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The struggle for equality in academia:

The gendered effects of an apparently innocent work allocation

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Abstract

This contribution builds on a social-constructionist conceptualisation of gender to investigate gender inequality in academia; the focus is on negotiation of the workload and the role of leaders' in building fairer working and career conditions. Data come from a European project on gender equality in science, and comprise in-depth interviews and focus groups with both women and men, across roles and grades, in one College in the UK. It is shown how leaders' low awareness of the importance of work allocation and of the dynamics related to gender identity and gendered expectations can have detrimental effects on women's careers especially. We contribute to literature on gender in academia by demonstrating that negotiation and allocation of workload are intrinsically gendered activities. Following the voice of our research participants, we argue that training leaders could pave the way for creating more equal opportunities in relation to career management and advancement.

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Introduction

The quest for gender equality in workplaces dates back at least 40 years, but problems still persist in every sector. Considering higher education, we are confronted with underrepresentation of women in the most senior academic ranks, but also, in some disciplines, there is an evident underrepresentation of women across all levels (Sonnert and Holton, 1996, EC, 2008, EC, 2012, EC, 2015). Furthermore, women are more often subjects of discrimination (Etzkowitz et al., 2000, Rosser, 2004). The same patterns can be observed outside academia (OECD, 2012, EC, 2009).

In this paper, we focus on how women and men, in universities, deal with negotiating their workload, we look for the challenges along this process, and we investigate the possible solutions for ensuring a fair work allocation. Negotiation of the workload is relevant since it impacts on career progression (Barrett & Barrett 2011). We build our arguments on the assumption that underrepresentation of women persists because organisations are “gendered” (Acker, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987); meaning that organisations produce and reproduce a gender order to the disadvantage of women. The findings are part of a larger study conducted within a European project aimed at comprehending the role played by gender in shaping careers in higher education.

We wish to contribute to the following: first, we add to current empirical literature by comparing women’s and men’s experiences, and by considering both academic and professional staff, two issues that are often overlooked; this should permit to give a better understanding of the challenges faced by women; second, we provide new insights on the wider debate about the underrepresentation of women in science. Finally, we contribute to practice by focusing on a specific aspect that could be tackled quite straightforwardly by organisations.

The paper is structured as follows: first, an overview of relevant literature explaining gender inequality, with a focus on the academic sector; then, the design informing this research; the findings follow; afterwards, findings will be discussed together with the contributions and limits of the study; the conclusions will offer the opportunity to consider how to further develop this research.

Is academia a gendered organisation?

The definition of organisations as “gendered” (Acker, 1990) means that organisational structures produce and reproduce a gender order, that is present in our societies, and that assumes a division of labour constraining women in some specific areas (in relation to both occupational sector and rank). More recently, Acker (2006) introduced the concept of “inequality regimes”, as an analytical tool to investigate inequality as a process and practice that is deeply intertwined in organisational activities. It is worth to underline that the possibility for organisations to shape, and constrain, gender identities, resides in the fact that gender is not a fixed attribute, but it has a performative nature (Butler, 1993). This means that both the definition and implications of belonging to a specific gender are shaped and reshaped through human action, and gender is tied to expectations and behaviours when

people are engaged together in any activity (West and Zimmerman, 1987). For this reason, it is particularly important for scholars to look at daily routines, interactions and narratives.

Organisations have a prominent role in recreating and redefining what is expected from men and what is expected from women; such expectations can trigger stereotypes of what is assumed to be desirable from men and from women. Acker (1990) underlines that organisations tend to privilege an employee profile that has specific connotations from the point of view of gender: this profile coincides with that of a man (white, middle or upper class) who is completely devoted to his own work, while the role of women is marginalised independently of their position and contribution.

Universities are not an exception to the concept of gendered organisation (Benschop and Brouns, 2003, Goode and Bagilhole, 1998). The management of academic institutions is gendered in terms of power relations and career expectations, and this impacts career trajectories of women and men (Deem, 2003). Teelken and Deem's (2013) comparative study involving UK, Sweden, and Netherlands, shows that even the more recent developments in terms of academic governance and management do not help to foster equality. The existence of a problem at the more senior levels of academic hierarchies and in university management, and the underrepresentation of women leaders, have been widely documented and discussed (Morley, 2013, Haake, 2009, Peterson, 2016, Morley, 2014, Thompson, 2015, Gallant, 2014); Fletcher (2007) points out that managers are often quite ignorant in terms of gender equality.

Gender biases in the formulation of the criteria of academic excellence exist, as demonstrated by studies focused on different research-intensive countries, such as the UK (Bagilhole and Goode, 2001, Knights and Richards, 2003), Switzerland (Fassa and Kradolfer, 2013), and the Netherlands (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012a, van den Brink et al., 2010); also, universities have not reconciled the concepts of excellence and meritocracy, with the pursuit of diversity (Deem, 2009). The negative effects of the persistence of male networks and the tendency of men to promote other men have been pointed out as well (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014).

At the micro level of daily academic routines, scholars have shown that women are often at the centre of both direct and indirect discriminations, and stereotyping negatively affecting career progression (Haynes and Fearfull, 2008, Acker, 2012, Søndergaard, 2005, Priola, 2007); furthermore, tasks are often allocated to the disadvantage of women, who are taking up more teaching and service roles to the detriment of time for research (Winslow, 2010, Hart and Cress, 2008). Conspicuous literature highlights the challenges related to high workload and work-life balance (Bailyn, 2003, Woodward, 2007, Araujo, 2008, Acker and Armenti, 2004, Rafnsdóttir and Heijstra, 2013), and mobility (Ackers, 2003).

When it comes to envisaging potential solutions, scholars often call for cultural change, this involving more actions to make individuals and organisations aware of the problem. More measures have been experimented to tackle gender equality in academia, with relevant positive outcomes, even if research is often lacking a longitudinal perspective. For example, Meyerson and Tompkins (2007) discuss how ADVANCE has been applied at the University

of Michigan; this is a programme of the National Science Foundation in the US to foster women's participation in science. Initially it operated by funding women's careers, then it started funding more measures helping to overcome inequalities, this encompassing research and initiatives to tackle gender bias especially. In Europe, more research projects have discussed measures to foster equality: for example, the EU-funded PraGES project investigated a number of tools to be deployed in universities, such as: research and data collection, monitoring, awards and recognition, media campaigns, websites and discussion spaces, training, coaching, mentoring (ASDO, 2009).

Some initiatives aim at involving both women and men in the attempt to change organisational structures; an example is provided by Bird's (2011) contribution discussing the results of a workshop to make academics aware of gender bias in promotion procedures. Other measures are focused on empowering women, an approach that has been contested for being short-sighted and not effective in changing the gendered structure of universities (Schiebinger, 1999); however, it is still quite widespread. Examples are: mentoring programmes for women, that can be quite successful (Gardiner et al., 2007), and women leadership programmes, those contributions are more contested since often they do not focus on deconstructing the underlying assumptions behind leadership, its gendered connotations, and how women can navigate that (Gallant, 2014).

To conclude this section, it is worth underlining that gender inequality is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, involving several actors and depending on many contextual factors (such as the type of organisation and organisational structure, the specific activities being conducted, the composition of working groups and the type of leadership, but also regulatory frameworks at the organisational and national levels). This is exemplified by van den Brink and Benschop's (2012b) metaphor of gender inequality as a "seven-headed dragon", a creature with a multitude of faces in different social contexts. For this reason, in order to investigate the underrepresentation of women in academia, it is worth using an in-depth approach and applying several methods. Also, it is very likely that the issue cannot be addressed by relying on women only, but by involving men as well.

Methods

This study has been guided by a holistic, in-depth, inductive approach inspired by interpretive research (Janesick, 1994, Lincoln and Guba, 1985, Silverman, 2005). The research project focuses on one College in the UK, and considers two Schools where women are especially underrepresented (this encompassing areas related to biology, earth and planetary sciences, computer science, economics and management). Overall in the College women are slightly overrepresented (58% of women against 48% of men), but this is not the case in the Schools considered (more details in Table I below). The aim is to understand personal and professional career paths, and patterns of participation in academic activities. Both women and men are part of the study to assure a diversity of voices and perspectives; for the same reason, both academic and professional staff have been involved, since vertical and horizontal segregation of women applies to both. The study started with a broad set of research questions aimed at understanding how professional and personal trajectories of members of

staff (academic and professional) unfold in the departments where women are underrepresented. In this paper, we focus on the following:

1. How is the academic workload negotiated by women and men?
 - i. What are the main challenges women and men encounter in this process?
 - ii. How can such challenges be tackled?

The research relies on individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews privilege a narrative approach, which is widespread in literature on gender practices because it allows for an in-depth understanding of individual lived experiences. Focus groups should support understanding of how people construct together an account of their experiences and present roles. These methods should inform each other and cross comparison of the data should permit a thorough understanding of gender dynamics in scientific careers, thus paving the way for formulating recommendations to academic institutions.

The population to which we refer to is composed of 426 staff members, spread across two of the five Schools of the College; the two Schools represent the 35% of the entire staff. Women are slightly underrepresented overall in the two Schools, and especially when considering professors. We cannot give a further breakdown for confidentiality issues, given that the number of female professors especially is particularly low.

Table I: population of the study (absolute numbers)

Professional and support staff			Academic, research and teaching staff (excluding professors)			Professorial staff			All		
Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All	Female	Male	All
80	65	145	107	114	221	15	45	60	202	224	426

Recruitment of interviewees anticipated the recruitment of participants for focus groups by a couple of months, so that preliminary results from interviews could inform the design of the questions for the focus groups. Below is a description of the actual research participants. Regarding the division between senior and junior, in the case of professional staff we relied on their own definition; in the case of academic staff, junior comprises teaching and research assistants, PhD students, and lecturers; senior comprises senior lecturers, readers and professors.

Table II: Participants in individual interviews and in focus groups

	Women				Men			
	Academic		Professional		Academic		Professional	
	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior	Junior	Senior
Interviews	3	5	1	2	3	1		
Focus groups	I	1		1	1		1	
	II		1	2	1	1		

Interviews lasted on average 1 hour and 10 minutes, and focus groups 1 hour 35 minutes; they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Regarding interviews, participants were presented with specific questions concerning their career path and present and past experiences, but they were free to develop their answers as they wished and to introduce new topics. Regarding focus groups, participants were asked to describe their present role and main activities, and then had the opportunity to freely talk about themselves in relation to the way they approach their work and the challenges they perceive. The first focus group was conducted by two members of the research team, and the second by three of them.

Following the hermeneutic cycle characterising interpretive research, analysis has been characterised by three steps: first, a careful reading of the transcribed data and of the notes generated during the research; second, researchers looked for the main themes emerging in interviews and in focus groups; third, themes have been contrasted to look for categories able to summarise the phenomena observed; these categories have been refined in a movement of going back and forth from data to theory. This cycle permitted to go from the formulation of codes, very close to participants' accounts (first step), to more general themes and patterns emerging during interviews and focus groups (second step) which were compared with one another to look for more interpretations (third step).

The analysis permitted to obtain very rich findings; however, it is challenging to present and deeply comment on all these findings in a single contribution. This paper focuses on workload negotiation and the challenges related to that; as a possible solution, we will investigate leaders' training and how this can impact on building more equality in universities. These topics have been thematised by more senior participants especially, who highlighted not only what is perceived to be a lack in the system, and a potential cause for problems, but also a possible strategy to tackle inequality.

Findings

Along this research it emerged that, when talking about career development in universities, there are many factors to consider, such as age, seniority, discipline, but also the general atmosphere of the department where a person is affiliated; gender is especially relevant and it interplays with these factors in different ways. Furthermore, discriminations towards women, albeit more often in an indirect form, persist. Overall, findings can be summed up along five thematic patterns: (1) high workload, this negatively impacting work-life balance; (2) local, trans-local, international trends intersecting, this making the features and challenges of an academic career more homogeneous even across institutions; (3) different career trajectories and different life experiences (e.g. junior vs. senior), this underlining how differences in career trajectories can go beyond gender; (4) indirect discriminations and gender bias, stressing how women are still experiencing many problems in their daily professional life, and especially when trying to get promoted; (5) the relevance of socialisation and training to new roles. This last is an interesting theme since it provides an original perspective on how gender and career development shape themselves at the micro level of daily routines and task allocation, and it opens up to significant considerations from the point of view of practice. This is the theme addressed by our research question and we will focus on it.

Feeling lost in a new role

Topics related to a discretionary work allocation and lack of training come up quite early, and even unexpectedly, in most of the accounts, especially when talking about taking up new roles or starting in the College. Most of the participants remember their first days in their position as a very intense and challenging moment, characterised by active searching for information, planning activities, and establishing contacts, all of which was mostly conducted individually. Especially the more junior participants report to have felt “lost” and unable to grasp the College structure even after a while in their present position. It is worth underlining that both academic and professional staff showed themselves to be proactive in becoming socialised to the new environment and tasks. We report below a few lines from a focus group showing the feelings of more junior people, and then a more senior participant explaining this is happening with her as well.

Excerpt I

WJA: here I’m still trying to understand the different research groups, and then like you said, it’s quite individualistic as well, everybody’s doing different things (...). So I’m not sure, really just perceptions. I don’t really know how things are run here.

MJA: I’m just...I feel lost...(laughs)...how things are run here, really, it’s er...

WSP: I’ve been here for quite a bit longer than you, and don’t worry about feeling lost, because quite often I do just, do the same. A while ago the University went through a process of restructuring which was meant to kind of put everybody in their place, and sort of, you know, kind of almost like defragging a computer, I think, um, but even still, I mean, a lot of the people that were, were before there, are still here now, um, and, people don’t fit into their, you know, into where they’ve been put, quite how neatly, as perhaps was planned. (...) I can’t speak for everybody, but a lot of people still feel kind of lost, too, so, don’t feel bad about that.

(WJA= woman junior academic; MJA= man junior academic; WSP= woman senior professional)

It is interesting to focus on accounts going back to the first days in one’s own Department, since they show very well how people had to rely on their own initiative.

Excerpt II

WSA1 (about her first weeks in her Department): It was a little bit laissez faire I think we could say. So I came here and I had an interview and everything it was all fine, they phoned me up and offered me the job, but then the start was on September 1st, and I kind of didn’t hear anything. I got a letter from HR saying “sign this” but then as August proceeded and September was approaching I thought “I don’t know what to do” (laughs). So I emailed the person that had invited me for interview and said “what should I do on 1st September?” And he said “oh well, you don’t actually have to come then, come when you want”. And I was confused. (...) In that first couple of months where I guess I didn’t have much distraction because I was just sort of in my office working all day and it took a while to get to know people I guess because everyone’s

doing their own thing and I'd think "hmm I must go and speak to this person" so there were some helpful people.

(WSA= woman senior academic)

Also, it is interesting that participants are more often inclined to refer to their own department, instead of the College, which can remain for quite a long time a big black box. The long time required to feel at ease in one's own role and Department can be due to the fact that all the participants tend to deal with their tasks mainly by themselves: it seems that both academic and administrative work are mostly conducted in isolation. Working in isolation renders it difficult to learn how things work in the College, to know about expectations from colleagues and from line managers, and ultimately to know about career opportunities. Working in isolation also means that, in the case of a problem arising, the individual will be more likely to experience it as a personal problem, or be unable to look for adequate support.

Work allocation

More senior participants underlined quite early the issue of work allocation. In a panorama where everybody feels the burden of a high workload, some participants (from both the academic and professional staff) stressed how work allocation sometimes does not seem to follow a clear rationale, thus possibly causing overload. Academics especially underline the frustration coming from spending a lot of time on administration (e.g. administration of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes), while they would prefer to have more time for research, data analysis and writing. Besides, it can be quite easy, for academics especially, to get trapped in administrative and support roles that take time away from core activities. In this case, it is important to have a Head of Department who cares, and who is willing to leave space for negotiation. However, it is striking that the initiative should come from the individual, who should pay attention to the tasks she/he is supposed to accomplish, and, if this is the case, try to work out possible solutions with the line manager.

For example, one female academic underlined she realised by herself, a few months before being interviewed, that she was among the ones having the highest teaching load in the Department, and as a result she negotiated with her line manager how to cut that down. Women especially seem concerned about the high administrative workload. An interesting account comes from a female academic recently appointed to a senior position. She explains how many times it happened to her to be involved in admin work even when she was already quite busy, and to be in charge of tasks without having any formal power over people, thus making her work more challenging.

Excerpt III

WSA1: I was asked to be a part of these (working groups) and I kind of found it difficult to say no and so I ended up doing a lot of work in addition to my teaching and the research I was trying to keep up with and I found that quite stressful and I think it's....you know when an authority figure says "we want you to be on this working group" it is quite difficult to say "I'm too busy". Other times...I think there have sometimes been issues where I've felt like, I was somehow responsible for a thing without actually having any power to get people to do

anything (laughs). So I was somehow in this sort of strange position of I need to get something done or I've ended up doing something or being in charge of something in a strange by default way that means that I'm not formally, I can't formally say "I need you to do something", I have to use I don't know, just persuading or whatever which is...can be a bit difficult.

We will come back later to this excerpt since it emphasizes more issues: not only ending up with a lot of administration work, but also having to do that without having any official power, this making necessary negotiation and persuasion, that can represent a meaningful investment in terms of time, commitment, energy.

The role of a Head of Department

Heads of Department (HoDs) have a very important role in assuring the smooth running of research and teaching activities, a fair distribution of tasks, and equal opportunities in applying for promotion; also, this role is strategic when solving any interpersonal or bullying issue (if this is the case). Having the power of distributing tasks in the Department (or in a research group) means being in the position to assure equal opportunities and avoid women being overloaded with administrative tasks and pastoral care, as was pointed out by some senior academics. The importance of having a HoD who cares about fair allocation of tasks and development of staff was underlined by several participants: for example, a woman in a male-dominated discipline praised her previous HoD for having the habit of giving regular feedback to all staff regarding their curriculum and for having motivated her to apply for promotion. A senior professional woman who experienced some problems related to work allocation when coming back from maternity leave, underlined that this could not happen now, since her current HoD is much more sensitive to the issue.

Among the academics, two (one man and one woman) had past experience as HoD in their current institution and in others as well. However, as it is the case for most new staff, HoDs do not receive any specific training (there are just a few suggested workshops organised by the HR Department, but nothing tailored for them). The lack of specific, and compulsory training, has been highlighted as problematic, even from a gender equality perspective. We rely here on more quotes coming from a male senior academic, since they are particularly enlightening to describe the issue and the implications in terms of gender equality. It is important to stress that this account emerged spontaneously, after the interviewee had been asked to speak about his experience in the College.

Excerpt IV

MSA: You end up doing your job (as a Head of Department) without any real training and that's problematic because it means it's really left to the individual whether they are aware of issues to do with gender, and if they are all well and good but if they're not then they might not necessarily think "Oh, yes, I need to think through, I need to make sure that when I distribute jobs I don't drift towards offering them to the people who are more acquiescent and less assertive". (...) So without necessarily wanting or intending to end up with a gender bias workload allocation, you can, because of the pragmatic way you respond to your perception of difficult colleagues over less difficult colleagues, end up loading work on to the colleagues who

are less assertive and more acquiescent. I know all the evidence suggests that they're more likely to be women than men, so again there's potentially some indirect discrimination there.

(MSA= man senior academic)

The interviewee explains clearly what the problem is for him: absence of training can mean that people are not aware of issues dealing with gender, and this could bring a HoD, when allocating tasks, to rely on more "acquiescent" colleagues. He then cites both his experience and literature to say that more often women tend to be acquiescent. Later on in the interview, this participant will stress that training should be compulsory: he is aware that this can raise resistance, but, on the other hand, he is convinced that, if people are unwilling to learn, they are not going to be good leaders. The two excerpts below show how, from his experience, an unfair work allocation is going to impact negatively on promotion, and this happened for women especially.

Excerpt V

MSA: We had a colleague here who actually didn't get through, didn't get through tenure a couple of years ago and some of us had quite heated discussions with the senior people in department about that because I said she was overloaded with stuff, you know she had too much administration, and the answer was that she agreed to do it, but my view was that she shouldn't have been asked to do it all. (...) I worked at another University for 24 years I only ever encountered one person who failed to get through probation, it was a woman as it turns out who was very conscientious and was very agreeable to doing lots of work and she was very good at it and when you, from a Head of Department perspective, when you prove to me very good at programmes, or administration or whatever there's a tendency to say, "Oh you're good at this so you can do more".

The narrative built by this interviewee seems to follow typical stereotypes and gendered expectations: women being very conscientious in taking care of all their activities and not assertive enough to be able to negotiate more time for their own research, when it is known that research output is the main point to get a promotion. However, these anecdote come from lived experiences, that are even confirmed when we look at other participants accounts (such as the senior woman cited in excerpt III). We report another excerpt below. We observe that this participant is not claiming that some individuals are better than others when doing administrative work, but this is an issue of individual choices and strategies:

Excerpt VI

MSA: We don't want to give it (admin work) to other colleagues who aren't so good and that was always a bit of an issue in work allocation, and then your colleagues who don't want to take on admin, take on admin, there were straightforward ways of achieving that objective, is when you are given an admin job, just make a complete mess of it. (...) I'm not saying you should just dump the work on the difficult colleague regardless, and in my experience again, this is anecdotal, it was male colleagues that were more likely to behave that way, and engage very calculated behaviour, I don't like admin, I don't want to do it, I'll mess it up and they'll let me off again.

As the participant himself says, these are anecdotes, so we cannot generalise and say that women are more conscientious and consequently they find themselves involved in a lot of administrative work, thus negatively impacting on promotion (and, in the short run, on work life balance), while men apply strategies, that can even seem nasty, to avoid this overload. Nevertheless, such an account is particularly important since it relies on a long experience in different universities; also, if we look at narratives from female academics, we can find some correspondence.

Excerpt VII

WSA2: I look at women's careers I can see there are aspects in the way in which I managed my career that are typical of the literature in terms of not applying for things, not pushing, of focusing very much on the domestic work of the organisation, the housework of the organisation rather than the high status, stuff. I'm at a point now where I'm sort of thinking "I can see I did that, I can see what I would need to do in order to get me promoted, but could I do it? I don't know". Or do I want to do it enough and, so I think there's a combined sense of thinking, you know, "I should have done better", and also thinking "and it's all my fault that I didn't".

Negotiating tasks and gender identity

In this section we investigate one last topic related to work allocation, which underlay some of the previous excerpts as well: negotiation of task and negotiation of one's own gender identity seem to go hand by hand. This because, when negotiating and sharing tasks, women are expected to display some behaviours instead of others, thus impacting on how the tasks will be conducted as well. One of the senior female participants highlighted how managing academics requires a lot of negotiation skills and ability in persuading others, often because reporting and hierarchical structures inside individual departments are not clear. Moreover, being independent and critical are intrinsic characteristics of academic work, and this can make the management of academics particularly challenging.

Excerpt VIII

WSA1: You can get people who just really strongly say "I'm not doing this" or something like this and then, how do you deal with that? It's a difficult one and, especially when no one likes conflict but, I find it quite difficult...I don't want to have an argument with someone, so it's challenging. I think you do sometimes get the perception that maybe...like if a woman gets angry, maybe it's because she's emotional (laughs) whereas if a man gets angry, it's not that reaction to it. (...) I don't think I tend to get angry but then the side effect of me not getting angry is that I end up with a lot of work to do because I say "Oh OK, we'll find a way to do this".

It is interesting to observe that the participant stresses she wants to avoid arguments when allocating tasks, because, as a woman, if she is getting angry she will be considered to be too emotional, and she does not want that (she will insist later on in the interview that it is important to keep a "professional" image). She admits that for men this would be different, and that her behaviour means for her to do more and more work. It is worth underlining that such a dynamic can heavily impact on women's time: this can be understood as a vicious

cycle, where often women tend to accept more and more tasks because they think they are expected to do that, and they try to accomplish these tasks at their best; this behaviour can motivate their managers to give them additional tasks; the awareness, from women's side, that expressing their feelings can have negative consequences on their identity and image means that they will need to invest more time and energy in activities that probably are not that strategic for getting promoted. This dynamic underlies the accounts of more senior women especially: probably their long experience in academia means they have been confronted with that more times and they had the opportunity to reflect on that.

Going back to the accounts of participants who had experience as HoDs, we can advance the argument that training HoDs (or the ones who are responsible for work allocation), can help. Surely, training will not be beneficial if it does not focus on making leaders aware of the existence of possible unconscious biases when allocating tasks, and of the implications in terms of gender identity. Such training could be helpful to create a new organisational culture, more careful of individual needs and challenges, work-life balance, and equality.

Discussion

We relied on a few excerpts in this paper since we preferred to focus on the ones that were especially illuminating in supporting our arguments. As we stated in the introduction, our objective was to investigate workload negotiation and related challenges, and to understand possible solutions for ensuring equal career opportunities for women and men in universities. We have shown how workload management can be particularly tricky for the more junior staff needing to progress their career, and for women especially, given that work allocation and negotiation of gender identity (and especially women's identity) go hand in hand. We have demonstrated that a superficial allocation of work can have negative effects in relation to gender equality. We observed there is a lack of training for leaders (the ones in charge of allocating tasks). Lack of training is problematic at any level, not just for leaders, since it causes a feeling of confusion on newcomers as well. For sure, in a situation where academic leaders themselves experience a task overload and time pressure, there could be the tendency to look for quick solutions and not devoting a lot of time in reflecting about one's own decisions. This is why training could help: leaders would have the opportunity to realise how important work allocation is, how biases can be avoided, and they would have some time to start thinking about it in an operational way as well; we will come back later on this point.

The results extend previous literature, especially in relation to unfair work allocation (Winslow, 2010), the tendency for women to take up more service and pastoral roles (Hart and Cress, 2008), and the intrinsic difficulties when managing academic managers and leaders (Deem, 2010). Our considerations in relation to the role of a HoD are consistent to Bryman's (2007) review, that lists, as behaviours associated with effective leadership in university departments, treating academic staff fairly and providing resources and adjusting workloads. On the other hand, Bryman underlines how creating the conditions for effective leadership can be difficult considering that academics have a strong professional identity, with freedom and independence being intrinsic parts of it.

We stated that one of the contributions of this study was to consider the experiences of both men and women. In this regard, it is worth underlining that our male participants, even if they also experienced a high workload, did not seem to have felt compelled to take on new roles, or felt their behaviour and identity (negatively) judged because of their response to such requests. This highlights very well how women's and men's careers can take different paths and how women have to struggle much more to advance in their trajectory. Also, the fact that junior people in our sample were not always aware of that seems to be a sign that such mechanisms are quite hidden in the organisational structures.

A second contribution of this study, which is strongly related to the considerations above, is showing that allocation and negotiation of workload are gendered, and this can work to the detriment of women's careers. We formulated a possible solution by advancing the idea of training. We are aware that training nowadays seems to be a fad, and we want to be cautious. We call for a critical approach to training (Collinson and Tourish, 2015): this should facilitate leaders to start a reflective process, in which acquiring the so called "leadership skills" is not the priority, but the priority is to gain awareness of how both task negotiation and execution are indissolubly related to gender identities. Otherwise, the risk is providing knowledge that can be quickly summed up along a few guidelines or checklists, and this will not help in changing organisational cultures. Training cannot solve any issue: even when following the best intentions, training may not be effective, as in the case of gender bias training described by Bird (2011). There is a tension when we call for a reflexive and critical approach to train current leaders: this approach has the potential to change existing power relations, but will the current leaders be eager to embark in change, or will inertia prevail? However, it would be a mistake for universities not to engage in such a challenge, since it can represent a significant step towards advancing equality.

It is worth recalling that even programmes focused on gender equality, tend to stress much more the need for women to be trained as a leader, than the need for leaders to be trained to be able to guarantee a fair treatment. The approach of "empowering women" is problematic. First, it assumes that women lack some competences and need to be equipped, an assumption that is accompanied by the risk of imposing a dominant vision of both gender relationships and leadership abilities. Second, it leaves all the responsibilities to the individual women, who are supposed to be active for finding a space for themselves in a male world. Schiebinger (1999) has been among the first to criticise the approaches assuming that women need to be given what seems to be a recipe for success, and to call for initiatives able to change both organisations and the definition of science. More recently, Morley (2013) underlined that this approach, when applied to leadership, ignores the relevance of organisational structures and their responsibility in creating an unequal world.

Training the ones who are already leaders could represent an effective step to change organisational structures. We do not want to suggest that leadership training for women is unnecessary, but that it should include spaces for starting a reflexive process instead of being conceived as a transmission of tools and competences; also, leadership training for women and training for leaders should be designed and applied in a complementary form, to make sure change will happen. We could advance the argument that leaders' training, other than

having beneficial effects on work allocation and advancement of both women and men, could support diversity as well, and help create a better climate where both negotiations and conflicts are handled more smoothly.

This study has some limits, especially because our conclusions are based on a sample of people coming from the same university. However, the fact of having participants coming from very different Departments, where different procedures are present, and the possibility to rely on both focus groups and interviews, permit to compare among more perspectives. Also, another issue is that we could not listen to the voices of people who had some experience in relation to training to new roles: some institutions provide tailored training for HoDs, but we could not gather any accounts in relation to that. A third issue is given by the fact that we could gather very dense accounts in relation to academic staff, but less in relation to professional staff: some of the issues in relation to feeling lost in a new role or lacking training are shared, but we would need to gather more data to better understand the role of gender in this group.

Conclusion

We conclude by sketching some possible strategies to build on this study and to conduct new research. First, it would be interesting conducting similar research in a university having a very proactive approach on training leaders, and trying to understand how this is experienced by both leaders and the other staff. Second, it is necessary to apply a longitudinal perspective, to liaise with leaders and staff at different points in time, this to investigate changes and any potential issues. A focus on the type of training, and comparisons among different types of training and how they are experienced by participants, could be fruitful as well, especially to inform practice. Action research could provide an interesting methodological approach. We do not want to suggest that leaders' training is the only solution to have a more gender sensitive environment, but it will be important to try motivating leaders to create a reflective space where to think about the consequences of their decisions.

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