





Co-creating Gender Equality in Czech Academia: External and Internal Factors

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Abstract

In the Czech Republic, gender equality in public higher education and research has been championed for over twenty years by the Centre for Gender and Science at the Czech Academy of Sciences. Nevertheless, concrete policies and measures have been slow in coming and they have always required protracted negotiations with the relevant stakeholders at the national level. In the past two years, the situation has changed significantly due to both external and internal circumstances. Externally, the introduction of gender equality plans as an eligibility criterion in Horizon Europe has had a major impact at the level of higher education and research institutions, creating demand for capacity-building support from the Centre as well as new opportunities for the work of institutional change agents. Internally, student initiatives and mobilisations have started addressing the issue of gender-based violence in higher education and research, making power a central issue. This essay will consider these two developments in the wider context of work at the national level to advance gender equality in higher education and research. It will examine the productive ways in which diverse types of stakeholders can be mobilised to push for change. In conclusion, it will emphasise the need to address issues of care (including self-care) in order to support gender equality efforts.

Keywords: Czech Republic; gender equality; gender equality plans; gender-based violence; co-creation.

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1 Introduction

The Czech Republic joined efforts to address gender inequality in research in 1999 when the European Commission set up the Helsinki Group on Women and Science (HG, later Gender and Science) with representatives of member states and associated countries. In response to the demands of the HG's work, the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) first established the Working Group on Women in Science in 2000; and in 2001 the Centre for Gender and Science was launched at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Science, as a research, support and advocacy centre. Since then the Centre has championed gender equality in public higher education and research sectors. It has worked to advance gender equality efforts and introduce changes, raise awareness, and build capacities in Czech academic settings. The EU level has always been a key contextual factor in this endeavour because it has provided opportunities for exchange and mutual learning at both the policy and institutional levels. This has been facilitated by the Centre's participation in EU-funded institutional change projects, as well as the coordination of the policy-focused projects¹ and engagement in the EU advisory bodies.²

Nevertheless, changes in the system have been slow and the introduction of concrete policies and measures has always involved protracted negotiations with the relevant stakeholders at the national level, as well as complaints and petitions. For example, in 2012, the Centre lodged a complaint with the Public Protector of Rights against the Czech Science Foundation related to the discriminatory eligibility rules of individual postdoctoral grants, which did not allow any interruption of grant implementation in the event of pregnancy and childbirth and forced women researchers to terminate such a grant with a "fail" grade, barring them from application in the years thereafter. The Public Protector of Rights upheld all the claims (case no. 1/2012/DIS/ZO), including a breach of the Czech legal order, and mandated that the Czech Science Foundation adopt rectifying measures. In 2014, the Centre, together with the Vědma initiative, launched a petition against similarly discriminatory eligibility rules in the new Junior Grant competition, which garnered widespread support with over 800 signatures.

In the past two years, the situation has been changing due to both external and internal circumstances. Externally, the introduction of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) as an eligibility criterion in Horizon Europe has had a major effect on higher education and research institutions, creating demand for the services that the Centre offers, as well as a new framework for the work of institutional change agents. Internally, student initiatives and mobilisations have addressed the issue of gender-based violence in higher education and research. Both these developments underscore the power that change agents can wield when opportunities arise or are created, but also their vulnerabilities in a system without a solid policy and political backing.

In this essay, we chart the above-described two new external and internal developments in the wider context of work at the national level to advance gender equality in higher education and research. First, we present a context for gender equality initiatives in higher education and research more broadly, and as a backdrop against which to illustrate the conditions in which the change agents operate. Second, we present the work of the Czech community of practice titled the "Community for Change" established by the Centre for Gender and Science in 2015, and

1. These include, between 2017 and 2021, Horizon 2020 GENDERACTION project (grant agreement ID 741466), and for the period 2022 to 2025 the Horizon Europe GENDERACTIONplus project (grant agreement: ID 101058093).
2. This first entailed the membership of Marcela Linková in the HG and between 2017 and 2021 Chair of the ERAC Standing Working Group for Gender in Research and Innovation.

we discuss the opportunities as well as challenges afforded by the new eligibility criterion, stressing the vital role of sharing, networking, mutual support and having a safe space for venting. Third, we discuss the recent surge in student mobilisation in regard to gender-based violence in higher education and research, the crucial role that this mobilisation is playing, and the needs and limits of initiatives of this kind. Fourth, we consider these developments in relation to the role of co-creation, participatory approaches, and reflexivity in a push for change. We examine the ways in which different types of stakeholders (gender equality infrastructures, change agents, informal networks and mobilisations, and femocrats in institutions) can be mobilised in a modified type of Velvet Triangle (Woodward, 2015) and the conditions that have proven vital in the Czech context to sustain these efforts, turning them into a long-term and continuous, albeit slow, push for change, ready to seize opportunities when they arise.

This essay is a self-reflexive study embedded in feminist action research, auto-ethnography, and feminist advocacy (Jain, 2017) because we all currently work at the Centre for Gender and Science. Our position is in the middle between that of engaged feminist researchers and gender equality advocates (Breen, 2004; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), occupying the liminal space between doing research and advocating for change at the policy level, as well as supporting institutions and their change agents in their endeavour to build capacities to advance gender equality in higher education and research. On the one hand, we employ results of research into the ways Czech academia is gendered in order to name and frame problems, while also proposing measures to the relevant policy bodies in the country. On the other hand, we engage with our stakeholder groups (such as change agents, ombudspersons, student initiatives) in co-creation and capacity building with a view to identifying their needs, amplifying their voices in the policy process, and building alliances for mutual reinforcement. To facilitate this task, one of us was involved in the launch of the Community for Change in 2015, and another is its current manager, while also organising the capacity-building programme of the Community in close contact with its members and the challenges they are facing. Similarly, we have engaged in capacity-building and experience-sharing actions with the student initiatives to combat gender-based violence, with a view to learning about and amplifying the needs of these initiatives in regard to relevant stakeholders at the policy and institutional levels. With this essay, we contribute to the understanding of why policy change continues to be slow in Central and Eastern Europe and what the role of exogenous and indigenous factors is in advancing gender equality. We close with consideration of the need for increased stakeholder engagement in a system that continues to operate in accordance with the values of the Ivory Tower.

2 Context

In this section, we briefly describe the context. First, we review the basic statistical information in order to identify the long-term trends in women's participation in the Czech research and higher education system. Second, we present the main features of the gendered research culture and attitudes to gender equality initiatives. Third, we describe the Czech policy context as a backdrop to current developments.

2.1 Statistical Representation of Women in Czech Research and Higher Education

Significant horizontal and vertical gender segregation has long been evident in Czech academia, with few signs of improvement. According to the 2020 Monitoring Report on the Position of Women in Czech Science (Koubayová, 2022), the proportion of women among researchers had

never passed the 30% threshold since 2005, the year when the statistics started to be published, reaching 27.6% in 2020. This is one of the lowest proportions of women researchers in Europe, a position the Czech Republic has occupied repeatedly (European Commission, 2016 & 2019).

The percentage of women in tertiary education has increased in the past ten years, with 59.6% of graduates being female in 2020. Among doctoral students, women make up 44.5%. Among researchers, however, their proportion drops, and in 2020 was 27.6%. The largest number of researchers in the Czech Republic work in the technical (37.4%) and natural sciences (31.0%); they represent more than two-thirds of all researchers. However, the proportions of women working in these fields have long been the lowest, with 13.0% and 24.4% respectively.

Gender segregation in academia is even more significant vertically. Women make up 56.4% of lecturers and 48.8% of assistant professors, but only 26.8% of associate professors and 15.3% of full professors. The Czech Republic is among the lowest-ranking countries in the EU, occupying the 30th position among 32 EU+ countries. Decision-making, too, remains the domain of men, who occupy 90.7% of senior academic posts. Only 14% of the rectors of public universities are female (the Czech Republic ranks 27th out of 33 EU countries), 7% of directors of public research institutions, and 26% of members of expert and evaluation bodies. While the annual statistical reports attract major attention in the media, it cannot be said that these figures — pointing to the inability of the Czech research and higher education system to make use of the pool of highly educated and talented women — raise a policy issue that would translate into concrete policy measures.

2.2 Attitudes toward Gender Equality in Higher Education and Research

Several studies (Cidlinská et al., 2018; Linková et al., 2018) have shown that a major obstacle to eliminating gender inequalities in Czech research and higher education is the gendered nature of Czech academia. This is manifest, first, in a general failure to reflect on the masculine set-up of the academic environment and to recognise the structural nature of gender inequalities. It is then compounded by the belief in the complementarity of the sexes and gender roles, which also entails the definition of women as deficient — not sufficiently dedicated — research auxiliaries who cannot work at 100% and hence not suited for progression to the top echelons of the research profession (Linková, 2017; Vohlídalová, 2013). A third factor is the conceptualisation of equality as equality in difference, so that men and women are regarded as different by nature, because of childbirth and childcare (which explains the limited recognition of work-life balance issues as the only policy concern). Fourthly, equality is framed as an individual choice that a woman makes (Linková et al., 2021). This gender blindness regarding the operation of research institutions results in reluctance to adopt proactive support measures for gender equality on the part of academic management and policy-makers, for whom not preventing women from studying and pursuing research careers means the same as supporting their career development (Cidlinská et al., 2018). These attitudes to gender equality and the insistence on individualised excellence contribute to creating a *careless* academia (Lynch, 2010; Lynch et al., 2021).

Despite these barriers, a tangible shift is evident in the approach to gender equality in research and higher education. While in 2006, gender equality was framed as a “luxury we cannot afford” (Linková, 2006), by 2010 this stance had shifted to a “policy of inactivity” (Tenglerová, 2014). By then the issue was embedded in the EU commitments, and the way to disregard it was to treat gender equality as a non-issue and/or to locate it on the periphery of, or even outside, science itself. If gender equality was thematised at all, it was reduced to work-life balance issues concerning women scientists. This understanding has significantly reduced the space for

policy measures to be adopted and narrowed their scope.

Recently apparent is another shift whereby gender equality becomes “a policy of necessary evil compelled by external pressures” (Linková et al., submitted). This is tied to the introduction of a new eligibility criterion, the GEP, in Horizon Europe and the resulting changes in the policies of the Czech funding bodies.

2.3 Policy Contexts

Since the initial actions to support gender equality in research launched at the beginning of the new millennium, the Czech policy and advisory frameworks have made great progress. While the previous National Research, Development and Innovation Policy (Office of the Government, 2016) referred to gender equality only in relation to the need to improve the position of Czechia in the ERA, the current National Research, Development and Innovation Policy 2021+ (Office of the Government, 2020) sets out a first concrete action related to gender equality. However, much as in the past, it is limited to creating conditions for a combination of research work and parenthood and for the employment of women after maternity leave and women or men after parental leave. Another policy framework is the Gender Equality Strategy for 2021–2030 (Office of the Government, 2021), which focuses not only on work-life balance but also on expanding the content of education and research from a gender perspective and the application of gender aspects in the operation and management of educational and research institutions. The Strategy is the most ambitious policy document adopted to date, and several factors have been instrumental: firstly, the Office of the Government involved gender experts and scholars in working groups drafting individual chapters, including the staff of the Centre for Gender and Science in the chapter dedicated to Knowledge; secondly, it adopted a participatory approach and organised round tables with the relevant stakeholders in order to build consensus prior to the Strategy’s submission to inter-departmental consultation. These two steps played a key role in the document’s adoption. It should be noted that the Strategy is currently under review for the upcoming period, and with the current right-wing, austerity-focused government there may be pressures to reduce the scope of the policies adopted. Nevertheless, the current government has introduced a new ministerial position for research which provides a platform for implementation of this new policy framework, and the government’s stance includes women in research and work-life balance as one of the priorities.

In terms of external factors, the most recent and strongest is linked to the EU-driven policy introducing GEPs as an eligibility requirement in the Horizon Europe funding programme. The obligation to adopt a GEP can be compared to the obligation to transpose the EU anti-discrimination directives of 2009, which was perceived as an unnecessary intervention (Havelková, 2017, p. 202) that had financial consequences. As a result, the number of academic institutions which adopted a GEP rose from 11 in 2021 to 69 in 2022; as of January 2023, 64% of public research institutions and 71% of public higher education institutions have a GEP (Donovalová & Tenglerová, 2023). In 2022, the main national research funding organisations — the Technological Agency and the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR, 2023) (as well as MEYS in the Operational Programme Jan Amos Komenský, OP JAK) — introduced the same GEP eligibility criterion. Furthermore, the recently adopted Gender Equality Strategy 2021 - 2030 contains a plan to provide financial support for the introduction of GEPs (Office of the Government, 2021).

Following this overview of the role of GEPs in the national system, we now turn to the reception of the GEP requirement in the Czech academic system and the role in it of the Centre’s

Community for Change.

3 The Opportunities and Challenges of the GEP Requirement for the Change Agents

Long before the introduction of the GEP eligibility criterion, the Centre for Gender and Science recognised the growing need to build a community of allies and supporters which could, first, be mobilised in support of actions and measures the Centre was proposing and, second, serve as a space in which to share experience, build capacities, network, and provide mutual support (on the role of communities of practice in promoting institutional change see Palmén & Müller, 2023). To this end, the Community for Change was established in 2015, as a Czech community of practice, with approximately one hundred members at that time. It brought together project managers, researchers and experts from Czech universities and research institutions interested in and/or working for gender mainstreaming in research and higher education. At that time, the community was predominantly without any official remit and reflected the personal preference of its members. With the introduction of the new GEP eligibility criterion, the Community for Change expanded rapidly. Today it has more than 450 members and serves to build capacities, connect people so that they can support each other, share promising practices, have access to up-to-date information, build shared understandings of gender equality, stimulate mutual learning and self-reflection, diffuse existing knowledge, articulate the needs of change agents, and provide a safe space for sharing and venting. For the Centre's staff, the Community is vital in co-creatively formulating proposals for policymakers of actions to be taken, reflecting on the challenges and resistance to implementing gender equality, and mapping the strategies to overcome them.

To this end, in 2022 the Centre conducted an internal online survey among members of the Community in order to determine the changed circumstances consequent on introduction of the GEP requirement and the fast-paced work at the institutional level to adopt GEPs. The survey results showed that the lack of gender balance in decision-making positions and the lack of support from the top management were the two most pressing challenges that the Community members faced. This outcome was subsequently confirmed in a panel discussion focused on the obstacles to implementing GEPs with institutional change agents which was organised at the 2022 national conference on GEPs. The survey of the Community's members also revealed that their work was not adequately communicated *vis-à-vis* the rest of the workplace (Linková et al., submitted). Relatedly, their agenda was not embedded in institutional policies and strategies. Hence it was not, or only marginally, linked systematically to the broader institutional missions and infrastructures. Without a clear institutional mandate, they were forced to rely on the individual interest and support of colleagues responsible for other agendas. At the same time, it was these change agents who were responsible for the results. Success or failure of the gender equality implementation was subsequently presented as a failure of a particular person or as a failure of the measure as a whole. Furthermore, in many instances, the top managements of higher education and research institutions did not see the GEP as a cyclical activity but rather as a one-off action.

Unsurprisingly, the Community members also faced various types of resistance. One that was more significant and emerged repeatedly was reference to an “agenda of no content” (*agenda bez obsahu*) used as a derogatory term to indicate that the gender equality agenda was seen as a meaningless signifier. This underscores the lack of awareness of structural gender

inequalities, including issues of power and the operation of power structures, and of the role and purpose of implementing measures to promote gender equality. In this regard, the change agents reflected that they lacked institutional recognition of the GEP agenda and its relevance to the organisational culture, which they saw as the next stage of development that would be vital to ensure the transformative capacity of the GEP eligibility criterion. At the moment, the situation is far from this state of affairs.

Nevertheless, the mapping also showed that the obligatory GEP building blocks have helped to slightly shift the situation, mainly due to the increased awareness and information flow, especially through training plans and education. Increased acceptance of the GEPs has also been helped by the discovery that GEPs also address disadvantages based on age, disability, etc. They have also proven to be rapid means to establish measures with which to deal with the cases of sexual violence that have recently surfaced in Czech universities.

4 Student Mobilisations to Fight Gender-based Violence

As elsewhere, the Czech academic system manifests many different forms of gender-based violence and other kinds of unacceptable behaviour. The first available data on the issue come from 2009, when two studies were conducted on students' experience of violence, sexual harassment, and bullying. Both of them reported high prevalence rates, major uncertainties as to what constitutes sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour, and a total lack of information about what to do in the event of an incident (Kolářová et al., 2009; Vohlídalová, 2009). These studies did not elicit any remedial measures from the higher education representatives or the MEYS; and in fact, they met with fierce opposition from some members of the academic community. This was manifest not only during a public presentation of the results of one of the studies but also in media attacks on the study's authors, one of whom described this experience as a "witch hunt" (during a panel debate held at an annual meeting of the Educational Ombudsperson Platform on 27 January 2023).

The Czech higher education and research system is not unique in the strong individualisation of gender-based violence, and sexualised violence in particular; a factor which makes it possible to deny its structural nature embedded in relations of power and inequality and ranging along a continuum of violence (Bondestam & Lundquist, 2020; Humpreys & Towl, 2023; Kelly, 1987; O'Connor et al., 2021). When cases of gender-based violence occur, they are treated as examples of individual failures, not as expressions of institutional cultures that permit such behaviour. The approach is also individualised in relation to the victim-survivors, who are held individually responsible for violent incidents, and there is a focus on the risk of excessive reporting by students and of their provocative actions against academics (Smetáčková, et al., 2009, p. 21; cf. also Burton, 2021, p. 23).

One of the objectives of the burgeoning student initiatives is therefore to address the power asymmetries between teachers and students that exist in the hierarchical organisation of higher education and are embodied in grading, examinations, assessment of theses and state examinations, allocations of internships abroad, job opportunities and work contacts, and networking in the community. This power imbalance inherent to higher education is compounded by the still strongly hierarchised and ageist nature of Czech universities, with students treated as less relevant and less than equal (as documented for example by the 2023 documentary *After the Silence Was Broken*, which features a meeting of the Academic Senate). One of the manifestations of this is the fact that a person who has been reported as a harasser has more rights in the

system and is subject to greater protection than the person who reports the offence. To change this situation, the student initiatives have emphasised the victim-centred approach.

Student activities³ started to emerge in 2016 with the activist group Fourth Wave (*Čtvrtá vlna*), which brought together students from the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, and the Faculty of Arts of Charles University; their first video had over 150,000 views in the first three weeks after it was released. More forceful and continued actions started in 2021 with a performance by Marie-Luisa Purkrábková, a former student of the Theatre Faculty in Prague (DAMU), who presented testimonies of her fellow students about abuse by their teachers. This act created a sort of safe community space in which it became possible to share personal experiences. This prompted students from other universities and faculties across the country to start forming initiatives and create web platforms to address the issue. The topic quickly attracted significant media attention. Multiple cases of gender-based violence were publicly reported, and this applied pressure on the university leadership.

The first initiative with a tangible impact was *You Don't! Have to Endure It* at the Theatre Faculty in Prague (DAMU), which forced personnel changes among staff members, the creation of the position of an ombudsperson, a vote to limit the tenure of department heads, and a programme to develop an ethical culture. The initiative gave people the courage to speak out, with the result that artistic director of the National Theatre resigned from his post, saying “I don't have to endure it”, while pointing out the abuse of power and nepotism in the Czech theatre sector.⁴ This was followed by the founding of the *Initiative Out Loud (Iniciativa Nahlas)* at the Faculty of Philosophy, Charles University, which formulated its demands (Iniciativa Nahlas, 2022) for changes at a systemic, institutional level. This mobilisation helped to raise issues of safety and toxicity, and the student initiative became a contact point for fellow students to share their experiences of stalking, grooming and sexual assaults, either by faculty staff or by other students. Others soon followed suit: *Mater Nostra* at the Faculty of Law, Charles University, and *You Don't! Have to Endure It (Nemusíš to vydržet) FAMU (Film Faculty in Prague)*, *safe space kolektiv* at Charles University, *Feminist University Circle (Feministický univerzitní kroužek)* at the University of Western Bohemia and *Why We Didn't Report It (Proč jsme to nenahlásily*i)*. Debates were held at many other universities and secondary schools, and a documentary *After the Silence Was Broken* (Arsenjeva, 2023) was produced in 2023.

This mobilisation has been due to the utter failure on the part of university managements to respond adequately to gender-based violence and trauma. A founding member of the student *Initiative Out Loud* from the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague, Anna Schubertová, stated during a panel discussion at the conference *Ending Gender-Based Violence in Academia*⁵ — organised by the Centre for Gender and Science within the framework of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU under the auspices of the MEYS — that the pri-

3. On the role of student mobilisations and partnerships see Marine & Lewis, 2020; Humphreys & Towl, 2023 and Pritchard & Edwards, 2023.

4. This resignation was widely reported in the press: e.g. for Czech Public Television see: <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/kultura/3362802-nemusim-vydrzet-zduvodnil-svuj-odchod-spinar-ceske-divadlo-podle-neho-zahnila-v>. For an interview in Czech with the artistic director see: <https://www.heroine.cz/kultura/5921-divadelni-mafie-toxicke-prostredi-jake-jsou-duvody-odchodu-sefacinohry-nd-daniela-spinara>. The resignation was also reported on the Information Portal of the Czech Theatre at: <https://www.divadlo.cz/?clanky=umelecky-sef-cinohry-narodniho-divadla-daniel-spinar-predcasne-ukonci-svuj-mandat> (in Czech).

5. <https://gbv2022.soc.cas.cz/>.

mary mission is to establish a channel between the institution and its students concerning the issue of safety and fairness. The downside of these mobilisations, as also reported at the conference and the two meetings organised by the Centre with the student initiatives in 2022 and 2023, is the psychological harm caused to students actively working to change the academic environment, the draining of the mental, emotional and time resources that they should be devoting to their studies, and the erosion, if not loss, of their trust in higher education institutions and their institutional management.

Aware of the power imbalance between the university management and the student initiatives, in August 2022 the Centre for Gender and Science invited the student initiatives to organise regular meetings for exchange and strategic planning. Given the Centre's long-standing push for gender equality and engagement with research and higher education institutions, the objective — much as with the Community for Change and a new partnership with the Ombudsperson Platform in higher education — was threefold: 1) Support the student unions in the provision of resources for capacity building that help build their resilience and sustainability; 2) Push for change through networking and by generating proposals for measures and actions to be taken by the higher education and research organisations; and 3) Create alliances for sustained advocacy and pressure. With this partnership, the Centre aims first to gain a clearer understanding of the needs and concerns of students in order to, second, more effectively advocate for change in Czech higher education.

5 Harnessing the Velvet Triangle for Sustainable Institutional Change

As reported in this essay, two significant changes are under way in the Czech higher education and research environment; one is related to the impact of the EU-initiated GEP requirement; and the other is related to student mobilisation around the issue of gender-based violence in higher education.

The GEP eligibility criterion created a surge in membership of the Community for Change, which has been instrumental in expanding the audience for capacity-building activities (including training and e-learning modules in Czech) and discussion on the opportunities for, and barriers against, promoting institutional change in the system. The co-creative design of the programme for the Community for Change and the participatory techniques used in the programme's delivery have contributed to building trust, alliances, and reflexivity. This has enabled the Centre to better respond to the needs of the Community's members, but also to communicate these practice-based needs to institutional leadership as well as to policy-makers. The objective is the same as that of the student initiatives: to use co-creation, participatory techniques, and reflection on the positionalities of the student initiatives, the Centre, and other stakeholders in the system in order to develop strategies for further change while providing the expertise that the Centre has been developing, including for example the concrete results from the Horizon 2020 UniSAFE project.⁶

It is evident that the above-described two changes have created a momentum that the Centre can harness for mutual reinforcement of agendas and increased pressure on the system, taking advantage of the powers of the Velvet Triangle. Alison Woodward originally deployed this concept to describe the multi-layered processes of “informal governance in the EU”, which

6. UniSAFE is a Horizon 2020 project which has conducted a survey on more than 42,000 respondents, analysed national policies in the EU and institutional policies in 48 higher education and research institutions, and carried out 15 case studies. It has used the research insights generated to develop practical tools and policy advice for various stakeholders. For more information see: <https://unisafe-gbv.eu/>.

included civil society actors, the state, and gender studies scholars in various constellations reflecting “the lack of a fundamental power base in the masculine power structure” (Woodward, 2015, p. 10). We borrow the concept with a slight adaptation whereby the poles of the triangle consist of femocrats and allies in the state and public administration, activists and advocates in academic institutions, and engaged gender and feminist scholars (among whom we include ourselves). Interactions and mutual reinforcements make it possible to tie different elements of the system together, including gender scholarship and research, sustained advocacy at the national and EU levels, activism and civil society pressure, and the engagement of variously positioned stakeholders in higher education and research organisations, including the project management teams, human resources and personnel departments and the staff responsible for GEP and/or HR Excellence in Research Award, the European Commission award for institutions implementing the principles of the Charter and Code for Researchers, including non-discrimination and equality.⁷

6 Conclusions

Recalling the notion of *carelessness* introduced in relation to the underlying organisational logics of Czech academia, in this conclusion we argue for the need to valorise care (cf. Gaudet et al., 2021). With this we do not mean care in the sense of the dominant understanding of the Czech academic system as childcare and work-life balance, but we refer to a much broader notion of care as opposed to individual choice. The stress on autonomous choice which underlies much of the discussion on gender equality, excellence and meritocracy, as well as the issue of gender-based violence, serves to obfuscate the realities and values that are essential for the research profession and people’s lives more broadly even if they often remain invisible. These entail different care practices in regard to students and colleagues, including collegiality, respect, listening, recognition, accountability, fairness and justice, and sometimes even solidarity (Burton, 2021; Linková, 2017, p. 59).

The provision of care is vital for two reasons. First, our exchanges with the change agents responsible for the GEP implementation and the student initiatives, as well as our own work with higher education and research institutions, highlight the crucial need for self-care, given the emotional toll that gender equality work takes on individuals. This again underscores the need for community building, mutual support, and safe spaces for reflection. Second, we want to stress the issue of care in relation to caring for others. The processes of co-creation, listening and exchange, amplification of the voice groups in marginalised positions are to us instruments of care. They not only enable us to establish relations of care with the various stakeholders in the system and reflect their needs; they also enable us to insist on the care responsibilities pertaining to the institutional leadership and management. Being able to mutually reinforce our various voices, support our various agendas, and focus on the various concerns and needs of those in less powerful positions, is an instantiation of care. Creating situations where these other needs can be heard and seen makes it less possible for the institutional management to disregard them through silencing and invisibilisation.

7. For more information see: <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/hrs4r>. In 2023, a revision of the framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe (COM/2023/436 final) will reinforce gender equality measures in Pillar I of the European Charter for Researchers. For more see: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2023%3A0436%3AFIN>.

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