

9th Conference Gender Equality in Higher Education, Paris, 12, 13, 14, sept. 2016

Gendered management and academic leadership in Spanish universities

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Abstract

Higher education is reorganizing according to the logic of the marketplace. The modernization of universities has been running parallel to an increased competition, precarization and commodification of the academic work. And entrenched new management practices together with the global austerity policies, have had consequences in the production and reproduction of gender inequalities. Paradoxically, there has been a significant rise in the number of women in top decision making positions at Spanish universities. This seems a rather positive evolvement, yet analysis based on conventional and merely descriptive indicators may be hindering a not so egalitarian reality.

Morley (2010) has pointed out that “[w]omen disappear when power, resources and influence increase” (p.387). So we decided to investigate what kind of senior management positions are women accessing? Are they appointed to leadership roles which acknowledge them as agents of change? Or, by contrast, they are blurring in less attractive new managerial positions? To do so, we analyzed the gender composition of vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors of forty-four Spanish universities. Regarding to this, it is important to note the uniqueness of our research. Firstly, because in order to analyze the gendered distribution of the pro vice chancellors we have classified them in several categories-; and second, because after establishing categories, according to associated functions, we have tested the classification with a sample of pro vice chancellors.

In view of the functional classification of the pro vice-chancellors, the results show an uneven gender distribution across top decision making areas. Specifically, and sustaining previous international research (Morley, 2005; Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010), our analysis shows that women in top decision making are often involved in positions related to community engagement and care of students (graduates, postgraduates and quality), while their presence dramatically reduces in strategic areas (those especially related to innovation, technologies, research) and some management functions (mainly finances and infrastructures). In addition, the influence of the type of university on the gendered distribution of functions and positions in management and academic leadership has been explored.

Conclusion

HE reforms inspired by NPM have changed the way universities perform its traditional functions and gave rise to new management tasks in charge of organizational development and institutional change guided by market values. Working and managing in the restructured university, while increasing the workload of teaching, research and administration, demands new skills and abilities (softer and transformative leadership, and abilities associated to caring duties such as presentism and responsabilization. Much has been written about gendered management styles, however Wajcman (1998)

argues that leadership style has to do with organization's gendered regime structures rather than with people's characteristics. The fact that women are identified with a more participating, soft and integrative style, would be therefore related to the positions and functions they usually held (often impregnated of domesticity). But even if management style is a question of power rather than a gender issue, new management positions seem to endorse a gendered division of labor (Morley, 2003, 2005; Probert 2005; Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010), which results in an unequal distribution of workloads.

Our results show that while academic women in senior management are in charge of intensive functions in terms of pastoral care, their male peers are more likely in charge of post-graduate concerns, organizing international conferences and engage in consulting and research. Academic women senior managers in Spain are also more likely to be clustered in activities that require extensive administrative work, emotional labour (attending students and the academic community), a high degree of organizational housekeeping (such as quality management roles) and unpopular glass cliffs management areas. Mainly due to the idiosyncrasy of the Spanish university system, our data also reveals contrasting results in relation to previous investigation. Most functions related to academic housekeeping are carried out women, like Social Responsibility and University Community, while others such as Quality Assurance should be labelled as relatively neutral. Functions like the restructuring of Faculties and Centres and Equality, considered as glass cliffs by the literature, are highly feminized but others, Organization and Campus for instance, are also considered more neutral. Additionally, certain functions which have been traditionally considered male dominated by previous international research, such as Research, Innovation, Technologies, Infrastructures, relations with Government and business, budgeting and academic governance are effectively masculinized in the Spanish case. However, categories like managing faculty and staff which previous studies consider academic housework and glass cliff, are rather male dominated, as far as a pillar of the old, and still alive, Spanish academic governance system.

The research reveals how, in the context of current NPM reforms, an increasing representation of academic women within senior management and leadership positions across Spanish public universities follows a distinct gendered distribution. Blackmore and Sachs (2007) stated that new gendered divides emerge between increasingly feminized management and increasingly masculinised research. Women managers, positioned as emotional laborers and institutional housewives, clean up the debris from increasingly toxic and restructured workplaces. The international tendency which finds male academics clustered in the most strategic and rewarding areas, and academic women blurring in less attractive new managerial positions, is confirmed in Spain. Yet, even if the social roles attributed to women and men seem to go beyond the private sphere and spread out the academic arena, certain specificities in the gendered distribution of Spanish HE top management system can be identified. The aim of this paper was to stimulate discussion on the nature of academic women participation in senior management and leadership. Considering the mentioned above, even if the proportion of women in top decision making positions increases, it cannot be inferred that the process of feminization will change gender relations in universities, as far as

women are mostly in charge of caring and housekeeping traditional and new functions, and still are excluded of strategic areas.

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