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Women and science: keeping distinct but together issues of equal opportunity and issues of gender mainstreaming in research

National and European discourses on gender in higher education and research address two distinct issues: that of equal opportunity or better of gender equality, and that of introducing a gender perspective in education and research. The formulation «gender mainstreaming» apparently includes both issues, but risks obfuscating the different levels, as well as actions, which each of them involves. Further, I believe that if we do not carefully distinguish them analytically, we cannot adequately understand where and how they may overlap, where and how gender equality may require, but also strengthen, the development of a gender perspective in research and education, and *viceversa*.

Gender mainstreaming as a gender equality/equal opportunity issue

It involves making efforts in that both genders have a balanced presence everywhere and in all fields at all levels in education and research. It involves removing constraints (including intellectual and psychological) at least at two levels: that of access and that of career. At the first level, it involves a process of enlarging options, breaking down the cultural and practical barriers which define some scientific and professional sectors as masculine rather than feminine. Thus it involves both incentives to a «feminisation» of prevalent male sectors and a «masculinisation» of prevalent female sectors. This dual approach helps correcting the idea that equality involves only a transformation of women's choices and behaviours. Thus, on the one hand, its aim is that of what we could call «quantitative equality» (very important); on the other hand, it implies a cultural approach to gender mainstreaming which crosses and overlaps with that which is more specific of scientific work: rethinking standards and values.

Gender mainstreaming as a gender equality issue is one of the two focuses of European policies in research, and more generally throughout actions promoted and financed by European funds. It is at the core of the document *Science Policies in the European Union: Promoting excellence through mainstreaming gender equality* of the Helsinki group. It is very important both from a “simply democratic” point of view and from a human capital point of view. As such, it is self-sufficient and it does not need any further explanation and legitimisation. It is also fairly easy, conceptually, not practically, to define as an objective, even if far less easy to reach, as we all know.

Precisely this gap between conceptual clarity (easiness) and practical/political difficulty, however, points to the need to make links between the issue of mainstreaming gender in terms of personnel and mainstreaming gender in terms of interests, experiences and possibly patterns of knowledge. In order to understand why the former is so difficult to achieve, but also to understand the conditions under which it is achieved, analytical and theoretical tools must be developed. Thus, if it is true that the demand for gender equality developed, at least partly, from empirically based theoretical thinking, its implementation in turn produces new demands at the level of research and theory on gender experiences, relations and behaviours. The well known phenomenon of slower careers for women in the

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academe and in research laboratories calls for the understanding of mechanisms which involve not only explicit discrimination (including self-discrimination). They involve also patterns of work organisation, of implicit and explicit career inner timing, of work protection in case of parenthood (motherhood). Here cross country differences might be worth analysing to understand how different traditions concerning not only gender patterns, but patterns of organizing scientific work, as well as social protection systems may support, or on the contrary hinder women's participation in scientific research. For instance, in Italy within the University, but also in research institutes, the usual pattern to start working in research is that of temporary contracts with little or no social security protection – in terms of unemployment indemnity but also in terms of maternity leave and indemnity. Even PhD students with a scholarship are not covered during the statutory five months leave in case of pregnancy and child birth. Their deadline may be postponed accordingly, but when on leave their scholarship (or other kind of pay) is suspended. Thus on the one hand pregnancy and child birth are perceived as a nuisance in the research program (and by the research coordinator and co-workers). On the other hand new mothers loose crucial income precisely when they need it most, having to rely on a husband or more generally family. One might even suggest that the situation of young mothers in research work represent at their highest the dilemmas faced by all women workers, but without the social protection measures which most dependent workers have long conquered. At the same time, their work environment, although there might be differences depending on the disciplinary field and kind of research, is possibly even more impermeable than standard work environments to critical rethinking its internal organisation in order to accommodate individuals with family projects and responsibilities. The apparent informality of research institutions may be more demanding and morally coercing than a more formally organised enterprise.

In this perspective, the development of gender sensitive statistics in the area of research work and personnel, of research on organisations and institutions to detect patterns which favour or discourage women's participation in research and the acknowledgement of their contribution, are crucial tools: not only in order to denounce discrimination, but in order to design new possible, more gender neutral and if necessary women's friendly, practices.

From this point of view, European policies should be closely monitored in their efficacy and impact. Certainly the requirement that there is a greater gender balance in research groups which ask for European money has helped a great deal to have more women in international networks and research groups – and not only as research assistants or administrative officers. It might seem just another form of tokenism. Yet, in so far European bodies sustain systematically and coherently this requirement, growing number of research coordinators around Europe are being forced to look twice and to discover the good woman researcher in their institute and even to see her as an additional asset. It may take some time, and it will not come “naturally”, but it is possible that after a while the incentive (or disincentive in the contrary case) to integrate women in research will become less necessary, because men will be more used to have them and women will expect more to participate, thus will act accordingly. The work done by the Helsinki group concerning the development of indicators more sophisticated than simply head counting is a valuable tool in this direction. It is also an example of how attention for equal opportunities within the research community may intersect with the effort of introducing a gender perspective in the research agenda. Attention for excluding mechanisms, prompted from equal opportunity concerns motivate the development of new research questions, analytical tools, data collection and so forth with regard to the organisation of scientific work which otherwise would not have been asked, thus changing our understanding of the process of research development and knowledge building. How truly scientific and efficient is a pattern of work organisation which does not

select its personnel according to truly universalistic criteria (but on the contrary considers as universalistic and objective criteria which are highly particularistic in so far gender membership and family responsibilities are concerned)? What are the costs of wasting human resources only because of their gender? To what degree expectations concerning gender homogeneity among researchers, with their implications concerning patterns of thinking, of organising, of experiencing research work, and so forth, imply, and prize, a degree of intellectual homogeneity which might be constraining for intellectual work? These and others are, crucial, questions which may be raised when concern for equal opportunity go beyond «head counting» to explore mechanisms of exclusion, inclusion, marginalisation, promotion.

Gender mainstreaming as a research and theory issue

Mainstreaming an attention for the gender impact of social, economic and technological developments is the second focus of the EU policy in research. In order to achieve this is not enough asking «how many women and men where». What is needed is the development of theoretically and empirically well founded hypotheses, middle range explicative theories concerning the situation of men and women in different fields, which must be put to the test of empirical findings, which allow the development of sets of indicators, adequate research methodologies and techniques.

Feminist research has done a great deal in this direction, although to a different degree in different fields. Here I wish to stress two somewhat problematic points. In the first place, the process of mainstreaming the approaches and results of feminist and gender oriented research in prevalent research approaches and theories is at best partially halfway. Too often the attention for gender remains an added on afterthought, or a specific chapter, without being systematically explored. Gender and women' studies and research continue to run parallel to other approaches and theories instead of interacting with and transforming them. Thus, second, the gender dimension runs the dual risk of being reduced simply to a research field (often further restricted to studying women) and of being understood as founding a specific theory . Which, as we very well know, it is not correct, since there may be different, and even conflicting, theories and approaches which include a gender dimension.

Different national research traditions and different disciplines, of course, have a different story to tell and possibly also different understandings of what introducing a gender perspective might imply from a theoretical and methodological point of view. For a long time social sciences (anthropology, sociology, history, political sciences, economics) appeared to be the privileged arena for this exercise. And certainly these are the fields in which more often the vocabulary of gender – at least in its simplest form, men *and* women – is taken on board, even if less than one would expect. These are also the fields in which the requirements of the European Union in terms of the development of data, indicators, impact evaluation and so forth have supported and legitimised the development of research areas and tools. One might say that there has been a mutual re-enforcement between the social sciences feminist research community and the European feminist policy community. Yet, the overall results are far from being fully established and mainstreamed, in the so called European research area itself. Possibly because it is easy to use the language without substantially changing approach and research questions, the growing demand by the Commission for gender as a transversal dimension of research and for a focus on the gender impact of development of processes and measures in the social, economic and political sphere has gone largely un-answered. On the one hand, no specific tool, criteria, has been developed for evaluating whether a given project incorporates a gender perspective and, if not, whether this is acceptable scientifically. Everything is left to self declarations by proponents and to the idiosyncratic judgement of

project evaluators who often do not have an idea themselves of what a gender perspective should be and why should be present. Of course I am not so naïve, or so dogmatic, to think that there should be a perfect measuring tool. But I do think that something more than good intention is needed, if we believe that a gender perspective matters from a knowledge point of view. In this perspective I find extremely interesting the exercise, done in the area of medicine for the 5th framework programme and presented in this conference, to develop a set of specific requirements which a project must meet in order to pass the test of the gender perspective. I think that such an exercise is helpful for the involved scientific community because it is not just an exam to pass, or a formula to fill (I am too familiar with the overburdening jargon and paper work of European projects to be appreciative of any similar thing). Rather it requires proponents to rethink critically their research questions, enriching their insights and range of relevant issues. Thus it is a tool in building a scientific community.

It is a sobering lesson, for a sociologist like myself, long involved in mainstreaming the gender perspective in research, that the first scientific community to develop such a tool does not belong to social sciences, but to medicine.

This brings me to the third issue I want to address: how do we form researchers, but also policy makers, employers, trade-unionists, social workers, teachers. and so forth who are able to routinely use a gender perspective?

Gender mainstreaming the curricula in higher education

The traditional answer has been that of establishing gender and women's studies, more or less institutionalised, depending on the national institutional framework of higher education. It has been an important development, which has allowed visibility, accumulation of knowledge, reproduction. It has also strengthened the idea that gender is a, legitimate, field of knowledge and research. Even in a country such as Italy a «gender module» in the curriculum is fairly easy to be had. Access to the European social funds are even incentivating the development of such «modules» as an easy way to fulfil the requirement of «the gender dimension». Thus, students in curricula which are supported by these funds must «pay the price» of this «added on» module. All these developments have also offered women academics job opportunities, although with different degrees of status and security depending on the institutional framework. Is that enough and should we be satisfied with this level of mainstreaming?

I think not. I think not only that we should be more ambitious, but that we need to be. We must train students who are capable to systematically use a gender perspective. Which means that we have to form them both theoretically and methodologically from within, interacting with, the specificity of their curriculum. The gender perspective is certainly an interdisciplinary one. But this interdisciplinarity, both in research and in education, must put to the test not only of specific disciplines and their different approaches and methods, but of specific curricula. And its integration in a curriculum should not only be offered in terms of «general formation» of a dimension needed for a well rounded education, but, as much as possible, also as a specific professional dimension.

Mine is not an either or position. I think that both couples of approaches are needed – gender studies as a field and as a perspective integrated in the various disciplinary fields, sensitivity to the gender dimension as a part of basic education and as a «skill» for professional life.

This is the challenge we have ahead of us.