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Gender Equality in Academia: Comparative Perspectives From Feminist Institutionalism

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Abstract: New Institutionalism (NI) explores how institutional rules, norms, and cultures constrain the choices and actions of individuals when they are part of an institution. Feminist Institutionalism (FI) applies NI through a gendered lens, starting from the premise that institutions are highly gendered, and considers how they constrain and/or enable gendered change. In their approach to institutional analysis and understanding of underlying mechanisms, NI and FI share common assumptions and concerns, such as institutional creation, continuity and change, structure and agency, and power. At a European level, the EU through its Research and Development programme, Horizon 2020, considers gender as a cross-cutting issue to be mainstreamed. Specific EU initiatives to support Research Performing Organisations (RPO) in implementing gender equality strategies seek to removing those barriers that generate gender discrimination in scientific careers. There are dedicated calls, targeted at research performing and financing organisations, to implement gender equality plans. RPOs promote gender equality and diversity through initiatives coordinated at national level. This study compares two of these initiatives: the Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland and the Italian "Comitati Unici di Garanzia" (CUG). It uses a qualitative exploratory approach, based on desk research, drawing upon scholarly research and grey literature in Ireland (and UK) and Italy. The paper examines the impact of these gender equality strategies and their implications for institutions across the EU.

1. Introduction

The loss of women scientists working in academia at each stage of the career pipeline and their underrepresentation at senior levels (Ovseiko *et al.*, 2017) are well documented. More acutely, women continue to be a minority among science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) degree holders, despite accounting for half of all university graduates.(European Commission, 2013) The gender deficit resulting from this under - representation hinders gender-sensitive innovation in academia and is a negative influence on society at large (Forsberg and Stenbacka, 2018).

According to New Institutionalism (NI), formal organisational practices and structures are shaped by myths, rules, and conventions that are grounded in the wider environment (Zucker, 1977; Meyer and Scott, 1983). Feminist Institutionalism (FI) applies NI through a gendered lens, starting from the premise that institutions are highly gendered, in order to consider how this influences gendered change.

In Academia, structural change to promote gender equality is pursued in diverse ways. Ireland and Italy represent two different approaches: in Ireland, the Athena Swan (AS) Charter utilises a dual top-down and bottom-up initiative while in Italy, the CUG (Comitati Unici di Garanzia) model represents a mainly top down model.

This paper is the first exploratory step in a wider comparative study, aimed at identifying similarities and differences between progress towards gender equality in academic and other organisations. The wider research objectives are to gain a greater understanding of how gender equality is promoted in two interconnected sectors, academia (STEM disciplines) and ICT small and medium enterprises (SME), in Ireland and Italy. It will explore the roles that individuals play within the selected institutions in promoting gender equality and responding to resistance to change, in order to understand the ways in which these organisations shape individual behaviours.

This paper compares two initiatives: the Athena SWAN Charter and CUGs, both of which are used to promote gender equality in Academia. Using secondary data, the pros and cons of each approach are explored, to provide key themes and issues for future analyses, based on primary data collection.

The following section sets out a literature review on NI and FI. The subsequent sections relate to the main characteristics of the AS Charter and CUG, the methodology used for the study, including the tentative analysis and results, conclusions and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

While former institutional theory depicts institutions as "efficient solutions to predefined problems" (Holm, 1995). New Institutionalism (NI) includes the role of actors and actions in the creation of institutions, and explores how institutional rules, norms, and cultures constrain the choices and actions of individuals (Jepperson, 1991; Battilana, Leca and Boxenbaum, 2009). Lowndes and Roberts (2013) affirm that institutions have entered a third wave of NI in which institutions are forms of social organisations that may be both formal and informal. Individuals devise rules and these rules govern how they interact and behave (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). Institutions shape change, through a complex game of rewarding or sanctioning behaviours (Lowndes, 1996). Formal institutional rules are clearly designed and detailed. They are spread through official channels, while informal institutional rules are less evident, and enforced through informal power, culture and structures (Lauth, 2000). NI has developed around four approaches: rational choice institutionalism; historical institutionalism; organizational (or sociological) institutionalism; and discursive (or constructivist) institutionalism. In contrast, Feminist Institutionalism, places emphasis on continuities rather than on the differences among these approaches (Mackay et al. , 2010).

Feminist Institutionalism (FI) applies NI, starting from the premise that institutions are highly gendered, and considers how they constrain and/or enable gendered change. Hence, gender "not only operates at the level of the subjective/interpersonal (through which humans identify themselves and organize their relations with others) but is also a feature of institutions and social structures, and a part of the symbolic realm of meaning-making, within which individual actors are 'nested'." (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010, p. 580) Understanding institutions could benefit from a gendered analysis in several areas, including structure, power and agency.

According to FI, all rules are gendered, and not only contribute to the gendered power dynamics but influence the opportunities for change in institutional settings (Krook and Mackay, 2011). While in the past FI has been applied mainly to political institutions, more recent research strands have extended to other types of institutions. The Australian construction industry, a male dominated sector, has been examined to observe the formal institutions in the area of gender equality (Galea et al., 2015). To do so, the authors applied two concepts introduced by Lowndes and Roberts (2013): *robustness*, which refers to the maintenance of policy strength and resistance to change over time, and *revisability*, defined as the capacity for policy amendment or alteration, which is required when a policy fails to achieve its stated objective. Robustness and revisability "have proven to be useful tools for exploring the complexities of institutional design processes because they have helped to explain why some policies rather than others are successfully implemented and endure over time." (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013, p. 27).

Verge et al. (2018) have identified the types and forms of resistance to the integration of gender into the Higher Education curriculum in a Spanish University. They describe the informal (non-written) rules underpinning the reinterpretation of gender equality and the gender mainstreaming policies that had an impact on the implementation phase of new curricula in their institution. This case is particularly interesting as it refers to a country in which mainstreaming gender in higher education has been prescribed by law but where the resistance to change is demonstrably high.

In order to explore the institutionalisation of gender equality and the career progression of women, the FI perspective suggests that institutions constrain or favour certain types of behaviour (Chappell et al. , 2006). Institutions change over time, while apparently showing stability. This has inspired scholars to identify and describe mechanisms of incremental institutional change (Van der Heijden, 2012): displacement, drift, conversion and in particular institutional layering, "the introduction of new rules on top of or alongside existing ones" (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010, p. 15). Campbell (2004, 2009) suggests that incremental institutional change may require bricolage, the recombination of institutional principles and practices in new ways, and/or, translation, when new elements are blended into already existing institutional arrangements.

3. Athena SWAN Charter, Ireland

The Athena Project, 1999-2007, was a UK based national Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine (STEMM) diversity project to advance and promote the careers of women in STEMM disciplines in higher education and increase the number of women recruited into top posts.

The Athena Project initiative has been continued by the Athena Scientific Women's Academic Network (SWAN) Charter: https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/about-athena-swan) launched in 2005 in the UK to advance the representation of women in STEMM, with the support of the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), now ADVANCE HE. The Athena SWAN Charter encourages and recognises commitment to advancing women's careers in higher education and research in four areas: representation; progression of students into academia; journey through career milestones; and the working environment for all staff.

Athena SWAN (AS) represents an award that universities, departments and research institutes can apply for by initially signing up to the Charter's ten key principles. Members are expected to apply for an institutional Bronze award within three years of joining the Charter, starting on a path that may lead to a Silver, and finally, a Gold award. The data needed for submitting award applications are collated and analysed by Self Assessment Teams (SATs), comprised of members of staff within the institution/School/Department. The application must include an action plan, defining, for each action addressing (currently or in the following four years) the issues identified in the application, success/outcome measure, the persons (or positions) who will be responsible for the action, and a timescale. Actions, and their measures of success, should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound (SMART). In May 2015 the Charter was expanded in the UK to facilitate applications from Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Law disciplines (AHSSBL).

In Ireland, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) were partners in the INTEGER FP7 project (2011-2015) that sought urgent and high-level policy changes to ensure gender equality, through acting as institutional change agents. TCD's INTEGER teams composition were modeled on Athena SWAN Self Assessment Teams, following consultations with Athena SWAN award holders in the UK. "In order to anchor/institutionalise the gains from INTEGER, and build upon them, required an external stimulus which was provided by the establishment of an Athena SWAN national committee which led to the extension of the Athena SWAN awards to Irish HEIs" (Drew *et al.*, 2018, p. 329).

Following discussions with Irish HEIs and key stakeholder RFOs, the AS Charter was launched in Ireland in 2015. By 2018, eight universities and one Institute of Technology in Ireland had achieved Bronze institutional awards. The importance of gaining the award has increased as a consequence of the decision of three of Ireland's RFOs (Science Foundation Ireland, the Irish Research Council and the Health Research Board) requirement that Higher Education Institutions should hold Bronze awards by the end of 2019, in order to be eligible for research funding and, by end of 2023, they will be expected to hold Silver awards. The decision was led by the overarching funding body the Higher Education Authority (HEA) that funds all HEIs (Higher Education Authority, 2016).

The Annual Report *Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions* (Higher Education Authority, 2016), tackled gender inequality in the Irish higher education system. Drawing on the work of the Higher Education Authority Expert Group, the Gender Equality Taskforce was established in November 2017 to identify significant measures that could accelerate progress in achieving gender equality in Irish HEIs. The Gender Equality Taskforce has developed an Action Plan to accelerate the rate of progress towards gender equality and to ensure that progress is constant and sustainable. In the meetings with stakeholders, the relevance of the Athena SWAN process to the HEIs progresses has been emphasised, and in fact the first recommendation issued in the report refers to institutional gender action plans, included in AS applications: "Each HEI will develop and implement a gender action plan (including goals, actions and targets), which will be integrated into the institution's strategic plan and into the HEI's compacts with the HEA" (Gender Equality Taskforce, 2018, p. 19)

4. Comitati Unici di Garanzia, Italy

The "Comitato Unico di Garanzia per le pari opportunità, la valorizzazione del benessere di chi lavora e contro le discriminazioni" (CUG) is a central committee to guarantee equal opportunities and promote workers' wellbeing and protection against work discrimination. Introduced in 2010 (Italian law of 4 November 2010 n. 183/art.21.), the CUG is mandatory in all Italian public sector organisations through combining the competences of the committees for equal opportunities (CPO - Comitato Pari Opportunità) and anti-mobbing.

The CUG's mandate is to guarantee: equality and equal opportunities between men and women; the absence of any form of discrimination and violence, direct and indirect, in areas related to work (access to it, and working treatment and conditions) as well as in professional training and careers/promotions; and occupational safety.

The CUG is an administrative authority, independent of politics, aimed at protecting different sectors of social relevance. Its role is the defence and protection of citizens. Each public organisation has a joint committee composed of members elected by the organisation's components. In the case of a University, the members are elected by academics, administrative staff and students with the gender ratio of 50/50 for each subgroup.

A CUG has proactive, advisory and verification tasks to implement data collection and analysis, positive action plans, gender budgeting, welfare surveys and climate surveys. The public organisation should consult the CUG before adopting internal acts in its areas of competence. The formal opinion issued by the CUG is an instrument to control the discretion of the employer in matters affecting the dignity, health and freedom of workers. The CUG opinion is obligatory albeit non-binding: if the administration decides not to comply with the opinion expressed by the CUG, it must justify its reasons in the answer to the CUG. Under Italian law, the public administration can only refuse to accept the CUG's opinion in very rare cases, since this would be an arbitrary action expressing a misuse of a public authority's powers. The CUG can challenge the non-acceptance in any case. An in-depth study of this aspect, which seems to point to a contradiction, is not possible here. However, it is worth noting that Civil law applies under the Italian legal system, while in Ireland Common law is applied. The main difference between Civil law and Common law lies in the way in which general and abstract regulations are created: through laws which are based on abstract hypotheses (Civil law), and through verdicts issued by judges based on concrete cases (Common law). Therefore, the fact that a CUG is a legally entity is in itself a guarantee which enables certain obstacles to be overcome (such as non-acceptance of an opinion).

In order to carry out its task the CUG needs to be connected within the institution it belongs to and with the outside world. Its statutory role of guarantor places the CUG at the centre of a network of skills, figures and roles, internal and external to the administration, which facilitates the evaluation of every question it is asked to express its opinion about, as it has the power to interact formally with a network of organisations and individuals (Quinz, 2018). University CUGs have the power to interact with formal and informal networks, to harmonise the approaches to gender equality and facilitate, for example, work-family balance.

5. Methodology

AS and CUG are important as they are the formal institution in which the promotion of gender equality can be embedded in Universities. To identify relevant knowledge about AS and CUG, initial keyword / search string searches of electronic databases of scholarly publications were conducted. These sources have not provided a sufficient corpus of high-quality, relevant, peer-reviewed articles referring to the two initiatives in Ireland and in Italy, therefore grey literature has been added, to broaden the evidence search beyond the limits of the little corpus of academic journals (Adams et al., 2017).

This paper therefore involves the analysis of scientific literature, legislative documents, project reports planned by Higher Education institutions, national and regional reports, websites and other online documents related to AS and the CUG. Some grey literature was collected through attendance at two local meetings related to AS in a university in Ireland and a national conference and a national training event of the CUG network in Italy.

The activities took place in September - December 2018, apart from the participation at the national CUG conference, May 2018, to build an initial picture of the differences and similarities in the roles of AS and CUG in influencing the promotion of gender equality in academia, observed through the FI lenses. All persons contacted to collect documents and grey literature have been given written information about the purpose of the study, who is undertaking it (the article's author) and how it will be disseminated and used.

6. Findings

In Ireland, the threat of lack of funding for organisations that do not hold the AS Charter has recently acted as an incentive to Universities and Departments to apply for the AS award. Eligibility for research funding has become thus a strong strategy within AS, as it is a necessary step to ensuring Universities continue to make gender equality a priority. Participants in a UK study of AS "perceived that the linkage to research funding had motivated institutional leaders to be engaged in achieving Athena SWAN awards. Respondents also sometimes

stressed the importance of maintaining incentives and resources for Athena SWAN activities and the sustainability of the positive changes after the required Silver level awards were made" (Ovseiko *et al.*, 2017). The mandatory aspect of the CUG is embedded in law and sanctions are real: Universities that do not activate a CUG are banned from recruiting. However, some Universities have still not elected a CUG. "Among the major reasons that explain such a slow change to reach gender equity in research, despite the amount of available knowledge, is identified the lack of skills and experience, of universities and research institutions, to apply this approach to their own tools and procedures. The consequences are the persistence of direct and indirect discrimination, exclusion or marginalization of women from decision-making processes, from research and evaluation" (Biancheri, 2018).

The evolution of the two initiatives is another aspect emerging consistently in the white and grey literature about AS and CUG. In both initiatives there have been adjustments to adapt them to changes in society. For example, in many Italian universities, the introduction of double student ID cards for transgender students, who will be able to use their new identity in the academic field without amendments being made to the civil registry (CUG, 2013). In Ireland, Maynooth University has incorporated 'intersectionality' as part of its Athena SWAN application, taking into account factors that can overlap with gender inequality, such as race and ethnicity: "A gender action plan for 2018 to 2021 also commits the Co Kildare university to launching a gender identity and expression policy for transgender and gender-diverse staff and students" (Murray, 2018). The promotion of a broader approach to diversity and inclusion is common to the two initiatives, however, in documents such as the Piani di Azione Positive, formal documents detailing the action plans issued every three years by the CUG, is mentioned the necessity to constantly monitor gender related issues. The shift in the AS Charter towards gender equality rather than women specifically, including a focus on areas where men are underrepresented, is also considered interesting in practical terms. Its primary focus is still the systemic under-representation of women and gender inequalities.

Concerns about diluting gender issues leads to another topic: the view that gender equality is perceived as something that mainly, or only concerns women. When actions are related to gender equality rather than diversity (although both initiatives require a gender balance in their committees), the practical workload appears to fall mainly to women. A UK single case study referring this problem suggested that a "simple explanation might be that, as the under-represented gender, women felt more personal interest in becoming involved in a programme for change and the programme itself does not provide a mechanism to ensure that this work is evenly distributed"(Caffrey, et al., 2016, p. 7). This extra load in Italy has no positive impact on women's careers, and this is felt as a problem.

While in Italy the difficulties encountered within the Universities are reported, the negative perception is offset to an extent by the awareness that successful actions are favoured by the possibility of networking with other organisations' CUGs, with a positive impact on the final results. The CUG is in fact presented in public speeches as a "transmission belt between the public administration and its stakeholders" (Tomio, 2018).

7. Discussion

The results of this research show more similarities than differences among the two initiatives observed. While it is impossible to claim generalisability, the findings may contribute to future research activities focused on the collection of primary data.

According to Thelen (1999), when studying how layering is applied in organisations, incremental and endogenous change is important and the role of forces external to the organisation must be considered. The CUG is an example of layering, having added both actors and instruments to previously existing initiatives. Institutional transformation has been guided not by replacing the older committees, but merging them and adding new functions thereby favouring the creation of CUG networks across different types of organisations (Kodilja and Tomio, 2018). Smith underlined the risk of 'confusion and futility' (1983, p 164) in the layering process, and this research confirms this risk, through the time needed to get familiar with the systems, and the complexity of creating and incrementing networking outside the University.

The efforts involved in networking could have at least one positive side: the Italian documents cite almost unanimously the advantages offered by networking activities among different public organisations' CUGs. UK research suggested that the impact of the AS was perceived to be undermined by wider institutional practices,

national policies and societal norms, which are beyond the programme's reach (Caffrey 2016; Ovseiko 2017) and the Spanish research conducted in a University promoting gender equality shows resistance to change (Verge et al. (2018). It is unclear whether the Irish and Italian Universities could see AS and CUG as a contrast between a University system, which is clearly committed to gender equality, and the outside world which could interacts negatively with what would otherwise be possible to obtain through wider institutional and societal changes. The strong collaboration among CUGs belonging to different public organisations under the Italian initiative offers a chance of coordinating actions.

The risk of gender segregation described in UK based research (Munir *et al.*, 2014; Caffrey, Wyatt and Fudge, 2016) is evident in Italy, where the events promoting the CUGs in Universities promoted by the *Conferenza Nazionale degli Organismi di Parità delle Università italiane*, the national network of CUG members, are overwhelmingly attended by women, suggesting that there is still a real risk of gender equality being considered a women's issue even in contexts, like the CUGs, in which there is a formal gender balance.

8. Conclusions

This exploratory paper provides an overview of AS and CUG based on desk research. It is obvious that geographical size facilitates uniformity of approaches and coherence in Ireland, where all the 7 Universities and 14 Institutes of Technology are currently involved in the AS Charter. In Italy, there are 68 state universities. However, despite this difference there is a general appreciation of the progress seen in Universities/Departments where AS/CUGs are actively implemented, as well as of the advantages of belonging to networks promoting training and exchange of information, the AS with other Universities and the CUG also with external organisations with which they must collaborate by law.

In conclusion, the implications for practice and research may be useful for Universities engaging in international projects promoting gender equality projects. As suggested by UK research (Ovseiko *et al.*, 2017), survey questionnaires could be used to collect comparable data at international level.

Gender Equality Plans represent a core element of the AS initiative and the EU approach to gender equality in the Horizon2020 programme. Observing the structure of the Italian Piani delle Azione Positive (PAP), the three-year strategic planning documents issued by each CUG, it is evident that only minor adjustments are needed to transform them into Gender Equality Plans, as in the AS initiative. This is indirectly demonstrated by observation of the work done by numerous Italian Universities in many EU-funded projects aimed at implementing Gender Equality Plans, available on FP7/H2020 project websites.

The higher education sector has already shown willingness and ability to harmonise and coordinate its efforts at international level. One example is the process that led to the European Credit Transfer and accumulation System (ECTS) credits, the standard means for comparing, measuring and recognising learning achievements in higher education across the European Union and other collaborating European countries. Nurturing a similar process to formally harmonise existing gender equality initiatives in academia might create a more efficient European academic system incorporating gender equality and inclusion.

Acknowledgements

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