

Challenges and Opportunities for Building Alliances for Greater Gender Equality. A Commentary on the Symposium “Don't Fix Women, Fix Academia? Gender Inequality in National Academic Contexts”

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Abstract

This commentary on the collected essays brings into sharper focus some of the key advances, lessons learned but also continued challenges for tackling gender inequality in R&D. Adopting a comparative perspective across countries but also across analytical levels (micro-, meso-, and macro) demonstrates once more the widespread nature of gender inequality. Drawing on the provided insights from cases in Europe and the US regarding gender equality in R&D, it argues for the importance of building broader alliances beyond gender equality practitioners in science to unite against illiberal, anti-democratic tendencies within Europe and beyond.

Keywords: Gender inequality; comparative research; Europe; masculinity; excellence.

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Taken together, the five essays in the Symposium provide a welcome opportunity to bring into sharper focus some of the key advances, lessons learned, but also persisting challenges in regard to tackling gender inequality in R&D. The fact that the articles report on experiences both in Europe and from the ADVANCE program in the US testifies to the widespread nature of gender inequality, while also strengthening international alliances of equality work. Opportunity for dialogue, however, does not only exist on a cross-country level; it also exists insofar as the essays consider the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of gender inequality. While Maddalena Cannito and her colleagues (2023) foreground the individual approaches used by women in the Italian academic system to cope with career barriers in the wake of the neoliberal turn, María Bustelo (2023) and Kristen Myers et al. (2023) reflect especially on the role of organizational level factors for change, respectively including the role of top-management commitment or the role of men. While each of the articles is naturally aware of the importance of macro-level factors, it is the article by Heike Kahlert (2023) on the German Excellence Initiative and the article by Marcela Linková and her co-authors (2023) that discuss more specifically how external and internal demands on the national level can address gender inequalities in R&D. Taken together, the five articles thus not only restate a central insight of feminist thought — that personal coping strategies are part of a broader, political constellation — but they also make clear that any advances towards greater gender equality will necessarily have to operate simultaneously across these three levels, namely individual, organizational, and national. The rest of this commentary follows the logic of these essays as they map current challenges and lessons learned across these micro-, meso- and macro-levels. This is evidently a selective reading, but hopefully it can highlight some common issues, foregrounding once again the transversal and changing nature of gender and gender inequality.

Based upon testimonies by women working in Italian academia, Maddalena Cannito, Manuela Naldini, and Arianna Santero convincingly argue in their essay that gender inequality has lost none of its urgency. By drawing on interviews with 46 women working in 4 Italian universities, the authors evidence the individual experiences behind one of the most persistent and important gender inequalities in Italy, Europe and worldwide — namely the disproportionate loss of women as they advance from their PhDs to senior academic positions. The essay presents the well-known reasons for the continued vertical segregation, distinguishing discriminatory practices and bias against women from women's own choices that may reinforce existing care and wage gaps. The strategies used by the interviewees to advance their careers despite a precarious higher education system, demanding work environments, and care responsibilities at home show that the main challenge of neoliberal Academia is not so much the increased competitiveness within the university system as the purely individualized response mechanisms. The women interviewed coped by working on the margins of their field, postponing motherhood, reducing maternity leave, or self-censoring their ambitions to become full professors, among other strategies. However, none of the statements transcend these individual-level ways to tackle the underlying structural constraints and masculine gender patterns of universities or the science system. Interestingly, one issue that shines rather through its absence is gender-based violence. It seems that gender-based violence is largely normalized and tolerated in the Italian context as it is not really emerging through the interviews. However, the opportunity should not be missed that the pandemic proportions of gender-based violence could drive a more political and collective response to the existing faultlines in the science system. Gender-based violence is an integral part of the reproduction of an unrelenting, competitive, predatory, output-oriented science system. Whence derives the importance of recent developments in the Czech Republic, as described by Linková and

co-authors, where student-led initiatives and mobilizations against gender-based violence have become a central force for change. This shows that the true push for change arises precisely when individual experiences are seen as forming part of a broader, discriminatory pattern able to evoke and formulate a collective demand.

How to mobilize men for a collective push for change is the key theme of the article by Kristen Myers, Stephanie George, Allison Danell, and Andrew Morehead. Reporting on the experience of the Advocates & Allies programme at the East Carolina University in the USA, the article provides a revitalizing perspective on how to tackle gender inequality at the organisational level. Amid all the complexities, set-backs, and obstacles to achieving real organisational change for gender equality, it is refreshing to follow the simplicity of the argument that “power, privilege and authority” should be used in order to disrupt the “hegemony of that power, privilege and authority.” By recruiting and training white male faculty and administrators as Allies and Advocates for women and other marginalized academic staff, the initiative is able to upset entrenched hierarchies and correct “interpersonal and procedural biases ‘on the ground’.” The A&A programme breaks new ground by reversing the perspective from discrimination against women to the accumulation of advantage among white men. Interrupting this effortless maintenance of privilege on behalf of men may be as consequential, or even more so, as fighting against exclusionary practices directed against women (DiTomaso, 2015). Moreover, the initiative also shows that the focus on “bringing men in” disarms the antagonist logic of “us” versus “them” by creating a “we” within a diverse academic community for change. Importantly, it also redistributes the onus of equality work from those marginalized faculty members and women to white men, who assume responsibility and take action to create a more just higher education environment.

The need of learning and rethinking entrenched logics of organisational change strategies is also evidenced by María Bustelo’s paper on the SUPERA project at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). The team at the UCM coordinated this 4-year structural change project from 2018–2020, involving six implementing institutions and two supporting partners. Despite the difficulties of implementing the project during the Covid-19 pandemic, the essay engages more specifically with the “doctrine” of top-level management support for structural change initiatives. Building upon the previous experience of structural change projects, the current evidence has highlighted the importance of an institutional commitment (via top-level management) for the successful implementation of Gender Equality Plans (EIGE, 2016; Mergaert et al., 2022; Palmén & Kalpazidou Schmidt, 2019). However, as Bustelo’s article argues, reliance on top-level commitment can become an obstacle if such support suddenly — through a change of the rector’s team — breaks down. Hence, flexibility in building alternative support structures becomes paramount for maintaining pressure and influence and achieving sustainable impact.

What both these articles thus show is that, although the literature on organizational change for gender equality is massive, it is still necessary to question — sometimes quite radically — entrenched perspectives and well-rehearsed “truths”. As others have remarked, the role of top-level commitment (Benschop & Van Den Brink, 2018) or institutionalized equality offices (Mcquillan & Hernandez, 2021) for structural change is far from established. Again, how to build alliances for collective change that overcome individual responses is a key issue on which both the articles by Bustelo and Myers dwell.

The role of national level factors, and especially the conditions under which external demands can advance gender equality, complement these individual and organization-based reflections. Heike Kahlert’s take on the German Excellence initiative starts with a brief review

of gender equality policies in the German science system from the 1970s to the 1990s. Many initiatives have been implemented, including gender equality laws, affirmative action plans, or the establishment of equal opportunity units/offices in all federal states. These actions have managed to make inroads into a very hierarchical and high-status science system which functions within a society characterized by the male breadwinner model (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012). With the creation of the German Excellence initiative in 2005, science stakeholders reached consensus that a strong, competitive German system would need to address its persistent gender inequalities. Crucial for achieving an overall agreement was the external pressure by the international board of reviewers, which emphasized that the Excellence initiative would remain faulty if the candidate universities continued to ignore gender equality as a central component of their funding applications. However, as Kahlert points out, although the discursive link between gender equality and excellence has been relatively well established, a considerable gap continues to exist between the policy discourse, on the one hand, and the daily practices, cultures and structures within universities which resist any deeper change on the other. Although the article does not delve more deeply into this issue, it would be interesting to explore in more detail which stakeholders in the German system are willing to convert external pressures into real change on the ground.

Cross-reading Kahlert's article with the experience of the Czech Republic both enhances insights into the role of extra-national inputs for the national equality agenda and furnishes insights on how to fill the gap between policy discourse and practice. As mentioned, the article by Marcela Linková, Gabriela Langhammerová, Zuzana Andreska, and Eva Oliva describes how student-led mobilization against gender-based violence has become an important internal factor that exerts pressures for change. At the same time, the introduction of a Gender Equality Plan as an eligibility criterion in Horizon Europe constitutes an important external factor that has had a major impact on academic organizations in the Czech Republic. What is interesting to observe in this case — compared to that of Germany — is how these external pressures are taken up by national stakeholders and converted into a real, practical change on the ground. Crucial in this regard is the long-standing experience of the Centre for Gender and Science at the Czech Academy of Sciences, which provides a participatory forum to build trust, alliances, and a capacity for institutional change. It would be instructive to compare the experiences of the Centre for Gender and Science with those of similar stakeholders in Germany, such as for example the national network of equality officers & practitioners (*bukof*) that has existed since 1990s. In the same way that internal and external pressure in the Czech Republic can be harnessed to create synergies and increase pressure for change in the academic system, can we identify similar processes in Germany? How does symbolic pressure travel from the policy level to actual change processes when also factoring in the Center of Excellence Women and Science (CEWS) in Germany? Have these players been able to leverage the policy dialogue surrounding the Excellence Initiative to drive real structural change forward?

Comparing these different national experiences yields interesting insights into the scope and reach of strategic alliances among national stakeholders for gender equality. As these articles have shown, the combination of external pressures with internal networks and alliances is a promising means to achieve real transformation within national boundaries. However, this of course invites further reflection on the extent to which existing networks and alliances can be expanded, both geographically and thematically. Importantly, this includes acknowledging that the greatest threat to the sciences system might not be originating from within the system itself but rather from right-wing, anti-democratic forces — as Andrea Petö continues to remind us (Köttig et al., 2017). Pressure for gender equality in science might therefore find

valuable allies in civil society or various other interest groups that defend the democratic order and stand up for peace and social justice on a broader scale. However, this entails making a broader and more encompassing discourse also part of our approach to gender equality: that gender equality in science is not about women, equal representation or excellence, but rather about making an inclusive science and higher education system contribute to the fight against illiberal tendencies and the creation of a more just society.

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