

TESEV GENDER EQUALITY DEBATES

Women in Academia and Gender Equality

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This policy brief is translated from its original (Turkish) by Melis Kurtuluş

A recent study published by TESEV shows that science and research is one of the areas with the lowest female participation in high level decision making.¹ Among all 201 universities in Turkey, only 9% of the rectors, 10% of the vice rectors and 21% of the deans are women; and again, in Turkey, countrywide, 31% of the professors are women and 69% are men.² This numerical inequality, as well as being a sign for a lot of other problems, is just the visible or easier-to-see tip of the iceberg. To talk about the obstacles women face in academia and the gender inequality in a wider sense, one must examine all written and non-written rules, practices and norms in every area of academic life, and establishing equality requires transformation in structural, institutional and individual levels. In this report, I will be talking about some of the obstacles women face climbing the career steps in academia and participating in high level decision making and the steps that have been taken and can be taken to ensure gender equality in academic life.

Glass ceilings and leaking pipelines

The most extensive answer to the question "What can be the obstacles women face participating in high-level decision making?" directs us to the structural problems. Most of the reasons that limit women's participation in high level decision making in any organization also apply to academia. Patriarchal norms and practices, approaches that reduce the capabilities, roles and the responsibilities of women and men to some biological justification shape the relationships between societies, institutions and individuals. In academic life, women sometimes encounter glass ceilings after rising to a certain point,

sometimes they leak from a part of the pipeline and continue their career without rising. As academists and scientists are not detached from social norms, non-academic responsibilities and roles, the academic institutions also, are not genderless structures that have been established independent of sexist stereotypes, prejudices and the practices over the years. In short, the structures, processes and resistance mechanisms that cause gender inequality and the maintenance and reproduction of it or prevent an opposite transformation can also negatively affect women's access to career opportunities.

Meritocracy and gender

Today, as in many other institutional structures all over the world, overt or covert discrimination based on gender is observed also in the field of science. Specifically, in universities, gender based discrimination and non-egalitarian practices can be hidden behind the objectivity of merit based academic achievement criteria on paper. For this reason, it is important to examine the concept of scientific excellence itself, to question how the achievement criterias are defined and by whom, to identify the academic concession structures and the gate keepers of science and try to transform them.

For example, in the stages of appointment, promotion and taking advantage of career development opportunities in universities, women can face direct or indirect obstacles, which can be both visible and invisible. According to the principle of merit-based academic progress, your academic progress should be directly proportional to the quality and the quantity of your scientific production and your contribution to educational and research activities. For this very reason, that this is contradictory to the merit principle, positive discrimination, one of the temporary structural measures taken to represent women in the decision making committees or to promote them to higher positions can be resisted, regardless of men and women, in a lot of places in the world. However, researches that examine universities from a gender perspective show that career evaluation processes can actually be far away

from objectivity. It is important to note that some of the experiences, needs and responsibilities of women which vary according to their social environments may not be taken into consideration in their career evaluations. Gendered stereotypes can influence many evaluation mechanisms against women, such as references received from supervisors, students course evaluations and the preferences of grant making organizations.

From structural problems to individual concerns

The structural and systematic problems I mentioned above also trigger and shape personal drawbacks, fears and concerns. Therefore, we need to think twice when we hear the sentences like, women "don't want to run for senior positions" or "women themselves don't want to be managers" and similar ones. For example, the imposter syndrome, translated into Turkish as fraud syndrome, and described as a psychological phenomenon that success cannot be internalized and the person believes that she/he earned her/his position by chance, affects women on daily basis, which is worth considering. Concerns about the fact that processes are daunting, especially the excess of responsibilities outside work such as care, compared to men, may cause women not to nominate themselves for executive positions and choose not to take advantage of some opportunities that require international travel. To see that some of the individual concerns and drawbacks stem from structural and systematic problems requires taking institutional precautions to eliminate them and establishing incentive and support mechanisms. These include, highlighting women role models and achievements, setting up mentoring programs to promote cooperation and mutual learning among women, programs to encourage early career women researchers to apply for grants and other similar formal or informal incentives, support and solidarity mechanisms.

Gender perspective in science and research

What would change if there are more women among the gate keepers of academia? What does integrating

a gender perspective to research mean? To have more women in decision-making in the university as well as in research funding organizations will result in including, first of all, their reflection of voices, needs, experiences, talents and knowledge in the decisions that are being taken, and a sense of management in academic culture, in which women's knowledge and awareness from their own concrete experiences are taken into consideration. In addition to that, gender mainstreaming in education and research means including a gender perspective in all stages of the research process, from allocation of grants to the structuring of the research teams and management mechanisms, from the determination of the research's methodology to the analysis of its impacts.³ To raise awareness in this direction, activities and trainings can be organized, people who have gender equality awareness can be included in selective committees and incentive mechanisms can be put into practice. For example, the European Commission grant committees, when deciding between two research project proposals with the same score, are encouraging researchers to consider gender equality by selecting the application which aims also to analyze this topic and which has a gender balance in the research team and the management. There is no doubt that not every woman executive can have gender equality awareness and the presence of men with such awareness in committees can also be very transformative. In short, including gender perspective in the management mechanisms at universities and other scientific and research institutions will pave the way for a long term transformation in academic culture.

Institutional transformation for gender equality

Universities can take important steps to promote gender equality and there are some significant efforts in this direction, both worldwide and in Turkey. The steps of institutional transformation efforts to ensure gender equality can be summarized as follows: collecting data, identifying the current situation and needs, then planning the actions according to the needs of the institution, organizing training and

awareness activities that will strengthen institutional capacity, to develop and implement an action plan for achieving numerical and other objectives by taking support from university administrations and making them commit to it, and to activate monitoring and evaluation processes, in order to ensure sustainability of the actions. It is very important to collect qualitative and quantitative data on gender equality and to conduct monitoring and evaluation systematically, in academia. It should also be added that, not only the universities but also in research funding and producing institutions should evaluate themselves and take steps to transform. We can say that supra-institutional or inter-institutional incentive mechanisms that support and reward universities and research institutions that carry out such studies are also functional to motivate universities. Some of the short and long term objectives of the transformation processes in universities are to ensure the participation of women in decision making mechanisms, to eliminate direct or indirect discrimination, based on gender equality, in the processes of appointment, promotion and career development, to include the perspective of gender equality in education and research activities, and in general, to remove all the prejudices and discriminatory practices from every stage of the academic life. While doing all that, it is important to see, gender equality is not only a matter of women, especially only a group of particular women, we should be considering the inequalities in between women and the differentiating experiences of LGBTIQ+'s as well. Gender equality mechanisms established in universities will be inclusive and sustainable as long as inequality is handled in different and cross-cutting dimensions.

Work-life balance mechanisms

Two of the reasons that effect the career developments of women and men in different ways in academic life as well as in many areas of business life are the unequal sharing of domestic labor and care responsibilities against women and the lack of mechanisms that would balance work and private life. For this reason, women may refrain from leadership positions. Transferring care responsibilities to

other women becomes an important condition of career development. This is why it is necessary to promote awareness on care responsibility belonging equally to men and women on both personal and societal levels, and public and institutional care services need to be expanded and made accessible. We need to talk about not only the structural transformations to provide services as kindergartens, nursing homes or adjustment of working hours, but also a norm-level transformation that will ensure that neither work nor care activities should be gender-specific. When we talk about work life balance, we should be able to talk about really devoting time to our private lives from work and not overlook the inequalities in between women themselves and the needs and experiences that born from different life styles.

Resistance, resilience and cooperation

Awareness of gender equality in academia will not blossom overnight. It is necessary to work continuously both at institutional level, by transforming practices and regulations and on individual level, by transforming perceptions and internalizing gender equality. Awareness raising activities and trainings should not be done with the thought “we did it once and it’s done”, they should be repeated continuously and also the needs and context analyses should be repeated as well, since gender equality actions can frequently and systematically encounter resistance. It is very important to identify the resistance mechanisms and with that awareness, develop strategies to sustain the efforts, to train experts to work in this field and to institutionalize the gains. Van den Brink and Benschop (2012) compare gender inequality to a seven-headed dragon who is indomitable and have more than one face.⁴ There are people who have been working to defeat this dragon, for years. Making this work visible and learning from good examples is one of the most important steps in strengthening cooperation and solidarity. Gender and women’s studies programs, departments, research centers and the people who established these departments and working with them in the universities in Turkey have been encouraging the production of academic

knowledge, training experts and providing important steps towards gender equality at institutional level, for years. Education and awareness activities are organized in universities, units against sexual harassment and violence are established and inter-university cooperation activities are conducted and also institutional gender equality action plans are being implemented by participating in EU-sponsored multinational consortiums or by individual efforts.⁵ In short, there are important studies being carried out by the universities in our country in order to ensure gender equality, to work and to get education in campuses free from discrimination, violence and harassment. I think it is the most important condition to make all of these studies visible, to support, to strengthen the existing collaborations and to create new ones, to ensure gender equality and sustainability of the efforts carried out in this direction.

¹Turkey's Economic and Social Studies Foundation, 2019. Women's Participation in Senior Decision-making. Access link: http://tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ust.duzey_.karar_.almada.kadin_.katilimi.TR_.ENG_.pdf

²Turkey's Economic and Social Studies Foundation, 2019. Women's Participation in Senior Decision-making. Access link: http://tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ust.duzey_.karar_.almada.kadin_.katilimi.TR_.ENG_.pdf

³Stanford University's "gendered innovations" web page can be a reference for the best examples of the researches on gender analysis in different kinds of sciences. Access link: <https://genderedinnovations.stanford.edu/>

⁴Van den Brink, Marieke and Yvonne Benschop (2012). "Slaying the Seven-Headed Dragon: The Quest for Gender Change in Academia," Gender, Work and Organization 19(1): 71-92.

⁵For the examples and evaluations of institutional transformation studies of gender equality in universities, please see: Göker, Zeynep Gülru ve Aslı Polatdemir (2019). The Social Gender Equality Mechanisms in Turkey's Higher Education: A Basic Assessment Study. SU Gender ve Research Worldwide Istanbul, Istanbul. Access link: https://sugender.sabanciuniv.edu/sites/sugender.sabanciuniv.edu/files/univ_toplumsal_cinsiyet_raporu_30nisan.pdf



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TESEV would like to thank the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung for their support for this publication.