

Embodying (dis)abilities: The Renegotiation of Pedagogical Practices by Women Undergraduates with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Sri Lanka*

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This study explores the potential to renegotiate pedagogical practices in light of the unprecedented transformations necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, through centralising discourses surrounding the body in relation to women undergraduates with disabilities in Sri Lanka. While recent studies have engaged with the heightened sense of marginalisation experienced by individuals with disabilities during this immobilising pandemic, a significant lacuna exists in its involvement with the Sri Lankan higher education sector. Simultaneously, while research on gender responsive education during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Asia has dwelt on the impact of worsening economies and rising domestic abuse upon the education of women, there appears to be inadequate emphasis on the intersections of women and disabilities, particularly in Sri Lanka. The present study thus gathers data from semi-structured interviews conducted with an eclectic group of six women undergraduates with disabilities from three state universities, which is examined using theoretical and conceptual frameworks related to critical disability, feminist and pedagogical theories. While the study highlights the debilitating consequences of functioning in a culture that is disabling for women with disabilities, it dwells on the subversive potential of their bodies (which are constructed within normative discourses on (dis)ability and knowledge), to interrogate ideologies and practices that shape the education system. It further contends that such subversive bodies demand a critical engagement with encroaching neo-liberal values that define our pedagogical practices through laissez-faire economic policies, exposing in that process cracks that may otherwise remain invisible. The study identifies such embodied experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic as critical to rupturing assumptions of women undergraduates with disabilities. It further posits that their bodies may function as sites that dismantle the strict categorisation and hierarchisation of knowledge, thereby challenging and expanding disciplinary boundaries. The study, subsequently, reinterprets the Covid-19 pandemic as a critical point of departure for women undergraduates with disabilities and other marginalised social fractions in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: embodying (dis)abilities, renegotiation of pedagogical practices, women undergraduates with disabilities in Sri Lanka, Covid-19 pandemic, disabling.