

When Gender Equality in Academia Takes a Toll on Agency and Well-Being

Giulia Arena

Department of Law, University of Genoa, Italy

giulia_arena@outlook.it

Abstract: The present paper aims to investigate the limits surrounding the implementation of gender equality in academia and the correlation between gender measures and the consequences on personal well-being. Despite the efforts to build more inclusive and equal environments, fatigue seems to affect all the university's components, especially regarding the uncertainties of an academic career, seen as stressful, delusional, impossible to conciliate with motherhood. Even appropriate measures cannot deal with the fatigue of what is considered a "double presence": they only allow complying with those standards. Moreover, emotional issues are deriving from choices seen as gender deviant, like not being the major caregiver in the family, and the personal agency is often diminished. The purpose of this study is to show how gender measures in universities are not as neutral and unambiguous as they may seem, but rather fall into one of four approaches to gender inequality itself. These four approaches can be identified as neoliberalism, gender mainstreaming, work-life balance, and the capabilities approach. Agency and well-being could be seen as pivotal aspects and the mix of those elements in each approach results in a different level of fatigue, which, along with stress and mental charge, could play a major role in diminishing the effectiveness of gender equality measures. The significance of this four-sided framework lies in the possibility to reclassify every single gender equality measure and the data collected to support it into one of the four approaches, alongside the opportunity to acknowledge fatigue and evaluate university politics like gender-responsive budgets and gender equality plans.

Keywords: gender equality in academia, work-life balance, gender equality plan, choice feminism, leaking pipeline

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse recent changes in gender equality policies in academia, such as the introduction of the gender equality plan requirement from the European Commission (Bencivenga et al., 2017). The key question is what kind of gender narrative is really found within the recent changes, which are often attributed to the gender mainstreaming framework. This paper intends to discuss and problematise this assumption from a theoretical point of view, while also correlating university gender policies with the actual level of well-being experienced by women in academia.

The literature on gender in academia has focused on the "new" strategy of gender mainstreaming from two perspectives: some scholars have traced it to the category of neoliberalism (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010), while others have rejected this interpretation (Walby, 2011). This paper tries to propose a four-part alternative, taking the last option as a starting point: while neoliberalism and gender mainstreaming remain different frameworks, the work-life balance approach is added, which in a partially broader sense has also been defined as "specific equality policies" (Verloo, 2016). This approach considers motherhood as the main obstacle to women's careers and offers tools that address this particular issue, which will be discussed in more detail in section 3. Finally, the capabilities approach has also been considered, since important policy tools have been derived from it, first with regard to human development and finally also with regard to academia (Addabbo, Lanzi and Picchio, 2010).

The theoretical framework of this paper is meant to be critical of all four approaches, starting from the consideration that gender policies, all of them, do not seem to have improved the situation particularly yet and that universities continues to show not only a lack of equality, but also a general decline in the well-being of university staff (Murgia and Poggio, 2019). Note that the key concepts recalled here are the same ones that have been running through feminist literature for several years: well-being, agency, fatigue, are fundamental words to describe women's lived experience and are therefore essential starting points to approach the issue of equality policies from a situated (and feminist) point of view (Smith, 2005).

2. Living in a neoliberal academia

The academic context in which the new gender policy measures have been introduced is characterised by what scholars call the 'neo-liberal university'. This section attempts to briefly and roughly summarise the social and political changes that have characterised the European university in the last thirty years, and the academic reflection that has been created on them in the meantime. Universities are a particular form of gendered

organisations (Acker, 1990), in which gender is continuously constructed through gendered practices that are indistinguishable, at first glance, from normal working rules. Gendered practices are based on discourses, norms, languages, actions and so on, and universities narratively construct the figure of the ideal academic (Lund, 2015). Although this figure may no longer be identified exclusively with a man, his characteristics have fundamental repercussions on gender. One of these characteristics is excellence, which young researchers should strive for (Bozzon et al., 2019). Unlike in the past, the boundaries of the competition for excellence have widened, creating a truly international and global arena, although differences in the countries of origin of researchers persist. Women struggle with this standard of excellence, not because they are not excellent, of course, but because the very mechanisms of academia, where power is handed down through homophily, prevent them from growing and improving. Another characteristic is mobility, which is no longer just a spatial condition but has now taken on existential connotations, as Raffini (2017) rightly points out. Many scholars have given the name of neoliberal university to these and other changes and have analysed (Riegraf and Weber, 2017) how the consequences are detrimental to gender equality, also defining this type of academy as a greedy institution (Currie and Thiele, 2000).

According to Verloo (2016), gender measures can be classified into three main categories: equal treatment, specific equality policies and gender mainstreaming. It should be added that each of these categories relates differently to the concepts listed above, such as excellence, precariousness, productivity, well-being and so on, and does so in a less dichotomous way than simply making a good/bad verdict. However, a classification of university gender policies has not yet been proposed, which is what this working hypothesis aims to do.

3. Four approaches to gender equality measures

Four approaches can be identified in the way gender policies are implemented: gender mainstreaming, work-life balance, capabilities and neo-liberalism approach. In particular, it is interesting to analyse these four approaches through two specific lenses: choice (or agency) and well-being.

The gender mainstreaming approach implies a strong focus on the accountability of the institution, which, following the dictates of the UN and the European Union, shall carefully consider each choice from the point of view of its effects on gender equality. It is an approach where the institution is proactive regarding change (also called “fixing the institution”), however gender mainstreaming in practice has often been linked to the second considered approach, neoliberalism. In this case, the focus is on individual responsibility: it is no longer the institution that has to change, but the woman (“fixing the woman”), who thanks to the measures provided by equality policies can succeed in closing the gap that was the cause of inequality. The concept of empowerment is strongly emphasised and there is a clear preference for non-family models of care, promoting the idea of a neutral and agender worker who outsources family management to the market.

The third approach is work-life balance, which echoes the traditional gender policies of the 1970s and 1980s when the problem of the leaking pipeline was identified almost exclusively with motherhood and the tools to achieve gender equality were providing women with various types of work-life balance measures. However, while sociological research has shown that the early stages of women's academic careers are characterised by feelings of insecurity and stress, and that the pursuit of a career is seen as delusional and impossible to combine with motherhood (Murgia and Poggio, 2019), even where appropriate measures are put in place for so-called conciliation, these fail to alleviate the fatigue of double presence. In addition, there are emotional problems resulting from choices considered deviant from gender norm, such as not being the main caregiver within the family.

Lastly, the capability (or well-being) approach was developed by the Centre for Public Policy Analysis at the University of Modena (Addabbo, Lanzi and Picchio, 2010) and is inspired by Sen and Nussbaum's theories, focusing on the well-being of the individual and the creation of a list of capabilities in a participatory way, jointly with the target group. It is the only approach in which individual well-being is explicitly taken into account.

Although well-being and agency are key terms in equality policies, in practice the four approaches described above do not implement them in the same way. Agency here is defined as the possibility to carry out certain roles, in a context where there is a tension between the mainstreaming narrative of equality and the narrative that sees women as the main caregivers, and where the refusal of certain standards of productivity or certain tasks is expressed by the choice to take a step back because of the fatigue of managing everything (not only

logistically, but also emotionally and psychologically). In other words, sometimes the problem lies not so much in offering tools, which taken on their own can be effective and valid, but rather in the overall context, resulting in a narrative that doesn't take into account the fatigue and discomfort that women in academia feel when they have to balance their caring role, their professional role, what university gender policies expect from them, and their personal aspirations and desires.

It is precisely for this reason that over the last few years choice has become a polemical target of reflection on the so-called choice feminism (Ferguson, 2010), even within the university context of work-life balance policies, showing how many conditions (fatigue, stress and mental charge, etc.) can play a major role in diminishing the effectiveness of gender equality and personal agency.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, although recent innovations such as Gender Equality Plan push in the direction of offering an increasing number of measures for gender equality, a more thoughtful reflection on the effects and narratives proposed by these policies is due. It also represents an opportunity to encourage participatory processes that acknowledge individual agency, giving the opportunity to express needs and desires. However, the very idea of need also requires further discussion: as Fraser and Nussbaum rightly pointed out, we are often faced with the inconsistency of the concept of "need" as an expression of the authenticity of the subject.

Policies inspired by the idea of institutional accountability risk ultimately hinging on the neo-liberal concept of individual responsibility, which results in a process of self-absolution that continues to celebrate fatigue as a paradigm of productivity.

The real challenge, I believe, is to avoid relapsing into an approach to care that has so far reproduced either a family-type system centred on the figure of the mother and her availability, or a system based on market services and the availability of the worker, in this case, for the institution.

The hope is for a policy that is able to consider care as a social, cultural, economic and legal problem to be tackled as soon as possible: not only the care for others, but also the care for oneself and for one's personal well-being. The proposals coming from various parts of the feminist world (Fraser, 2013; The Care Collective, 2020), especially in the context of the global pandemic emergency, are pushing in this direction, and make urgent and no longer negotiable to reflect on changing the models of care and work in our society.

References

- Acker, J. (1990) 'Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations', *Gender & Society*, V. 4(2), pp. 139–158.
- Addabbo, T., Lanzi, D. and Picchio, A. (2010) 'Gender Budgets: A Capability Approach', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, V. 11(4), pp. 479–501.
- Bacchi, C.L. and Eveline, J. (2010) *Mainstreaming politics: gendering practices and feminist theory*. University of Adelaide Press, Adelaide.
- Bencivenga, R. et al. (2017) 'Gender in Horizon 2020: The Case of Gender Equality Plans', *AG About Gender - International Journal of Gender Studies*, V. 6, pp. 326–355.
- Bozzon, R., Murgia, A. and Poggio, B. (eds) (2019) *Gender and precarious research careers: a comparative analysis*, Routledge, New York.
- Currie, J., Harris, P. and Thiele, B. (2000) 'Sacrifices in Greedy Universities: Are they gendered?', *Gender and Education*, V. 12(3), pp. 269–291.
- Ferguson, M.L. (2010) 'Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics', *Perspectives on Politics*, V. 8(1), pp. 247–253.
- Fraser, N. (2013) *Fortunes of feminism: from state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*, Verso Books, Brooklyn.
- Lund, R.W.B. (2015) *Doing the ideal academic: gender, excellence and changing academia*, Aalto University Press, Espoo.
- Raffini, L. (2017) *Cosmopoliti dispersi, culture del lavoro*. Università Ca' Foscari, Venice.
- Riegraf, B. and Weber, L. (2017) 'Excellence and Gender Equality Policies in Neoliberal Universities', *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research*, V. 18(1), pp. 92–112.
- Smith, D.E. (2005) *Institutional ethnography: a sociology for people*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek.
- The Care Collective et al. (eds) (2020) *The care manifesto: the politics of interdependence*, Verso Books, London.
- Verloo, M. (2016) 'Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Europe. A Critical Frame Analysis Approach', *Επιθεώρηση Κοινωνικών Ερευνών*, v. 117, p. 11.
- Walby, S. (2011) *The future of feminism*. Polity Press, Cambridge.