WORKING PAPER

Gender In/Equality in Men Wor(l)d's: Perceptions on the Construction of a Gender Equal and Inclusive Portuguese University

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Abstract: Based in a H2020 funded project and on theoretical contributions of the feminist institutional perspective, this paper provides a comparative view between men and women on the identified values, practices and behaviours needed to the institutionalisation and promotion of gender equal and inclusive higher education institutions (HEI). This theoretical perspective grounds our comparative analysis, supported by 22 interviews with institutional key-actors: 15 men and 7 women. Being our sample constituted by both male and female interviewees of a Portuguese university can be seen as an innovative approach due to two complementary reasons. First, Portuguese HEI clearly exemplify women representation in academia, considering their significant presence and rapid growth in HEI: as the system expanded and democratised, it also became more feminised, although women are still underrepresented in top-management and leading positions, contributing to perpetuate the vertical segregation phenomenon. Second, gender issues on (Portuguese) HEI are usually approached by women, with men having a peripheral role. Towards this background, we are interested in understanding how both sexes envisage gender equality in their working place (the academia) and even to depict how men perceive their role in the construction of gender-balanced and inclusive HEI. Data analysis reveals not only differences but also similarities between men and women perceptions of the values, practices and behaviours needed to the institutionalisation and promotion of a gender equal and inclusive institution. There is a common trend to consider universities as gender neutral and to attribute the responsibility for changes to the political, social and/or cultural systems, which results from a common symbolic realm of meaning-making common to women and men. However, it is more common to find women manifesting a more positive perspective to affirmative actions at the university. Thus, one can say that women situation can justify their greater assumption of an agency perspective on institutional change.

Keywords: gender; (in)equality; higher education; universities; Portugal; feminist institutional perspective

1. Introduction – Gender Equality in Higher Education

Gender is a constitutive element of social relations based on the socially constructed and culturally variable differences between women and men. It is a structural element not only at the subjective/interpersonal level, since it is the base for humans to identify themselves and organize their relations with each other, but also at the level of social structures and institutions, since it is one of the basis for the construction of symbolic and meaning-making. Gender is present in the processes, practices, images, ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life, including within institutions (O'Connor et al. 2015). Within institutions, gender operates in two different ways: nominally and substantively. The nominal dimension is a consequence of the historical domination of positions of power by men (Witz and Savage 1992). However, there is also a substantive dimension resulting from the symbolism or practices of the gender order, since gender bias permeate all the arrangements assumed as impartial or gender neutral (Goetz 2007). This means that even if more women reach power positions more *often* now than in the past, there is no guarantee that the institution operates differently since institutions are gendered. By other words, the constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the daily life or logic of the institution (Kenney 1996).

A strong relationship between masculinity and power has also been identified in higher education (HE) and science (Acker 1994; Hearn 1999; Hearn 2002; Morley 1994), emerging as an explanation for the under-representation of women in senior positions (Bagilhole 2007; Deem 1999; Husu 2001; O'Connor et al 2019).

The persistence of the same gender structure over time in these institutions evidence the need of having policies and processes able to promote gender equality and gender balance.

"Gender equality is achieved when individuals in any particular situation are treated equally, independent of their sex or gender. Gender balance is a property of groups, so that it is achieved when there are roughly equal numbers of men and women in that group" (Rice 2012: 4). Different theoretical perspectives have been developed to try to understand gender relations within institutions. This paper enlightens to the more recent developments of the feminist institutionalism perspective.

2. The Feminist Institutionalism Perspective

Since the 1980s, a broad field of theories dominated by new institutionalism has been developed to improve our understanding of institutions. Until now four different perspectives – historical, rational, sociological and discursive (Hall and Taylor 1996; March and Olsen 1984; Rhodes et al. 2006; Schmidt 2008; Thelen 1999; Diogo, Carvalho, Amaral 2015). Despite the variations in these four types of institutionalism, none has been able to include gender in the analysis. Since the last decade, a number of scholars have been trying to overcome this critique, framing what has been known as 'feminist institutionalism'. The main target of this new theoretical approach is to include gender in the institutional analysis to improve our understanding of the institutional design, processes and change (Krook and Mackay 2011; Mackay and Waylen 2009).

Feminist institutionalist scholarship established that gender is a 'feature of institutions within which individuals are "nested" (Mackay et al. 2010), operating not only at the individual level but also at the institutional level. Connell (1987) had already sustained that each institution has a particular 'gender regime', which operates through formal and informal norms with gendered implications (Kenney 1996; White, Carvalho and Riordan 2011). Even the gender-blindness included in the organisational and management practices is part of this gender regime (Benschop and Verloo 2006). Universities have a gender regime of their own (Eveline 2004), which comprehends also a complex relation between formal and informal norms, processes and structures. A relevant number of studies reveal how gender is embedded in formal processes. Evidences as men's overrepresentation in the academy, and especially in top decision-making bodies, gender-pay gap and 'motherhood penalty' when it comes to promotions, have been revealed at the level of personnel policies (Mason & Goulden 2004; Monroe et al. 2008). Largely, this results from the fact that these processes are embedded in and by gender stereotypes that discriminate (against) women's access, retention and promotion (Steinpreis et al. 1999), framed by an institution's cultural and normative framework sustained in meritocratic and excellence principles and values. The difficulties women face to reach the top, known as glass ceiling, are also associated with informal processes. Examples of these are the symbolic representation of the scientist as male (Bates et al. 2012); the existence of male informal networks within academia (Kantola 2006); the sex prejudice underpinning non-blind peer-review processes, leading to an overestimation of men's achievement and underestimation of women's scientific productivity and competence (Wenneràs and Wold 1997).

The genderedness of universities is also present in the 'logic of appropriateness' that determines the kind of tasks individuals are expected to perform (Chappell 2006). The traditional association of women with feminine roles as care takers lead them to 'naturally' assume positions associated with 'institutional housekeeping' and 'relational work' (Valian 2004). The same gender social norms attribute less visibility and less power to these roles in the division of labour (Valian 2004). Actually, even when women reach top positions, the service dimension of these roles is emphasised, through a 'gender devaluation' process (Monroe et al. 2008: 219). Even so, it is important to refer that women are not a homogenous group within academia and other elements are also in place (Carvalho and Machado-Taylor 2017; Carvalho and Diogo 2018; Carvalho 2018). Furthermore, even the epistemological dimension of universities is gendered. Androcentric knowledge (Fotaki 2013) is reproduced by a continuous preference of the disciplinary 'founders'-men (Tolleson-Rinehart and Carroll 2006) and feminist scholars are regarded negatively within academia (Barataa et al. 2005), with researchers, in general, being unfamiliar with the epistemological, theoretical and empirical challenges gender studies face (Dahlerup 2010). European policies for science and innovation acknowledge the gender dimension of higher education institutions (HEI) and have been trying to encourage not only research in the field but also the implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEP) in knowledge producing institutions. A great challenge to transform gender norms is the intersection between the gender regime and other structures of power within each specific institution working together to reproduce the existent gender logics of appropriateness (Chappell and Waylen 2013).

This paper tries to analyse the 'gender regime' of a Portuguese university by identifying the positions in the structure, through statistical analysis, and the dominant norms by developing content analysis of discourses gathered through semi-structured interviews.

3. Methodology and data

This research uses a mixed approach of data collection and analysis' methods. A quantitative analysis on the composition of the professional categories of teaching and research careers, using data disaggregated by sex, was developed. Then, the authors analysed the gender composition of all management positions in the organic units and in the coordination of research units. The study is complemented by a qualitative analysis, based on the content analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2018 and 2019 to seven women and fifteen men with decision-making positions in HEI. Of these interviewees, there were 3 women directors of organic units and 4 women coordinators of research units; 10 male directors of organic units and 5 male coordinators of research units. The following codification is used to signal Male (M) or Female (F) interviewees.

The data presented in this study have two purposes: to identify possible gender imbalance focuses in the institution under study and to provide the contextual framework for the more detailed analysis that will follow –possible through a more qualitative approach.

According to this University Human Resources' services, in 2019, 957 professors and 409 researchers worked at the institution. Of these, there are 562 male professors (58,73%) and 395 female professors (41,27%); and 243 female researchers (59,41%) and 166 male researchers (40,59%). The percentage of men is higher than the percentage of women among teachers (about 59% against 41%), but among researchers, the situation is reversed and women are the majority (about 59% against 49%). When the gender composition of the various professional categories in the teaching career is analysed, the number of women is clearly lower in all categories. Moreover, it is only in the lowest categories of the hierarchy that the representation of women exceeds 40%.

Regarding the research career, women clearly have a numerical advantage over men in the lower occupational categories (over 60%) and in the higher categories (where they represent 60% of the workforce). In the intermediate categories (PI), women represent only 40% of researchers in this category. Additionally, however, looking at the research domain, one sees a significant imbalance in the percentage of women and men in the coordination of research projects: 58.82% of projects are coordinated by men and only 39.63% are coordinated by women (it was not possible to identify by whom 1.55% of the projects are coordinated; the information regarding the projects for the period of 2016-2019 was accounted by the Human Resources' Services of the HEI). Within the HEI, the Coordination positions of the Research Units are mostly held by men.

4. Analysis and discussion of results

As previously analysed in the theoretical framework, inequalities between women and men in the labour market and in HEI can be studied from different theoretical perspectives.

The interviews' analysis reveals that the dominant perception of the directors of the various organic units and of the coordinators of the Research Units is that gender inequality does not exist (at least, not in the institutions they work in). As such, a discourse –common to both men and women –prevails, which tends to classify gender inequality as a non-existent phenomenon (a non-problem) and therefore, it is a question that does not *deserve* concern and/or attention in the organisation:

It is not a concern we have here and I dare to say that we do not feel it. (M1)
I do not see discrimination in our institution. (F2)

This generalised perception ends up interfering with the reasons pointing to justify the gender imbalances that the numbers evidence and which indicate the relative advantage of men over women in relation to top positions and positions of power in the institutions, as the previous citations showed. Although the quantitative data clearly evidences the phenomena of vertical segregation, there is an absence of gender awareness in the institution, as the institution is seen as gender-neutral (Acker 1994; Carvalho & Machado-Taylor 2017) suggests.

In order to stimulate this gender awareness, we confronted interviewees with numerical data on the distribution by sex of the human resources allocated to each unit, and which evidenced numerical asymmetries. On this,

some interviewees refer to the historical roots of the phenomenon, but one of the most mentioned arguments was that the relative advantage of men in senior positions and/or higher occupational categories reflects only a circumstantial situation that will naturally fade away over time.

> *We are talking about an unequal distribution in some categories (…) but it is not a result of any discrimination, it rather results from circumstantial situations. We work in an area where historically more men have access to graduations than women do, so it is only natural that when one is progressing in the career, more men than women emerge.* (M2)

The idea that inequalities between women and men tend to blur over the years is not new and it is in line with the neoclassical economic theory (Dahlerup 2010). The differences between women and men in employment result, firstly, from human capital differentials –in terms of education, skills or labour force participation –which will naturally disappear. In this context, advances in education are seen as an effective means of reducing inequalities between women and men in the labour market and it is argued that achieving gender balance to access the labour market, equal wages and/or eventually top positions, is only a matter of time. However, it should be noted that although women's participation in HE and faculty positions has increased since the 1980s, the phenomenon of vertical segregation still persists.

Women's choices, preferences and interests are also arguments often mobilised to explain inequalities. On the one hand, women's (and also men's) options while still being students –mainly related to the choice of programme and/or field of study –are considered relevant as they later constrain human resources available, both in teaching and research, contributing to unbalancing gender representation in the different areas and occupational categories within HEIs:

> *The area itself (…) usually attracts many more men than women.* (M1)

> *I think it's related with the area. (…) the previous years were essentially girls.* (F1)

In this context, the importance of cultural, as well as social and economic factors in women's choices and outcomes should be stressed. On this, Guiso et al. (2008) (through a study related to the results of the PISA tests) concluded that gender differences in math's tests in favour of males are fundamentally a question of culture. As countries make progress in gender equality, these differences will gradually disappear. Despite the progress made by women in academic terms in recent decades, these progresses do not seem to be reflected as expected in the labour market and (Jordão, 2018). Regarding the gender imbalance in decision-making positions, Rice (2012: 12) emphasises that "if we just wait, we won't see the benefits of gender balance in top leadership teams during our lifetimes".

On the other hand, issues related to maternity also tend to be viewed by most of the interviewees as an individual choice of women that (may) end up to have a negative impact on their professional life:

> *I've made options that I think many women don't want to take. I stayed at home for 9 months when my children were little. (…) Not only during pregnancy, but also the period after they were born. Can we do everything? No, we can't do everything and we can't do everything well, but it was the choice I made, and I'd do the same choice again. In my curriculum, I have a period of six years in which, from the scientific viewpoint, I produced very little.* (F2)

In general, interviewed men also tend to acknowledge the professional costs of motherhood as a problem for women:

> *I have no doubt that a woman has a disadvantage if she becomes a mother –and in this, we are in a situation that tends to blur as one progresses in the career, but in short careers that may be significant. A woman who has a longer maternity leave faces this risk (…) if the career is long this dilutes throughout time (…) but in 5 years this can be an handicap, right? Although society today also provides paternity leaves, who stays most of the time at home is the mother, not the father.* (M2)

The dominant discourse of men and women emphasises the penalty of motherhood as an individual problem of women whose resolution will lie not with the institution, but with the society and/or family, through legislation, cultural change and/or family re-organisation to ensure greater involvement of men in family life and parental responsibilities. In line with the literature (cf. Leathwood & Read 2009), also in this University, professional activity is considered to be central by most academics and researchers. However, in relation to the reconciliation between work and family life, some differences emerge between the discourse of men and women. When asked about how they reconcile professional and family life, men tend to not identify significant constraints or difficulties in this domain and their ideas highlight a clear prioritization of the professional sphere over the personal/family one.

> *There are always difficulties. These activities, at least some of them, require periods of absence abroad, which also contributes to some remoteness. But I think the family handles that quite well. (…) It may be, I'd say, another element of pressure, but l wouldn't consider that a significant problem.* (M7)

Most men assume the traditional *bread winner* posture, giving priority to work, while assuming that there is someone taking care of the (his) family. In this context, they tend to completely disregard the HEI in this domain, arguing that the role of the institution is limited. As it is assumed as an individual issue (or *problem*), actions that can be implemented in the organization to ameliorate this scenario, are rarely identified. When they arise, the emphasis of these actions is placed on the professional sphere and essentially related to organisational procedures, e.g. performance and human resource management systems.

> *The responsibility does not falls upon the institution itself, these are individual choices, I'd say. If I want to say 'no' to a project, the institution will not penalize me due to that. (M7)*

For women, family support is often referred as an important factor for the (success) in articulating family with professional responsibilities. Additionally, and curiously, it seems easier for them than for men to identify concrete actions that facilitate the reconciliation of family with work. Women proposed measures related with the provision of educational services for children and their transport, food (takeaway) or clothing (laundry). This apparent difference between the discourse of men and women seems to suggest that it is mainly from the female perspective that tensions are more evident and that the institution can play (and, in some situations, already plays and/or has played) a relevant, differentiating and facilitating role in the reconciliation between professional and personal life.

> *I usually say that it is only possible when there is a very strong family support. It is only with the husband I have, that I can I do what I do. (…) the family scheme we have organized over time has allowed it to be possible. Also the travelling, so many hours, only with the support of the family and my husband is it possible. For those who don't have this backup is surely too hard (…). I never reflected on this question [when asked about specific measures the institution could provide to help in the work-life balance], I don't have any small children, if I had, I'd probably answer differently. Having sports activities here can help, as well as protocols with educational services.* (F1)

It should be noted that, regarding to management and/or coordination positions, the small number of applications submitted by women tends to be identified as one of the factors explaining gender asymmetries (by male interviewees). When asked about the reasons why women do not apply, men tend to identify several reasons. It is argued, in particular, that they do not apply for the same reasons as men, that they have no interest, or they do not want those responsibilities. It is also reported that it may be due to the high workload that the position requires, the negative impact that it may have on the scientific career or simply because women exclude themselves to apply to these positions.

> *The problem is that there are very few people applying (…) and for me, it is not about being a man or a woman, is about people, or because they know that the previous director is going to apply (…) or that they don't want to have work. (…) For the past 20 years, the directors of this department have been men only because no women have applied, applications are open, right?* (M3).

Equal opportunities are often used to attest the absence of discrimination and, in general, the opportunities are considered to be the same for all people who want to apply. This hegemonic discourse seems to ignore all the structural and cultural barriers that women continue to face, including in the academia (Leathwood & Read 2009). In fact, the debate on the reasons why women are not in senior positions is not recent and there are three possible explanations for the low presence of women in these positions: 1) Women are not capable of doing the work that is required at the top; 2) Women do not have the desire to be at the top and 3) There are structural impediments hampering women from reaching the top (Rice 2012). Discarding, the first possibility (for obvious reasons), it should be mentioned that, in relation to the second option, some studies have shown that women do not lack ambition to get to the top", what happens is that "women's approach to the workplace in general and to leadership in particular, can have the superficial appearance of a lack of ambition, when judged against a male corporate culture" (Rice 2012: 9). It is necessary to be aware that structural barriers represent a problem within institutions, which will not be automatically solved over time (Rice 2012).

Familiar responsibilities and/or difficulties in the articulation between professional and family life (even if hypothetical) are not mentioned by men as hindering or limiting the access to top positions –neither for themselves or for their female colleagues. In this domain, differences are notorious when comparing both male and female perspectives, with the constraints arising from family responsibilities emerging, in a more or less explicit manner, as a condition easily perceived and/or felt by women. Some men, however, recognize maternity/motherhood as having, in some way, implications for career progression, as aforementioned. When the ambition is to increase the number of women in senior positions, this is also an issue that tends to be overlooked.

The principle of equality and non-discrimination tends to be regarded by both men and women as tacitly incorporated into the organisation as it is ensured not only through national legislation but also through the internal rules, statutes/public notice that 'support' applications, which are seen (or supposed to) as transparent and fair. In general, it is considered that the meritocratic system, based on excellence, quality and skills, prevails and it should prevail in the institution. In this context, the resistance to the hypothetical introduction of gender issues into the established system, especially in the form of positive action measures, becomes evident (both from men and women):

> *Our criterion has to be quality, it can't be if it's male if it's female (…) And I don't see that in this framework we put anything like quotas, because what we want is quality and if we put a quota it's almost as if we were having a public notice competition with a 'picture'.* (M3)

Being seen as a gender-neutral organisation, gender inequalities become less visible because they become less obvious and explicit –but horizontal and vertical segregation remain and women continue detached from the organisation's higher positions. In parallel, organisational practices and procedures triggered by a set of global neoliberal policies can be particularly detrimental to women: the increase of long hours of work, international mobility, competitiveness and/or precarious careers (Hearn 2017; Carvalho and Machado 2011). In fact, the challenges of structural barriers and gender biases are multiple and involve, first and foremost, deconstructing our idea of a meritocratic system. It is based on the premise of a fair, objective and gender-neutral assessment, when, effectively, it is known that "[m]en and women are judged by different criteria, that they are expected to perform differently, and that they are rewarded differently for the same accomplishments" (Rice 2012: 10). Some of the existing biases are very clear. The work of Wennerås and Wold (1997) demonstrates how, in a certain area of academia women had to be 2.5 times as productive as men to be judged as equal to the men. Another very illustrative example of gender biases is related to the issue of parenthood. Several studies show that their impact on the professional field is substantially different for women and men: not only do women tend to be penalised, as we have already highlighted, but men tend to benefit (Correll, Benard & Paik 2007; Fuegen, Biernat, Haines & Deaux 2004). The academy is not 'immune' to this 'polarisation'. In Spain, for example, in identical circumstances, a man with children is four times more likely to become a full professor than is a woman with children (Anghell, Rica & Dolado 2011). It should also be noted that – despite the fact that men have a numerical advantage over women at all higher hierarchical levels, in teaching, research (although the university of this study is an exception) and management, there is a concern with the situation of men, showcasing, even if in funny and/or provocative tone, that a hypothetical situation of disadvantage for men can be more alarming than the current situation of women. Curiously, this concern is common to both men and women.

5. At the present: progresses in course and future perspectives

Progress on gender equality seems to be currently underway within the institution. Although still in minority, there has very recently been a significant increase in the number of women in management positions in Organic Units (4 women: the highest number ever) and in the coordination of Research Units (6 women coordinating Research Units, also the highest number ever). At the same time, more than half of the research workforce is female. Based on the interviews conducted, it is possible to identify a set of factors, external and internal, which help explain these recent improvements:

i) Greater visibility and awareness of the theme gender equality (motivated by EU discourses and by informal conversations on the subject within the Institution); ii) Commitment of the institution/rectoral team to gender equality; iii) A growing number of female candidates for management/coordination positions; iv) The sensitivity of some men and women to diversity and gender equality (and who have made efforts to spread the message either through their example, or either by constituting working teams, or by promoting the visibility of women in areas that were traditionally associated to men, or by encouraging female applications for decision-making positions); v) The institution's participation in an H2020 action-research project that aims to implement a GEP in HEI and that includes as Transfer Agents two members of the Rector's team (the Rector and a Vice-rector).

The formal implementation of actions or measures aimed at improving the situation of women in HEI and/or enhancing their access to decision-making positions is generally not perceived as necessity within the institution, although some advantages of a higher gender equality are recognised. The creation of working networks, the incentive/encouragement of female applications, the role models, the invitation of women to certain positions and/or the awareness of the gender equality theme are, however, some of the suggestions that seem to have a greater consensus and a greater acceptance by the interviewees.

6. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the situation of a Portuguese HEI, some paradoxes between the dominant discourse and the structure of the institution in terms of gender equality were uncovered. The interviews allowed us to identify the general perception of men and women with decision-making positions in an HEI and to systematize the main reasons given by them to justify the existence of gender inequality in the institution –evidenced by imbalances between the number of men and women in the various professional categories and decision-making positions, especially evident as highest the positions are. The dominant perception, both from men and women, is that gender inequality is not a problem in HEI and, besides historical and circumstantial reasons, women's preferences, related to the area of study and maternity, tend to emerge as factors explaining such numerical imbalances. Additionally, the articulation between work and professional life emerges as a source of tension mainly for women. In turn, the lack of applications from women to top positions is one of the reasons that men tend to point out as a justification for the asymmetries existing in decision-making positions. Interviewees' perceptions on the fact that HEI is gender-neutral were briefly discussed, mobilising aspects related to gender biases, meritocratic systems and structural barriers for debate.

Responsibility for changes fall down to the political, social and/or cultural systems, which results from a common symbolic realm of meaning-making common to women and men. The concern with an hypothetical inversion of the sense of inequality often appears in the discourse of men and women; also the occasional recourse to examples of women who have been and/or are in positions of power tends to be used to legitimise the idea that inequality does not exist. The article ends with a brief reflective synthesis highlighting that gender equality rhetoric alone is not enough to combat and/or eliminate inequality between women and men.

It should be, however, remembered that both the quantitative and qualitative analysis pertain only to one Portuguese (public) HEI and more research is needed to assess whether these data mirror other HEIs reality nationally and internationally s well as the extent and actions to promote gender equality can be incorporated by the academia as whole.

Acknowledgments

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