I will outline in this section, politically engaged feminist scholars are faced with the triple burden of knowledge production and, even less recognized, knowledge translation. The case exemplifying this triple labour is that of the research project Rebecca Tatham conducted between July 2015 and August 2017 with Indigenous activists resisting the mining activities at the Fenix mine from four communities in Izabal, Northeastern Guatemala: La Revolución, Lote 8, Chichipate, and La Unión (43). Building on five years of collaboration that preceded data collection with the same group of activists, Rebecca asked one question on two occasions, first in 2015 and then again in 2017: "As an Indigenous Maya woman, why do you resist large-scale mining?" On each occasion, the women were asked to answer using different methods. First, in 2015, 12 women between 33 and 71 years of age (the majority being between 50 and 60) answered this question during semi-structured interviews. These interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were further accompanied by focus group discussions (each lasting between 100 and 120 minutes). Then, two years later (in 2017), Rebecca organized auto-driven photo elicitation interviews. Nine of the 12 interviews in 2017 were with the same participants from 2015. Auto-driven photo elicitation consists of research participants taking photographs as a way of answering the research question and then explaining the rationale behind their photographs to the researcher, as well as in a subsequent focus group discussion (44). All of the data collection was conducted in Maya Q'eqchi' and translated into Spanish with the help of an interpreter.

In photo elicitation methods, the focus of researcher's attention is not the photograph produced by a research participant but the narrative arc research participants develop about it. Despite the commonalities of the two data collection efforts (the same research question, the same researcher, and almost the same group of research participants), the two methods yielded significantly different results.

Semi-structured interviews resulted in findings that were directly relevant to existing scholarly and policy discussions around Indigenous resistance of mining. These findings highlighted the increase of gender-based violence correlating with the presence of the Fenix mine, as well as broader grievances around gender-based differentiations in benefits from mining activities, environmental harms caused by the mining industry, and its effect on local communities' subsistence activities such as farming. These findings offered evidence of the material and economic harm large-scale mining inflicted on Maya women, as well as the psycho-social harm for which the state and the corporate actors were responsible. Findings from semi-structured interviews and initial focus group discussions, therefore, corroborated existing research and provided context-specific knowledge, contributing to activists' work in support of Indigenous people's already-existing forms of political mobilization against the mining company. In the canonical policy language of Schön and Rein (45), the 'frame reflection' (between justice-oriented claims of Maya women activists and mainstream policy frames on large-scale mining) was fairly direct. Namely, research findings helped to identify causal relationships between the actions of the mining companies and the economic, social, and psychological harms inflicted upon the members of Indigenous communities. The findings also largely echoed the legal reparatory claims of the Indigenous communities as well as policy actors that support them, such as civil society actors, human and environmental rights lawyers, and the broader academic community.

However, findings resulting from photo-elicitation methods fundamentally disrupted the path-dependent nature of knowledge production. Freed from pre-existing (epistemic, linguistic, and even ontological) frames that inevitably characterized semi-structured interviews, Indigenous women activists Rebecca worked with told a different story of what Pratt defines as 'planetary longing' (46) and a deeper, intergenerational harm. Photos and their descriptions reflected Mayan women's cosmologies of interconnectedness between humans and nature, tying their Indigenous identities with land stewardship and the collective commitment to ensuring natural equilibrium between human and non-human communities. In this sense, large-scale mining activities were fundamentally incompatible with the Indigenous communities' productive economies, social relations, and collective identity.

As mining companies jeopardized the cultural identity of Maya women as land protectors, they threatened the traditional Indigenous role of women, which has been undergoing a rapid and drastic transformation. Therefore, the symptoms of the disintegration of Indigenous social contracts are reflected in the rise of, for example, gender-based violence and gendered patterns of poverty, but the collective and individual harm goes much deeper. Understood in this way, the harm of large-scale mining to the individual and collective sense of self is further reaching. Mining activities threatened inter-generational exchange and learning, as well as other cultural activities such as weaving (which also serves the purpose of storytelling and collective deliberation and narration across all four communities). As a result of this disruption, there was a change to subsistence activities, the roles of the elders in communities, as well as to social reproduction (which is changing from collective and integrated patterns to isolated, privatized pursuits, or considered in competition with higher-paying, mining-related activities). Environmental degradation threatened subsistence farming and other forms of collective self-reliance in the broader context of colonial genocide of Indigenous peoples and their cultures.

The fundamental overhaul of economic and social practices in the community, as well as the destruction of previously available environmental resources (such as arid land and clean water), resulted in harms that cannot be contained by existing policy frames such as labour rights, economic damage reparation, and provision of social services, understood as side-effects of otherwise legitimate means of economic production through mining.

As the findings resulting from photo-elicitation suggest, the physical and psychological harm inflicted on Maya women could not be considered a side-effect of mining activities that needed to be prevented and mitigated. Instead, large-scale mining in itself represented a violation of Indigenous sovereignty and both personal and collective autonomy. Therefore, these harms call for more fundamental interrogations of corporate violation of Indigenous rights and the impact of capitalist systems on weakened social relationships and a fundamental crisis of Indigenous collective and personal identity. In this sense, a more decolonial approach of photo-elicitation yielded findings that were embedded in Indigenous cosmologies and, therefore, diverged from mainstream scholarship as well as mainstream policy debates on economic reparations for, but not the cessation of, mining activities. Grounded in Indigenous cosmologies and Maya people's cultural identity, these findings were not neatly corroborating existing scholarly priorities, nor could they be clearly pertinent for policy efforts (as even civil society and activist organisations leveraged the colonially inherited legislative and judiciary mechanisms that fundamentally protect corporate interests by considering the trade-off between economic gain and environmental and human harms of extractive industries (47)). In other words, findings resulting from long-term and decolonial engagement with Indigenous anti-mining activists did not lend themselves to the articulation of incremental, market-oriented, or neoliberal policy recommendations of harm reduction or economic retribution envisioned under the traditional policy impact frameworks. Instead, these findings inspired more radical interrogations of extractive industries and the prioritization of short-term, corporate gain over the need to preserve the environment, Indigenous cultures, and relationships among humans and between humans and non-humans. Most simply put, the new question emerging from research findings was not how large-scale mining could be more ethical but whether it can ever be considered ethical.

By providing the example above, I do not mean to suggest an inherent superiority of photo-elicitation methods over semi-structured interviews, nor to imply that these methods generally result in drastically different results. I am not focused upon methods because they are not the cause of a particular process of knowledge creation– they are a part of the outcome. In other words, the two phases of data collection were rooted in different epistemic standpoints: semi-structured interviews were conducted from an epistemic standpoint of a student-activist who did value Indigenous women's perspectives but also observed the question of Indigenous women's resistance to large-scale mining through the lens of Western epistemic frameworks (of human rights, feminist solidarity, and international cooperation). Research participants themselves participated in semi-structured interviews with an understanding of Rebecca's policy aims (of informing existing discussions of civil society, human rights activists, and legal teams) as well as her aforementioned epistemic grounding. In this sense, the implicit social contract of informing an already existing (and largely mainstream) policy discussion biased the initial findings.

The second round of interviews, instead, was organized through photo elicitation because of an important shift in Rebecca Tatham's epistemic standpoint. More rooted in Indigenous feminist scholarship, decolonial participatory methods, and ontologically more open to Indigenous cosmologies, epistemologies, and relational praxis, the second round of interviews was an invitation for Indigenous women to self-express: narrating their own experiences of their activist resistance but also the affective web of motivations that inspired their mobilization. Understood in this way, the two phases of data collection allow us to contrast not only methods (which, again, is not the focus of this paper) but the implications of shifts in epistemic standpoints, as most actors stayed the same across both sets of interviews. The case study presented allows us to observe a domino effect: the two different epistemic standpoints enabled different processes of knowledge generation, which resulted in very disparate research findings, ultimately posing different challenges for knowledge mobilization.

Knowledge mobilization of phase two findings, which were imbued with Indigenous cosmologies, traditional gender structures, and Indigenous political praxis, required additional efforts of knowledge translation. This, in turn, demanded significant resources of time and technical skillset. In addition to linguistic translation, research findings required cross-cultural knowledge translation for policy relevance. This knowledge translation assumed different forms across scholarly articles, advocacy messages, and legal action, such as court appeals and expert testimonies. Yet professional skills like these, as well as the time required for these efforts, are not considered in academic graduate curricula, nor subsequent professional structures (such as promotion or grant-awarding criteria). For the skills, resources, and labour inputs to be recognized, they must be first made visible. To this end, the sections below highlight the additional labour feminist scholars undertake in generating and disseminating policy-relevant research. I call this labour a 'triple burden of politically engaged and policy-relevant decolonial feminist research' observed across (i) decolonial knowledge co-generation, (ii) translation of decolonial knowledge into mainstream policy arenas, and (iii) mobilization of policy-relevant research in support of Indigenous feminist activism.

2.1. DECOLONIAL KNOWLEDGE CO-PRODUCTION

Decolonial feminist research engages in co-production[4] as a scholarly intervention to resist the epistemic erasure of non-dominant (generally Western) ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies. Within it, the researcher seeks to establish themselves alongside the subject alongside the assertion of epistemic, political, and cultural alternatives (3, 33). In this sense, feminist decolonial research often dislocates at least some anthropocentric, Western-centric, heteronormative, patriarchal, and imperial biases to cast light on injustices of contemporary or past political, environmental, and social governance and their hierarchies of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other categories of marginalization that mediate them.

Decolonial knowledge co-production differs greatly from more mainstream knowledge generation approaches. Decolonial research involves a long-term commitment to creating lasting ties with communities of research participants. It, therefore, requires familiarity with alternative cosmologies and epistemologies that are in dialogue with mainstream approaches, as well as research methods that require more time or other resources (such as human resources to support collective discussions and material equipment such as cameras or art supplies). All this knowledge is not in lieu of, but on top of, mainstream disciplinary traditions. In this sense, decolonial feminist research calls for a distinctive epistemic standpoint. Such a perspective goes beyond the methodological norms in ordinary participatory research and requires a wealth of knowledge about Indigenous onto-epistemologies, community-specific praxis, as well as the dynamics of political and policy arenas in which researched agendas are embedded. From that epistemic standpoint, knowledge is co-constructed with communities over longer periods of time, as well as through greater mediation of other stakeholders such as interpreters, community elders, and other advisors. Therefore, this type of research demands

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4   I am referring to the process of co-production (as opposed to just production) of knowledge to highlight the collective nature of this process across projects that involve human engagement such as surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, or other forms of direct or indirect engagement (with the researcher being only one of the actors involved in research design, data collection, and interpretation).

greater resources, yet it is, at best, judged according to the same criteria as other forms of research.

The complexity of policy-relevant feminist research often lies in its interpretive approaches, which often, but not always, characterize decolonial approaches to empirical research. Interpretive research is, in the words of Dwora Yanow (48), *abductive*. In other words, it draws from the existing knowledge (like deductive research) but is open-ended and informed by empirical findings (as is the case of inductive research). In this sense, decolonial feminist researchers engage in onto-epistemologies and methodologies that require greater skills and resources, namely (i) a more well-rounded familiarity with existing policy and scholarly debates in which research projects are embedded and (ii) constant 'frame reflection'.[5] Reflexive, relational, and politically engaged, feminist decolonial research does not suggest a de-contextualized hierarchy of research methods. Instead, it calls for carefully designed epistemic frameworks that reflect the commitments to epistemic justice (countering the erasure of traditionally excluded ways of knowing), as well as inclusive processes of knowledge co-creation that are embedded in the praxis of research participants. The labour, time, technical skills, and long-term relations-building required for this kind of scholarly work should be acknowledged in the co-construction of the infrastructure for higher education and accounted for in the research design and planning.

2.2. DECOLONIAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION FOR POLICY-RELEVANT KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

Often critiquing mainstream scholarly approaches, feminist decolonial research has been traditionally insular. Decolonial studies have spoken to each other rather than trying to reach the broader academy or public policy arenas (31, 39). However, insular feminist scholarly discussions are unconducive to broader political or policy change. Without a political orientation, feminist decolonial scholarship stands the risk of tokenisation, relegating the purpose of Indigenous or otherwise historically marginalized knowledge to academic careerism, virtue-signalling, or cooptation of racial and Indigenous justice initiatives (15, 49). In this sense, witnessing, describing, or naming Indigenous ways of knowing and being without supporting emancipatory projects of the communities in question is extractive. If a researcher fails to pursue policy change in pursuit of social justice, the only benefits emerging are in favour of the researcher, with minimal, if any, importance given to the researched communities and their political agendas. Albeit to a different extent, even researchers who are, themselves, Indigenous (or from another marginalized category at the core of scientific inquiry) are engaging in extractive research through institutional capture unless they are transcending the limitations of identity politics by contributing to the political agendas their research participants are advancing (27, 37, 38). I am, therefore, not suggesting identity-politics approach of what Audre Lorde called "oppression Olympics" (50) that would suggest a hierarchy of researchers' positionality at the core of justified recent critiques (51). Instead, I highlight the non-delegable scholarly task of political engagement in the interest of the decolonial projects their research agendas encompass (15, 49).

To ensure that decolonial feminist studies have a more direct impact, scholars must engage with mainstream disciplinary discussions and directly engage in relevant policy arenas, even if it means a full rejection of existing policy agendas, their epistemic frameworks, or the limited array of policy solutions deemed as possible. However, policy engagement requires additional knowledge translation that is seldom recognized (and in even rarer instances, institutionally underwritten). Decolonial knowledge co-construction cannot be reduced to, however inclusive, truth-finding missions. Instead, it requires a conscious intervention seeking to re-orient academic knowledge, as well as transcend the barriers of journal paywalls and disciplinary jargon. Without broader efforts at knowledge translation, decolonial feminist research risks being politically non-threatening to the systems under academic scrutiny because policymakers rarely make the time for unprompted reading of academic literature (and I would hazard to suggest this is particularly true for decolonial feminist scholarship). Translating from scholarly

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5   Referencing Schon and Rein's (45) 'frame reflection,' I refer to feminist efforts to 'translate' different interpretations of social phenomena and policy categories across diverse groups involved in a given policy arena in the interest of mutual understanding.

to policy and media jargon is a highly skilled effort, one that needs to be recognized, not for the purposes of scholarly accolades (although institutional incentives for knowledge translation matter), but to ensure that these skills are included in the epistemic toolkit of graduate research training ahead of comprehensive/qualifying exams for doctoral candidacy.

Unlike the knowledge translation gap between scholarly and policy arenas, the integration of decolonial knowledge into mainstream disciplinary discussions is more often acknowledged and, to an extent, integrated into disciplinary training. However, there are few scholarly incentives in place to support researchers to account for the additional knowledge translation required to, for example, connect modernist historical materialist ecologies with Indigenous cosmologies and Indigenous communities' lived experiences of capitalist resource extraction (and social hierarchies of gender, race, class, age, Indigeneity, and disability that mediate those experiences). Efforts to decolonize graduate programs by ensuring ontological, epistemological, and methodological pluralism, as well as support interdisciplinary research, are contributing to scholarly know-how in this area. However, disciplinary rigidity (as well as ontoepistemological and methodological bias) varies across fields, institutions, and departments.

Moreover, politically engaged feminist research involves engagement with policy stakeholders in collaborative and adversarial manners. For instance, in the case of Indigenous women's resistance to the Fenix mine in Guatemala, engagement with NGOs and community-based advocacy groups was a critical element of the scholarly engagement, but so were efforts to attend court hearings, help to challenge corporate or even government misinformation, and support community organizing oriented towards the very political directions highlighted in the research (43). The skills underpinning policy and political engagement are generally outside of graduate curricula and undervalued in academia. Unlike, for example, statistical analysis, policy-writing, or media liaison are not graduate-level skills that are required, taught, nor awarded at most higher education institutions. Moreover, resources such as time and stakeholder connections are generally not considered across academic excellence frameworks unless they are conducive to neoliberal metrics of impact (such as legislative or policy change within the often-short timeframe of a research project or other incremental and institutionally oriented achievements) (29).

2.3. RE-THINKING RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORKS' FOR ENGAGED FEMINIST RESEARCH

As outlined above, feminist decolonial research requires layered efforts to co-construct decolonial knowledge, and translate it to ensure its relevance for scientific and policy debates. The skillset required for effective knowledge translation across scholarly and policy arenas is ignored in graduate training programs, as well as academic frameworks for research excellence that determine, inter alia, grant-based resource allocation and career progression through promotion.

Although knowledge translation and mobilization now features in project design (often through time and budget allocation), they rarely receive sufficient resources. Moreso, knowledge translation and mobilization often suffer from broader limitations of results-based management, such as systemic biases in favour of outcome-oriented, measurable, and short-term interventions (52). Most social justice causes at the core of feminist research agendas are incompatible with these frameworks, given their political orientation towards radical, long-term, and open-ended change. However, the 'publish or perish' incentives of higher education prevent scholars (particularly those who are more precariously employed) from engaging in long-term and open-ended political organizing, which rarely falls under the newly added category of 'research impact' (26, 29, 53).

Across diverse higher education frameworks, impact-oriented metrics are generally envisioned as add-ons to existing mainstream research projects, which share political orientations with non-academic institutional actors (such as governments and corporations). However, feminist decolonial research is often set up against path-dependent mainstream policy objectives, which tend to perpetuate environmental exploitation, corporate expansion, austerity-ridden fiscal solutions, etc. For the most part, feminist research findings go 'against the stream' of government or corporate-backed policy solutions in their direct or indirect opposition. Therefore, feminist policy impact is harder to measure because its success often takes the form of policy

resistance (which is hard to quantify) or the prevention of a given policy initiative (e.g., the prevention of mining expansion, abortion bans, etc.). These goals, however, are generally not encouraged across mainstream research structures, which invite researchers to find solutions within the existing system, not to challenge it. For example, many grants invite scholars to come up with solutions to poverty or climate change, but very few offer long-term, large-scale grants aimed at dismantling capitalist modes of societal organization that stand at the core of these issues.

Condemned to more micro-scale and short-term projects, researchers rarely tackle root causes (e.g., corporate greed, imperialist interference in poor countries' labour laws, infrastructure plans, etc.) and, at best, document and politically oppose harmful policies and practices (54–56) The impact of these oppositions are hard to explain under the frameworks of "research impact" because of the challenges of measuring the scholarly contribution to policy resistance, which delays or prevents harmful practices. Feminist 'success' is often in the form of non-events, such as the failure of corporate mining efforts to demoralize and disincentivize Indigenous protests of their activities or a reversal of political decisions to expand mining activities. Therefore, politically engaged feminist research exists in the negative space of research excellence: it is deployed in spite of the existing incentives and pressures, often at a great personal cost to individual researchers. In this way, the current system undervalues the existing impact of feminist research while curtailing the emancipatory and agenda-setting potential of future projects expected to fit the already-existing policy frameworks.

Other challenges of proving research impact include the issue of attribution, as a single research project is rarely solely responsible for any, however slow, impact. For example, a government decision to suspend or cancel an expansion of a mining site is never due to the engagement of a single researcher (and even less so their single research project). Instead, any success is attributed to a network of local and transnational activists, local communities, environmental and human rights lawyers, other scholars, media, allied politicians, and other organizers over years, if not decades. The positivist bias of policy frameworks for academic research excellence fails to account for the collective nature of feminist knowledge co-construction, as well as grassroots and even civil society organizing. Therefore, incentive structures should be shifted away from individual efforts of impact and towards coalition-building. Such a shift would also require resources for stakeholder management, partner outreach, and collective advocacy and political engagement. Granted, a more collective approach to "contribution" as opposed to "attribution" would practically mean shifting from results-oriented to input-oriented (or activity-oriented) metrics for the purposes of institutional administration of research funds. However, such a shift would mean backtracking from neoliberal public-administration trends of marketized higher education (3, 15, 57) and towards a more progressive understanding of higher education spending as a public good that does not need to be cost-effective to be justified.

Overall, most efforts at decolonial knowledge co-construction, translation, and mobilization are incompatible with higher education research project cycles. For example, most coalition-building, stakeholder coordination, and other efforts required for eventual policy impact are conducted before or during the project design stage (therefore, before any grant-funded project activities). The burden is on researchers, who are unlikely to receive institutional support for this work outside of grant parameters, given the increasingly precarious nature of academia. This is especially true for academics without permanent contracts, who face greater job market pressures and worse working conditions (higher workload and lower wages).

Positioned in this way, research excellence frameworks are set to incentivize extractive and tokenistic research, or at the very least, sway researchers towards short-term and measurable results across their knowledge translation and mobilization efforts. This is particularly the case for scholars who must prove their research potential for grant or job-market purposes (29). However, most social justice wars worth waging do not coincide with five-year research excellence cycles. Invoking the case study of Mayan women's resistance to mining in Guatemala, the struggle for Indigenous land rights is not a new phenomenon; as Voyle reminds us (58), Indigenous resistance of resource extractivism has been ongoing since 1490s, so the idea of a 5-year research project having any decisive impact is absurd. Feminist decolonial scholarship has proven that social justice struggles take, at best, decades and often yield progress that

is fragmented, difficult to fully demonstrate, and prone to political reversals. However, this is precisely why we need more feminist decolonial research oriented towards emancipatory struggles.

Efforts to recognize and incentivize policy-relevant research that is politically oriented towards social justice are embedded in broader debates around the existential crisis of academia as a whole. Resisting the liberal bias of neutrality, which feminist research shows is deeply steeped in modernist agendas of imperialism, racism, heteronormativism, sexism, and capitalism (28, 36), means arguing for re-politicized function of academia in society. What our current 'governance-by-numbers' technocracy fails to account for is a world in which the mere preservation of conditions of life, as Mbembe puts it (59), amounts to a political miracle. However, if we keep ignoring the planetary crisis in pursuit of path-dependent and incremental change, we will stand no chance of co-designing academic structures that reflect the political direction required for our planetary survival. Redesigning incentive structures for research excellence, therefore, emerges as a deeply political question of academic purpose.

3. CONCLUSION

As I have argued, politically engaged feminist scholars engage in more complex projects that require significantly greater resources (time and funding), skillsets, and often timeframes for evaluating their policy relevance. This additional labour should not serve as an excuse for pursuing extractive, tokenistic, or inconsequential feminist research. Instead, it is a critical recognition that can inform both individual and collective action.

On the institutional level, feminist scholars can take note of the incompatibility of the existing academic structures of research design, planning, and incentive structures and engage in administrative deliberations on research excellence. Radically redesigning research metrics to create an enabling environment for justice-oriented research is a long-term research agenda that is unlikely to attract those who are already overworked and under-appreciated in the current academic system. However, it makes the task of reshaping the terrain of higher education administration to ensure practical conditions and legal instruments for decolonial, radical, and politically salient research we so urgently require in times of planetary threats even more critical. Consequentially, participating in administrative debates on higher education emerges not as a neoliberal distraction but a radical strategy necessary to enable feminist decolonial scholarship.

At the risk of being overly optimistic, counter-cooptation emerges as possible. Existing institutional commitments to impact-oriented research can serve as a policy window, allowing feminist policy scholars to place discussions about the individual and institutional costs of engaging in justice-oriented research on top of universities' agendas (25, 37). Redefining timeframes and definitions of impact, as well as imbuing a normative dimension in research excellence frameworks is certainly not a straightforward task. However, avoiding intellectual debates (in favour of isolated agendas) only leads to further de-politicization of academia and, therefore, intensifies the neoliberal bias of academic environments. Clarifying accountability to research-participatory communities, upholding the value of long-term political engagement, as well as accounting for well-rounded academic training (that includes policy literacy, advocacy, and other knowledge translation and mobilization skills) are all important initial steps (26).

On the individual level, recognizing the added challenge of engaging in politically oriented research can help against academic (self-)gaslighting. Such gaslighting places scholars engaged in more long-term and resource-intensive decolonial knowledge generation under expectations to meet the productivity levels of, for example, their colleagues doing desk analysis of secondary data sources and informing mainstream institutional discussions (24). Greater awareness of added challenges of engaged feminist research can also help researchers advocate for themselves, highlighting, for example, their policy engagement expertise in promotion committees and requesting additional resources and extended research timeframes in their research design, funding applications, as well as career planning.

If we consider that policy-relevant and politically engaged work is often conducted by scholars who are women, racialized, disabled, queer, first-generation university graduates, precariously employed, and/or from the Global South, then the recognition of policy-relevant and politically

engaged research also becomes a question of institutional fairness and academic justice. Ensuring that emotional, administrative, and other research-adjacent labour is recognized as a critical element of academic work is paramount for commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Such a DEI approach also transcends identity politics' tokenistic tendencies and, instead, more deeply challenges the underlying structures of academic knowledge production, translation, and mobilization that mediate scholarly pursuits of social justice.

Lastly, equipping researchers and institutional structures with tools required for feminist policy-relevant (and politically engaged) research is a critical step towards repositioning academia as a vital element of our societies. The long-documented isolation of academic knowledge production and political decision-making remains unresolved and worsened by institutional gatekeeping. This includes but is not limited to, paywalls erected by multi-billion-dollar corporate publishing houses. While the accessibility of academic knowledge can and should be improved, it is insufficient to shift the paradigm of academic self-isolation.

To combat anti-intellectualism, re-gain public trust in scientific knowledge (particularly across social sciences), as well as ensure policy relevant research without institutional cooptation, more radical reforms of higher education are vital. Re-positioning knowledge translation and knowledge mainstreaming as a core of academic work, as opposed to its less glamourous after-care or a set of activities to be sub-contracted to academic support officers, is both urgent and critical for the re-integration of scholarly ideas into all forms of social, political, and environmental governance. Integrating academic knowledge into everyday functioning of our society calls for a construction of an enabling environment for policy-relevant and politically engaged research. This is particularly true if we understand academia in service of those who have been historically denied social justice.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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