

## WHAT CAN A WOMAN KNOW? EPISTEMIC BIAS AS DEPERSONALIZATION

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### Abstract

Since such publications like Lorraine Code's essay, "Is the sex of the knower epistemically significant?" and Sandra Harding's "Is Gender a variable in conceptions of rationality: a survey of issues" the conversation of the relation between gender and knowledge has remained an intellectually polemic area of discussion in epistemology, particularly, feminist epistemology. The relation between gender and knowledge is not merely theoretical, but it also involves power relations. Power dynamics have a lot to play with knowledge acquisition and how we accord truth values to an epistemic agent. Although, mainstream epistemology pretends to be gender neutral with the knowing subject, such claim can arguably be said to be nominal rather than practical. This paper interrogates particularly how we determine knowing subjects. It argues that the female gender or woman has sometimes been treated with discrimination in determining whether she is a knowing subject or not. This paper further situates this discrimination as fallouts of biases or prejudices. Far from creating an unwholesome epistemic situation such biases are associated with power. Epistemic bias against women apart from showing how gendered-power structure of societies affect the shape and possibilities of knowledge production, it further argues that such epistemic bias also depersonalizes the woman and this is a form of dehumanization. This paper concludes with an argument for an inclusive gender-balanced structure of epistemic relations as a pathway that can create a more robust epistemic relation for knowledge. It is believed this can further strengthen the understanding of the human person as an epistemic agent.

**Keywords:** Epistemic bias, Depersonalization, Gender, Human person, Power dynamics.

## Introduction

The goal of every cognitive or philosophical inquiry is the desire to know. Aristotle begins the opening line of his, *Metaphysics*, stating this fundamental truth, saying, “All men by nature desire to know.”<sup>1</sup> This desire to know is not just fundamental to human nature it is also part of man’s evolutionary make up and destiny. Man as *homo sapiens* (intelligent being) is also *homo quaerens* (thinking and knowing being). The history of epistemology in the Western tradition from Plato till date is largely concerned with “How do we know what we know?” “Do we really know anything at all?” Much of the efforts in traditional epistemology have focused not on the knower, per say, but, on what the knower can know. The concern was more on what can pass as knowledge to make it legitimate or genuine in the face of skeptical opposition which argues that we cannot know anything at all or what we can know is limited. It is this challenge that gave direction to epistemology for a long while. However, from the 1970s and more robustly, around the 1980s new epistemic questions have been asked about who this anonymous “we” referred to in the common interrogatives? The critical interrogation basically seeks to know, like Lorraine Code asks, “Is the sex of the knower epistemologically significant?”<sup>2</sup> It further seeks to find out whether gender has any role to play with the way knowledge is acquired or accepted. For a long time, orthodox epistemology claims that in the search for knowledge, the gender of the knower was significantly neutral.

However, this assumption has been exposed by these critical interrogations, which has come under the umbrella of feminist epistemology as hypocritical. Code, for instance, argues that “the fact of being male or female seems to be fundamental to one’s way of being a person in such a way that it could have a strong influence upon one’s way of knowing”<sup>3</sup> She argues that in the pursuit of knowledge, there are sometimes gender biases and discrimination at least historically speaking. Women sometimes are not allowed access to certain aspects of learning. From this, at least, biological makeup creates a limitation of cognitive capacity. Thus, there is both a type of knowledge that a woman can acquire and what is accessible to her. Miranda Fricker has argued vigorously in her book, *Epistemic Injustice, Ethics and the Power of knowing*, that this politics of epistemic practice “has an irrepressible connection to social power, or that social disadvantage can produce unjust social disadvantage”<sup>4</sup>. The point is that is there is such politics of social stratification; it also leads to situations of cognitive authority or powerlessness. Thus, gender plays a role in knowledge acquisition and

this sometimes creates an air of imbalance. Apart from an imbalance in power relations, knowledge leads to how we are conceptualized, classified, or personalized. This paper, which seeks both to address issues in this epistemic imbalance, also seeks to expose how biases in epistemic relations and conceptualization lead to depersonalization. It seeks to further argue ways in which there can be epistemological inclusivity. The end point is to both have a normative vision of epistemology as well that of the human person. This paper adopts analytic and expository methodologies.

### **Understanding the Feminist Thesis and Philosophy**

Feminist epistemology is a form of social epistemology. Social epistemology refers broadly to the evaluation of social dimensions of knowledge. Knowledge within social epistemology is not taken solely as an individual activity but sometimes as a social or a collective achievement. Thus, social epistemology deals with those social means of arriving at knowledge or social justification for our knowledge claims. Feminist epistemology “examines the relations between gender and knowledge, where gender is understood not as an attribute of individuals, but rather as an axis of social relations.”<sup>5</sup> The concern of feminist epistemology is based on social bifurcations along lines of gender. Society is conceived, at least from this biological point of view of things existing either as male or female. The concern of feminist epistemology is an examination of the connection between power relations of gender and knowledge.<sup>6</sup> This concern is different from feminine epistemology which concerns itself what ways women can know. Although, the broad scope of feminist epistemology concerns all such discussions include those hitherto known as feminine epistemology. Heide Grasswick notes that the scope of analysis for feminist epistemology is broadened beyond gender, but involves all such divisions of race, class and sexuality and all such axes of oppression. Feminist epistemology becomes a face of ‘liberatory epistemologies’.

Feminist epistemology is a reaction to an overall social class grouping arguably created by radical systems like Marxism. It seeks to overcome the epistemic disadvantage for belonging to a particular class or gender, in this case, the female gender. Marxism with all its variants, helped to create social and class divisions in society and this had its own power play of one group having superiority over the other; the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. This class system reinforced an age-old division and domination like patriarchy and androcentric biases arguably perpetuated by some world religions, where women are given a secondary or an inferior class position. This class oppression saw the rise of women's liberation movement (WLM) and other forms of self-actualization

movements like feminism. From movements to philosophy, feminist epistemology seeks to address situations of imbalances created by class, race or gender superiority.

The concerns of feminist epistemology are not just about the power imbalance, but also involve some aspects that are moral. The imbalances caused by class bifurcation are also moral. They impede on the virtues of such purportedly epistemic inferior other, like women. If women are regarded as inferior, they are less likely to be trustworthy and their testimony easily dismissed on the grounds of a default class stratification that deflates their epistemic credibility. The concern of trustworthiness bears on the virtues of agents. Therefore, gender imbalance has a crystallizing effect not just on power relations, but also on virtues. Feminist epistemology seeks to interrogate all these issues that are the fallout of gender and their relations with knowledge. The effects of gender biases have an overarching aftereffect in many areas within the overall epistemological framework. The scope of feminist epistemology thus deals with the many intersecting areas of women's lives and feminist philosophy.

The goal of feminist philosophy is not just for justice, but to give meaning to women's history and to seek an inclusive philosophy or epistemology. Nevertheless, critics against the foundations of feminist philosophy argue that feminist philosophy generally begins with an assumption that women are oppressed or marginalized and the same experiences of women are universalized rather than taken within contexts.<sup>7</sup> No matter how the arguments go, we cannot deny that feminist epistemology is radically transformative of how women are seen and their experiences evaluated and also that the issues of epistemic marginalization on the grounds of gender are no longer left to silence. The starting point for a meaning discourse is the question of biases in epistemic relations.

### **Knowing Subjects and Biases in Epistemic Relations**

Knowing is a function of different variables and how one can know and what a knower can also know are also impacted by different variables. The main thrust of feminist epistemology is an interrogation into the role and place of gender in knowledge practices. Kristen Campbell argues that for feminist theories of knowledge, the gender of the knower is epistemologically significant and that deconstructive feminist epistemologies maintain that the Western subject of reason is not sexually neutral but presupposes a masculine knower.<sup>8</sup> This is why feminist scholars like Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill Collins argue for a reconstruction of new models for knowledge with the woman as a

knowing subject. Therefore, we cannot really ignore the sex of the knowing subject.

Be that as it may, within feminist epistemology, there is the question of who the knowing subject should be whether the female knower or the feminist knower, or both? But, to pursue this would be creating another imperfect situation that first gave birth to feminist epistemology. Lorraine Code has elaborately written on how the female knower can be impeded and rendered epistemically inaccessible to some knowledge. Constraints on the sex of the knower can lead to constraints in knowledge in general. This creates a situation of 'epistemic obscurity'. This kind of situation can be warranted with certain kinds of knowledge limited or designated as strictly for male. In responding to the interrogative, what can a woman know? It seems that the process of socialization sometimes, limit what certain persons can know based on their gender. This kind of situation creates a biased epistemic situation. Some of these social systems or epistemic situations are reinforced by male chauvinistic teachings and philosophy. For instance, Aristotle in his *Republic* regards woman as irrational, higher than slaves and lacking in authority. He even argues that women are meant to be subject to their husbands and that they are sometimes deceptive.<sup>9</sup> The Danish Philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard holds that "the attainment of the ethical and religious levels of existence to be open to men only; women are aesthetic being". In Roman mythology, women are regarded as Dionysian creatures, meaning they are for merrymaking and wining.

The putative designation of women into inferior catalogues to that of men is a function of epistemic biases. Biases are "persistent and widespread psychological tendencies that can be detrimental to objectivity and rationality."<sup>10</sup> In logical thinking, when a premise is implicitly accepted in our theories and methods, it becomes a philosophical bias. Philosophical biases are acquired from professional practice and other disciplinary traditions that defines a scientific paradigm. Thus, when we have used a basis for a long time, implicitly, it becomes foundational, and this makes one undermine the strength or foundation upon which such claim rests. Biases could either be cognitive, conflict of interests, statistical, or prejudices. Biases could also be understood in different contexts, like biases in the media, academia, etc. Biases could be explicit or implicit. It is explicit when it is intended and implicit when it is not intended. Gender bias against women and androcentric cataloguing of women can arguably fall under implicit bias. Philosophically, implicit bias suggests that "people can act on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes without intending to do so".<sup>11</sup> Implicit bias lead to discriminatory behaviour in favour or against a subject, and these raise metaphysical, epistemological and ethical questions.

Evaluative judgments based on implicit bias or any such biases can be termed epistemic bias. Epistemic bias can be implicated in epistemic injustice. The wrong labelling of women has epistemological implications, including epistemic injustices. Jules Holroyd and Katherine Puddifoot<sup>12</sup> identified five types of epistemic injustice that can be due from such epistemic relation. The first is testimonial injustice, where a person is given less credibility than they deserve due to stereotypes about the competence or sincerity of those with their social identity. This thought is explored in Miranda Fricker's book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, 2007. The second is epistemic appropriation where the contribution to knowledge provided by a person is not recognized as their contribution and is instead attributed to someone else. This form is deeply explored by Emmalon Davis.<sup>13</sup> The third type of injustice from epistemic bias is epistemic exploitation and this occurs when members of a marginalized group are expected or required to educate members of privileged groups about injustices that are faced by those who share their social identity. This form is explored by Nora Berenstain.<sup>14</sup> The fourth form of injustice due from epistemic bias is what Miranda Fricker identified as Hermeneutical injustice when some people are unjustly excluded from contributing to the shared conceptual resources that are widely used in a society. The fifth kind of injustice is contributory injustice, which occurs when an agent is wilfully ignorant in using conceptual resources that thwart the ability of others to contribute to the knowledge community. This form is elaborately explored in the thoughts of Kristie Dotson.<sup>15</sup> Women arguably suffer all the forms of injustices outlined above by epistemic biases against them.

Be that as it may, biased epistemic labelling of women imparts on the qualitative difference in how we accord trust or truth-worthiness to women as knowing subjects or not. With man given a status of an epistemic superior, it renders without interrogation, that women's knowledge are inferior and subjective. In traditional epistemology, the gender of the knower has, for the most, been treated as a "featureless abstraction,"<sup>16</sup> while for the least, this knower, in an uncontested given, has presumptuously been an imaginary male. This gender-biased situation presents a problem of knowledge, granted that knowing is a combination of both the objective and subjective factors. While the objective component of knowledge is what is known, the subjective component is the knower. John Bewaji has argued that the subjective component has mostly been ignored in classical epistemology and this has largely resulted in impartial accounts of knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Arguably, the undermining of the subjective component of knowledge, in this case, the female knower, can be due to how the objective component has been appreciated. What is known is a product

of many factors, including individual creativity, social conditions, location of the knower, affective sides, etc. These conditions have also generally led to social roles and how men and women apply themselves to different tasks or activities. This in turn imparts on what can be known. For instance, women are more inclined into sewing clothes, cooking, doing domestic chores, etc., while men are generally disposed to doing some more mechanical and physical jobs and roles like fixing stalled cars, mowing the lawns, etc. These polarised gender roles impact what particular people are inclined to knowing. The consequence is that it leaves knowledge for the most to be sexually differentiated by practical expectation. Nevertheless, the fact that men have applied themselves to particular roles does not mean women lack the cognitive capacity to do so and vice versa. Hence, knowledge being a sexually differentiated product by practical expectation does not necessarily mean a logical necessity, that is, because men are expected to always mow the lawns, for instance, does not mean women cannot do it. Hence, to completely delimit women's knowledge based on practical expectation, or social default on certain issues, for instance, is to create a lopsided account for knowledge situation *ab initio*. The consequent effect is that this affects the overall subjective component or condition for knowledge.

The challenge of epistemic biases to the subjective component of knowledge mirrors the overall questions of marginality discussed in feminist epistemology. There are different forms of gender marginality or exclusion that affect knowledge production. For instance, when women are refused admission into certain schools of learning, they are marginalized both institutionally and epistemologically. This is one of the forms of marginality which affects what a woman can know and it only resurfaces the question of who a knowing subject should be. Lorraine Code surmises, that "as long as the view prevails that women cannot know according to the highest criteria for establishing knowledge, it seems that they are in fact not just marginalized but excluded, confined somewhere beyond the limits of both marginality and centrality".<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the sex of the knower is epistemologically significant.

The sex of the knower is important because in a certain way, it gives grounds for justification of what we claim to know and epistemic justification aims at the truth in a very strong way. For instance, we are more likely to ask, someone a question that we think is likely to produce the right answer. If we were to ask the time for Mass today, we are more inclined to ask the priest, because we believe, he would be a more justified epistemic agent. These are the issues about the subjective component of knowledge. The properties of a knowing subject are not just on account of his cognitive capacity, but also by its location, position as well as gender. These add up to what makes the knower a viable

epistemic agent or a truth-bearer. If women have been largely marginalized and this is allowed to gain enough ground, then, we cannot claim that the sex of the knower is not epistemically significant.

Ordinarily, proposing the sex of the knower casts doubt on the autonomy of reason. In our commonsense assumption, we really do not require the gender of a person to determine the rationality of a claim; rather, it is a function of the coherence in thought, logic and strong appeal to reason and truth. This assumption that gender is unimportant has nevertheless been contested by scholars like Edward Craig<sup>19</sup> and Miranda Fricker.<sup>20</sup> The epistemic duo has argued that matters of truth and rationality are inextricably tied to power and social identities. Fricker tries to explain how social power enters into epistemic practice by explaining *who knows?* Fricker uses Craig's framework to explain this relationship. Craig in explaining the meaning of "know" imagines a case of an epistemic "state of nature" in which we seek true belief in order to survive. In this state, we have a fundamental need to acquire true beliefs. This desire for truth drives our practice and this, in turn, leads to seeing "good informants" people who would tell us the truth as whether *p*- in order to multiply our epistemic resources.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, to distinguish a good informant from a bad one, three features are identified, namely, (i) competence (ii) trustworthiness (iii) indicator-properties. Knowledge in this case is enshrined in a good informant. What it means is that someone who is trustworthy and competent is said to have rational authority. These properties are for the most social properties. Hence, if we take a woman on the basis of some social exclusion and epistemic marginalization as being a bad informant, she, therefore, is being excluded from rationality or being a good sources of knowledge. Hence, rationality is generally a function of social factors, not just some internal epistemic properties. In this wise, if a woman is disdained as a bad informant, then, she is already excluded from being a good source of knowledge.

Miranda Fricker has argued that rational authority has a lot to do with social power or powerlessness. When we find a credible person who has rational authority, he also possesses some social powers, because of the ability to tell the truth. The contrast to this is someone who lacks social authority is one who is powerless. This is not the only dimension that rational authority presents. The powerlessness due from lack of rational authority leads to a kind of depersonalisation. It leads to a metaphysical obscurity or oblivion. We are not likely to recognize as a person, someone we think lacks rational authority. The context of being a person goes beyond the physical features, but, one we strip of qualities enabling a person. Being a person goes beyond a biological make up, but also to some other extraneous factors, hence, we regard institutions



sometimes as a juridic person. From an ethical point of view, a person can be conceived from the point of responsibility. If we deny that an individual is incapable of truth or knowledge, we absolve him of responsibility to any such claim; hence, we do not hold him accountable. Ethically, a person goes beyond biological features. The point here is, epistemic biases against women, have inadvertently led to some form of powerlessness and this kind of metaphysical obscurity leads to depersonalisation. Powerlessness diminishes one's social and epistemic relevance as well as its authority. While, biases in epistemic relations are sometimes a function of historical androcentrism; seeing women from uninterrogated social misconstructions, this limitation depersonalizes. It suffices to examine the phenomenology of personhood briefly.

### **The Phenomenology of Personhood and Depersonalization**

The question of personhood is essentially philosophical. The quality of being a person is metaphysical and even controversial. There are several theories on personhood and the term contrasts strongly with other related terms which are sometimes used interchangeably with it. Boethius as cited by Frederick Copleston defined the person as "an individual substance of a rational nature".<sup>22</sup> The implication of this definition which long dominated the whole of medieval philosophy holds that every human being is a person. For Aquinas, the disembodied soul is not a person because he loses at that point what gives it rationality. In Thomas Aquinas, the person is made up of body, soul and mind. Aquinas placed emphasis on the rational substance.

With Descartes on the other hand, the emphasis was changed. A person consists in self-consciousness. This is the naturalist epistemological tradition which is reflected in the writings of Locke and Hume. It does not place a premium on the body, but on consciousness and its ability to relate to the world and performing actions and being able to represent them. This naturalist position places emphasis on what a person can do. The emphasis is on ability rather than on any ontological criteria. A person is one on account of a consciousness that can be; a consciousness that can produce something or is doing something. Some critics have argued that a person is not brought into being on account of his functions.

The non-embodiment view of personhood contrasts with the position of embodied and embedded in the world. This is first captured in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, but more concretely expressed in Martin Heidegger's phenomenology of being-in-the-world. Dermont Moran argues that "In Husserl's phenomenology, the heart of embodied selfhood is the *person*, understood as the unified, goal-directed center of action, bearer of rights and status, responsibilities and moral standing".<sup>23</sup>

For Heidegger, we are more defined on account of our experiences. Thus, persons are those whose experiences are meaningful in the world. Meaning, therefore, defines a person. The contributions of modern thinkers generally tend to regard freedom as the chief characteristic of the human person.<sup>24</sup> The idea of person for the most in modern philosophy has a moral connotation unlike the metaphysical connotation that was emphasized in the scholastic and the medieval period.

The personalists view of personhood begins with a primordial distinction between “an individual” and “a person”. Copleston explains that the term “individual” is used in a pejorative sense, one that is essentially egocentric. The individual is the egocentric man.<sup>25</sup> The individual is described on the biological level, a practical materialist, no moral vocation, a member of the crowd. The person, on the other hand, contrasts with this view and has a moral vocation. Copleston gives the personalist manifesto which expressly defines a person as:

...a spiritual being constituted as such by a manner of subsistence and of independence in being; it maintains this subsistence by its adhesion to a hierarchy of values, freely adopted, assimilated and lived, by a responsible self-commitment and by a constant conversion; it thus unifies all its activity in liberty and develops, moreover, by means of creative acts, its own unique vocation.<sup>26</sup>

With the personalists, a person is tied to a vocation which is fulfilled with social interaction and beyond. A person is a transcendental being, one who is an embodiment of collectivity. A person for the personalist is beyond being a member of the human species, but also one that can contribute to a purpose or vision. A person is beyond biology. Whereas an individual is anti-social being, a person is a social being. As a social being, “he is more than a mere being in the group, but one oriented towards a society of persons, and a society of persons is a society of free, morally responsible human beings”.<sup>27</sup> This personalist view of a person is opposed to Marxism which creates both a social caste system and regards man only within his economic value or benefit. However, man is not conceived not from a parochial plane, but, from a holistic plane. Personalists like Emmanuel Mounier and even Karol Wojtyła are doctrines antithetical to individualism.

The personalist creed is a reaction to the perceived depersonalisation created by such philosophies which undermined the creative vision of man, his transcendentalness, axiological relevance or teleological goal of man, yet conceives him from a limited sense or on account of some metaphysical values. Personalism tends to give dignity to the human person and correct the Darwinian error that the difference between man and other terrestrial being is in degrees and not in kind. Darwinian

evolutionary vision and the social engineering places man not at the centre of the cosmos but like every other creatures seeking survival. In personalism, a fundamental difference in the classification of all beings is the distinction between person and non-persons. Thus, in the words of Jacques Maritain: “Whenever we say that man is a person, we mean that he is more than a mere parcel of matter, more than an individual element in nature, such as is an atom, a blade of grass, a fly or an elephant...Man is an animal and an individual, but unlike other animals or individuals.”<sup>28</sup> Personalist thesis also holds man as having a dialogic relationship with the world like the I-Thou of Martin Buber.

Personalists also hold the dignity of the person of the individual. The quality of being a person is not dependent by this on variables such as intelligence or social prowess. Also, the quality of being a person cannot be derived by a cosmological reduction of any sort, but are functions of some irreducible conditions. It means that being a person is not a function of what one is able to do or not. Also, in personalism, the human person is relational and always in communion. He is never always alone. “Relationship is not an optional accessory for the human person, but is essential to his personhood. He is a being-for-relation.”<sup>29</sup> Personalist see the human person’s strive for communion as a function of his rationality. Thus, the human person is never judged in isolation. To evaluate him in isolation from relationality is to both deny him rationality as well as depersonalize him.

The personalist view of a person is very metaphysical, conceiving of man beyond his physical features. However, epistemologically, the starting point for conceptualisation on personhood is rationality and epistemic responsibility. This understanding of personhood is more fluid beyond metaphysics. The fluid conception of personhood is one that makes us conceive of a person in other senses like ethical, moral or legal. As an ethical term, it may refer to a mode being and as a legal term, it may refer one as a human individual, a partnership or a cooperation. Epistemologically, a person is not just a human being, because, the conception of a person would invoke the idea of an epistemic agency. An epistemic agent goes beyond a human person, but include also non-human epistemic agency including collectivities like groups or institutions. This is the ground for discussing non-human epistemic agents as having group beliefs. Therefore, to depersonalise in the epistemological sense is to deny an epistemic agent of the ability to hold epistemic belief, at least, or knowledge at best. When, therefore, we deny an epistemic agent the privilege of having epistemic claims or knowledge, we depersonalise them. In this wise, when, women, as a consequence of epistemic bias suffer epistemic injustices, they at some level are depersonalised. This depersonalisation which is due from epistemic bias

is not on account of women being incapable of certain epistemic belief, truth or knowledge, but, that such biases have unjustly impaired, marginalized or circumscribe them from such. The consequence is that, we limit the possibility for a wholesome picture of what is possible in a knowledge situation. Knowledge situation is understood as the “interaction of factors that directly or indirectly contributes to the knowing process. It concerns the question of the relation of the knower, sense data experienced and things known.”<sup>30</sup> If we must have a wholesome knowledge situation, epistemic justice to the knower is important. This first helps establish *prima facie* ground that he is a viable, credible or truth-worthy epistemic agent. If he is denied this quality, not on account of any sufficiently grounded incapacity, but, one on the basis of implicit or epistemic bias, then, we are poised to have a shaky foundation, on whatever is established by the subject of knowledge. Biases in epistemic relations, especially of women, raises further the challenges to having genuine knowledge or a wholesome knowledge situation.

### **Concluding Remarks: What Can a Woman Know?**

From the discussion above, we have seen that epistemic biases are sometimes default thought patterns which skew our judgements in favour or against a person, class of persons or situation. The concern of feminist epistemology is one that aims to correct this imbalance epistemic relation. Persistent gender inequality has affected how the subjective component of knowledge affects areas of what can be known and unknown. Why this seems to spiral the skeptical challenge, it has also left the efforts to gaining purity, balance and wholeness in what we can know. Biases are the stumbling blocks to what we can know. As long, we pretend that the gender of the knower is unimportant, the female knower will continually be disdained by implicit biases, and this will continually ferment the grounds of epistemic injustices in epistemic relations.

The analysis above shows there is a need to improve the dynamics of our epistemic practices, one that seeks to eliminate all forms of marginalization. If we wish to raise the quality of knowledge production and authorization, we must seek to be all inclusive of the composition of epistemic communities, one that seeks to give equal grounds for male and female knower. Our attention must be properly paid to a robust appreciation of the epistemic advantages that can accrue to those who are otherwise marginalized. A useful way which has been advanced by feminist epistemology is feminist standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint theory is a transformative shift that holds three principal claims to correcting the epistemological imbalance and impasse occasioned from

biased epistemic relations, namely, “(1) knowledge is socially situated, (2) marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized, and (3) research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized”.<sup>31</sup> Feminist standpoint theory advocates that the lived experiences of the knower, in this case, the woman, cannot be discounted. It also analyses the effect of power structures on knowledge production. The Feminist standpoint theory offers new methodological starting point and approaches to knowledge situations which generally eliminate such forms of epistemic injustices due from a marginalized knower in mainstream epistemology. The framework advanced by feminist standpoint theory, makes the question, what a woman can know as almost superfluous, if it is not asked in the same way, what can a man know? This is because, when a woman is given equal chances bereft of biases in the epistemic community, a woman can know as much as a man, given the same epistemic context. Therefore, feminist standpoint theory privileges social contexts and experiences of the knower, precisely, female knower.

The extant of biased epistemic relations in knowledge communities mirrored in the typical anonymous knower of *S knows P* in mainstream epistemology, have helped to reduce the credibility of women as knowers. When women are so biased, the starting point is to doubt their competence or epistemic credentials. What this means in the first instance is that, they are denied rational authority and this is epistemologically tied to personhood. When we raise the question, what can a woman know, we are entering into the polemic waters of epistemic injustice and this can only cause systemic gaps in the interpretive resources available to epistemic agents and knowledge gaps in the epistemic community. Feminist standpoint theory, therefore, resolves this impasse, which is also the position of this paper, for a situatedness of knowledge. Situated knowledge which is a feminist thesis, holds that all forms of knowledge reflect the particular conditions in which they are produced and at some level reflect the social identities and social location or gender of knowledge producers. This position deflates the myth of scientific objectivity. This position advances that all knowledge must take into cognizance the perspective of the knower. The knower is always a combination of functions, including idiosyncratic skills and talents. Alison Wylie expresses this intent more robustly:

What individuals experience and understand is (contingently) shaped by systems of social differentiation that structure and are, in turn, structured by the material conditions of their lives, the relations of production and

reproduction that condition their social interactions, and the cultural and conceptual resources available to them for representing interpreting these relations.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, to interrogate, what can a woman know, is to begin with a *prima facie* unbiased recognition of the woman as an epistemic agent imbue with credibility and rationality; a person whose situation must be cognized, taking her experience in context as well as social conditions in perspective. This can only help to enrich the epistemic community, granted that all knowers, male and female, are equally appreciated. The synopsis of the above submission for our conversation is that to further close the gaps caused by skewed epistemic relations from biases, women's experiences should be taken into context as well as their experiences. Each time we advance the embers of epistemic exclusion of women as knowing subjects we further rupture the challenge of scepticism or increase the chances of having a wholesome and a more warranted knowledge and knowledge production. Apart from the many epistemic advantages these have, epistemologically, it restores personhood to the woman as a knowing subject, as epistemic injustice and biases depersonalizes.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book A (1) in Louis Pojman (Ed), *Classics of Philosophy*, Second edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 267.

<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Code, "Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?" in *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 12, No. 3 & 4, July/October 1981, 267- 276.

<sup>3</sup>Code, "Is the Sex of the Knower " 267.

<sup>4</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice, Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Heidi E. Grasswick, "Introduction: Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science in the Twenty-first Century" in Heide E. Grasswick (Ed), *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science, Power in Knowledge*, (London: Springer, 2011), xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Grasswick, "Feminist Epistemology".

<sup>7</sup> Linda Martin Alcoff and Eva Feder Kittay, "Defining Feminist Philosophy" in *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy*, Linda Martin Alcoff and Eva Feder Kittay (Ed), Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Kristen Campbell, *Jacques Lacan and Feminist Epistemology*, (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group publishers, 2004), 59.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Republic*.

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