Articles   Social Sciences

2022

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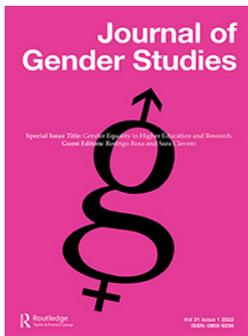
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EDITORIAL

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Higher education and research are key instruments for empowerment and social change. Universities can be powerful institutions for promoting gender equality, diversity and inclusion, not only in the higher education context, but also in society at large. Nevertheless, universities remain both gendered and gendering organizations (Rosa, Drew, & Canavan, 2020). The persistence of gender imbalances and pay gaps at both the top and the bottom levels of the academic hierarchy; gender segregation across academic disciplines and activities; the lack of integration of gender perspectives in teaching and research; and the extent of sexual harassment and assault on campuses, largely silenced and denied until the recent #MeToo movement, reveal the extent to which gender still structures, in very significant ways, the divisions of academic labour and capital (Caprile et al., 2012; European Commission, 2019; Hearn, Strid, Humbert, & Balkmar, 2020; Heijstra, Einarsdóttir, Pétursdóttir, & Steinþórsdóttir, 2017; Husu, 2020; Kachchaf, Ko, Hodari, & Ong, 2015; Paoletti, Quintin, Gray-Sadran, & Squarcioni, 2020; Schiebinger, 1999). Between 2016 and 2019, women just slightly increased their representation at professorial level in the EU (from 24% to 26%) and the proportion of women among the heads of higher education institutions (HEIs) stood at 23.6% in 2019 which is 1.9 percentage points higher than the proportion for 2017 (21.7%) (European Commission, 2019, , 2021a).

The discussion about the experiences of tackling gender inequality in higher education and research is timely for two main reasons. First, while men remain at the centre of power in academia, gender binary systems are being politically challenged as never before by the rights of gender minorities, thus subverting hegemonic gender patterns. Nonetheless, the overriding gendered inequalities that result from different normative assignments to men and women should not be underestimated. Although the idea of a single dominant form of masculinity is being increasingly contested (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2021; Hearn, 2020), it is through both institutional and cultural practices that gender comes to uphold a social order where women, as well as the feminine, remain subordinate (Acker, 1990). Second, the Covid-19 pandemic and the prevention measures imposed have enhanced existing gendered inequalities and amplified enduring privileges and disadvantages in society at large, including in higher education and research (Gewin, 2020). In the competitive context of the neoliberalised university, where gender equality policies are routinely jeopardized by a 'merit' system conceptualized as gender-neutral but essentially masculinist (Ivancheva, Lynch, & Keating, 2019; Rosa & Clavero, 2020), social distancing and strict lockdowns, as well as the closures of educational institutions and childcare centres, can hinder academic careers by reinforcing barriers to combining paid work and private life. Recent studies show that when academics faced a reorganization of working time and space amidst lockdowns, women published fewer papers as first/corresponding authors and co-authors than men (King & Frederickson, 2021; Barber, Jiang, Morse, Puri, Tookes & Werner, 2021; Kasymova, Place, Billings, & Aldape, 2021) and that their voices have been heard less in the scientific response to the pandemic (Saglamer, Drew, & Caglayan, 2021, p. 6). The articles gathered in this Special Issue shed new light upon a multitude of challenges for gender equality in academia today, and hence contribute to exploring further avenues for preventing higher education and research from rolling back the progress achieved to date.

In tackling gender inequalities in higher education, one mechanism that is being increasingly promoted is the implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) (European Commission, 2021b). GEPs cover a wide range of thematic areas, depending on contextual/institutional factors and assessment of need, such as recruitment, selection and career progression, work-life balance,

leadership and decision-making, organizational culture, gender in research and education practice, and gender-related harassment and assault. Despite the diversity of positive experiences in implementing GEPs in universities across Europe (Rosa et al., 2020), the potential of GEPs to generate institutional and cultural change in universities is a contested matter. On the one hand, GEPs have been criticized for their overt instrumental rationale (with the ascendancy of efficiency arguments justifying policy interventions) and also for the predominance of conservative frameworks informing understandings of gender equality and the actions designed to achieve that goal (Lätti, 2017). On the other hand, there is a question of how GEP initiatives can respond to current changes in the higher education sector, marked by corporatization, marketization and globalization. The emergence of new far right movements alongside new feminist movements (Grosser & McCarthy, 2019), new constructions of masculinities and the resurgence of patriarchy (Gilligan & Richards, 2018; Hearn, 2020), the consolidation of intersectional perspectives on gender inequality and discrimination in organizations (Woods, Benschop, & van Den Brink, 2021), and the increased engagement of men in gender equality (Subašić et al., 2018), testify to the increased complexity of environments in which GEPs are being designed and implemented.

This Special Issue gathers a host of approaches that build bridges between different fields in gender studies. It addresses, from a critical standpoint, the gender mechanisms that underpin the (re)production of inequality in academia, drawing on contrasting perspectives, such as feminist institutionalism, social constructivism, poststructuralism, matricentric feminism, feminist perspectives on care, interdisciplinary feminist epistemology, transnationalism and intersectionality. It contributes to current academic debates and policy practice on advancing gender equality in HEIs through original articles that present, analyse and discuss several areas of intervention to be addressed by policy mechanisms such as GEPs in the post-pandemic era. Using a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative methodological strategies, the assembled papers feature research on university policies, transnational and multi-institutional communities, care work, parenthood and the entanglement of various identity layers in different national contexts. It also covers a testimonial on ground-breaking gender equality policy initiatives and a critical review of literature on work-life balance in academia.

In *Sexual and Sexist Harassment in Spanish Universities*, Lombardo and Bustelo take a feminist institutionalist framework to elucidate opportunities and resistances emerging from formal and informal institutions in the implementation of the 'Protocol against sexual and sexist harassment' at Madrid Complutense University. Through a combination of content analysis, interviews and a survey involving the university community, the authors show how the success of a policy against sexual harassment is dependent on a combination of factors. On the one hand, there were factors facilitating the implementation of the sexual and sexist harassment protocol at Madrid Complutense University, such as the Chancellor's governing unit, gender expert university colleagues, feminist students' associations, and EU funds. On the other hand, the authors show that the implementation of the protocol was impeded by a scant awareness of the prevalence of harassment in daily university life, and the concomitant acceptance by the academic community of the phenomenon as a 'normal' practice.

In *Navigating UnChartered Waters*, Drew shows how the extension of the UK Athena SWAN (AS) Charter to Irish HEIs in 2015 provided a catalyst for change towards gender equality in that country. The paper charts its rate of adoption by Irish HEIs as well as its impact on the sector. Drawing on the experience of Trinity College Dublin as an institutional case study, the author examines prevailing critiques of the AS Charter and demonstrates how some of the identified shortfalls have been overcome in the Irish higher education sector, most notably through linking AS awards to sectoral and research funding. By demonstrating AS ability to adapt to conditions outside the UK, the author concludes that gender equality policies in the wider European Research Area can benefit from exploring the AS contextually embedded systemic approach. While recognizing that this

accreditation system can be further strengthened by promoting the integration of sex and gender analysis in research and education, Drew shows that AS is the single most comprehensive and systemic scheme in Europe to further promote gender equality in a post-COVID environment,

In *Fostering Collaborative Approaches to Gender Equality Plans and Initiatives in Higher Education and Research*, Thomson, Palmén, Reidl, Barnard, Beranek, Dainty and Hassan argue that collaborative approaches to institutional change in Higher Education, Research and Innovation might be particularly valuable as the levels of readiness, expertise and experience with such interventions widely vary across institutions and member states. GEP implementation for institutional change relies not only on the structures of stable governance frameworks, legislation, resources and external incentives, but also on the individual agency and activism of a few passionate individuals in institutions often with no collective force or voice to systematically challenge the status quo. Drawing on the experiences of seven transnational and multi-institutional communities of practice (CoPs) for gender equality, the authors show how those CoPs supported change agents, who leveraged membership to respond to challenges in promoting gender equality initiatives. Being part of collaborative, co-designed CoPs for learning, knowledge sharing and institutional change provided external support to change agents' activism and allowed them to build legitimacy around gender equality work. CoP members leveraged this support through learning opportunities, knowledge transfer, sharing practice, political support, and solidarity from the CoP stakeholders. Findings also show that when CoPs were transnational, multi-institutional and interdisciplinary, their heterogeneity did raise some challenges in relation to the divergence of members' contexts and geopolitical idiosyncrasies. The authors recommend considering this when designing CoPs that transcend national and institutional boundaries.

In *The Trouble with Work-Life Balance in Neoliberal Academia*, Rosa carries out a critical review of literature focusing on how work-life conflict has been studied. After mapping the challenges of combining work and private life in the neoliberalised university the author conducts a systematic review of the literature on work-life balance (WLB), which has been a cornerstone of GEP design and implementation as it is recognized as 'a key component of the transformation of an organisation's culture for advancing gender equality' (European Commission, 2021b, p. 32). Drawing on a sample of 143 articles specifically addressing work–life issues in academia following an exhaustive search using the ISI Web of Knowledge database, Rosa observes that despite the rich literature about how university staff and students combine academic, familial and professional responsibilities, there is a paucity of research addressing work–life interface from a critical standpoint that discusses the gender mechanisms underlying the social construction of WLB conceptions and perceptions. Even when it is critically addressed and reformulated through a gender lens, work–life is equated generally to work-family interface; personal-life being reduced to family-life (caring for children and/or ageing parents). The author stresses the dearth of research addressing work–life interface from a critical standpoint while the few gender-theoretically-informed studies show that the pervasive neoliberal climate counteracts equity initiatives. Rosa highlights the fact there is a lack of literature applying intersectionality and focusing on diversity and intra-gender variations. Whereas the presented inequities are likely to be amplified as research into Covid-19 observes its gendered consequences, the author contends that the main challenge for research on WLB in neoliberalised academia is to expose the gendered conditions under which this 'balance' is defined and pursued at both individual and institutional levels. The paper presents a set of recommendations that researchers may consider to address under-studied gendered aspects of work–life interface in academia. It proposes that further research takes an approach that merges intersectional analyses of intra-gender variations and work–life experiences resulting from the overlapping dynamics of different forms of inequality, and a framework to investigate how job resources, working conditions, public policy, organizational cultures, workplace policies, care services and institutional governance impact on an individual's perception of what they are entitled to claim as well as the scope of alternatives in exercising those claims.

In *Women and Care Practices in Canadian Universities*, Gaudet, Marchand, Bujaki and Bourgeault assess care practices and how they offer a new understanding of equity in academia. Academics are routinely engaged in care activities for their students, colleagues, institutions, and families, yet care is often overlooked in the performance-oriented culture of academia. Drawing on interviews with female professors, the study explores the extent, variety, and lived experiences of care practices in academia. It shows how female academics perform caring for undergraduate and graduate students and for colleagues through academic tasks. Although these care tasks are at the heart of their daily work at universities, they are invisible. They prevent women from sufficiently attending to their self-care and from speaking out about their health because the performative culture creates a code of silence around vulnerability issues. Taking into consideration these findings, and also the fact that they exclusively interviewed women academics in permanent positions, the authors encourage future studies to broaden their research sample in order to perform an in-depth intersectional analysis with the aim of identifying how different inequalities interact with gender and the differential impact on care. The authors highlight that acknowledging care as a value and practice may reduce gender inequalities within an organization by improving its responsiveness to the needs of different community members, and recommend rethinking how universities, as bureaucracies, develop responsiveness strategies to the vulnerabilities of their employees and students.

In *Gender Mainstreaming in Swedish Academia*, Peterson and Jordansson examine how Swedish HEIs conceptualized and organized the 2016 Swedish government directive to gender mainstream their operations. The directive provided the general guidelines for the programme Gender Mainstreaming in Academia (GMA), which was to be implemented by the HEIs between 2017 and 2019. The authors explore how gender mainstreaming, as a broad policy approach on a macro-political level, has been translated into more tangible articulations in locally specific ways in the unique environments of 13 Swedish HEIs. The analysis draws on qualitative interviews with 72 people at these HEIs responsible for, or in other ways participating in, the development of tailor-made gender mainstreaming plans, which served as the starting point for the GMA programme. Peterson and Jordansson investigate how the informants translated gender mainstreaming, as a broad policy strategy, into more specific conceptual and practical terms to fit their local contexts. They focus on how these gender mainstreaming translation processes were organized and who was invited to participate in the process. The results highlight how the organization of the translation process, the appointment of translators and the local translation of the GMA programme were guided by different principles, most often resulting in an integrationist rather than transformative translation of gender mainstreaming. The authors observed that gender mainstreaming was merged with the closely related concepts and practices of diversity and equal opportunity, which do not necessarily challenge the structural and cultural power relations in organizations. These translation principles were connected to the different logics guiding the organization and formation of mostly temporary committees, and in some cases failed to give gender-equality experts authority and influence over the translations. Appointing administrators who lack gender expertise to be part of the translation process integrated and embedded the GMA programme into the organization, as a 'technocratic tool', thereby risking defusing the transformative potential of the GMA programme, which instead was shaped by local strategic priorities focused on neoliberal efficiency goals. The authors conclude that one avenue for future research is to design studies in line with ideas and principles for participatory research, co-creation of knowledge and/or feminist participatory action research, which would empower practitioners involved in the translation and implementation processes at the HEIs.

In *Gender Back on the Agenda in Higher Education*, Morris, Hinton-Smith, Marvell and Brayson focus on experiences of those who are committed to developing gender in the higher education curriculum to shed light on 'gender work' and the challenges it faces in the contemporary UK context. Drawing on a case study institution, which included documentary analysis of course materials and semi-structured interviews with students and staff, the authors address the lack of gender mainstreaming in this context while considering the impacts of the socio-political milieu alongside the

intensification of neoliberal management practices and poor working conditions. Far from being 'mainstreamed', gender is continually positioned as peripheral, optional and of questionable value in the neoliberal episteme. The paper echoes work which locates feminist and gender work as operating beneath the radar of mainstream institutional practice in contradiction to stated institutional commitments to gender equity. Notwithstanding complex multi-faceted challenges facing higher education practitioners, the authors take hope and inspiration from the committed and thoughtful participants they spoke to who care deeply about their students, bringing creativity, commitment and passion to their work. As a starting-point for ensuring gender equality remains firmly on the higher education agenda, they recommend working collaboratively and in solidarity to share interdisciplinary perspectives and expertise and to make the case for institutional support and resource.

In *Sojourning as a Wife, a Mother and a Daughter*, Phan employs a critical autoethnography, as a Vietnamese student (and mother) pursuing a doctoral degree in New Zealand, to explore the navigation between cultures to adapt to the host country while sustaining the bond with Vietnamese heritage. Based on theories of transnationalism, space and place, Phan explores her own spatial production and place-making processes and focuses on the way she grew to become 'a cultural translator' for other family members, making the home a space of cross-cultural exchanges and inter-generational legacy inheritance. Gender family roles (motherhood and daughterhood) and status as a doctoral student are entangled in a complex network of different cultures, lifestyles and social structures. The paper highlights how the author experienced border crossing as an essential part of her motherhood and daughterhood, and her reconfiguration of family organization, which entailed the negotiation of different languages, cultures, identities and roles. By focusing on how motherhood experiences are influenced by the societal and cultural practices in both home and host countries, and the concomitant neutralization of cultures and generations, the paper gives voice to the marginalized and often overlooked challenges that international doctoral students who are mothers must face, such as the explicit and implicit pressures of childrearing, challenges in cross-cultural communication, differences in educational values and medical practices, the inheriting and fracturing of cultural origins, the mediation between cultures, and intergenerational mix-and-match communication.

In *Go the Extra Mile*, Bonache, Carballo, Chas and Delgado examine the fears and barriers towards parenthood experienced by Spanish early career academics in a context in which research excellence and parenthood are often perceived as mutually exclusive. Drawing on data collected via an online survey, this article contributes to the literature showing that both women and men are affected by gender-based biases that maintain them in traditional gender roles, complicating men's integration into childcare practices and upholding the maternal wall in working women. Findings suggest that while the factor that most influenced the decision to become a parent was the financial solvency to support a child, followed by professional stability and being able to balance work and family time, early-career women perceive more barriers to their academic career after having children and spend more time thinking about how to integrate professional development and parenthood than men do. Nonetheless, being able to stay at home and raise a child was more decisive for men than for women, suggesting that traditional roles linked to fatherhood are changing and men today are more involved in childcare than in previous generations. Finally, the authors stress that further research is needed to determine if there are differences in the perception of academic career barriers between men who wish to be actively involved in fathering and men who do not.

In *Never the Right Time*, Eren looks at pregnancy and maternity planning and how these pose a challenge at different tertiary education levels. Using in-depth individual interviews with women from four universities in Dublin, the paper discusses how women evaluate maternity-related issues in the field of physics and the physical sciences from undergraduate to postdoctoral level, and how this affected their career progress. Findings indicate that compared to their male counterparts, the need to continually publish, the absence of paid parental leave, contracts of short-term duration, lack of clear institutional policies on maternity, lack of pregnancy/maternity-friendly environments and the

non-extension of contracts, put many female early career scientists at an academic disadvantage, resulting in a 'leaky pipeline'. Moreover, responses from the participants revealed that traditional gender responsibilities were not compatible with women's identity as scientists or with their scientific career aspirations. By offering a wider understanding of how job instability intersecting with maternity, gender and gendered family responsibilities cause young women to re-evaluate their progression in academic science, the paper suggests that the key to solving this is for academic institutions to establish policies for early-career researchers which encourage the best researchers to continue in academia rather than perpetuate gender-based sacrifices.

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