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## Executive Letter

# Working for Gender Equality in the Neoliberal Academia: Between Theory and Practice



Trabalhando pela Igualdade de Gênero na Academia Neoliberal:  
Entre a Teoria e a Prática

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## ABSTRACT

In this executive letter, Barbara Poggio reports her experience as vice-rector of equality and diversity at the University of Trento (Italy), emphasizing the issue of gender asymmetries and the current challenges in the academic environment. The text results from a lecture at the Faculty of Business at the University of Lakehead (Canada) in June 2021. The letter's purpose is to draw attention to the implication that the predominantly male academic environment has important implications for working conditions and quality of life. In addition, it highlights the impact of the current academic transformation and the affirmation of the neoliberal agenda, emphasizing performativity, excellence, and competition, and the implication in terms of increasing precariousness.

**Keywords:** gender; science; diversity; work balance; neoliberalism.

## RESUMO

Nesta carta executiva, Barbara Poggio relata sua experiência como vice-reitora de igualdade e diversidade da Universidade de Trento (Itália), enfatizando a questão das assimetrias de gênero e os desafios atuais no meio acadêmico. O texto resulta de uma palestra na Faculdade de Negócios da University of Lakehead (Canadá) em junho de 2021. O objetivo da carta é chamar atenção para a implicação de que o ambiente acadêmico predominantemente masculino tem implicações importantes para as condições de trabalho e a qualidade de vida. Além disso, destaca o impacto da atual transformação acadêmica e a afirmação da agenda neoliberal, enfatizando a performatividade, a excelência e a competição, e as implicações em termos de crescente precariedade.

**Palavras-chave:** gênero; ciência; diversidade; equilíbrio no trabalho; neoliberalismo.

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## INTRODUCTION

This is the text of a guest speech given at the Faculty of Business Administration of Lakehead University, in Canada, on June 2021, in the context of an annual initiative where outstanding scholars in the field are invited to present their research work.

Here I tried to briefly retrace my research path and later to focus on the issue on which I worked more during recent years, both in terms of research and, more recently, in my academic role of vice-rector for equality and diversity at the University of Trento, namely the relationship between gender, science, and academia.

Since the beginning of my experience as a scholar in the field of sociology of work and organizations, I've always had interest in gender issues. In my research work, I adopted an interpretative frame based on gender as a practice, drawing inspiration from practice-based studies. From this perspective, gender is seen as a situated practice, an active accomplishment, something actualized through social interaction, produced and reproduced as a socio-material routine, and that positions persons in contexts of asymmetrical power relations. In this view, we look at gender as something we do, we perform, even also through a process of mutual positioning (Poggio, 2006). This has several implications from the point of view of the research methods and practices, as it requires the use of methodological approaches able to grasp the practice and symbolic dimension.

Usually, qualitative methodologies are more suitable for this purpose. In particular, I explored and deepened the narrative approach, which I used in several research projects (Poggio, 2004a). I found it very helpful in order to study how gender differences and asymmetries are constructed and represented in organizations (Poggio, 2018a).

Moreover, in my research work, I dedicated specific attention to situations of exceptionality, where the dominant gender order gets broken, starting from the awareness that in these contexts it is easier to bring to light meaning and practices usually taken for granted. This is the case of the entrance of women in male-dominated contexts, where their presence represents in some way a break, a challenge for the hegemonic gender order.

The first example I would like to mention is a research work conducted together with Silvia Gherardi focused on women and men working in male-dominated professions in private sector. We collected both male and female work stories, constructed around the 'entry of a woman' into an organization or a sector typically defined as male or in positions in which generally few

or no women were found. By using a narrative analysis approach, we studied how gender was 'being done' in these organizations and how gender culture was constructed by discourses and narratives. We also focused our attention on how storytelling can contribute to produce specific and different gender configurations in organizations (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007).

A second example of research realized in a field where women are usually underrepresented was an ethnographic study, realized with Silvia Gherardi and Attila Bruni, on entrepreneurship (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2005). The study was based on the ethnographic observation of five small enterprises, showing how discursive and narrative practices in business cultures constitute gender and entrepreneurship. Through the analysis of the ethnographic material (observation field notes and narrative interview texts), we showed how gender and entrepreneurship are enacted as situated practices and how gender is culturally constructed by the same practices that constitute the social phenomenon of entrepreneurship.

A further field where I studied women's presence in male-dominated sector was the political arena (Poggio, 2004b). In this case, I collected narratives of male and female politicians related to their political career paths and the discourses with which they accounted for female under-representation. The focus of analysis was on how the symbolic gender order was created and reproduced through practices, symbols, meaning, and sexed images. The research highlighted the gender positioning performed through the narratives and the tendency to cast women in the role of 'Other' with respect to the political system.

Coming to more recent years, I had the opportunity to participate in several research projects on gender and science. In particular from 2014, I coordinated together with Annalisa Murgia a project funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Program, GARCIA (Gendering the Academy and Research: combating Career Instability and Asymmetries)<sup>1</sup>, with a specific focus on early-career researchers and precariousness in academia both in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and SSH (social science and humanities) departments (Murgia & Poggio, 2018). Our attention was primarily focused on the impact of welfare gender regimes, the phenomenon of the leaky-pipeline, the experience of work-life balance, the management of resources and funds, and the processes of recruiting and evaluation inside a framework of excellence. I will come back to some of the contents of this project later on, as they are at the heart of my reflection.

Finally, I would like to refer briefly to another topic that crosses my research path, namely the specific attention to work-life balance practices. Here, my research

attention has been drawn to the gender subtext of the work-life balance policies (Bertolini & Poggio, 2022). Moreover, I was particularly interested in the experience of working fathers (for example regarding their use of parental leave, that in Italy is not very widespread, and therefore could be considered another kind of challenge to the symbolic order), and I studied as well the work-life experience of young people in precarious work conditions (Murgia & Poggio, 2013).

More recently, even the pandemic represented another exceptional situation for studying the experience of work-life balance of parents (and mainly mothers) working remotely by home, during the lockdown and later. Here too, a breakup allows bringing to light structures and processes usually taken for granted (Poggio, 2020).

In the last years, my research work has been intertwined with a charge of executive position in my university, as on 2015 I was appointed as vice-rector for equality and diversity. This assignment forced me to put into practice my skills and knowledge in the field of gender and diversity in organizations, and in scientific context in particular.

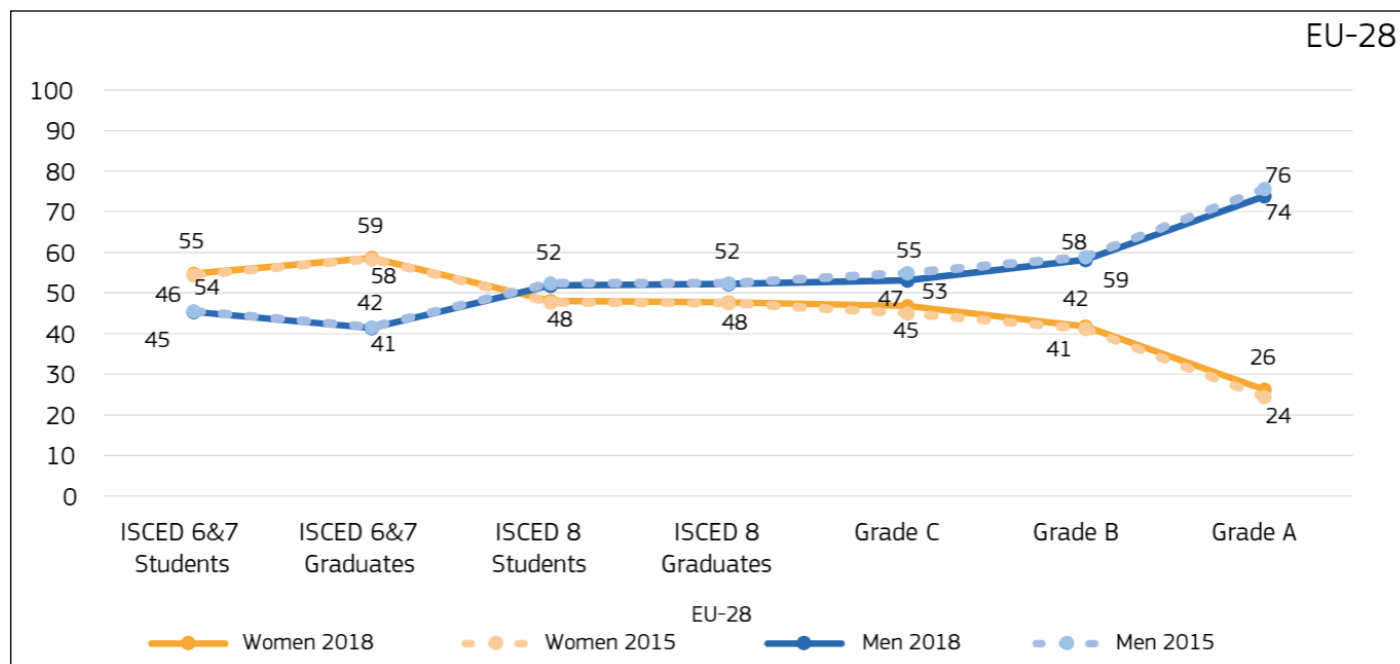
Even if, during these years, the time for research has been more limited, I tried to keep doing research on gender and scientific careers, managing to take advantage of this experience. Currently I am involved in a national project on gender asymmetries in academic careers in

Italy<sup>2</sup>. This is the reason why, among the several issues I've dealt with over time, I decided to focus this contribution mainly on the relationship between gender and science, and in particular between gender and academia.

## GENDER, SCIENCE, AND ACADEMIA

First of all, I would like to briefly outline the main issue, namely the relationship between gender and science, and gender in academia in particular. In recent decades, there have been significant changes in women's participation in educational paths. In fact, we observed a process of progressive feminization of the student population, up to higher education. The presence of women in STEM sectors has grown, particularly in the field of life sciences, and their presence has also increased in scientific careers and leadership positions.

However, data show that, despite some progress, gender asymmetries in scientific contexts are persisting and it is not easy to overcome them (and, above all, it is now clear that they do not disappear 'naturally'). Women are overrepresented at every level of the educational path, but they are still being more concentrated in the social sciences and humanities than in the STEM sectors. On the whole, higher educational organizations remain male-dominated, and women seem to be still underrepresented in senior positions in scientific institutions.

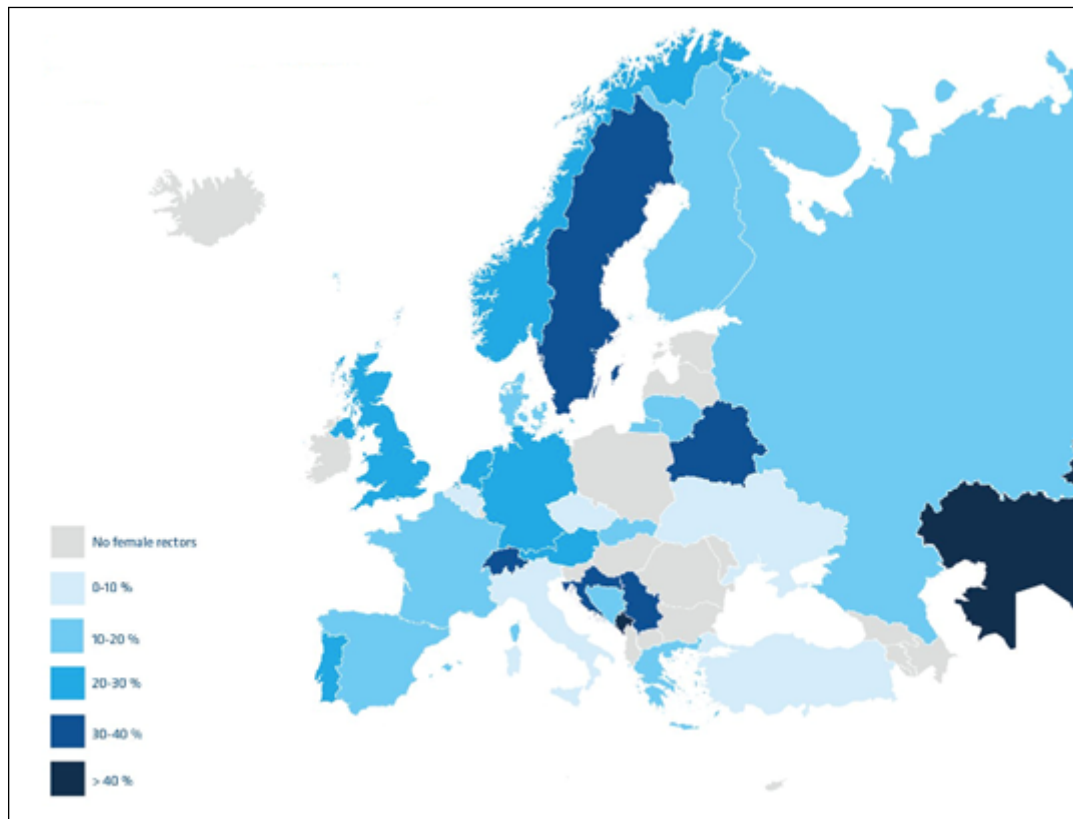


**Figure 1.** Proportion (%) of men and women in a typical academic career, students and academic staff, EU-28, 2015-2018.

Source: European Commission (2021). *She figures 2021: Gender in research and innovation*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from <https://op.europa.eu/en/web/eu-law-and-publications/publication-detail/-/publication/67d5a207-4da1-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1>

In Figure 1, we can see how in Europe the so-called ‘scissor trend’ persists, whereby distances widen over the course of life. This figure shows the proportion of men and women at the different steps of career and you can see how women are the majority in the first stages of the

career, to student until the grade A, but their presence is progressively reduced as the level of the position increases. Moreover, in total, men represent 76% of full professors (grade A level), with the proportion of all men who are at this level being over twice that of women.



**Figure 2.** Representation of female rectors in the EUA membership in 2020.

Source: European University Association (2021, March 5). Despite gains, women still highly outnumbered by men as university leaders. Retrieved from <https://eua.eu/news/645:despite-gains,-women-still-highly-outnumbered-by-men-as-university-leaders.html>

Instead, in Figure 2 we can see the distribution by sex of rectors in the European University Association (EUA) and we can note the existence of great differences between countries, but also a general situation of asymmetries. In Europe, men make up 85% of the heads of universities. Women are more than 40% in only few countries. In Italy, their presence is under 10%.

It is also possible to observe the presence of gender asymmetries in grant allocation, where men have a better success rate in the majority of EU countries (19 out of 28) (European Commission, 2021). In the most prestigious EU research program, the European Research Council (ERC), only 22% of applications have been submitted by women and only 23% won by them (European Research Council, 2021). Women are also underrepresented among the authors of articles published on scientific journals: they publish less, are less present among the first or last authors

of the articles. And the pandemic seems to have expanded the gap (Squazzoni et al., 2021).

Why gender asymmetries are so widespread and persistent in academia, maybe more than in other sectors? Going briefly through the debate and the explanations that have been provided over time, we can see how the interpretations used to account for these asymmetries refer to a number of factors, ranging from innate characteristics to the organizational practices of academic institutions.

The most traditional explanations of gender gap in academia propose essentialist interpretations, emphasizing the role of inborn cognitive sex differences. They can be identified, for instance, in differing mathematical and spatial performances rather than verbal and written abilities, which are attributed to biological factors such as brain structure and functions, or to hormonal composition



or mental development. Then, several studies have been conducted in this perspective, to measure the 'natural' differences in performances between girls and boys, and to explain differing educational choices on the basis of them.

However, more recent evidences showed a progressive decrease in this gap, which in some EU countries (such as Sweden, Norway, and Iceland) has disappeared. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that integrated educational systems and more equal societies are correlated with smaller, or even nonexistent, gaps in scientific performance (Guiso, Monte, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2009).

This brings us to a second theoretical approach, mainly based on cross-national studies and on the use of several kinds of indexes of gender equality, where the importance of macro-structural factors is stressed. For example, the type of education system, the labor market, the care and welfare regimes, and the development of gender equality.

Several studies show that, even if gender asymmetries in scientific careers are common in various countries, women and men do not face the same structural and normative opportunities and constraints in every national context (Musselin, 2005; Van Langen, Bosker, & Dekkers, 2006). Indeed, the internal and external structure of the labor market, the position of the academic occupation in the socioeconomic hierarchy, and the support provided by the welfare system can generate different experiences of academic work (Le Feuvre, 2015).

A third body of research focuses on cultural determinants in socialization and gender identity construction processes. According to this perspective, a dichotomous, stereotypical view of gender differences underlies the divergence of career pathways. And it assigns different tasks and competences to women and men in society, where women are associated with reproduction and men with production, women with social skills and men with technical ones (Miller, Eagly, & Linn, 2015).

Research shows how various socialization agents (such as family, peers, teachers, and the mass media) cooperate in the construction of gender identity and influence the educational paths of girls and boys through stereotyped expectations, pressures, on vocational choices, and different evaluation criteria that reinforce gender asymmetries (Xie & Shauman, 2003).

Finally, a fourth important strand of research — where my work and my scientific contribution is mainly positioned — includes studies focused on organizational practices, and therefore on how scientific and academic organizations behave, with specific regard to the gender and power dynamics that characterize them. These works show how in academic organizations power operates in

a broad manner; it is not limited to direct control, but is exercised through norms, rules, everyday practices, discipline, discourses, symbols, and so on. When we adopt a gendered lens to study academic institutions, starting from the observation that women find it more difficult than men to secure positions of power (Benschop & Brouns, 2003), it can be useful to analyze the norms that govern formal recruitment and promotion procedures, observing power relations and gatekeeping practices, and analyzing formal and informal networks (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001).

Many of these studies have shown that scientific careers reflect the traditional model of the male worker without domestic or familial obligations and totally committed to his work as the norm (Dean & Fleckenstein, 2007). And in this frame, the attention to other spheres, such as the family, is seen as a limitation on total dedication to a scientific career. They show how the prevalent career model in scientific contexts is based on a 'long-hours culture' (Currie, Harris, & Thiele, 2000), constant availability (Ward, 2000), and the linearity of the career pathway (with no deviations or interruptions, that are seen as indicative of a lack of commitment).

This has negative implications for anyone — both men and women — who wants to combine professional and family commitments, but it penalizes more severely women — for the dominant culture, especially in countries as Italy —, as they are expected to give priority to caregiving. The difficulties associated with reconciling scientific work and caregiving duties have been studied by a large body of literature, where scholars noted that in a significant number of situations, the dilemma is resolved by abandoning the career or by temporarily suspending it or, alternatively, by deciding not to have a family, as many women, unlike men, see it as incompatible with a career (Blackwell & Glover, 2008). This is a problem that seems to have been exacerbated by the pandemic of coronavirus.

Other studies shed light on the presence of mechanisms deeply embedded in the cultures of scientific and academic organizations, which are reproduced through homosocial practices, such as the informal male-dominated networks that perform a gatekeeping role by means of gendered mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). They also identify biases in formal assessment procedures, such as peer-review, recruitment, and evaluation, which give rise to unequal access to research funding or academic positions (Addis, 2010). Another studied issue is the allocation of time to the different kinds of academic tasks performed by men and women (research tasks versus teaching and administrative tasks, a sort of production/reproduction division in academia, so that some scholars — also in our GARCIA Project — talk about 'academic housework'),

and this can have different consequences for the career advancement (Heijstra, Steinhorsdóttir, & Einarsdóttir, 2017).

Last but not least, some studies stress the presence of practices of sexual harassment or bullying that can generate phenomena of isolation and discouragement, or even lead to dropout (Bird, 2011; De Welde & Stepnick, 2014; Martin, 1994).

These various interpretations furnish a composite picture of the problem and highlight its multi-faceted nature. We can consider all these phenomena in light of more general changes that went through the academic world. Changes that are producing new configurations that affect the various areas considered and that, in general, have important implications for gender balances within scientific domains.

## THE IMPACT OF THE NEOLIBERAL MODEL

I am referring in particular to the impact of the neoliberal model. Practices emerging in science production and the evaluation of scientific performance, as well as the new working arrangements in academia related to the affirmation of this model, are not irrelevant from the point of view of gender asymmetries.

Of course, we have to recognize that the affirmation of 'academic capitalism' has introduced norms and values that disrupted some controversial practices of the classic liberal (and patriarchal) universities, as its elitist professorial authority relations, the 'old boy' networks, and the internal discretion standard, problematic also from a gender perspective.

At the same time, the emphasis of the neoliberal agenda on meritocracy would seem promising from the perspective of more effective equal opportunities. However, we can also look at these transformations with a more critical glance (Ferree & Zippel, 2015). I would start from the fact that in recent years, in many Western countries, we have seen growing cuts to public funding of higher education and a process of marketization, favoring cost-efficiency, accountability, and performance in academia (Krüger, Parellada, Samoilovich, & Sursock, 2018). These policies made research and scientific work increasingly rationalized and efficiency-driven in response to the urgent need to transfer new knowledge from academia to society, and to promote economic growth and competitiveness in global markets (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013).

According to some scholars, academic organizations increasingly became 'greedy institutions' (Coser, 1974; Hochschild, 1989) with regard to the level of total loyalty, high work productivity, and emotional engagement that

they expect of their members and the redefinition of the boundaries between personal and family life and work time (Currie et al., 2000; Grant, Kennelly, & Ward, 2000).

Moreover, the neoliberal turn has changed the model of university governance, with a growing emphasis on managerialism and entrepreneurialism at the expense of the independence and collegiality of the teaching staff. This has also significantly affected the nature and content of academic work, in particular by severing the relationship between teaching and research (Barnett, 2003).

On the one hand, universities require increasing workloads, greater flexibility and availability, and accelerated rhythms and time pressure, while on the other, instability is on the increase, salaries are falling, and career prospects and professional development are shrinking for the younger academic generations (Court & Kinman, 2008; Hey, 2001).

## Gender implications

All these processes have remarkable gender implications. Some scholars observed that the total commitment required in the neoliberal frame is closely associated with the male breadwinner model that excludes management of caregiving responsibilities. The previous views of science as an Agora, where the social dimension of scholarship is crucial, have been nowadays replaced by an Olympian model, where the dominant profile of a researcher is that of "a young man in solitude high on top of the Olympus, distanced from all everyday practices" (Benschop & Brouns, 2003, p. 207).

At the same time, the proliferation of sessional, part-time, and contract employment seems to affect women more dramatically, as they are more likely to be hired into such positions (Dever et al., 2008), something that we had the opportunity to observe also in our recent research projects.

Moreover, scholars observe how managerialism is imbued with masculine discourses and practices (Deem, 1998). As recognition and evaluation of merit gradually become more focused on productivity, performance, and entrepreneurship, other dimensions of academic work important in the past, such as teaching responsibilities, become more feminized, and progressively lose prestige (Thornton, 2014).

In addition, the growing emphasis (and economic investment) on STEM disciplines, considered as engines of innovation and economic growth, has relevant consequences from a gender perspective, because they are differently targeted.

In this debate, particular attention has been devoted to the concepts of meritocratic ideal and excellence, which play a crucial role in the neoliberal frame. Excellence is typically presented as a standard objective against which individual applications or CVs can be assessed in evaluative contexts such as recruitment, promotion, or research funding allocations. From a gender equality perspective, we could identify some positive opportunities in the affirmation of the meritocratic ideal; however, several studies — as ours — highlight how, when put in practice, the idea of excellence presents several limits and criticalities, mainly because its criteria are often opaque and gender biased (Murgia & Poggio, 2018; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012).

## POLICIES TO COUNTER GENDER ASYMMETRIES IN ACADEMIA

After outlining the problem and the main interpretative frames, I would like now to draw your attention to the policies aimed to counter gender asymmetries in academia, which usually reflect the implicit interpretations of the phenomenon.

In recent decades, several policies aimed to overcome gender asymmetries in academic institutions have been formulated and implemented in the European universities and around the world (Poggio, 2018b).

At first, actions and programs were mainly based on an interpretative approach focused on women's weaknesses and specific needs, and consequently targeted on helping women gain access to and pursue a scientific career through two different intervention methods. On the one hand, they encouraged and promoted women's participation in scientific education through interventions to render the choice of scientific disciplines more appealing to them or to assist them in their academic pathways, thereby combating the risk of dropout (for example, by implementing mentoring schemes). On the other hand, they supported women's careers by increasing their scientific productivity, introducing quota targets, promoting access to funding, incentivizing attention to gender equality in the preparation of projects, providing financial incentives to rebalance the gender presence in departments, enhancing female role models, facilitating networking among women, and providing support for maternity and maternal leave.

Over time, however, it was realized that these programs were not sufficient to close the gender gap in scientific careers, especially with regard to women in positions of responsibility, and that the focus should be changed: we don't have to fix women, but organizations. This awareness led the main European institutions to stress the need to foster structural changes in educational

institutions by employing a systemic and sustainable approach. In 2007, taking lead from the advance program in US, an EU Framework Program was launched to promote greater gender equality by supporting universities and research institutes that undertook to implement structural changes. By 'structural change,' the European Commission meant actions intended to urge scientific institutions "to address gender management issues at work towards a better representation and retention of women at all levels of their scientific careers" (European Commission, 2012, p. 10).

In this frame, several universities received funds from the European Commission in order to promote equal opportunities for men and women in scientific and research organizations, with a special emphasis on management changes and structural transformations by implementing tailored gender equality plans. The effort requested to the universities was that of formulating strategies and policies more directly tailored to the specific requirements and characteristics of the organizations concerned, starting from a situated analysis of the context, and then developing and implementing actions focused on organizational structures and practices rather than on women.

Among the main objectives of these interventions, usually we find the promotion of gender awareness at individual and organizational level, and the implementation of changes in the organizational settings. In particular, we could mention:

- the implementation of actions aimed to make decision-making transparent, like gender budgeting, a process focused on the analysis and monitoring of how financial and time resources are distributed in the scientific organizations, assuming that this allocation reflects gender asymmetries in power;
- the creation of networks within universities in order to design and activate change in a gender-sensitive perspective;
- the integration of a gender perspective into research and curricula.

In the case of the GARCIA project, we worked on all these aspects, but we dedicated a specific attention to the gender implication of the current changes on the experience of early-career researchers, trying to limit implications in terms of instability or reduction of protection. Moreover, we tried to problematize recruiting and evaluation practices, and the use of excellence criteria (Murgia & Poggio, 2018).

In this general context, there are some risks to avoid, in particular that of entrusting equality strategies to procedures implemented from the top down, to use mainly the rhetoric of competition and success as a primary



motivator of organizational effort, and to base the actions only on quantified performance metrics.

## MY EXPERIENCE AS VICE-RECTOR FOR EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TRENTO

The experience developed through study and research in this field has been really important for my work as vice-rector at the University of Trento, even if working for change in your own organization is never a simple challenge.

When I was appointed, it was the first time that this topic assumed a strategic role in my university (together with university's usually main assets as research, teaching, and internationalization). I was fully aware of the risk that this nomination could represent only a nominal sign of engagement on diversity and inclusion issues and not a real commitment to change. Then, I made it clear that I was interested in the position only if I had the opportunity to make a real change, and the condition was accepted.

At the beginning, unlike the other vice-rectors, I had no team, little money, and little information about the context. Therefore, first of all, I set up a network, which included other people in charge of responsibility (as other vice-rectors, bodies of warranty, but also identifying delegates in every department) in order to create a critical mass of people engaged on this issue. Contextually, I worked to create a dedicated staff.

Then, I started a participatory process of collection of needs and proposals, starting from which a gender equality plan was built (not only focused on gender, but on other diversity issues as well, in an intersectional perspective). At the same time, an accurate process of data collection and analysis (quantitative and qualitative) was activated in order to clearly define critical issues and objectives.

On the basis of all the collected data and information, and taking into account the complexity of the phenomenon, we put in place several actions, focused on:

- . systemic gender monitoring and budgeting;
- . a huge program of work-life balance policies targeted both to women and men (a kindergarten, summerlabs for children, rooms to breastfeed, counseling for parents...);
- . economic incentives for female recruitment, in particular on calls from abroad (thanks to these policies, the number of women full professor has now doubled);

- . policies to counter discrimination, harassment, and bullying (mainly through promotional campaign and training);
- . initiatives aimed to raise awareness on gender issues (from gender violence to gendered safety);
- . guidelines for a language respectful of differences, but also for gender equality in public events (when possible);
- . actions aimed to foster gender balance in STEM and SSH disciplines;
- . initiatives for integrating gender-sensitive approach into research and teaching.

Moreover, an extensive work has been conducted with the local community, starting from gender-sensitive guidance in primary and secondary schools, to counseling to organizations about gender equality and work-life balance, and to training courses for the political candidates, with a specific attention to gender equality issues.

We also tried to adopt an intersectional approach, by considering the interaction between different dimension of vulnerability, as class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and so on.

After six years, many things have changed and the University of Trento, which at the start of the mandate presented some relevant criticalities from the point of view of gender equality, has taken significant steps, both in terms of awareness and of structural changes, becoming a benchmark in Italy. Even if there are still many improvement areas, the most important result is that the cultural frame changed and we were able to raise awareness about the issue and to partially transform organizational practices.

On 2021, I have been reconfirmed in my position from the new rector and we are now working at the new Equality Plan for the next years. Our main objectives are the consolidation of what has been achieved until now and a more extensive work in terms of inclusion and intersectionality. We are also considering the critical consequences of the pandemic, so as to avoid the risks of accentuating inequalities.

To conclude, I am very happy I have had this opportunity to share my research and service experience, as I really hope that it can be of inspiration for other academic organizations, as I have learned that a more egalitarian university is not only a place where people work better, but also a better context to do science.

## NOTES

1. GARCIA website: <https://garciaproject.eu> retrieved on January 7, 2022.
2. GEA — Gendering Academy website: <https://www.pringea.it> retrieved on January 7, 2022.

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