

The Academic Feminist Fight Club

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Abstract: Why has gender equality still not been accomplished in academia? Studies and experiences from gender equality practitioners have pointed towards several problems like resistance, power issues and the knowledge-to-action gap (Karner et al. 2017). Additionally, another cause could be identified: conflicts of feminist actors who share a common goal, but differ in their 'gender knowledges' (Albenga 2016, Wetterer 2009), and in their status. In European gender equality projects often three prototypes of feminist actors are working together: the feminist engineer/scientist, the gender equality officer and the gender scholar. Prototypically, all three of them are using their 'everyday gender knowledge', the gender equality officers draw additionally their expertise on practical 'gender expert knowledge', while gender scholars debate 'scientific gender knowledge' (Wetterer 2009). These three types of knowledges can lead to a "conflict of knowledges" (Albenga 2016, p.140). This is the first arena of the feminist conflict in academia. The second arena of the feminist conflict can be explained with a concept of 'outsiders' and 'insiders' (Laube 2017). While feminist engineers/scientists, gender equality officers and gender scholars with permanent positions at universities are in fact in an 'outside' position because of their feminist commitment, they are because of their permanent positions, 'within' the university, that is why Heather Laube (ibid.) calls them 'outsiders within'. Contrary to this 'within' position, project-based gender scholars are 'outsiders' (ibid.), who share the feminist idea of gender equality in academia with all the other mentioned actors, and also bring in scientific and often also gender expert knowledge, but their status in the academic hierarchy is lower. The aim of this paper is to show that gender equality in academia could be reached more efficiently, if feminists of all backgrounds and with different knowledges would join a 'Feminist Fight Club' (Bennett 2016), which not only aims at fighting sexism, discrimination and inequalities without fighting each other ('rule number three', Bennett 2016). The innovative element of the proposed 'Academic Feminist Fight Club' is the method of co-producing gender equality knowledge with different actors, which is key to overcome knowledge conflicts (Karner et al. 2017).

Keywords: gender equality, feminist knowledge, gender knowledges, situated knowledges, knowledge-to-action-gap, co-production of knowledge

1. Gender equal academia: A feminist utopia?

The European Union has, for decades, policies in place to foster gender equality in science and research. In the currently running research funding programme 'Horizon 2020' the promotion of gender equality is not only limited to increasing the share of women in all academic career stages, overcoming gender biases and discrimination in decision making processes, but also by strengthening gender as a cross-cutting theme in research generally:

„The activities developed under Horizon 2020 should promote equality between women and men in research and innovation, by addressing in particular the underlying causes of gender imbalance, by exploiting the full potential of both female and male researchers, and by integrating the gender dimension into the research and innovation content as well as by paying particular attention to ensuring gender balance, subject to the situation in the field of research and innovation concerned, in evaluation panels and in other relevant advisory and expert bodies in order to improve the quality of research and to stimulate innovation. Activities should also aim at implementation of principles relating to equality between women and men as laid down in Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on European Union and in Article 8 TFEU.“

(The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union 2013, recital 25).

In an interim evaluation of gender equality as a crosscutting issue in Horizon 2020 an expert group stated that a number of successful steps could already have been accomplished. For instance, gender has been integrated in the whole research funding cycle in the European Union, from legal frameworks, work programmes, proposal evaluation, project monitoring to the reporting phase. To support this, gender trainings for the personnel of the Commission and involved agencies have been carried out. Advisory groups are now better gender balanced; evaluation teams are on a promising way. And very importantly, legal provisions for gender equality have been secured with respective articles in the framework programme and standard grant agreement (European Commission 2017).

However, the same evaluation report points also to several shortcomings in the efforts of Horizon 2020 to foster gender equality. First of all, indicators were flawed, some key performance indicators have not been measured reliably and projects falsely flagged as covering the gender dimension in their content, when they in reality did not. Having more women in panels had been identified as not enough to gain more gender fair selection or research processes, decision-making bodies would additionally need more gender expertise. Beside other mentioned shortcomings the expert group states that the slow reaching of gender balance in research teams is a huge problem, which can be explained with a lack of institutional changes towards more gender equality in research and innovation (ibid.).

And why is structural change in academia so slow? Studies and experiences from gender equality practitioners often name resistance and power issues (Bustelo et al. 2016) and lately also the knowledge-to-action gap (Karner et al. 2017, Thaler et al. in print). The later phenomenon would explain why knowledge from gender theory and research could not have been translated effectively into gender policies and practices (ibid.)

The above-mentioned evaluating expert group of the European Commission also concluded that producing and improving gender equality knowledge is an extremely important objective for fostering gender equality in science and research (European Commission 2017).

However, producing more gender knowledge will not be enough to fulfil the feminist utopia of a gender equal academic world, certain conflict arenas have to be dealt with first.

2. A feminist conflict based on diverse gender knowledges

Decades of gender equality research has shown that it needs a structural change as well as the integration of all relevant stakeholders in the organisational change process to sustainably reach more gender equality (EIGE 2016). However, it is crucial to keep in mind that all stakeholders in a structural change process, and this means also all involved feminist actors relate to diverse gender knowledges. The notion of diverse gender knowledges refers to a concept from German sociologists (Wetterer 2009 based on an original idea by Dölling 2005), which distinguishes the everyday gender knowledge of all humans from gender expert knowledge of gender practitioners (like gender equality officers at universities or gender trainers), and again from scientific gender knowledge, which is produced and passed on by gender scholars and researchers.

The main argument of this paper is that these different knowledges can lead to conflicts of feminist actors, who might share a common goal, but differ in their gender knowledges (Albenga 2016, Wetterer 2009), and what is also important: in their status.

In projects funded by the European Commission to foster gender equality, often three prototypes of feminist actors are working together: the feminist engineer/scientist, the gender practitioner (equality officer) and the gender scholar.

Prototypically, all three of them would use their everyday gender knowledge, meaning drawing their knowledge upon personal and peer group experiences, portrayals of femininities and masculinities in advertising and media etc.

Gender practitioners, like gender equality officers additionally use gender expert knowledge, which is based on a limited number of gender theories and specific knowledge about gender relations in their organisation. They translate their knowledge into 'gender competencies', which can be trained.

Gender scholars and researchers on the other hand challenge existing gender theories, provide new empirical and/or theoretical insights and often deconstruct the very gender binary, which is the core of everyday gender knowledge.

These three types of gender knowledges are building the groundwork of the first arena of the feminist conflict in academia, which Albenga calls the "conflict of knowledges" (2016, p.140).

The second arena of the feminist conflict can be explained with Heather Laube's concept of feminists as outsiders and insiders (2017). While feminist engineers/scientists, gender equality officers and gender scholars

with permanent positions at universities might share an 'outside' position because of their feminist values and interventions, they are in fact 'within' the university, because of their permanent contracts that is why Laube (ibid.) calls them 'outsiders within'. Contrary to this 'within' position, project-based gender scholars with temporary contracts are in both senses 'outsiders' (ibid.) They share the feminist idea of gender equality in academia with all the other mentioned actors, and due to their feminist commitment and system critique they are outsiders. But although they bring in scientific and often also expert gender knowledges, their situation is more precarious and their status in the academic hierarchy is lower than those of their feminist colleagues in permanent position.

Laube (2017) analyses that the stronger institutionalisation of gender studies in US American universities (440 gender institutes and programmes are nearly half of all worldwide) helped structural changes in the US, and makes gender equality efforts on the other hand more difficult in those European institutions where gender studies – and hence scientific and expert gender knowledge – are not structurally present. With gender projects financed by the European Union also those universities and research organisation have been part of structural change efforts in the last years, but then driven by feminist scientists/engineers with permanent positions or/and project-financed gender scholars. While the ones have the advantage of staying at their universities even when the project has finished, they have the disadvantage of a lacking gender network/support at their organisations. The others have the scientific gender knowledge and also a gender network, but their gender network is as outside as they are themselves, once the project ends.

Beside the arena of the feminist conflict, this situation of lacking institutionalisation of gender studies describes a structural weakness in some European universities, which has to be addressed by structural change efforts too.

Back to the feminist conflict and its groundwork, the diverse knowledges. It has been explained that everyday, expert and scientific gender knowledges are potentially conflicting knowledges. There has to be added of course that the very notion of diverse knowledges (!) is first and foremost based on Donna Haraway's "argument for situated and embodied knowledges" (1988, p. 583), which she concludes in a "hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing (ibid., p. 585)." In the last two chapters, this paper will now present a proposal, how systems of knowledge could be transformed.

3. The 'academic feminist fight club'

This paper has focussed on a specific clipping of the European academia and their efforts to become more gender equal: feminist scholars and practitioners who work together in so called structural change projects. It has been argued that although research funding and policies of the European Union improved the gender equality in European higher education and research in quite some ways, the gender balance in research teams, gender as cross-cutting issue in science and research, and structural gender equality in academia and research organisation have not been achieved so far (European Commission 2017).

Knowledge-to-action-gaps and knowledge conflicts of stakeholders have been identified as problems, which should not be underestimated. Also the variety on feminist actors and their different status can have an influence on the project process and outcome. It has been shown that in European gender research projects feminist engineers or scientists often work side on side with gender practitioners and gender scholars. While all three of them are using their 'everyday gender knowledge', the gender practitioners refer on practical 'gender expert knowledge', while gender scholars use 'scientific gender knowledge' (Wetterer 2009). It is further complicating that scientific knowledge is seen as superior than practical or lay knowledge, this often leads to inequalities based on knowledge hierarchies. All these arguments can be seen as reasons for a "conflict of knowledges" in the realm of gender projects (Albenga 2016, p.140), or to be more precise as a feminist conflict of knowledges.

Now, what would happen, if feminists of all backgrounds despite their different gender knowledges would join their forces and fight inequalities together?

Jessica Bennett (2016) coined the term 'Feminist Fight Club' for meetings, where women shared their discriminatory job experiences and the common goal of fighting sexism, discrimination and inequalities but without fighting each other. 'Fight Club' is originally a satirical novel (and later an iconic movie directed by David

Fincher based on that very book) by Chuck Palahniuk (1996), which is – in a nutshell – centred on the idea of a man establishing a secret fight club, to overcome his insomnia. While the first two rules of Palahniuk's fight club are "You don't talk about fight club" (ibid. p. 48), the first two rules of Bennett's (2016a) feminist fight clubs are: "You must talk about the Feminist Fight Club!" (p. 1). Bennett uses the pop-cultural knowledge about Palahniuk's respectively Fincher's fight club and its famous two first rules (to not talk about this secret club) and adapts them humorously and paradoxically to gain attention for a feminist intervention. With this new approach she not only digs the probably dusty idea of women discussion groups out, but also moreover reacts to the self-harming fights of diverse feminists in general public, media as well as in the academic discussion. Of course Bennett's idea behind her feminist fight club is not new and many feminists wrote about feminism, which is for everybody (see for instance bell hooks 2000), but Bennett appeals also a young and non-academic audience with her feminist fight club:

"The original Feminist Fight Club began in a cramped living room in New York City, with cheap wine and cheese. But there's no right or wrong way to form a fight club of your own, and in fact there are chapters of the Feminist Fight Club forming all over the globe. In Austin, there's a 500-person Facebook group that shares news and advice; during the Women's March, the Feminist Fight Club Toronto gathered to craft protest signs and peacefully demonstrate together. There are clubs on college campuses, in a middle school in Seattle, inside corporate offices, and even a real life fight club in New York –that is, a boxing club for teen girls. (Their slogan: "Together we can punch out the patriarchy.")"

(Bennett 2016b, p.1)

And this is what a potential 'Academic Feminist Fight Club' could learn from her. Such a club should be open for everybody, should unite diverse feminists and fight for a common goal: gender equality in academia.

In CHANGE a new approach of a gender equality project is tested which could be seen as an academic feminist fight club. In the last chapter of this paper the rationale of CHANGE will be explained.

4. Fighting together for structural change

CHANGE is an implementation project aiming at structural changes towards gender equality in science and research. Previous projects on gender in academia often finished with stating current gender inequalities, naming several barriers for women's careers, and giving recommendations for gender equality in science and research (Carvalho et al. 2013, European Commission 2012). But – this is one of the basic ideas of CHANGE – due to the knowledge-to-action gap (described by Strauss et al. 2009) these recommendations are not always put into action.

Additionally, the politics of feminist knowledge conflict and power issues, as described in the previous chapters of this paper, led to unsolved inequality issues in European academia.

This means, gender experts and scholars have provided a large body of evidence and gender knowledge, but there seem to be effective strategies missing, how this knowledge can be put into practice. In other words, the knowledge-to-action gap must be closed by integrating relevant stakeholders from the beginning, integrate diverse knowledges and overcome feminist conflicts. Thus

- the different individual positions of involved feminists: outsiders and outsiders within (Laube 2017),
- the conflict of diverse gender knowledges: everyday, expert and scientific gender knowledges (Wetterer 2009),
- and the potential tensions between academic and practice expertise in the context of gender training (Bustelo et al. 2016) have to be addressed.

But how to acknowledge these different positions, solving potential knowledge conflicts and reaching the goal of structural change in academic and research institutions?

In the described project CHANGE experiences from sustainability research, transdisciplinary approaches, adult education, and gender studies have been brought together to an integrated approach of co-production of gender knowledge. This idea of co-constructing knowledge together, and building communities of practices with the participating stakeholders has been tested in other knowledge brokerage and so called RRI ('Responsible

Research and Innovation') projects, and has indeed proven as a very successful strategy to enable structural changes (cf. Karner et al. 2016 tested this in the area of sustainable food systems).

Co-producing knowledge can also minimise resistances, resulting from expected changes in power relations (as a consequence of structural change in academia). In order to gain commitment from relevant stakeholders and key actors in research organisations for these change processes, they need to be involved bottom-up and in time, and not when results are fixed and actions recommended. Stakeholders (like university and research organisation managers, research funding directors, gender equality officers, research policy makers, etc.) need to be involved in good time, and their experiences and expertise be heard (Lee et al. 2010; Karner et al. 2017). Therefore, CHANGE uses 'Transfer Agents' (TAs) as relevant institutional actors who are committed to gender equality and structural change in their organisation and have a certain authority within their organisation (Thaler 2016) as active agents of change. TAs can help understand the specific organisational logics and take care that the co-produced gender knowledge is applicable for the respective organisations and expressed in words, relevant stakeholders can relate to. Thus this co-produced hands-on knowledge can be easier put into policies and practices. On the other side, TAs transfer the co-produced knowledge into their organisations and inform others explicitly and formally (for instance through changed recruitment procedures), but also very importantly during networking activities or even in informal contexts (for instance sport activities among members of the management). Furthermore, TAs stay in their organisation after the project ends and can help in a sustainable transition process including long-term activities, which can be planned but not fully implemented during a gender equality project duration.

The method of co-producing and communicating gender equality knowledge is in the centre of CHANGE. With this very method these three objectives of structural change are addressed:

- remove barriers to the recruitment, retention and career progression of female researchers,
- address gender imbalances in decision making processes and bodies, and
- strengthening the gender dimension in science and research.

These objectives are in line with the previously mentioned goals for gender equality in the Horizon 2020 funding programme of the European Commission.

It is expected that with the approach of CHANGE, the results should differ from other projects, as the co-produced gender knowledge will be implemented already during the project lifespan, in form of contextually-based gender equality actions in the respective organisations. In the beginning so called quick actions provide short-term wins (Peterson & Dahmen-Adkins 2018), which help to bring employees of the respective organisations on board, as they see that the project immediately gives something back (for instance via a staff survey, which can bring visibility to certain problems; *ibid.*). Later mid- and long-term actions are planned and implemented, based on a regularly updated gender equality plan.

Although the coordinators of the project have long years of gender expertise, and also experience with RRI and knowledge brokerage projects, and they can provide the necessary facilitation competencies to integrate knowledges and build communities of (gender) practices; the aspiring project goals can only be reached in a team effort. And the team consists of a committed group of diverse feminists,

- who are due to their feminist critique 'outsiders' in their organisations, most of them are 'within', but some are not, because they work project-based (Laube 2017);
- who draw upon different sets of gender knowledges (everyday, expert and scientific gender knowledge; Wetterer 2009);
- who come from different countries, organisational contexts and disciplinary backgrounds;
- who have diverse experiences with feminist practices and policies;
- who have differing affinities towards the actual methods for co-producing knowledge (like workshops and reflection exercises).

Despite all their diversities, this team of feminists shares a common vision of changing their own organisation, then changing other organisations in their regions, nations and finally changing academia generally towards more gender equality. And this is why CHANGE can be seen as a prototype for an academic feminist fight club.

The next years will show how successfully this club could reach its goals. But for now they simply follow the first four rules of their club:

- 1. You must talk about the Academic Feminist Fight Club!
- 2. You must talk about the Academic Feminist Fight Club!
- 3. We fight gender inequalities in academia, not each other!
- 4. We all value our different feminist knowledges and co-produce gender knowledge together!

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