


# Addressing Gender Inequality in National Academic Contexts. An Introduction to the Symposium “Don't Fix Women, Fix Academia?”

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## Abstract

Despite the progress made in recent years, achieving gender equality in academia is still a major challenge. In general, studies have revealed that women progress more slowly up the academic ladder, that they tend not to attain essential leadership roles, and that they earn less than men in comparable posts. Using the framework of gender as a social structure in order to capture the interplay between the cultural and the structural dimensions at the micro, meso and macro levels, this essay aims to introduce a debate on how gender inequalities are produced, reproduced and combatted in academic organisations located in different countries (Spain, Italy, Germany, Czech Republic, and USA), and with different experiences of external policy levers and internal networks and alliances that lead to different combinations of fixing numbers, knowledge or institutions from a gender equity perspective.

**Keywords:** Gender inequalities; Academia; gender structure; academic careers; inclusive policies.

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## 1 Introduction

Why is it that in universities, despite outnumbering men as students and achieving better results on average, women remain underrepresented in academic careers and governing bodies? What obstacles and processes make it more difficult for women to enter academe on a stable basis and reach top positions?

The aim of this symposium is to discuss gender inequality in academia by presenting a debate on the mechanisms and processes in different national contexts that contribute to producing and reproducing gender inequalities in academic careers in both STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and SSH (Social Sciences and Humanities) disciplines.

Specifically, the symposium is interested in understanding how gender inequalities are (re)produced at various stages of academic careers (recruitment, retention, career advancement) and in different national contexts and disciplines, and how they are connected to the structural and cultural factors that operate at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels (Risman, 2004). Furthermore, it aims to understand how it is possible to implement an institutional change by discussing how feminist research in different national contexts is impacting on practice and policy inside and outside academia. In this regard, it intends to discuss the role of international and national academic policies (such as GEPs, but also Positive Actions and Mentoring Programs) and schemes (such as EU HRS4R-Human Resources Strategy for Researchers, Horizon Europe, etc) in promoting change and enhancing equity even amid the affirmation of a neoliberal agenda. This entails both disentangling the role of cultural factors (i.e., norms on gender roles) and of structural barriers (i.e., recruitment/selection/evaluation rules and practices) and considering the complex interaction among the micro level (individual attitudes, preferences, and decisions), the meso level (organisational practices, cultures and processes), and the macro level (the institutional settings and the national regulations and policies).

In the following section we present a brief diagnosis of the problem and point to the limits of the mainstream explanations of gender inequalities in academia. The subsequent section focuses on the main external levers which have accelerated the adaptation of policy in different national contexts to combat gender inequalities and to promote gender equity (and diversity) in academia. Finally, in the third section, the main ideas of the five essays contained in the symposium are illustrated taking into account how gender inequalities at micro, meso and macro levels are produced, reproduced and combatted in academic organisations located in different countries (Spain, Italy, Germany, Czech Republic, and USA).

## 2 The Background: Gender Asymmetries in Academia

Despite the progress made in recent years, achieving gender equality in workplaces and professions, including academia, is still a major challenge. In general, studies have revealed that women progress more slowly up the academic ladder, that they tend not to attain essential leadership roles, and that they earn less than men in comparable posts (Peterson, 2016; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012 & 2014).

In the EU 28 as whole, female university students perform better than their male counterparts and are overrepresented in many fields of study, though not in the STEM area — engineering, manufacturing, construction, information and communication technology (OECD, 2017; Eurostat, 2020). The situation suddenly changes at the level of doctoral studies, where the majority of graduates are men (52.1%). The scenario becomes worse for women through-

out the subsequent stages of research careers in all Europe countries. In the EU-28 in 2018, 47% of assistant professors, 40% of associate professors and 26% of full professors were women (European Commission, 2021). These phenomena are known also as the “leaky pipeline”/and or the “glass door” (women are more likely to leave an academic career and less likely to obtain a tenured post), and as the “glass ceiling” (women are less likely to achieve a full professorship).

The underrepresentation of women in academia and research has triggered growing interest among scientists. They discuss whether it is due to overt gender discrimination, unconscious gender bias, a gender gap in scientific productivity, or to other more or less visible or subtle factors. The “mainstream” literature provides two main approaches: supply-side and demand-side (see Carriero & Naldini, 2022; Naldini & Poggio, 2023).

According to the “supply-side” approach, women’s disadvantaged position in academia depends on “individual self-selection” mechanisms. It is assumed that women have lower self-confidence, are less competitive or have a lower propensity to take risks (Azmat & Petrongolo, 2014). It is also argued that women have a greater preference for the family (Hyde, 2005; Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Fox et al., 2011; Pautasso, 2015; Weisshaar, 2017). Or that they feel less suited to leadership positions because of an ingrained belief that identifies leadership as a male characteristic and quality (Bosak & Sczesny, 2008). According to these explanations, it is therefore assumed that female researchers tend to behave differently from men, that self-selection mechanisms produce different “preferences” and choices in terms of disciplinary and research fields, time allocation between work and family, between teaching and research, research and publication strategies, but also in terms of decisions with respect to the propensity to hold full professorships and positions in governance. As an outcome of these (individual) self-selection mechanisms, it is argued, female researchers tend to have a lower level of productivity than their male colleagues and assume fewer strategic roles (Abramo et al., 2009; Misra et al., 2012; Abramo et al., 2017; Nielsen, 2016; Jappelli et al., 2017; Uhly et al., 2017; Filandri & Pasqua, 2019; Ooms et al., 2019).

According to the second approach the — “demand-side” argument — on the one hand, explanations of gender inequality in academia are based on the idea that gender biases and stereotypes exist on the part of organizations, and that they are reflected in discriminatory behavior in hiring and promotions; on the other hand, these explanations emphasize the existence of cultural and institutional barriers. There are various kinds of gender bias. There is “taste bias” when women are excluded on the basis of sexist prejudices (Pollard Sacks, 1999) or ideological beliefs about who is suitable for certain professions or for certain offices (Witz, 1990). There are also broader cultural barriers that reveal persistent gender biases and stereotypes with respect to the definition of masculinity/femininity in recruitment, promotion, and career advancement procedures, and in how scientific “excellence” is constructed (Addis & Villa, 2003; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011; Lund, 2015). In addition, gender bias also seems to be at work in perceptions of the importance of various areas of academic work (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012): women tend to be more involved in teaching than men, and they spend more time on student support and management tasks that offer fewer career rewards — a pattern known as “academic housework” (Heijstra et al., 2017; Minello & Russo, 2021) or “academic housekeeping” (Castaño et al., 2019). However, in academic evaluation criteria, “excellence” in research (measured predominantly in terms of scientific output, i.e. publications) takes precedence over teaching in all scientific fields (Garforth & Kerr, 2009). There are also a growing number of studies that address the role of gender equity policies in countering inequality in universities, as well as the resistance raised against them by actors that want to maintain the status quo (Lombardo & Bustelo, 2021).

This literature has also explored the role of actors, such as those linked to various feminisms, at both individual and institutional levels in countering such resistance and effectively implementing gender equality policies in universities and research (Verge, 2021; Tildesley et al., 2022). More recent studies have highlighted the emergence of new inequalities due to the rise of the neoliberal agenda, to the introduction of market-based regulation of academic work, and to the enactment of university reforms which seem to have important gender implications (Feree & Zippel, 2015; Bozzon et al., 2018; Poggio, 2018; Gaiaschi, 2021). Inequalities between men and women in academia can also be influenced by structural and normative opportunities that characterize different national contexts (as in the case of the welfare system, university reforms, or public investment in research and innovation) (Musselin, 2005). According to this perspective, supply factors are not independent of demand factors, i.e., the lower propensity of women to put themselves forward in leadership positions, apply for competitive calls or apply for promotions is rooted in the different cultural and institutional contexts in which women and men construct their paths of behavior and meaning (Naldini & Poggio, 2023).

Theories related to social capital and those of academic power distribution have also been used to explain gender inequalities in academia. Theories related to the importance of social and relational capital, of “networking” (strong or weak ties), i.e., all those analytical perspectives, on both the “demand” and “supply” sides, that consider gender differences in academic networks in terms of collaborations and co-authorships, mentor bonding and the prestige of supervisors, and “old-boy networks” (O’Leary & Mitchell, 1990; Husu, 2001; Scaffidi & Berman, 2011; Barthauer et al., 2016). Bourdieu’s “academic capital” theory (1984 & 1993) has also been widely adopted to explain gender inequalities in the academic world.

The debate on the barriers to women’s full participation, and on the main factors accounting for gender inequalities, is therefore varied, and more importantly, still open. In regard to this wide-ranging debate, it is important to underline that the gender gap and the barriers that women encounter in achieving gender equality in higher education are multidimensional, since gender disparities in academic contexts are the result of processes that reflect gender as a “social structure” (Risman, 2004; Risman & Davis, 2013; Acker, 1990; Weisshaar, 2017). These processes take shape at each of the typical stages of an academic career (recruitment, retention, consolidation and advancement). Over time, they increase advantages or disadvantages which are produced and reproduced at various levels: individual, cultural-relational and institutional (micro, meso and macro). Furthermore, though gender asymmetry in every socio-economic domain, and specifically in academia, is still a persistent phenomenon all over the world, its causes and consequences vary among national contexts.

### 3 Policy Levers for an Institutional Change

Amid this scenario, in recent decades efforts to understand and address these inequalities have increased at both the national and international levels. In particular, a crucial role has been played by the Lisbon Agenda, which, with the creation of the European Research Area in 2000, set out to encourage the development of a knowledge-based economy in which gender equality would play a key role. Specifically, this growing concern on the part of European institutions with instances of gender equality — later extended to the wider promotion of equity and diversity in scientific and academic contexts — has been marked, almost everywhere in Europe, by a remarkable shift. After a first period of policies/measures incentivized by the European Commission with the purpose of establishing equal opportunities and “fixing women” — in order to increase the presence of women in science, research and top roles — the general trend

then turned towards a second period of policies focused on institutions, and in particular on organizational cultures, in order to make them more gender-aware and gender-conscious by means of a set of interventions intended to “fix the institutions”. The latest generation of interventions challenge gender structures themselves, the purpose being to go beyond equal opportunities and the principle of equality and embrace a transformative vision, named “fixing the knowledge”. They aim not so much at changing the numbers (increasing the presence of women in science and research, especially in STEM), as at transforming the very way in which research is done and knowledge is produced by introducing a gender perspective into scientific research (Schiebinger & Schraudner, 2011), although few examples have been cited to show the relevance of this last perspective (Picardi, 2019).

Overall, the decisive push to accelerate the adaptation of policies to combat gender inequalities and to promote the objectives of enhancing equity and diversity in academia has been able to rely on three main levers which have had a strong impact not just as declarations of principle but as triggers for strategies to be activated even very rapidly so that the universities involved can remain competitive and accredited in the international higher education market.

In the first place, the framework for action has been defined by the explicit recognition of the elimination of the gender gap in every sector of the labor market as a prescriptive orientation on the global political agenda, set out in the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all EU Member States in 2015, as Goal 5: “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”<sup>1</sup> Among the six main targets, universities were also directly involved for the specific purpose of “ensuring women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life”. Just two years later, in the same vein, gender equality was included in the European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed in 2017 at the Göteborg Summit, as point two among 20 principles guiding the EU towards a “more social, fair and inclusive economy and society”: “equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men must be ensured and fostered in all areas, including regarding participation in labour market, terms and conditions of employment and career progression. Women and men have the right to equal pay for work of equal value.”<sup>2</sup>

More recently, in 2021, the European Union agreed on its most significant reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, which took the form of a temporary recovery instrument referred to as “Next Generation EU”. In light of the evidence that the coronavirus pandemic disproportionately affected women and further worsened inequalities between women and men, with the risk of rolling back the progress towards gender equality made in recent decades, the incorporation of a gender equality perspective at the planning, implementation and reporting stages of all activities and measures aimed at economic and social recovery stringently characterized this programme. In particular, the corresponding Recovery and Resilience Facility should have been spent on selected reforms and investments in the areas of gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting in all Member States by the end of 2026.

Another prominent lever for inducing an alignment of higher education institutions by implementing inclusive policies to combat inequalities and promoting a less asymmetric environment with respect to gender — in terms of both institutional architecture and guaranteeing organizational well-being — consists of the dissemination of performance certification tools in the international reputational capital market for the achievement of excellence in research pro-

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1. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

2. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1606&langId=en>

duction and education provision. There has been a proliferation of prestigious awards, prizes, and certificates of best practices to be taken as benchmarks in international guidelines for the entire academic world, in the name of the obligation of accountability, quality assurance and periodic accreditation of public and private higher education organizations. Thus activated has been a process of tendential isomorphism in adaptation of their medium- and long-term strategic plans, where the gender-sensitivity element of the policy directions has also become essential (Nason & Sangiuliano, 2020). To cite only the main ones, we cannot fail to mention, for example, the EU HRS4R-Human Resources Strategy for Researchers<sup>3</sup> and the well-known scheme on gender equality named Athena SWAN Charter.<sup>4</sup> One of the most advanced schemes at the international level, this latter is currently in the process of further internationalisation because of its success especially in UK and Ireland, with new countries adopting it.

A third lever which has probably been even more effective in promoting the rapid introduction of policies explicitly aimed at reducing gender inequalities in academia is constituted by the European Commission's decision to make the adoption of a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) mandatory as an eligibility criterion for research funding in the framework of European Research Council (ERC) and Horizon Europe (HE) programs for universities and research institutions, starting from 2022. More specifically, during the 2020 edition of the European Research and Innovation Days, Jean Eric Paquet, the General Director for Research and Innovation of the European Commission, announced this important novelty: among the technical information for those who intended submit applications and requests for funding, there was "a new box to be ticked", in which research institutions were asked to declare that they already had a gender equality plan in place, which should be documented at the time of signing the Grant Agreement. This provision has imposed an urgent need on all universities not yet equipped with a GEP to prepare and adopt one as soon as possible.

On a substantial level, besides the formal obligation to adopt a GEP, of great interest are the binding thematic areas recommended by the European Commission as operational fields within which the policy actions set out by the universities in their document should be implemented. According to the European guidelines, five areas should be taken into account: 1) Work-life balance and organisational culture; 2) Gender balance in leadership and decision-making; 3) Gender equality in recruitment and career progression; 4) Integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content; 5) Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment. Particularly challenging in the definition of these objective areas is the underlying assumption adopted by the European Commission of the threefold importance to be given to the issue of gender equality, in view of its operational translation: a) gender equality has an ethical meaning, in terms of social justice, promotion of human rights and guarantee of a more equal and sustainable social structure, in terms of both distribution of leadership positions and participation in substantial citizenship processes in the public and private spheres; b) gender equality has a positive and beneficial economic impact, specifically in terms of comparative advantage and value production in the academic labour market, and even more so

3. The European Commission recognizes with the HRS4R Award the institutions which make progress in aligning their human resources policies to the 40 principles of the Charter & Code. See: <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/hrs4r>

4. "The Athena Swan Charter is a framework which is used across the globe to support and transform gender equality within higher education (HE) and research. Established in 2005 to encourage and recognize commitment to advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) employment, the Charter is now being used across the globe to address gender equality more broadly, and not just barriers to progression that affect women." See: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter>

in the context of growing international competitiveness between public and private Research Performing Organizations (RPOs), within a neoliberal frame, because the reduction of the gender gap in academic career paths is directly related to the valorisation of talents and the fight against the waste of human capital (Goldin, 2021; Ferrera, 2008); c) gender equality, and diversity in general, have an epistemic relevance, and the integration of this dimension in research and teaching could have a crucial role in critically addressing the assumption of neutrality of scientific knowledge, and in promoting the planning of innovative and effectively inclusive scientific institutions (Nielsen et al., 2018).

This perspective is in line with the evolution of analysis carried out in the field of gender studies in recent decades. This has also promoted the broadening of theoretical horizons to include the paradigms of equity and diversity, which are not strictly anchored to a binary model of gender asymmetries and are able to incorporate an intersectional vision of possible profiles of treatment asymmetry and of possible ways to valorise differences, even in higher education institutions.

#### 4 The Plot of the Symposium

Universities are large, complex and highly hierarchical organisations with deeply ingrained gendered values, norms and practices. Using the framework of gender as a social structure in order to capture the interplay between the cultural and the structural dimensions at the micro, meso and macro levels, this symposium hosts five essays on how gender inequalities are produced, reproduced and combatted in academic organisations located in different countries (Spain, Italy, Germany, Czech Republic, and USA), and with different experiences of external policy levers and internal networks and alliances that lead to different combinations of fixing numbers, knowledge or institutions.

By focusing on the meso level, the essay by Maria Bustelo (2023) recounts the experience of implementing a Gender Equality Plan at the Complutense University of Madrid within a Horizon2020 project, named SUPERA, just before the third policy lever was in place — that is, before the adoption of a GEP was made mandatory as an eligibility criterion for the award of European research funding. By illustrating the resistances encountered in the process of designing and implementing actions, and in particular the sudden change of the top leadership in favour of a gender-sensitive transformation, this essay shows that institutional change certainly requires governance support. However, there are various requisites for institutional change (Kalpazidou-Schmidt & Cacace, 2019; Declich, 2017): it has to be sustainable and synchronized with all the key structures already present within the organization; it has to be both top-down and bottom-up; it has to be inclusive; it has to be self-tailored and contextualised (Caprile et al., 2022). Possession of all these elements ensures real and durable change; yet, not having one of them is not the “end of the story.” Bustelo’s analysis, in fact, shows that actions undertaken within SUPERA project before the governance change have created spaces for reflection and agency that feed collective change. In other words, cultural change is certainly slow and lame without structural actions (such as those that fix numbers through gender quotas or through incentives to promotions, or such as those that institutionalise new gender bodies or officers). But it is crucial for building trust, alliances and capacity for institutional change.

Also the second essay, by Kristen Myers, Stephanie George, Allison Danell, and Andrew Morehead (2023), draws on an external policy lever (the ADVANCE programme in the USA to ensure gender equity in academia) and focuses on the meso level and on the importance of building alliances for collective action. However, while Bustelo considers the role of top-

management commitment, here the analysis concerns the role of men in interrupting sexist patterns of interactions in everyday lives. By recruiting and training white male faculty and administrators as Allies and Advocates for women and other marginalized academic staff, the ADVANCE programme seeks to make men more aware of their “power, privilege and authority” and the various ways in which they reproduce it. Although the numbers of men involved have been small, and cultural change is only one partial means to achieve overall deep gender equality, the essay by Myers and colleagues importantly contributes to the debate on men as crucial change agents. Gender inequalities are sustained in part by the notions of masculinity constructed by the cultural meanings associated with being a man, the practices which men adopt, and the collective and institutional organisation of men’s lives and relations. Making some men aware of dominant models of masculinity and gender relations and deconstructing them in homosocial contexts — that is, men with men — is shown to be important. It is also shown that “bringing men in” weakens the logic of “us” versus “them” by creating a “we” that facilitates broader alliances for change, for fixing knowledge and institutions beyond numbers (Flood & Howson, 2015; Anicha et al., 2015).

The third essay, by Marcela Linková, Gabriela Langhammerová, Zuzana Andreska, and Eva Oliva (2023), moves from the meso to the macro level to show how the third policy lever described above, i.e. the extra-national input of making GEPs mandatory, can function as an accelerator of change if married to an internal “community of change”. Making GEPs compulsory is crucial for framing gender disparities as a public issue that must be tackled. Yet the risk of only approving empty GEPs is lying in wait. Drawing on the experience of the Centre for Gender and Science at the Czech Academy of Sciences, which provides an assessment of gender inequalities and participatory processes to discuss them, and on the experience of student mobilisation against gender-based violence, Linkova et al. show that consolidated and widespread internal practices of reflection, participation and mobilisation weaken organizations’ “resistance” to gender equality (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012) and counter the risk of decoupling or window-dressing (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017).

If organisations are deeply gendered, and gender disparities are the result of multiple barriers, then multiple conditions and actions are necessary to overcome them. It is not easy to say when and how some elements intersect with others in a virtuous circle and with a virtuous domino effect, when instead change is blocked. The fourth essay, by Heike Kahlert (2023), adds an interesting insight on this difficult issue. By remaining at a macro level but focusing on the German case, Kahlert shows that external pressure to embed gender equality in prevalent discourses and practices does not translate into real change if it is not accompanied, as in the Czech case, by frequent and participated spaces of reflection and mobilisation to identify the lights and shadows of such framings. With the creation of the German Excellence initiative in 2005, science stakeholders reached consensus that addressing persistent gender inequalities was necessary to achieve strong, competitive German systems. However, the approach in Germany seems to be confined to fixing the numbers, not the knowledge and institutions. Reducing the “leaky pipeline”, the “glass door” and the “glass ceiling” by increasing the number of women at all career steps is not only fair but also efficient, since it prevents talent waste and stimulates innovation through diversity. Yet, if the neoliberal myth of individual merit and of the unconditional worker (always available, without the right to other spheres of life) is not tackled, there is the risk of hiding or reproducing not only the environment that has generated disparities to the detriment of women but also the “publish or perish logic” amid strong competitiveness and precariousness to the detriment of all (Murgia & Poggio, 2020; Gaiaschi, 2021; Jenkins, 2022).



“Fixing the institutions” and “fixing the knowledge” primarily means de-individualising causes and responses and requires a change in the cultures and practices of how science is embodied and produced, how excellence is defined, how recruitment and career progression are determined, and how universities distribute workloads. The last essay of this symposium, written by Maddalena Cannito, Manuela Naldini, and Arianna Santero (2023), addresses this issue from another perspective, i.e. a micro one. By drawing on interviews with women working in Italian universities, the authors collect narratives on enabling and inhibiting factors behind the gender vertical segregation in Italian academia. Interestingly, there emerges a gap between perceived causes and coping strategies. Causes are de-individualised, perceived as mainly rooted in the motherhood penalty, in the over-representation of women in “academic housework” without recognition of its value, in the construction of an ideal academic as unconditionally devoted to his/her work (without caring duties and rights, that is, work which is implicitly “masculine”). In face of such perceived cultural and institutional barriers that constrain their choices, women develop coping strategies such as postponing motherhood, practicing a more caring style of leadership, avoiding participation in promotion panels. Although these strategies could work to “fix” the institutions and the knowledge, disseminating alternative models on doing science and being a researcher based on cooperation rather than competition, on coexistence and intersectionality rather than trade-offs between various domains of life, in the interviews with the female respondents they were perceived as individual problems, as personal choices. The way in which actors account for their academic (un)succes is important: potential for change diminishes if one’s experiences are not framed as part of a broader, discriminatory pattern, preparing a collective demand (Calvert & Ramsey, 1996).

The symposium closes with two commentaries, by Barbara Risman (2023) and Jörg Müller (2023), who draw on their long experience with gender theories and with projects on gender and science to re-read its plot, emphasising how each essay adds insights on the complex multilevel and multidimensional puzzle of how to explain and transform gendered sciences and universities. As Risman argues, the gender structure is so complex that any project cannot possibly do it all at once, so that change will be slow and reiterative. But if we think about change in this complex way, we can identify when successful actions at one level begin to impact on other aspects as in a virtuous domino process. As Müller concludes, gender equality is not only “good” for women and for a diversity-driven excellence, it is also “good” for the society as a whole. By building trust and alliances and promoting some new cultures and structures within universities, an inclusive science and higher education system can contribute to the fight against illiberal tendencies and unjust societies.

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