

## Revisiting struggles over gender inequalities: an account of three academics

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A newcomer entering the professional context of academia as a doctoral student or an early career researcher may not necessarily realise that navigating power imbalances and inequalities based on our sociologically ascribed categories – such as gender, sexuality and age – is going to be a key task. At least for two of us, reflecting back on the first few years of our academic socialisation, a strong memory emerges of a certain naivety about what it would take to start feeling that we belong in this environment, and in particular about how gender-related issues manifest in different aspects of the profession. For the other, there was a sense of resigned acceptance that there were inequalities but a lack of strategy to tackle them. This naivety is understandable in a profession that pursues knowledge and is predominantly marked by a focus on scholarly ideas and pedagogy, as well as having a reputation for collegiality and an interest in the social good. Why one should feel disempowered to challenge inequalities in such a community is, however, more difficult to explain. This is particularly striking since there is an extensive literature on gender discrimination impacting the academic workplace, teaching and recognition for research (e.g. Cohen and Duberley, 2017; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012); something that chimes with our own exploration of the experiences of researcher collaborations (Jeanes, Loacker and Śliwa, 2018). In practice, sooner or later, everyone experiences or witnesses these inequalities but we do not seem to do much about it, even if we write about it.

Where workplace relationships are discriminatory and have an adverse effect on academic women's workplace experiences and career progression (e.g. Weisshaar, 2017), it is reasonable to assume that they occur within institutional structures which do not adequately address gender inequalities and as such perpetuate them. Within such structures, it might be difficult for the affected academic to realise and 'find words' for gender-based discrimination and marginalisation and to develop a 'response repertoire' to them. Such discrimination and marginalisation are not limited to the more widely discussed forms, for example sexual harassment, which the #Time'sUp and #MeToo movements seek to call out and put an end to. They also have less visible aspects, the extent of which one becomes increasingly aware of over time.

Between us we have experienced multiple forms of unequal treatment, sometimes perceived as rather subtle, such as having a sense of not being treated respectfully by colleagues, or being perceived by students as having less academic gravitas. Other examples include a feeling that one needs to work harder than men academics to convince others of one's professional competence and credibility, witnessing male colleagues being promoted on potential and females only on high performance, unpleasant surprises when prospective male collaborators might have a less 'professional agenda', being asked – more often than men academics – to take on demanding administrative roles that do not 'count' for much in promotion and pay rise applications, or witnessing the tight-rope walked in interviews by female applicants who are trying to be judged as neither 'too feminine' nor 'too masculine'.

These are just some examples of how gender comes into play in the process of academic becoming. While on the surface, these examples might seem almost benign in comparison to the abuses of sexual harassment, they share with it a certain unspeakability. This unspeakability is, in the first place, connected to the traditional societal norms and negative judgements about women complaining about damage done to them. It is also a consequence of organisational structures and policies which do not consider such experiences as worthy of attention or that somehow try to 'resolve' them by, for instance, women-only leadership empowerment training. The lack of explicit attention given to gender discrimination in the academic workplace is also compounded by the fact that the naivety of women

scholars, especially in the early stages of their careers, is often matched by the naivety (or equality-blindness) of male colleagues.

Reflecting back on our own academic becoming, we wish we had engaged more critically with institutional and community-internal power dynamics and relations, as well as established images of 'good academic performance' earlier on. At the same time, we recognise the challenges and risks in doing so, and question the responsibility placed on women to find the resources to 'lean in' and tackle the inequalities along the way. We also wish there had been more spaces for women to share stories, and for these stories to have been taken seriously.

It is important, however, to acknowledge that since we first entered the profession, the academic field has changed and so have we. This is not to say that current times are much 'better' (i.e., equal and fair) than past times, but we do observe a few changes on the institutional, organisational and also collective level that we assess as rather positive. For example, the espoused principles underlying programmes such as the UK-based Athena Swan, that proclaim the ambition to 'fix the system' and not just 'fix women', are a welcome development. Organisational discourses surrounding what is acceptable and unacceptable talk and behaviour in relation to gender matters have also changed. Besides, the #Time'sUp initiative provides a welcome opportunity, also for academics, to share stories – and not just amongst those affected.

These encouraging signs notwithstanding, struggles over power, control and domination remain in place. Certainly, much more work is still necessary to develop effective institutional and organisational structures for dealing with gender inequalities, whatever forms these take. In terms of collective support mechanisms and action, more needs to be done to build a sense of sustained 'sisterhood' among women (and men) in academia: to help each other recognise signs of unequal treatment and when one might be engaging in it, identify where it happens; to create a sense of community and solidarity, especially at the beginning of one's career, which is often a professionally vulnerable time; and to support each other in speaking up against discrimination, inequality and harassment both individually and collectively. The aspiration to reduce domination to a minimum and 'not to be governed like that and at that cost' (Foucault, 2003: 265) may be a good starting point in our collective endeavour to strive for a more just and equal academic world.

## References:

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