

# The Complex Interventions Necessary to Push the Academy toward Gender Equality. A Commentary on the Symposium “Don't Fix Women, Fix Academia? Gender Inequality in National Academic Contexts”

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## Abstract

Women are under-represented in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) disciplines across the globe. For decades this has been recognized as a serious problem, and many governments have funded programs that address the issue. The earliest projects, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, attempted to “fix women” to help them succeed. These projects failed because the causes of women’s exclusion were not simply their socialization, but rather systematic institutional discrimination. Current attempts to include women in scientific disciplines focus on re-designing the institutions. In my brief introduction to the symposium, I introduce a way to think about gender that can help us evaluate what kinds of change each essay is describing and integrate their insights and findings so that they can inform future work in the area. To do this, I introduce the framework that suggests we must think about gender as a social structure. I then use the gender as a structure framework to briefly summarize the findings of each essay and suggest directions for the future for each project. I conclude with a summary of what we have learned overall from the essays in the Symposium and how this might inform future efforts at gender transformation in universities world-wide.

**Keywords:** Gender structure; science; women; university; transformation.

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Gender inequality in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) disciplines has been acknowledged as a serious problem for decades by countries across the globe. In the United States the ADVANCE project for gender transformation of universities began in 2001, at the same time the European Union began its Gender Equality Strategy. Both programs began with projects that are now referred to as attempts to “fix the women” that include projects such as a focus on recruiting and retaining girls in scientific college majors, assertiveness training for women, and attempts to help women with work/life balance. Such projects were doomed to fail because the causes of women’s exclusion were not simply of their own making, but rather systematic institutional discrimination, both overt and embedded into institutional design. Scientific work, and universities, were organized originally by men for men.

Both the U.S. ADVANCE gender transformation project and the variety of grants created within the European Union have by now been re-conceptualized to fix the institutions, rather than women. What has become clear is that misogyny and organizational discrimination are very resilient and resistance to change. And yet, there have been some successes even while much more change is needed. This Symposium is a testament to the continuing efforts to increase gender parity in universities in both the US and Europe.

Attempts to make change must take seriously the complex system of gender as a social structure. To successfully make change, we must conceptualize gender as a dynamic and changing social structure of inequality that intersects with other systems of inequality. Just as every society has an economic structure, so too every society has a gender structure with social processes that occur at the individual, interactional, and macro levels of analysis. There are both material and cultural aspects at each level of analysis, and so change reverberates in complicated ways, like a game of dominoes; when any one thing changes, it can set off a chain reaction.

In this short commentary, I will introduce a way to think about gender that can help us evaluate what kinds of change each essay is describing and integrate their findings in a way that each project may inform the others, and future work in the area. To do this, I will briefly introduce how to think about gender as a social structure. I will then use this theoretical framework to briefly summarize the findings of each essay and suggest directions for the future for each project. Finally, in the conclusion, I will suggest what we have learned overall from this research and how it might inform future efforts at gender transformation in universities world-wide.

## 1 Gender as a Social Structure

In every society bodies are assigned a sex category from which gender as an intersecting system of inequality is built. A gender structure has implications for individuals themselves, their identities, the formation of their personalities, and therefore the choices they make. The individual level of analysis has long been of interest to social scientists, and often presumed to be at least partly the explanation for gender patterns, and therefore inequality. While we no longer try to “fix the women” in programs designed to ensure women are represented in scientific disciplines, we cannot ignore the empirical reality that gender socialization is indeed sticky. Little girls are trained to care about emotions and nurturing and boys about logic and efficiency. For example, Erin Cech (2021) argues that even today, many women choose “feminine” (and therefore lower paying) jobs and men choose more “manly” and often scientific jobs because they have been raised to follow their gendered passions. Still, this gender socialization is not an explanation for why women scientists face all sorts of obstacles in their careers. The power of the gender structure goes far beyond the shaping of selves. The individual impact of gender structure is but one component of its power and influence. Every time we encounter another

human being, or even imagine such an encounter, the expectations that are attached to our sex category become salient to us and whether we meet such expectations or not, we are held accountable by ourselves and others. When male scientists ignore the suggestions of their female colleagues, or worse yet, sexualize and harass them, this is the power of an interactional level of analysis. But the power of the gender structures goes far beyond both the shaping of our selves, and the interactional expectations of others. Societal institutions, from religion to the workplace, including universities, are deeply gendered. Organizations require work hours and time commitments that depend on “ideal workers” (Acker, 1990) who have wives to take care of them and their children. This presumption of the “ideal worker” embeds male privilege and female disadvantage into the very organization of the workplace. But male privilege goes even beyond the rules and regulations that privilege workers with no care work responsibilities, cultural logics and beliefs about men as leaders and women as nurturers prop up the systems that advantage men. While such beliefs may vary along race and class lines, they are often built into organizational rules and the cultural logics that accompany formal rules and regulations. At every level of analysis — the individual, interactional and macro — there are material realities (e.g., things we can see, feel and touch) and there are cultural phenomena (selves, expectations for others, cultural beliefs). To change university structures, to bring women into an equal status in scientific disciplines, we must pay attention to each level of analysis and attendant material and cultural realities. (For more detail see Risman, 2004, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). The following is a graphic representation of the model.

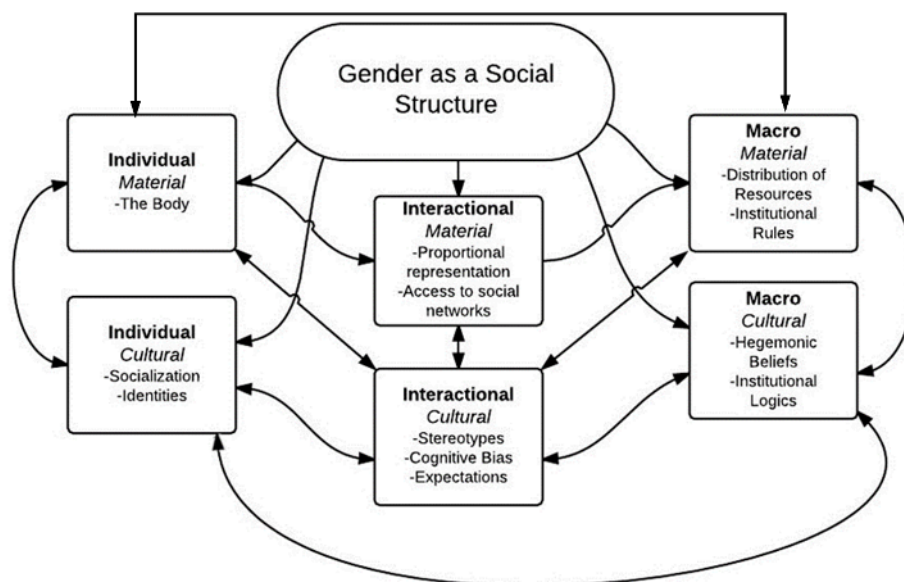


Figure 1: Model of Gender as Structure (Risman 2017, 2018a, 2018b)

Before discussing individual articles, I suggest that to successfully move our universities and scientific disciplines toward gender parity, we must eventually include policies that focus on individuals (both women and men), on social stereotypes and how male scientists interact with women in daily life, and on the policies and cultural logics embedded in both science and universities. We must focus both on the material reality of inequality (sexual harassment,

pay gaps, retention issues, work requirements) but also the cultural beliefs that support the rules and regulations that disadvantage women and other minoritized groups in the scientific community. Realistically, every project cannot possibly do it all at one time, and so change will be slow and reiterative. Still, if we think about change in this complex way, we can identify when successful changes at one level of analysis begin to impact other aspects of the gendered structure of science.

## 2 Reflecting on the Five Essays

In this symposium two essays focused on Italian and German universities and conducted analyses of the current gender relations in their respective settings. The article by Cannito, Naldini and Santero (2023) is a study of why there is vertical gender segregation in Italian universities. The article by Kahlert is an analysis of how German universities move toward a neoliberal model changed the policy conversation about gender equality.

Cannito et al. present a research project that tries to understand the cause of vertical segregation in faculty positions within Italy where only approximately one of four Full Professors and Institute Heads in Italy are women. They interview 46 women at different ranks and across the country. What they found was the women identified several reasons for the scarcity of their female colleagues at the top of the academic ladder: the motherhood penalty, the expectation that women do a disproportionate amount of teaching and service while research is what counts as productivity, and the belief that ideal leaders are men who are devoted exclusively to their jobs. Women use strategies to overcome such discrimination including postponing motherhood until they have earned a secure position, avoiding competition with men, and when they do become leaders, bringing in the skills from nurturing so that their leadership style includes care. But most women see these problems and strategies as individual problems, and even personal choices. With great skill Cannito et al. analyze their data using Correll's (2004) theory that constraints constrain preferences. Women who face motherhood penalties because they work in organizations that expect "ideal workers" to have no children or elderly parents, or wives to take care of their children and elderly parents face constraints that affect their preferences. Similarly, women whose superiors expect them to "care" so much that they take on more than their fair share of service classes and academic service face cumulative disadvantages that eventually tire them out and constrain their choices. This study shows very clearly how gendered discrimination shapes the possible choices that women can make. In gender structure theoretical language, what Cannito et al. show is that several on-going processes contribute to vertical segregation: the gendered expectations for academic housework at the interactional level, the institutional requirements of work devotion that preclude caretaking family labor, and the cultural beliefs that mothers are responsible for children and men are better at leadership all reinforce gender inequality in the academic labor force. What Cannito et al. do not address in this particular essay are any strategies to overcome the ways in which these gendered processes can be changed. I will return to this issue in the last section of my commentary.

Kahlert (2023) analyzes the changes in the German university system and argues that despite the possibility for gender equality to be included in the definition of "excellence" for universities, that has not been the reality in Germany. Kahlert begins with a short history of recent changes in the German university system. Historically all universities were considered equivalent and funded similarly. But in a desire for international competitiveness, some universities were to be designated as "excellent" setting up a neoliberal competition between institutions. The question became is gender equality a component of excellence. Kahlert writes that the

Chancellor's rhetoric suggested that gender equality was a part of university excellence and that most, but not all, faculty and administrators agree. And yet the 2006 policy initiative has stalled and moves along like a "slug." While the goal for more women in science is at least discussed, Kahlert writes that there is not even discussion of more structural change such as work/life balance or the gendered production of knowledge. Using a gender structure theory, we can see that without cultural acknowledgement that gender inequality is a problem, there can be no structural change. In this setting only the small number of women is seen as a problem, and so the only leverage for change is to change the interaction at the local level by bringing in more women, and hope that will eventually spur more cultural change. The external push of European Union dollars seems to have kick started at least some change in other countries, and I will return to discuss that more in the final section.

In the next three essays the authors each discuss some intervention that is designed to push forward gender equity in science disciplines at universities in Spain, the United States, and the Czech Republic. In Spain, Bustelo (2023) describes her experience in a European Union funded project when the support of the higher administration vanished. Myers, George, Danell and Morehead (2023) describe a project which trains men to be allies and advocates in an effort to improve the experiences of women and other marginalized groups in their interactions on campus. Finally, Linková, Langhammerová, Andreska and Oliva (2023) describe how feminists, both faculty and students, are fighting to change the culture of their universities so that when an external push comes from the European Union such as Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), the universities will be able to move forward.

We will begin discussing these essays about interventions with the Spanish case. Bustelo describes the SUPERA project funded by the European Commission under Horizon 2020 and its fate at the Complutense University of Madrid. This article differs from the others as it is a narrative about one of the 8 partners in the SUPERA project. The project had strong feminist goals for gendered structural change in universities. The goals that were funded included attention to many of the central issues in gender transformation of universities. The problems the proposal sought to address included: opaque decision-making, unconscious bias in performance evaluation, bias in the content of science, and organizational issues such as pay gaps, sexual harassment and work/life balance. The structure of the plan was to create participatory faculty nodes for empowerment and networking, a committee to ensure the GEP plan was enacted and an advisory committee of gender experts. The first year went as planned, with Bustelo as the coordinator of the project. The faculty nodes were established and began meeting in a participatory fashion. But then the unexpected happened: the supportive Rector (top leadership position at the university) was not re-elected, and the new Rector did not support the goal of gendered structural change for the university. Instead, the project was seen as a research project and the GEP committee and the advisory committee were disbanded. The author left her position. But Bustelo suggests that all was not lost. She argues that the faculty nodes were effective at empowering faculty, for networking, and for creating concern about gender equity. Bustelo argues that such bottom-up change is itself meaningful and so some change can be accomplished even without upper leadership buy-in. This may be true although in this short essay, there is not much evidence provided to support the claim. Still, using gender structure theory, we can see that simply having upper leadership support without cultural changes may not be enough, because if the leader is deposed, the change is thwarted. And yet, the organization of faculty nodes, changing the interactional expectations around gender, raising consciousness of inequality is part of changing the cultural values. This paper reminds me of a research article titled "Real-Life Conundrums in the Struggle for Institutional Transfor-

mation” (McQuillan & Hernandez, 2021). They trace the effect of a gender transformation grant funded by the United States government to the University of Nebraska, an ADVANCE grant, for two decades. What they found was, like at the University of Madrid, a supportive leadership team was replaced with one with no commitment to feminist transformation and change was not sustained. However, the faculty that had been originally involved became the senior faculty over time, and their commitment didn’t waver, and so current leadership has mainstreamed many of the original ideas. This supports Bustelo’s suggestion that faculty empowerment as change agents can, over the long haul, change the culture of the organization, and then, perhaps, sustainable structural change is more possible.

Myers et al. describe a project funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF), an ADVANCE grant. Since 2001 the NSF has invested over \$270 million to support ADVANCE projects designed to transform American universities to insure gender equity. At this point, successful past projects are being replicated on other campuses. Myers et al. are implementing a program to bring men back into the work of disrupting sexism on campus. They are training faculty and administrative men to be allies and advocates, to interrupt male privilege and sexism when they see it, to intervene to change the interaction. As in many places, at their university, East Carolina, a doctoral granting research focused institution, women are severely under-represented in STEM disciplines. Women represent less than 20% of engineering faculty, only approximately a third of the natural sciences, health sciences and social sciences faculty. The team uses both gender structure theory and feminist theories of masculinity to design their intervention to change campus culture by having men interrupt sexist patterns of interaction. The goal is to catalyze critical consciousness, so men are aware of sexism and inequality and interrupt it when they see it. They do not train men to insult or degrade those who are devaluing women, but rather to “call in” their colleagues to help them see the problem and address it. They hope to make small changes in daily life, and over time to change the campus culture. While the project is in process and so not yet fully evaluated, early indications are that the men involved believe they are more aware, and that they can recognize previously invisible sexism. Myers et al. conclude that while the project has potential thus far, too few men are involved, the training time is too short, and that voluntary social change activities fall low on the priority list when faculty get busy during the academic year. Still, Myers et al. report that at least one administrator has consciously hired new male and female faculty with equivalent resources because of the sensitivity raised by these trainings, and higher administrators have removed someone who was blatantly discriminatory from a post with this new sensitivity. Using gender structure theory, this project seeks to change the interactional experiences of women by raising the critical consciousness of their male colleagues. This is perhaps one method to change the culture of the university. Feminist higher administrators will have more success with structural and organizational change once the culture is supportive of such transformation.

The final essay, in this symposium is about the Czech Republic. In this essay, Linková et al describe how both feminist faculty and students are working to change the culture of the university. Faculty have championed gender equality for over two decades by creating and sustaining the Centre for Gender and Science at the Czech Academy of Sciences. Student mobilization against gender-based violence has more recently focused attention on the power dimension of gender inequality. Such internal mobilization has paved the way for possible success of external pushes toward social change. Recently, the gender equality plans as a criterion for a grant from the European Union Horizon Europe project has created an external push for universities to move toward more gender equality. The Centre for Gender and Science has led the way by doing an internal mapping which shows that the gender imbalance in decision-making

positions, and the lack of support for gender equality from top administrators, are major challenges for gender equality transformation projects. Without addressing those projects, the GEP is not given high priority and even faces resistance. The GEP is seen as an empty signifier because there is a lack of awareness of structural gender inequality, and male privilege in power. And yet, the student mobilization against gender-violence and the GEP eligibility criterion for grant funding has created a surge in membership in the group on campus, the “community for change” which has been promoting institutional transformation with participatory techniques. As with the other interventions, this is an on-going process, and so no evaluation is presented. Using gender structure theory, we can see that student mobilization is a means of change at the interactional level that raises consciousness and creates the opportunity to push for cultural and structural changes. So too, faculty participation in organizations that promote equality can be instrumental in changing the culture enough that when an external push from the European Union exists, structural organizational change may be implemented.

### 3 So What Have We Learned from These Articles?

It is useful to focus on just what parts of the gender structure each project is trying to change. One thing is very clear, no one anymore is trying to fix the women, or the men either. That’s a good thing. By the time students and faculty are in universities, because gender socialization is very sticky, there is little evidence that workplace policies are going to alter gendered selves. Eliminating policies unlikely to work is useful.

Several of the projects focused on changing the interactions amongst faculty and between faculty and students. In the U.S. project, men were recruited to be allies and advocates to interrupt sexist behavior as it happened and to do so with by calling people “in” to better behavior rather than calling them “out” with shame. In the Czech project the Centre for Gender and Science created “communities of change” which served a similar if more diffuse function than the allies and advocates in the U.S., creating conversations among faculty to sponsor critical thinking and ideas for change. Very similarly to the Czech communities of change were the faculty nodes that survived despite the lack of leadership support, as sites where faculty could change their own interactions, support one another and educate each other. In each of these cases, the implied goals of disrupting sexist interaction is to eventually make misogyny counter-normative, and therefore to have changed the organizational culture one small step at a time. It seems as if the example from the University of Madrid, where a change in leadership halted most of the progress envisioned by the intervention, shows that changing the culture is a prerequisite for sustainable change. One leader can change the structure, that change exists only as long as the leader is in power — unless the culture has changed as well.

None of these projects focused directly on changing the organizational structure, the material aspect of the organization. In Germany, if gender equity had actually been embedded within the definition of a university’s excellence, perhaps that might have happened. But gender equity was not built into the measurement of excellence. Instead change is elusive, and the only discussion is increasing women’s numbers. In Italy, the women scientists themselves cannot envision strategies to end discrimination by changing the organization, but rather search for individual solutions. The authors, however, did identify the ways by which all the accumulation of disadvantages women face (from motherhood penalties to the expectation that they do academic housework, to the belief men are more natural leaders) influence women’s very narrow set of choices. Preferences are all tainted by the constraints faced by women faculty. The authors of the paper about the Czech academy expressed hope that the cultural work both

faculty and students were doing to change acceptable behavior on campus would allow structural regulatory changes to be successful, when the external push from the European Union criterion for GEP was implemented.

In every essay, the authors acknowledge that gender inequity was ubiquitous, and had consequences for daily interaction, for the cultural logics of their institutions, and hard wired into the very organizational design of science, and of the academy. Each essay noted, in its own way, that a workplace that requires total devotion to science presumes that scientists have wives, or do not need them. Science can only demand complete devotion because scientists have heretofore been men with wives to take care of them, to care for their children, and even their aging parents. To continue to require such devotion for excellent performance evaluations is patriarchal by design, continuing to privilege men.

These essays, however, still give me hope. Each set of authors envisions radical change that removes sexism from daily life, that ends the micro-aggressions of sexual innuendo and gender-based violence, that stops the presumption that women are disproportionality responsible for the service and teaching that is not evaluated as productivity, and that finally destroys the belief that men are better at leadership. Such vision is empowering, and these articles, these authors commitment to both feminist activism and scholarship, is what will help us move beyond the gender structure, with many small steps and occasionally by leaps and bounds. We need this attention to ending interactional sexism, to changing organizational cultures, and to re-structuring the organizational demands of universities and scientific careers. The gender structure has been patriarchal for all of history, and so revisioning it is radical work all by itself. May these authors continue to do this work, and to make small gains, and slowly but surely move the universities, science, and our world towards a feminist transformation.

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