

The Cascading Shadows of Academic Ego: Faculty Politics, Gender Dynamics, and Stakeholder Outcomes in Kerala's Higher Education Ecosystem

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to explore the all-pervading impact of faculty politics, ego clashes and negative interpersonal relationships in the academic environment of higher education institutions in Kerala, India. Data collection was done based on a descriptive research design from 177 respondents (Faculty members, students, research scholars, and administrators) in Arts and Science colleges along with a few MBA institutions of the economic and IT hub of the state, Ernakulam district. A structured questionnaire was used and adapted from previously created questionnaires for academic toxic dynamics, which were analysed by Exploratory Factor Analysis and Chi-Square tests to explore the relationship between the different stakeholder categories, gender and workplace toxicity experience. The results indicated that a high percentage of conflicts in the classroom are based on the individual's ego, and these conflicts have a significant impact on the quality of education provided in the classroom, especially for female teachers who experienced higher emotional and psychological distress. The Inter-faculty competition was identified as a problem that led to the breakdown of the coordination of the departments and the planning of the institution. Students and research scholars were the most vulnerable stakeholders who are often caught in the middle of faculty conflicts. The study highlights the need for emotionally intelligent leadership, an open grievance process and gender responsive institutional policies to make the academy an atmosphere of academic integrity and professional dignity.

Keywords: Faculty Politics, Ego Conflicts, Gender Dynamics, Academic Ecosystem, Toxic Work Culture, Kerala Higher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic institutions are considered to be places of scholarly endeavour, critical thinking, and knowledge generation. They are environments for mentorship, scholarly opportunities, and quests for truth. However, a sometimes more hidden, yet gravely corrosive element often lurks beneath the surface—the non-toxic interpersonal dynamics that arise from faculty politics, ego clashes, and negative alliances. These dynamics, widely regarded as mere personality clashes and/or professional disagreements, can systematically undermine educational integrity, stakeholder welfare and institutional productivity.

While the issue of faculty politics is not new, its implications have become much more complicated in today's context of higher education. When combined with personal insecurity and the reluctance to change, a lack of resources, recognition, administrative control, etc. often leads to unhappy relationships at work. These conflicts appear in different forms: First impartial subjects' allocation, exclusionary practices inside the departments, manipulation in research supervision,

informal power groups, which exclude good faculty members. The repercussions ripple beyond the faculty lounge to how syllabus is delivered, mentored with students, evaluated fairly, and ultimately, how trust is held within the learning community.

These challenges have been especially pronounced in the Indian higher education sector. The higher education system in Kerala, a state known for its high literacy rate and educational success, is a place of great contestation and conflict, both between individuals and among groups. The conflict between the state and centrally placed governors over the governance of universities, the politicization of the appointments of Vice-Chancellors and the rise of ideological groups have made many universities administratively weak and directionless. Many universities are now directionless and weak in administration because of the conflict between the state and the centrally appointed governors, the politicization of the appointments of the Vice-Chancellors and the growing influence of the ideological factions. This instability at the macro level often permeates down to the micro level between faculty, resulting in a climate of suspicion, factionalism and professional jealousy.

In this regard, the current research centers on the micro-dynamics of faculty politics and ego conflicts and their effect on the academic ecology, at the institutional level. The study was conducted in Ernakulam district of Kerala, which is the economic and IT hub of the state with a concentration of arts and science colleges serving a diversified student population in the district.

1.1. Problem Statement

A university is becoming a place where everyone is collaborating intellectually, building alliances and creating transformative educational experiences, but faculty politics, conflicts of interest and negative personal alliances permeate and threaten institutional integrity and the health and well-being of stakeholders. While there may be a number of quality assurance systems and learning outcomes reforms in place in Indian higher education, the micro-dynamics of workplace toxicity, such as allocating subjects based on a student's caste, mistreating students by their supervisors, and rivalry among factions, are inadequately studied, especially in Kerala's higher education system. Such interpersonal dynamics create a toxic culture which has repercussions on faculty morale and academic dignity, but can also permeate the classroom, impacting teaching standards, mentoring, evaluation processes, and the overall psychologically safe environment for faculty members. The research scholars are, in most cases, the ones who suffer from the manipulation of the supervisor and from department politics as well, but, institutions do not have proper and accessible grievance redressal mechanism for them. Moreover, the gendered aspects of academic conflict, i.e., the disproportionate emotional and career burden on women faculty members is under-studied in the Indian context. This study aims to, therefore, systematically examine the nature, manifestations and implications of faculty politics and ego conflicts between stakeholder groups and gender, and also to find institutional interventions to neutralize the academic work space and to once again foster a culture of collaboration, equity and mutual respect.

1.2. Scope of the Study

Geographically this study is restricted to the arts and science colleges in the Ernakulam district in Kerala, India, the economic base and IT hub of the state and where there is a considerable number of higher education institutions affiliated to different universities. The study involves four major groups of stakeholders such as the faculty, students, research scholars and administrators, with each of the educational institutions possessing a distinct perspective on workplace toxicity. The research specifically investigates how interpersonal dynamics (such as an "ego clash", "faculty politics", "negative alliances", "subject allocation bias", and their cascading effect on teaching standards, well-being, departmental

coordination, and institutional reputation) impact the institution. Methodologically, the study is limited to descriptive and cross sectional research with quantitative approaches, using techniques Exploratory Factor Analysis and chi square for data analysis and data collection is carried out with a structured and self-administered questionnaire. The study is also restricted to the gendered aspects of academic conflict, and how male and female teachers experience conflicts of the ego type differently and the impact this has on their professional and psychological lives. The findings are relevant to the leadership and policy making of educational institutions, but the study cautions that the convenience sampling method and a sample that was concentrated in one geographic area may make it difficult to generalize the results. The study recommends that future studies expand to other geographic areas and adopt longitudinal designs to reflect the dynamic nature of academic workplace relations.

1.3. Objectives of the study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify the key factors within the academic ecosystem that are significantly impacted by faculty politics and ego-driven conflicts among teaching staff.
2. To examine the relationship between gender and the experience of ego-based conflicts, specifically investigating whether gender influences perceptions of impact on classroom teaching quality, emotional and mental well-being, and departmental coordination.
3. To analyse the differential impact of stakeholder roles (faculty, students, research scholars, administrators) on the perception and experience of ego-based conflicts and their consequences for the academic environment.

By addressing these objectives, the study aims to contribute empirical evidence to the growing body of literature on toxic academic cultures, offering actionable insights for institutional leaders, policymakers, and academic communities seeking to foster healthier, more inclusive, and more productive educational environments.

Hypothesis

H1₁: There is a significant association between gender and the perception that ego-based conflicts affect classroom teaching quality.

H1₂: There is a significant association between gender and emotional or mental distress arising from inter-staff issues.

H1₃: There is a significant association between gender and the perception that faculty rivalry affects departmental planning.

H1₄: There is a significant association between stakeholder role and the perception that ego-based conflicts affect classroom teaching quality.

H1₅: There is a significant association between stakeholder role and emotional or mental impact resulting from inter-staff issues.

H1₆: There is a significant association between stakeholder role and the perception that faculty rivalry affects departmental planning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Toxic interpersonal dynamics in higher education can be approached from the perspectives of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and psychological safety. In SET, work relationships are based on transactional resource exchanges, trust, recognition, and support. Employees who feel that there is inequity, unfair treatment, and violations of reciprocity are more likely to show lowered commitment, withdrawal behaviors, interpersonal conflict, and counterproductive workplace conduct (Ahmad et al., 2023). In recent years, applications for SET in organizational settings highlight the significance of non-material exchanges in knowledge-intensive settings like academia, where competition for publications, grants, promotions and leadership roles can drive perceptions of injustice among others (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Psychological safety has also become a key variable to understand toxic work environments. Psychological Safety is the level of trust that people have in one another to discuss ideas, concerns, and errors without fear of punishment, embarrassment or retribution. Empirical studies in higher education highlight that psychological safety facilitates cooperation, creativity, and communication, whereas a lack of psychological safety leads to "defensive behaviour," mistrust, social division, and political maneuvering among faculty members (Kyambade et al., 2024; Laird et al., 2024). Without psychological safety, there might not be much positive discussion in academic settings with defined hierarchies and competitive environments, and it can also lead to negative relationships between individual academics.

Faculty politics is the strategic application of influence, networks and power to achieve professional benefits within a school. Some political activities are an inevitable part of the organizational life but when it is done too much, it leads to favoritism, exclusion, manipulation, interpersonal tension etc. Recent studies have found that this situation persists in contemporary HEIs as they are still competing for promotion and tenure, research funding and administrative roles (Al-Asfour, 2023).

Faculty politics often go hand in hand with ego-conflict, which occurs when others feel threatened to their professional identity, status or competence. The conflict may be exacerbated in settings where achievement is tied to academic acclaim and job promotions. Some of the significant antecedents of workplace conflicts found in academic environments are a lack of equal workload, perceived bias in course allocation, lack of transparency in decision-making, and limited opportunities for promotion (Al-Asfour, 2023; Sood & Kour, 2023).

In the case of South Asian higher education, inter-personal tensions add to the general governance issues. In recent years, the detrimental effects of political manipulation, reduced institutional independence, and outside control of academic decision-making procedures have been discussed (AAUP, 2024; Hall & Thomas, 2023). These situations could lead to uncertainty, jeopardize the meritocratic criteria and exacerbate academic rivalry over scarce resources and jobs. This can lead to a reduction in collegiality and in institutional effectiveness due to organizational politics and conflict based on individual interest.

The impact of faculty politics and interpersonal toxicity goes beyond faculty to affect a variety of stakeholders in the academic environment. Departmental tension issues can heavily affect students. Such ongoing conflict among faculty may stunt collaboration in teaching, create conflicting opinions on academic matters, and impact the quality of mentoring that is provided to students. Study of incivility in the workplace in higher education has also shown that incivility negatively impacts on psychological well-being and organizational functioning, all of which have an impact on educational outcomes (Sood & Kour, 2023).

Research scholars and early-career academics are also vulnerable to negative experiences caused due to negative departmental environment. Mentoring opportunities, research collaboration and professional development may be restricted due to competitive and politicized settings. Research on psychological safety in academic settings has revealed that people who work in a low-trust culture experience higher levels of stress, burnout and professional isolation (Cuevas & Landicho, 2024; Laird et al., 2024). Such circumstances may slow down research output and have a detrimental impact on career advancement.

The institutional leaders and administrators also have to deal with significant issues in dealing with toxic workplace environment. Supervisors and administrators at the departmental and university levels must deal with faculty interests, organizational issues and transparent administration. The studies reported in this paper show that negative work environments relate to lower levels of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, intention to leave the job, and a decline in institutional performance. These can have long-term effects that can tarnish the reputation of an institution, impact employee retention, and affect student satisfaction.

Workplaces in academia continue to be a place where gender is a key determinant of experiences. Current research still reveals an ongoing issue of structural and interpersonal barriers to the participation and advancement of women in higher education and STEM-related fields. Women face greater scrutiny in terms of their competence and leadership potential, subtle forms of discrimination, and exclusion from influential professional networks (Cheryan et al., 2024).

Research on academic career paths indicates that women often need to work harder to establish themselves as professionals and receive recognition for their achievements. Definitions of merit and readiness for leadership within institutions tend to be shaped by historical norms which may disproportionately disadvantage women academics (Cheryan et al., 2024). Moreover, women may be more prone to interpersonal stressors as a result of incivility and exclusion in the workplace, which can have an adverse impact on psychological health and career satisfaction (Sood & Kour, 2023).

Emotional labour expectations are also a driver of gender and workplace conflicts. Women faculty members are expected to do mentoring, student support and relationship management tasks which are not recognized institutionally. These extra duties can exacerbate the negative effects of conflicts and diminish chances for career growth. Therefore, an examination of gender differences in faculty politics and interpersonal conflict is an important area of study for higher education.

2.1. Research Gap and Contribution

So far, the issue of incivility in the workplace, psychological safety, governance issues in higher education, gender inequities in higher education, and mentorship failures have been the focus of recent scholarship, but the interpersonal aspects of faculty politics, such as jealousy, informal power struggles, sabotage, and mentorship failures, have received limited treatment, especially in the context of higher education institutions in Kerala. The key focus of past research is on organizational governance, the effectiveness of organizational leadership, or on a more general policy issue rather than on the actual conflicts of day-to-day faculty interactions.

Moreover, empirical research that combines gender, faculty politics, outcomes of stakeholders and academic performance in the Indian context of higher education is yet to be found. There is a need for evidence that is specific to the context of Kerala, the prevalence and impact of dysfunctional working culture on the higher education sector. This current study aims to fill some of these gaps by examining the connections between faculty politics, ego conflict, gender,

stakeholder experiences, and academic results. By doing so, it seeks to help shape evidence-based strategies to foster psychological safety, equity in governance, and healthier academic environments.

3. METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research design, followed in this study, was of a quantitative nature to identify the prevalence and the impact of toxic interpersonal relationships in Higher education institutions of Kerala. The data were collected using a structured questionnaire, which enabled perceptions and experiences of the respondents on the role of politics, ego conflicts and relations among the faculty members to be assessed at a given time. The study was carried out in Ernakulam district, which is one of the major educational, economic hubs of Kerala with a high number of arts and science colleges attached to different universities. The target population comprised faculty members, students, research scholars and academic administrators, who form the key stakeholders of the higher education ecosystem.

The Arts and Science colleges and MBA Colleges in Ernakulam district were used to select participants using a convenience sampling technique. A total of 177 valid responses from 89 faculty members, 53 students, 18 research scholars and 17 administrators formed the final sample. The distribution of the female and male respondents was fairly equal with 88 females and 89 males' respondents to give a balanced representation. A structured questionnaire, modified from MK (2025), was used to collect data. The questionnaire comprised 18 question items which measured experiences associated with faculty politics, ego conflicts, bias in subject allocation and their consequences for teaching, emotional health, departmental performance and reputation.

The data collected were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed to determine the underlying dimensions of toxic workplace aspects and to distil the data into meaningful and meaningful latent constructs. Additionally, Chi-square tests of independence were used to analyse the association between the perceived impact of workplace conflict on teaching quality, emotional health and departmental functioning and gender, and between the perceived impacts of workplace conflict on teaching quality and departmental functioning and stakeholder roles. Cronbach's alpha was used to test the instrument, and the instrument was found to have high internal consistency with a value of 0.889. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.818, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2(120) = 2345.769$, $p < .001$), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis and that the measurement instrument was valid.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Statistical analyses were conducted to examine the prevalence and impact of faculty politics, ego conflicts, and interpersonal dynamics within higher education institutions. The findings are interpreted using descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis, and chi-square tests to identify key patterns, relationships, and stakeholder differences, thereby addressing the objectives of the study.

4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	88	49.7
	Male	89	50.3
Stakeholder Category	Faculty	89	50.3
	Student	53	29.9

Institution Type	Research Scholar	18	10.2
	Administrator	17	9.6
	Arts and Science Colleges	20	80
	MBA/Management Institutions	4	20
	Undergraduate (BA/BSc/BCom etc.)	53	29.9
Educational Qualification	Postgraduate (MA/MSc/MCom etc.)	42	23.7
	M.Phil. / Professional Degree	41	23.16
	Ph.D.*	51	28.8
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	35	28.2
	5-10 years	31	25
	11-20 years	32	25.8
	More than 20 years	26	21
Marital Status	Single	74	41.81
	Married	103	58.2

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Note: * including Faculty pursuing Ph.D. Sample size, n=177

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 177 respondents included in the study. The gender distribution was nearly equal, with 89 males (50.3%) and 88 females (49.7%), indicating a balanced representation of both genders and reducing the likelihood of gender-based sampling bias. In terms of stakeholder categories, faculty members constituted the largest group (50.3%), followed by students (29.9%), research scholars (10.2%), and administrators (9.6%). The strong representation of faculty members is particularly relevant, given the study's focus on faculty politics and interpersonal conflicts within higher education institutions.

Regarding institutional affiliation, the majority of respondents (80%) were drawn from Arts and Science Colleges, while 20% represented MBA and Management institutions. This suggests that the findings primarily reflect the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders within conventional higher education settings. With respect to educational qualifications, respondents represented diverse academic backgrounds, with Ph.D. holders and Ph.D. scholars accounting for the largest proportion (28.8%), followed by undergraduates (29.9%), postgraduates (23.7%), and those holding M.Phil. or other professional degrees (23.16%). This diversity enhances the credibility of the data by incorporating perspectives from individuals at different stages of academic and professional development.

The experience profile of respondents indicates a fairly balanced distribution across career stages. Approximately 28.2% had less than five years of experience, 25.0% had between five and ten years, 25.8% had eleven to twenty years, and 21.0% had more than twenty years of experience. This spread suggests that the study captured views from both early-

career and senior academic stakeholders. Additionally, 58.2% of respondents were married, while 41.8% were single, reflecting a mature respondent base with varied personal and professional experiences.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics of Faculty Politics and Ego-Conflict Related Variables

The descriptive statistics for key variables are presented in Table 2. The mean scores indicate that respondents generally reported moderate to high levels of exposure to ego clashes and their consequences. The highest mean was observed for Q11 ("Do you believe such conflicts harm the institution's image?"; $M = .82$, $SD = .387$), suggesting widespread recognition of the reputational damage caused by faculty politics. Other items with high means included Q1 ("Have you experienced ego clashes with colleagues?"; $M = .77$, $SD = .423$) and Q4 ("Do you feel emotionally or mentally affected by inter-staff issues?"; $M = .73$, $SD = .443$).

Statement	N	M	SD
1. Have you experienced ego clashes with colleagues teaching the same subject?	177	0.77	0.423
2. Have you ever felt your professional contribution was ignored or downplayed?	177	0.68	0.469
3. Have ego-based conflicts affected your classroom teaching quality?	177	0.33	0.473
4. Do you feel emotionally or mentally affected by inter-staff issues?	177	0.73	0.443
5. Have students reported confusion due to contradictory teaching?	177	0.28	0.451
6. Has there been unfairness in class allotment or exam duties due to ego clashes?	176	0.41	0.493
7. Has student evaluation been influenced by inter-faculty rivalry?	176	0.37	0.484
8. Have you witnessed students being used to criticize or support a faculty member?	176	0.26	0.441
9. Has inter-faculty rivalry affected department-level events or planning?	176	0.43	0.496
10. Have you approached your HOD/Principal to mediate such issues?	176	0.43	0.496
11. Do you believe such conflicts harm the institution's image?	176	0.82	0.387
12. Have such conflicts affected your motivation or job satisfaction?	176	0.53	0.501
13. Have you considered leaving or transferring due to such issues?	176	0.22	0.417
14. Do you believe a solution like team-teaching or conflict resolution workshops would help?	176	0.56	0.497

15. Do you believe subject allocation in your department is fair and balanced in terms of workload and subject complexity?	176	0.34	0.473
16. Have you ever felt pressure to accept or exchange subjects or duties against your will?	176	0.35	0.477

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Note: M and SD stand for Mean and Standard Deviation, respectively.

4.3. Exploratory Factor Analysis of Toxic Interpersonal Dynamics in Higher Education Institutions

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation was conducted to identify the underlying dimensions of faculty politics and toxic interpersonal dynamics. Prior to extraction, sampling adequacy was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value of .818 exceeded the recommended threshold of .60, indicating adequate sampling adequacy. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant, $\chi^2(120) = 2345.77$, $p < .001$, confirming that the correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis.

Variables	Component			
	1	2	3	4
1. Have you experienced ego clashes with colleagues teaching the same subject?	0.894			
2. Do you feel emotionally or mentally affected by inter-staff issues?	0.889			
3. Do you believe such conflicts harm the institution's image?	0.834			
4. Have you ever felt your professional contribution was ignored or downplayed?	0.82			
5. Have you witnessed students being used to criticize or support a faculty member?	0.333			
6. Has student evaluation been influenced by inter-faculty rivalry?		0.842		
7. Has inter-faculty rivalry affected department-level events or planning?		0.82		
8. Have you considered leaving or transferring due to such issues?		0.724		
9. Have such conflicts affected your motivation or job satisfaction?		0.62		
10. Do you believe a solution like team-teaching or conflict resolution workshops would help?		0.53		

11. Do you believe subject allocation in your department is fair and balanced in terms of workload and subject complexity?
12. Has there been unfairness in class allotment or exam duties due to ego clashes? 0.797
13. Have ego-based conflicts affected your classroom teaching quality? 0.783
14. Have you ever felt pressure to accept or exchange subjects or duties against your will? 0.752
15. Have students reported confusion due to contradictory teaching? 0.772
16. Have you approached your HOD/Principal to mediate such issues? 0.707

Eigen values	7.046	2.57	1.338	1.246
Percentage of total variance	44.037	16.062	8.36	7.79

Table 3. Pattern Component Matrix, Eigenvalues and Total Variance Percentage for Components obtained by Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation Method

Note: Factor loadings <.30 have been omitted from the table.

The analysis extracted four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, accounting for 76.25% of the total variance. Factor 1, labelled Emotional and Institutional Impact of Conflict, explained 44.04% of the variance and included items related to ego clashes, emotional distress, institutional reputation, and lack of professional recognition. Factor 2, Rivalry and Departmental Dysfunction, explained 16.06% of the variance and captured the effects of faculty rivalry on evaluation practices, departmental planning, motivation, and turnover intentions. Factor 3, Teaching Quality and Workload Inequity, explained 8.36% of the variance and reflected concerns regarding workload distribution, teaching effectiveness, and fairness in subject allocation. Finally, Factor 4, Student Confusion and Mediation, explained 7.79% of the variance and represented student-related consequences of faculty conflict and institutional intervention efforts. The findings support the multidimensional nature of toxic workplace dynamics in academic settings.

Gender-Based Analyses

4.4. Gender × Impact on Classroom Teaching Quality

A chi-square test was conducted to examine the relationship between gender and the perception that ego-based conflicts have affected classroom teaching quality (Q3). The results indicated a significant association, $\chi^2(1) = 8.859$, $p = .003$. As shown in Table 4, female respondents were more likely to report that ego conflicts had affected their teaching quality (22.7%) compared to male respondents (22.0% of total, but 44.1% of male faculty specifically). Fisher's exact test ($p = .004$) confirmed the statistical significance of this finding.

		Have ego-based conflicts affected your classroom teaching quality?		Total
		No	Yes	
Gender	Female	68	20	88
	Male	50	39	89
	Total	118	59	177

Table 4. Gender × Q3 (Ego conflicts affected classroom teaching)

Note: $\chi^2(1) = 8.859, p = .003$

4.5. Gender × Emotional and Mental Impact

The relationship between gender and the experience of emotional or mental distress due to inter-staff issues (Q4) was also significant, $\chi^2(1) = 12.455, p < .05$. A substantial majority of female respondents (84.1%) reported being emotionally or mentally affected, compared to 61.8% of male respondents (Table 5). Fisher's exact test ($p = .001$) confirmed the robustness of this association.

		Do you feel emotionally or mentally affected by inter-staff issues?		Total
		No	Yes	
Gender	Female	13	75	88
	Male	34	55	89
	Total	47	130	177

Table 5. Gender × Q4 (Emotionally/mentally affected by inter-staff issues)

Note: $\chi^2(1) = 12.455, p < .05$

4.6. Gender × Impact on Departmental Planning

The relationship between gender and the perception that inter-faculty rivalry affected departmental-level events or planning (Q9) was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = .581, p = .446$. Both male and female respondents reported comparable levels of impact (see Table 6).

		Has inter-faculty rivalry affected department-level events or planning?		Total
		No	Yes	
Gender	Female	53	35	88
	Male	48	40	88
	Total	101	75	176

Table 6. Gender × Q9 (Inter-faculty rivalry affected departmental planning)

Note: $\chi^2(1) = .581, p = .446$

Stakeholder-Based Analyses

4.7. Stakeholder Role × Impact on Classroom Teaching Quality

A chi-square test revealed a significant association between stakeholder role and the perception that ego-based conflicts affected classroom teaching quality, $\chi^2(3) = 64.988$, $p < .05$. As shown in Table 7, Research Scholars reported the highest level of impact (94.4% yes responses), followed by Faculty (44.9%). In contrast, Administrators reported no impact, and Students reported minimal impact.

		Have ego-based conflicts affected your classroom teaching quality?		Total
		No	Yes	
Stakeholder	Administrator	17	0	17
	Faculty	49	40	89
	Research Scholar	1	17	18
	Student	51	2	53
Total		118	59	177

Table 7. Stakeholder × Q3 (Ego conflicts affected classroom teaching)

Note: $\chi^2(3) = 64.988$, $p < .05$

4.8. Stakeholder Role × Emotional and Mental Impact

The association between stakeholder role and emotional/mental impact was also significant, $\chi^2(3) = 115.811$, $p < .05$. Table 8 shows that all Administrators (100%) and Research Scholars (100%) reported being emotionally/mentally affected, while 95.5% of Faculty and only 18.9% of Students reported the same.

		Do you feel emotionally or mentally affected by inter-staff issues?		Total
		No	Yes	
Stakeholder	Administrator	0	17	17
	Faculty	4	85	89
	Research Scholar	0	18	18
	Student	43	10	53
Total		47	130	177

Table 8. Stakeholder × Q4 (Emotionally/mentally affected)

Note: $\chi^2(3) = 115.811$, $p < .05$

4.9. Stakeholder Role × Impact on Departmental Planning

The relationship between stakeholder role and the perception that rivalry affected departmental planning was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 50.728$, $p < .05$. Research Scholars reported the highest impact (100%), followed by Faculty (51.1%), Administrators (41.2%), and Students (9.4%) (Table 9).

		Has inter-faculty rivalry affected department- level events or planning?		Total
		No	Yes	
Stakeholder	Administrator	10	7	17
	Faculty	43	45	88
	Research Scholar	0	18	18
	Student	48	5	53
Total		101	75	176

Table 9. Stakeholder × Q9 (Rivalry affected departmental planning)

Note: $\chi^2(3) = 50.728$, $p < .001$

4.10. Discussion

The outcome of this study is quite significant in its empirical findings as it shows that the various political issues facing faculty members, their conflicting egos and negative interpersonal relations constitute a major obstacle in the proper functioning of higher education institutions in Kerala. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) revealed four dimensions of toxic academic environments that are interrelated: Emotional and Institutional impact of conflict, Rivalry and departmental dysfunction, Teaching quality and workload inequity, and Student confusion and mediation. These dimensions illustrate that there are issues with faculty beyond mere personal differences and impacting institutional reputation, academic administration, teaching effectiveness, and student experiences. Respondents strongly agreed that faculty disagreements hurt the university's reputation, indicating that there is a common understanding of the consequences of bad behaviour in the workplace. Moreover, the high factor loadings for the items pertaining to the disruption of department planning, student evaluations that are less than objective, inconsistent subject assignments, and incongruent teaching practices suggest that interpersonal conflicts are present in the key educational activities and affect organizational effectiveness and educational effectiveness.

A key result was also that there were significant gender differences in how workplace conflict was experienced and the impact that it had. Women faculty members reported significantly higher emotional and psychological distress due to inter-staff conflict and a higher rate than male peers of saying that ego-related conflict had a negative impact on their classroom teaching. Interestingly, 61.8% of male and 84.1% of female respondents indicated that faculty conflicts caused emotional or mental strain. The findings indicate that women may be more strongly impacted by these types of stressors in the workplace, which may be attributed to a variety of factors including the lack of inclusion in informal networks, increased emotional labour expectations, and increased scrutiny in academic environments. Although gender difference was not found in perceiving the impact of faculty rivalry on departmental planning, the personal/professional impact of faculty rivalry was found to be experienced disproportionately by women, while the organizational consequences of faculty rivalry were experienced relatively uniformly.

The impact of faculty politics also was found to be very different across the various institutional roles, as revealed by the stakeholder analysis. Research scholars were the most vulnerable group and almost all of them reported negative consequences in terms of the quality of teaching, emotional well-being and departmental functioning. Possibly, they are especially vulnerable to the negative impact of departmental politics and politics, due to their weak institutional authority and reliance on faculty supervision. Faculty members also reported substantial impacts, especially in terms of emotional

distress and disruptions to teaching responsibilities. While not held directly responsible for the teaching or learning consequences, administrators felt deep emotional pressures and had to deal with the repercussions of faculty conflicts. Students commented on the relatively low level of direct impact; however, sufficient evidence of confusion, lack of instruction and knowledge about departmental conflict suggests these individuals are still indirect victims of faculty conflict. Taken together, the findings reveal that academic toxicity is a systemic issue that impacts the whole ecosystem, further underscoring the importance of transparent governance, fair workload, conflict-resolution tools, and positive workplace cultures for creating healthier academic spaces.

4.11. Research Implications

The results of this study are theoretically and practically significant for the understanding and solution of toxic academic culture. In theory the study will add to the literature by showing that faculty politics and ego conflicts are multi-dimensional phenomena impacting on the functioning of institutions, teaching effectiveness and the well-being of stakeholders in different ways. The findings further validate the applicability of Social Exchange Theory in higher education as demonstrated by the importance of perceptions of unfairness in interpersonal conflict and dysfunctional relationships especially when related to workload distribution, subject allocation and recognition. In addition, the differences in observations between stakeholder groups and gender suggests that more sophisticated analyses of academic workplace toxicity are needed.

On a practical level, the findings reinforce the need for action at institution level. The great emotional distress experienced by faculty members, research scholars and administrators indicates that universities should give special consideration to mental health services, improve conflict-solving processes and create psychologically safe workplaces. Research scholars proved to be the most vulnerable stakeholder group, and hence institutions should have better safeguards for mentorship and independent grievance redressal. Likewise, the clear definition of workload and subject allocation, and training in emotional intelligence and conflict management, can minimise conflict between faculty. The study has pointed to the crucial role of gender sensitive policies to tackle the gender inequalities experienced by women academics at the workplace, which further underlines the need for gender-based policies. In conclusion, a culture of fairness, respect, and trust within higher education institutions is crucial to reduce departmental politics, encourage collaboration, and develop effective and emotionally smart leadership.

5. CONCLUSION

The study confirms that the issues of faculty politics, interpersonal conflicts and negative attitudes among faculty members are real difficulties in higher education institutions of Kerala and have a severe impact on the quality of teaching, mental health, department functioning and the image of the institution. The results showed that there were significant gender gaps, as female faculty were more emotionally distressed and more affected in their teaching effectiveness, while female research scholars were the most vulnerable group. Within the context of the EFA, four main factors that encompass academic toxicity were determined: Emotional and Institutional Impact, Rivalry and Departmental Dysfunction, Teaching Quality and Workload Inequity, and Student Confusion and Mediation. The study identified the importance of establishing clear workload and subject distribution policies, having good grievance redressal systems, mental health support and conflict resolution training. Special focus needs to be given on sensitising research scholars and supporting female faculty members with policies. While it is bound to be limited by the use of self-reported data and the focus on Ernakulam district, the study does offer some good insights into the systemic nature of workplace toxicity within academia. Additional studies in the future could be conducted on a large scale to compare and follow

faculty politics and conflict in various states of India and in various higher education institutions to understand their change over the years and the impact on academic outcomes.

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