Gender Change in Academia

Re-Mapping the Fields of Work, Knowledge, and Politics from a Gender Perspective
Reflecting on Practical Experience and a Case Study within the Field of Gender Equality Politics¹

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Abstract

The majority of European universities have undergone a management reform that emphasises economic efficiency. This could be expected to offer opportunities for implementing top-down measures to promote equal opportunities for women and men working in academia. Applying these measures in practice turns out, however, to be difficult, especially in a university context. In this paper, I draw on my practical experience as the Equal Opportunities Officer at the University of Zurich and on my research on setting up a Gender Studies Graduate School to derive four insights that should be taken into account when considering ways to promote equal opportunities in an academic environment: 1. Pay attention to the "power of veto" in academia; 2. Remember nothing will happen without bottom-up support; 3. Take into account the power of tacit knowledge; and 4. Discover how particular gender equality strategies are accepted in a given context or considered a matter of taboo in everyday gender knowledge, and then combine these findings with scientific gender knowledge.

1 Introduction

What is the best way to develop effective gender equality and equity² policies in academia? This is a question I have been concerned with since 1996 not only from a practical point of view as first the Equal Opportunities Officer and then the Director of the Office for Gender Equality (Abteilung Gleichstellung) at the University of Zurich (UZH), but also from a theoretical point of view. Here I

¹ I am grateful to Silvia Dingwall for helping me with the English version of this paper.
² Following Nancy Fraser (1997), I see Gender Equity as a long-term, comprehensive goal associated with the deconstruction of the notion of gender, whereas Gender Equality involves shorter-term action to ensure equal treatment of women and men in a given context. In this paper, I will mostly be referring to Gender Equality, without losing sight of the long-term goal of Gender Equity.
have taken up Knapp’s call to reflect on gender equity practice theoretically (cf. Knapp 2004) almost to the letter by writing a doctoral thesis in political science on an intervention I made as the Equal Opportunities Officer at UZH to encourage women to pursue careers in academia. I managed to complete my dissertation in autumn 2008. Writing it allowed me the “luxury” of having the distance to reflect on my work and acted as a counterbalance to the often hectic and demanding everyday as the person responsible for gender equality and equal opportunities at Zurich University.

In writing this paper I have been able to draw first on my practical experience as an Equal Opportunities Officer within the field of gender equality politics in Switzerland, in the specific context of the University of Zurich. I have also been able to draw on my reflections about my most important project, which I launched when I first started working in this area in 1996, namely, a Graduate School for Gender Studies in the humanities (Graduiertenkolleg). This was the first such Graduate School in Switzerland, with four universities participating. In this article I describe some of the theoretical insights (Insights 1-4) I derive from reflecting on my practical experiences and empirical findings. My argumentation always proceeds in two steps: first I describe some “on the job” experiences” and then I discuss some “outcomes of reflecting on these experiences”.

The main question I address is: What specific factors have to be considered for gender equality and equity policies to be successful or for “gender change” in academia to take place? I assume that the four insights I describe are independent of a particular strategy such as gender mainstreaming, diversity management or classical gender equality measures, and are relevant for gender change in academia. They help to explain why very different approaches to implementing equal opportunities tend to run up against similar problems. Thus, when introducing any new kind of gender equality strategy, these insights would be worth taking into account.

2 Gender Equality at the University of Zurich (UZH)

The University of Zurich went through a process of reform from 1996 to 2000, resulting in the drawing up of new University Rules and Regulations, which came into force in 1998. These are based on the principles of New Public Management (cf. de Boer/Enders/Schimank 2007), also known as the new managerialism. The new legal structure at UZH conforms to the Swiss Constitution and Equal Oppor-
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...utunities law and thus includes guidelines for promoting equality of women and men in practice. Since Switzerland is not a member of the EU, it is not required to have any strategies for gender mainstreaming, anti-discrimination or diversity management. That is why strategies of this kind do not have to be explicitly specified in the University’s regulations.

Nevertheless, UZH and the Office for Gender Equality has, during the past ten years, been able to benefit from the Swiss Federal Government’s equal opportunities programme (BpC: Bundesprogramm Chancengleichheit) to increase the proportion of female professors at Swiss universities. The aim was for 14% of professors to be women by 2006 (a goal that has been reached!) and 25% by 2011. The BpC programme provides financial support for incentives to employ female professors, for career support for junior female scientists through mentoring, for improving childcare opportunities and for other forms of support for those combining family and careers (cf. Spreyermann/Rothmayr 2009). At UZH we have been pursuing these strategies to make gender part of the mainstream and to promote gender equality with both top-down regulations and bottom-up projects and networking. We have always tried to combine gender equality activities with the main strategic priorities of UZH’s management.

Up until now the University of Zurich has managed to implement top-down (see www.gleichstellung.uzh.ch):

1. A Behavioural Code for Gender Policy, including the annual monitoring of gender equality, which could be used in the data analysis;
2. Regulations to provide protection against sexual harassment;
3. Infrastructure for childcare.

In addition, we have been able to set up a well-developed infrastructure for the Office for Gender Equality and an active academic Commission for Gender Equality at UZH (cf. Löther/Maurer 2008).

In the University’s organisational structure, these top-down equal opportunities measures are considered to be part of UZH’s management policy for which the Rector is responsible. Various gender equality projects in the different faculties and disciplines, for instance, mentoring programmes (www.mentoring.uzh.ch), have also been established in a more bottom-up way. The University of Zurich started its Office for Gender Equality in 1996, and I was elected as the person in charge of equal opportunities. One of my first activities was to initiate the so-called SOWI-Disslabor mit Gleichstellungsanspruch (Social Science Dissertation Lab with a focus on equal opportunities). The intervention was financed by the Swiss Federal

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4 On average, 14.5% of the full professors at Swiss universities in 2008 were women and 26% of the assistant professors.
Office for Gender Equality (Eidgenössisches Gleichstellungsbüro), the Swiss Science and Technology Council (Schweiz. Wissenschafts- und Technologierat) and UZH’s Continuing Education Commission (Weiterbildungskommission). It took on concrete shape as one of the first graduate schools in the social sciences in Switzerland funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF), entitled “Gender-knowledge-professionalisation” (Gender-Wissen-Professionalisierung). This project led to various activities and allowed me to gain useful experience, which we could then draw on in setting up the Office for Gender Equality. The project has also been useful for developing gender equality measures and institutionalising Gender Studies at UZH.

3 The Graduate School as an Explorative Case Study

My involvement with the SOWI-Disslabor and the Graduate School provided me with an opportunity to do an explorative case study\(^5\). Such a study enables a topic to be explored in context to generate insights and potential research questions. The approach I took is dynamic, involving participant observation, critical evaluation (including self-evaluation), and reflection, with the overall aim of improving practice. Here, the focus of the case study was on investigating the scope of the Graduate School as an instrument for implementing gender equality. Over a period of three years (1999-2002) I attended the Graduate School’s meetings, doing participant observation and an in-depth network analysis as part of the research for my doctorate. I reflected on my personal experience, the empirical observations and data analyses in the light of findings from research on higher education and from women’s and gender studies.

In this paper I have restricted my focus to the question: What specific factors have to be considered for gender mainstreaming strategies and diversity management to be successful in academia? Rather than addressing the question directly, I use the following procedure: first I discuss some aspects of my practical experience and empirical findings, i.e. I provide some kind of what we could call “inside” information, and then, in a second step, I draw some conclusions from reflecting on this experience and present them in the form of what I have called “insights”\(^6\).

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\(^5\) “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.” (Yin 1984: 23).

\(^6\) See footnote 3.
4 Insights from my practical experience and the Graduate School case study

Insight 1: Pay attention to the “power of veto” in academia
On the job experience:
Part of the aim of the SOWI-Disslabor was to encourage young researchers and promote equal opportunities, both separately and in combination, by carrying out a formative evaluation. For this Regula Leemann and I developed a “basic instrument for a formative evaluation” as the first research on the SOWI-Disslabor (Leemann/Maurer 2000). This formative evaluation was intended to test, assess and, of course, support the promotion of equal opportunities in the Graduate School, which was originally set up to encourage young researchers in the social sciences.

We believed that we had very convincing reasons for carrying out such an evaluation, so we were surprised when the Graduate School participants refused to allow us to do this research on the grounds that it was linked to new managerialism and was therefore non-scientific. This was why I then decided to do participant observation in the Graduate School, in combination with a network analysis.

Outcomes of reflecting on this experience:
In developing the formative evaluation, I drew on new educo-economic steering instruments in research politics. I had intended to feed the results into an evaluation of the Swiss National Science Foundation. But this approach failed because I found myself on the conflict line between the scientific community of academia and research politics, which is independent of gender issues and which cuts across the fields of work of gender equality departments and gender studies. The rationale for modern management concepts like gender mainstreaming and diversity management strategies can be considered close to that associated with new managerialism. Attempts of universities to introduce educo-economic professionalisation and regulations have also met with resistance, as these concepts are all too often seen as being remote from science and rather political. As a result, they tend to be rejected or undermined, which shows how academia possesses a kind of “right of veto” to resist undesirable socio-political pressure on the scientific community.

Once I had decided to carry out participant observation and a network analysis instead of the formative evaluation, my case study and my involvement in the Graduate School met with more acceptance. I think this acceptance developed because the revised form of investigation had come closer to the thinking of the Scientific Community and further away from politically driven research politics.
Insight 2: Remember nothing will happen without bottom-up support
On the job experience:
The creation of the Graduate School “Gender-knowledge-professionalisation” was possible because it received financial support both externally from the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Federal Equal Opportunities Office, and directly from the University of Zurich. Moreover, the idea of a Graduate School had fortunately met with approval from the University Board and from faculty members. What was crucial was that a group of professors were prepared to work with me, the head of the Office for Gender Equality, on submitting a project proposal to the Swiss National Science Foundation to start a Graduate School. That is, these professors were prepared to take bottom-up action with the support of the Office for Gender Equality.

Outcomes of reflecting on this experience:
It is seldom possible to implement new research policies, whether PhD-programmes or equal opportunity schemes, in universities top-down by decree. To be implemented, such policies need first to be accepted by the specialized scientific community, which constitutes itself through its powerful bodies of experts and assessors. Without their support from the bottom-up, neither gender mainstreaming nor diversity management measures will gain a foothold. Gender mainstreaming and diversity management rely on management processes that are organised top-down. If they are not accepted by the experts or faculty members, they can, like other measures proposed by university managers, be undermined by academics taking bottom-up action.

Insight 3: Take into account the power of tacit knowledge
On the job experience:
My interviews with scientists confirmed the importance of networking for scientists’ careers. During in-depth talks I discovered just how significant “personal scientific friendships” could be. Such friendships are key factors, serving as connection points for “conveying” achievements. If you have “personal scientific friendships”, you have found interesting people who consider you to be interesting too. They then recommend you further and draw attention to you inside the network. Scientific friendships serve, on the one hand, as “gateways” (entrance) to scientific networks and, on the other, help to turn performance of tasks into achievements. I can express this better in German:

Wissenschaftliche Freundschaften machen durch die Anerkennung der Leistung die Leistung erst zur Leistung.
This can be roughly translated as: “scientific friendships transform, through recognising a person’s achievement, their performance into a success”. Researchers pursuing academic careers need to realise just how important such key people are for them, and “find out” how to make important scientific friendships. Nobody will teach them this explicitly. It is something that is usually not discussed, but just done – those who succeed (not everybody does) somehow manage to make important contacts and build up a network.

**Outcomes of reflecting on this experience:**

Implicit knowledge (Osterloh/Wübker 1999: 64-72) is crucial and highly relevant to issues involving gender and diversity. It influences whether people are excluded or included on an informal basis outside the formal realm, and this makes it difficult to implement “classical” equal opportunities policies or gender mainstreaming or diversity management. Implicit knowledge is communicated via personal contact, face-to-face, in stimulating intellectual and personal discussions and encounters, during which academic norms (habitus in Bourdieu’s sense – Bourdieu 1992) are also conveyed.

It is in this large and diffuse twilight zone that many female junior researchers give up on academic careers and leave science. That is why classical equal opportunities policies rightly insist on more visibility in this area. But it seems to me that focussing only on introducing more formal rules in this realm would be a mistake because the power of informal and implicit knowledge has a positive side too. Even though the force of the informal can have other effects, in practice it is just such tacit assumptions that serve as a source of inspiration for creativity, innovation, scientific productivity and successful career-path steps. This is why I am convinced that we need not only formal measures to promote young female and male researchers (e.g. graduate schools and mentoring programmes). We also need to “play” productively with the force of the informal in promoting equal opportunities and take into account the power and influence of implicit knowledge.

**Insight 4: Discover how particular gender equality strategies are accepted in a given context or considered a matter of taboo in everyday gender knowledge, and then combine these findings with scientific gender knowledge**

**On the job experience:**

During participant observation in the Graduate School, I saw once again how it is one thing for people to recognize theoretically the role of the sexes in the University’s processes and structures, but quite another for them to speak – in the formal context of the Graduate School – about how gender plays a role in their own everyday lives and work. Despite participants’ considerable theoretical
knowledge, much remained (and still remains) in the dark about what goes on in practice in institutions like the Graduate School.

Even though the members of the Graduate School intensively explore inequalities between women and men theoretically, and discuss research results from studies of “doing” and “undoing” gender in science, they find it difficult to turn a spotlight on their own personal experiences in academia and in the Graduate School. My participant observation revealed that participants and professors avoid raising questions about differences between men’s and women’s academic careers and finding solutions through discussion. For example, when someone dropped out of the Graduate School for personal reasons, this was not topicalised. The in-depth network analysis also brought to light the different network strategies women and men use. Thus women, unlike men, tended to establish networks with “strong ties” and to build “nests”, with a view to keeping the option to have children open, regardless of whether they had children or not. Some important gender equality topics seemed to be taboo, such as unequal requirements for female and male college participants (strategies of difference) or attempts to find solutions to the problem of compatibility between studying/working and having children (strategies for universal childcare).

In this way the highly gender-conscious members of the Graduate School practised and reinforced the prevailing assumption at Swiss universities that universities are gender-neutral. This de-topicalisation of gender issues creates fruitful ground for gender traps to form and perform in everyday life, and should really be brought into focus if real change is to occur.

**Outcomes of reflecting on this experience:**
People’s everyday knowledge and routines are essential for life in society. They enable a person to take part actively in everyday life and are indispensable for an individual to be accepted in society as a competent member who is taken seriously. The same applies to everyday gender knowledge in the scientific community. From their everyday experience, both professors and young researchers know which kinds of gender knowledge they can promisingly put to use in a particular scientific context to extract the most benefit. They weigh up whether they want to bring their own positioning on gender knowledge into play or whether they would “disturb” the prevailing consensus if they did. What is essential here is whether they can rely on important allies in the organisation or not (cf. Döllig 2007). It may seem banal to say that competent scientific gender

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7 “Doing Gender” means that people’s gender identities are constantly being formed and reformed during human interaction. “Undoing Gender”, which refers to gender neutralisation processes, is also of interest for researchers as it involves identifying those structures that are relevant to gender and those that are not (cf. Heintz et al. 2004).
knowledge does not necessarily go hand in hand with standing up in public to expressly defend this knowledge. But the effects of this are not banal and they are certainly worth thinking about. For it is just in this blind spot that gender traps in the concrete everyday can persist, creating problematic areas which form the basis for including or excluding young researchers. These “blind spots” then get passed on and perpetuated without being noticed.

Professional equal opportunities work in science can be performed as an activity for gender experts, by building bridges between scientific gender knowledge and everyday, commonsense gender knowledge (Wetterer 2007). Dealing competently with gender then means analysing the established potential for “disturbance” or “acceptance” in a particular context and focussing more on particular gender equality promotion measures, taking into account the kind of alliances that are possible. Part of the task of promoting equal opportunities must involve knowing and informing people about what limits the scope of different equal opportunities strategies, and what these strategies can realistically expect to accomplish.

The core business of science is the production of knowledge. Here, different kinds of gender knowledge often collide in an unreflected and highly emotional way, affected by people’s individual sensitivities and experiences. This makes the promotion of equal opportunities in academia particularly difficult.

5 Conclusions

Insights 1 to 4 are important – independent of any discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of various equal opportunities strategies. They provide a background for evaluating the special features of gender mainstreaming and diversity management in a particular context. The University of Zurich is currently pursuing a strategy that combines a gender policy behavioural code with the systematic integration of gender issues in existing and new management instruments. This approach does not seem, at the moment, to be much more promising than other strategies, but it is certainly not less.

Reflecting theoretically on my practical experience within the field of gender equity politics has led me to draw the following conclusions for gender mainstreaming and diversity management, as well as for gender politics in general:

1) If gender mainstreaming and diversity management are perceived as connected with new managerialism, the tacit power of veto in academia (mainly through expert bodies and peer review systems) may threaten them. Gender mainstreaming (top-down) must be accompanied by bottom-up measures. Gender diversity management cannot focus exclusively on promoting a diversity of human resources in academia. It must consider how the informal mechanisms in academia work to include or exclude different kinds of diversity.
2) If a university wants to implement gender equality measures (= top-down), these must be supported by the faculties and professors (= bottom-up). Changing the system in academia means accepting the power of informal and implicit knowledge and, where possible, actively using it.

3) Gender equality policies in academia that seem taboo according to everyday gender knowledge have to be analysed and transformed. The vision of gender equity in the long term will "disturb" academia because its aim is radical: to change established structures and foster a culture where diversity is accepted.

If you try to pursue the strategies of gender mainstreaming and gender diversity management in universities, or attempt to implement traditional gender equality measures, you tend to confront the same forms of competition that are all too prevalent in academia. Thus the crucial question today is: how to involve decision-makers in supporting gender equality. We have still a long way to go before we can be certain that, in a university context, particular gender equality strategies will be successful, and even further to go to reach the goal of gender (al)ity, where equity entails equality.

References


For further information and downloads: www.gleichstellung.uzh.ch