Gender, transformation of higher education and the division of social and political power

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On the (dis)connectedness of gender studies and higher education studies

Our point of departure is a fact confirmed by research and by general public perception: in relation to men, women are noticeably underrepresented in the division of social and political power and responsibility. This raises a series of questions, one of the most fundamental of which is: Why is this the case and what are the decisive contributing factors? Several earlier studies established a link between the proportion of women with higher education and the proportion of women in Parliament (e.g., Rule, 1987). Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2000, 9) summarise these studies as follows:

Early sociological accounts commonly regarded the social system as playing a critical role in determining the eligibility pool for elected office, including the occupational, educational and socioeconomic status of women. Accounts have emphasized the importance of the pool of women in the sort of related professional, administrative and managerial occupations like the law and journalism that commonly lead to political careers, providing the flexibility, financial resources, experiences and social networks that facilitate running for office [...].

In view of the fact that we are dealing with a complex set of issues, it is not possible to attribute this phenomenon as a whole to a single factor; however, factors that have been shown to be more important should be treated in more detail. This being one of the central objectives of the present research project, in this chapter we will focus on a specific question: Can higher education or the higher education system and the changes within it contribute to this, and, if so, to what extent or in what way? Given that the notion of higher education will not only be considered as a statistical indicator in population analysis but in a wider context, we can further broaden the question: To what extent can movements, trends and structural changes in contemporary higher education contribute directly or indirectly to this phenomenon?

At first glance, recent studies devote a great deal of attention to, for example, shifts in the gender structure of the student population as well as academic staff. Statistical overviews enable fairly detailed comparisons between various institutions, countries and regions, which yield results revealing crucial differences (e.g., between the European north and south), but
also some similarities (e.g., a growing number of female students at all levels of study). On the other hand, when more fundamental questions relating to contemporary higher education systems and institutions are addressed, the gender dimension is often ascribed lower priority in research, with the exception of some, still rather rare feminist studies (cf. Morley, L. and Walsh, 1996; Brooks and Mackinnon, 2001; Danowitz Sagaria, 2007). It is entirely possible to concur with the editor of one of these monographs, who says that “[c]ontemporary scholars of higher education change tend to overlook gender, and gender scholars tend to overlook higher education adaptation” (Danowitz Sagaria, 2007, 1).

Up to the beginning of the 20th century, the world of higher education was completely masculinised, after which it gradually opened up to women. In the past two decades, at the turn of the millennium, female students and graduates throughout Europe have begun to dominate the student population, initially as undergraduates and today in growing numbers as postgraduate students. It is more than evident, however, that this trend is out of proportion with women’s participation in the division of social and political power and responsibility at the national and regional levels as well as at the level of higher education institutions themselves. We shall focus on these aspects in the following pages.

Key issues

The disproportionateness in question is a result of very different factors. As an example, let us consider the current proportions of female students in Europe, which persist under 50% only in Cyprus, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Germany and Turkey.1 Similarity is thus demonstrated between such diverse countries that interpreting data with the geographical-political criterion alone is inadequate; other factors must also be taken into account, including economic, social, cultural, religious, and similar factors.

These factors can further be observed either in the macroenvironment (e.g., in the national or even wider regional environment) or the microenvironment (e.g., at the level of an individual higher education institution or even an academic discipline). In the process, we can reach quite different conclusions, thus requiring a theoretical approach to the problem and qualitative research capable of connecting the complex dynamics of higher education with the perspectives offered by contemporary gender studies. From an overview the literature, it ensues that this is a task only just starting to be tackled in an international framework.

Due to the understandable limitations of the present study, we will focus on the identification of only some of the factors listed above, primarily those that have a direct connection with the

1 Only a few years ago, this group included certain other countries and the proportions were even lower. According to Eurydice data (2011, 17), the prevailing proportions are now close to 50%, or, in more detail: Cyprus 49.0%, Liechtenstein 33.0%, Luxemburg 48.3%, Germany 49.7% and Turkey 43.1%. It should be added that quite a few countries only slightly exceed the 50% limit, having only recently advanced to this group: Greece (50.1%), The Netherlands (51.7%), Austria (53.3%), Portugal (53.5%), Spain (54.0%), etc. These figures relate to higher education as a whole; at universities (countries with a binary system) the proportion is further decreased (to 47.7% in Germany) and increased (to 59.3% in Cyprus). The average proportion for the entire EU27 is 55.3%, or 55.2% at universities and 57.6% at non-university higher education institutions. The highest proportions of women are recorded in Iceland and Latvia (64.4%), Estonia (61.7%), Norway (60.8%), Slovakia and Sweden (60.3%), etc. In the Eurydice publication referred to, Slovenia stands proportionally at 58.1%. 

key changes in higher education. We will attempt to reflect not only upon what effect the rising level of education in the population is having on the problem outlined here, but also upon how specific mechanisms operating within higher education affect participation in social and political power and responsibility. An additional motivation for this approach was drawn from the trend indicating that the proportion of women is not only on the rise amongst the student or “graduated” population, but also amongst the staff of higher education institutions.

The questions we ask are, therefore: Do mechanisms exist within the dynamics of higher education that – both in the undergraduate and postgraduate period – contribute to gender inequality in inclusion in important social and political functions? Is there a connection between gender inequality in integration into “society at large” and gender inequality within higher education institutions themselves (e.g., in gaining leading positions in universities, faculties, departments, research groups, etc.)? What then are the gender-specific factors within the dynamics of higher education, and how so they contribute to (in)equality? Can the rise in the proportion of women with higher education serve as a lever of their better positioning in the division of social and political power?

It seems that statistical surveys as well as critical literature provide ample evidence confirming the hypotheses contained in these questions. We will attempt to relate them to some of the central topics of contemporary studies on higher education, particularly the problem of its modern “massification”. The exponential growth in the proportion of the student population is directly linked to broader access to education for various social groups that were historically excluded from higher education, or whose access routes to higher education were ridden with significantly more difficulties. Does this “massification” solve the (past) problem of the exclusion of women from higher education, and does it provide an opportunity to solve the (current) problem of their unequal participation in key social and political functions?

Transformations of higher education: from “elite” to “mass” to “universal”

Universities have a long history of more than eight centuries. Although some of their characteristics remain constant, in many ways they have undergone numerous profound transformations. In fact, it appears that over time the frequency and depth of these changes have escalated; this is particularly true for the changing “idea” and social functions of universities. The 20th century was a time when women started gaining access to universities, both as students and teachers. Whereas, by the beginning of the 21st century, female students had become the majority, female teachers had not (yet).

As the last radical shift in the “idea of the university”, the relevant literature most commonly lists the period from the 1970s to the present day, and a key phrase used in relation to this era is the transformation of higher education. Many authors of important studies on higher education agree that there have been fundamental and essential shifts in the objectives and functions of higher education institutions, as well as a transformation of higher education in its entirety as a social sub-system. All of these tectonic shifts are clearly associated with the exponential growth in the size of the student population. In the early 1970s, Martin Trow
(1973), one of the most cited authors in this context, formed a theory on the transition from “elite” to “mass” to “universal” higher education, placing this in relation to the ongoing discussion on the transformations of higher education, which is also relevant to the present enquiry.

Trow points to the fact that “[t]he three phases – elite, mass, and universal education – are, in Max Weber’s sense, ideal types” (ibid. 18; emphasis by the author), and that, rather than being derived from only one of the developed industrial societies (USA), they are abstracted from numerous components of the empirical reality shared by all of these societies. These three concepts must therefore be regarded as theoretical models that enable us to understand higher education systems and their dynamics. Despite his understanding these phases sequentially, it is obvious that Trow did not treat them as inevitable developmental steps with each new phase completely replacing the previous one; on the contrary, “he saw definite possibilities of examples of elite forms surviving into the mass and universal stages” (Brennan, 2004, 22), as one of the commentators of Trow’s work believes.2

“Massification” is set in the forefront of the analysis by Trow (1973, 1): “In every advanced society the problems of higher education are problems associated with growth” and this “growth has its impact on every form of activity and manifestation of higher education”. It is in this perspective that the changes in accessing and exiting education are detected first and with the least difficulty: the elite phase is marked by Trow as a system encompassing 0–15% of the cohort, with the mass phase increasing this proportion to 16–50%, and the universal phase exceeding 50%. However, this is only the “superficial” dimension of the transformational processes, with other more complex dimensions revealing themselves under the surface, e.g., changes in the functions of higher education, changes in the curriculum and forms of study, shifts in the conception of the form of students’ “careers” and in the influence of experience acquired at university, new and changed characteristics of the way higher education institutions operate, shifts in the position of power-holders and decision-makers in institutions, and changes in the understanding and implementation of academic standards.

The Second World War was, for Trow, “the watershed event for higher education in modern democratic societies” (2006, 245), triggering increased demand for a labour force with more than high school education. Prior to and immediately after the war, the proportion of those studying in these societies was 3–5% of the generation, around 1970 it reached 10–20%, while towards the end of the century it exceeded 30%. With the growing size of the student population, the significance of university enrolment and the actual goals of higher education were subject to increasing change: “first from being a privilege to being a right, and then, […] to being something close to an obligation for students in some class and ethnic groups” (ibid., 246-247; emphasis by the author). The changing social context therefore re-established the basic functions of higher education: in its elite phase, the key function was to prepare the new generations of the ruling class to take over the leading roles in society, in its mass phase the focus became the transmission of skills for a broad range of technical and professional roles to

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2 Trow (2006) devoted particular attention to Brennan’s reflections in the contemporary adaptation of his original text.
a large proportion of the young, while the universal phase aims to equip the majority of the population with the means to cope with rapid social and technological change.

Like the majority of his commentators, Trow often linked the process of the transformation of higher education with effects that can be identified in class and ethnic contexts, while the context of gender remained virtually unexplored until the advent of contemporary feminist studies, which, as mentioned above, are still relatively rare in this particular field of research. This does not, however, give us a reason to doubt that the passage from elite to mass and universal education should also have direct and/or indirect effects on changes in the gender structure of the population entering and leaving universities, as well as on their participation in social and political power and responsibility. These aspects have only attracted more attention in recent times, but certain general principles, which can be applied in a more detailed treatment, have already been presented in the opening discussion. Trow (ibid., 245) himself says, among other things:

> a high growth rate placed great strains on the existing structures of governance, of administration, and above all of socialization [at higher education institutions]. When a very large proportion of all the members of an institution are new recruits, they threaten to overwhelm the processes, whereby recruits to a more slowly growing system are inducted into its value system and learn its norms and forms. When a faculty or department grows from, say, five to 20 members within three or 4 years, and when the new staff are predominantly young men and women fresh from postgraduate study, then they largely define the norms of academic life in that faculty and its standards.

In light of this, the phenomenon of the so-called “feminisation” of higher (not only primary and intermediate) education should receive proper treatment. The “growth and expansion” of the system is not only a matter of education statistics, but also of qualitative analyses that are often less “simply transparent” than statistical charts. “Massification” has a strong impact on (micro)academic cultures, institution-specific relations and patterns of behaviour, paradigmatic changes and similar. In the background of the attention directed towards the monitoring and analysis of the growth of student populations there is (and was) often a concealed progressivist expectation that this strengthens the process of the implementation of (a higher level of) equality, both in education and in society in general. Although this cannot entirely be denied, we know from numerous ongoing discussions that the statistically higher participation of various social groups in education does not in itself reduce social inequality; on the contrary, higher education systems in the universal phase are characterised by the reproduction of inequality, which, however, occurs in (completely) new horizons, therefore differing in its manifestations from the “former” inequality. In other words, “the elite forms survive” (Brennan, 2004) both at the mass and the universal phases of the transformation of higher education.

Although some forms of inequality may no longer be recognised in their classical form, they are still present in the amalgamated “new forms”. These forms are particularly identifiable when the student population is observed in the universal phase against its socioeconomic, ethnic and, undoubtedly, its gender backgrounds. In this regard, Brennan, for example, when analysing institutional differentiation in higher education with respect to “the myth of
meritocracy”, lists some characteristics of the student population in present-day England that can to a large extent be identified in other countries as well:

Students from working-class origins are much more likely to have part-time jobs and other external commitments alongside their studies. They are more likely to study vocational subjects, more likely to live at home, and consequently have less time for the social aspects of university life. And at those institutions which recruit high proportions of such students, there is likely to be relatively little ‘social life’ at the university. Thus, the broader social and networking aspects of the higher education student experience – which appear to be particularly valued in the UK labour market – may tend to be absent at many of the institutions at the ‘mass’ end of the system (Brennan, 2013, 191).

Brennan intentionally speaks of the myth of meritocracy. As a rule, the dominant academic discourse of today refuses to abandon the principle of merit as the only rational foundation on which to base an academic community, but contemporary research of the academic sphere has pointed out the dependence of this foundation on multiple conditions. Amongst contemporary reference works, we cannot avoid mentioning the celebrated work on “academic tribes and territories” (originally published in 1989; the 2nd edition from 2001 is cited here), in which the authors write:

Like any other tribal social formation, academic tribes have internal divisions of power, status and labour organised on a basis which is not only meritocratic. Social structural factors play an important part in conditioning the shape of these internal divisions and central among which is gender (Betcher in Trowler, 2001, 54).

Even though this aspect was not treated in detail in their study, the subsequent discussion showed that, particularly when gender is the key issue, it holds all the more that “elite forms survive”, but in a new way. That which only a quarter of a century ago was regarded as the key strategy in overcoming inequality in this field – that the low participation of women in higher education should be remedied by more open access and expanded enrolment – today seems like a contradiction, if not a complete anachronism, in a situation where the male student population has become the minority. The question nonetheless remains: Has the initial problem been “definitively” solved now that, statistically, the proportions are actually reversed after having first become equal? Research (e.g., Salvi del Pero and Bytchkova, 2013; Eurydice, 2011) shows that there are important and frequently gender-conditioned differences or inequalities even in the student populations of those countries with higher education in the universal phase. These differences become particularly evident when the students enrolled at individual institutions are studied from the perspective of institutional differentiation (which has intensified through “massification”).

In recent decades, “massification” has contributed to a rapid increase in the number of teaching and research staff. This is precisely where recent studies have clearly and consistently shown how the “elite forms” can survive in new contexts. While women have come to represent the majority of the student population, higher education by and large remains a field of “male domination”, especially in top positions that are the domain of key responsibilities and decisions. Studies of inequality in higher education from the perspective of gender show that inequality increases exponentially on the path from university enrolment
via the study process to its end results: “Women fare relatively well in the area of access, less so in terms of the college experience, and are particularly disadvantaged with respect to the outcomes of schooling” (Jacobs, 1996, 154). The process of “massification” in higher education thus leads to gender inequality becoming “less a matter of inequality in access, and more a matter of gender differentiation in educational experiences and outcomes” (ibid., 177).

It is clear that the opportunities for inclusion in tertiary education have increased dramatically and that, from this perspective, we can no longer speak of discrimination and segregation. In the process of massification, however, the mechanisms of discrimination and segregation have moved to deeper levels of the education system. The educational “experience” at a particular type of institution (or discipline, or level of study, etc.) is not comparable with the “experience” at some other type of institution, and this determines career differences, i.e., the opportunities that a male or female graduate either has or does not have. This is in fact one of the important levers that strengthens “male domination” in academic institutions.

On the other hand, we know that the increase in staff began to be associated with “feminisation” (“this is confirmed by statistical indicators”), while the “massification” of higher education in general is linked with “falling standards” (“elitism is being lost in the universal system”). Such direct and simple associations are, however, difficult to support with arguments, in view of the fact that the inner logic of academic environments is far more complex. There are always possibilities for these milieus to react to the direct influences of the environment according to their own logic and to specific power; this is not, however, typical only of higher education in its current, universal phase. As far back as the early 1980s, when Pierre Bourdieu analysed the French Homo academicus from the end of the 1960s (i.e., during the break with the elite and the transition to mass higher education), in his “concern to expand the professorial body” – one of the key concerns representing the foundations of an academic career and above all the structuring of academic power – he pointed out that

[for the less prestigious disciplines [e.g. in geography] […] the logic of the defence of the professorial body transpires not in the university diplomas of the newly appointed teachers […], but in feminization, or in a widening of the age range from which the teachers are chosen.

This is also supported by data:

Thus posts of rank B, which had only 15.2 per cent women in 1963, had 23.6 per cent in 1967; moreover, whereas the majority of teachers appointed before 1950 entered higher education before the age of 28, the mode of distribution according to the same criterion for teachers appointed after 1960 is between 30 and 35 (Bourdieu, 1988, 137-138).

In modern discussions, we could undoubtedly find more points of similar emphasis, albeit of varying weight. The last decade has witnessed particularly interesting discussions related to individual academic advancement and the closely associated “research excellence”. Here, then, we can address the issue of participation in academic power and responsibility, which finds expression in the vast production of contributions in research journals, as well as in public and political debates (e.g., European Platform of Women Scientists; see http://www.epws.org/). In one of the more prominent monographs from the field, Teresa
Rees, having analysed various reports about the state of gender (in)equality at European Universities, summarises the current situation as follows:

It is clear from these and other figures and reports that the ‘equal access’ to an academic education and career that women have enjoyed for the past 50 years in Europe has not thus far led to ‘equal outcome’ in terms of positions, pay, research funding, or indeed scientific prizes. On the contrary, gender appears still to be a significant organizing principle in academic life, despite the rhetoric of objectivity and excellence that imbues scientific and university culture. If academic life is a competitive labour market where the currency is excellence, then how is it that women do so disproportionately badly in it? (Rees, 2007, 8)

The problem of under-participation in the education process arose at the moment of transition from the elite to the mass phase, which means that it had not been “definitively” solved in the universal phase; on the contrary, new dimensions opened up reaching beyond insufficient integration. What is more, the trends with regard to participation in social and political power are, from the gender perspective, very similar to the trends that can be observed with regard to participation in academic power, but the mechanisms of the latter reproducing gender, ethnic or social inequities contain several specific elements. They not only concern formal procedures and structures, but are also present in daily academic processes:

Gender equality is not just about structures and procedures but also about the content of academic teaching and research, and the deconstruction of non-gendered mainstreams. Sadly, it is still possible to be a respected male social science academic and not read, support or cite scholarship by women, especially feminist scholarship (Hearn, 2001, 84).

The transition of the higher education system from elite to mass to universal does not, therefore, in itself solve the issue of the underrepresentation of individual social groups in education. Even though the elite phase is now a distant past, the “elite forms” characterising it have survived in the universal phase in the processes of institutional diversification, by means of research intensification and its limitation to the “peaks of excellence”, by rearranging “academic tribes and their territories”, etc. Gender is no longer the central dimension of discussions about insufficient integration into education. This aspect is only encountered in the context of “marginal” topics, such as the question of the proportion of women in the so-called STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) or in environments marked by specific religion-dominated cultures, etc.

**Raising the levels of education and of participation in social and political power and responsibility: Findings and critical observations from the gender perspective**

It has been pointed out that previous discussions of these issues have often rested on the following assumption: the higher the education of a social group, the more power and responsibility this group attains (or should attain) in public life (and vice versa). The power and responsibility of a group are therefore largely treated as a function of the level of its education. According to the above assumption, and given that highly educated women were a
minority in the past, this should be the (key) reason for their lower participation in power and responsibility. If the assumption is correct, this participation should have increased considerably in recent times.

It is more than obvious, however, that higher education is not the key factor in this field. To the relative extent that higher education does prove to be a factor, it is imbued with a meritocratic view of the question of participation in public affairs: in fact, in modern societies it is precisely higher education that legitimises participation in political power and responsibility. The fact that women today are better educated than in the past, but that their participation in positions of power and responsibility is still low, confirms that the stated assumption no longer holds true. It is also questionable whether the level of education is in fact the key mechanism enabling an individual to enter politics or take crucial positions of responsibility in society and/or the state. This does not, however, mean that we are denying connections between education and participation in public affairs.

It is time to verify these questions empirically, within a larger time span where possible. Trow limited his analysis of the transformation of higher education through the massification and universalisation of access to education to Western democracies of the second half of the previous century, but in socialist countries – particularly in Yugoslavia – a similar process took place after the Second World War (with a few particularities that are set aside in this limited framework). By way of illustration, we shall briefly examine the trends in Slovenia after 1970 (Zgaga, 1998; Zgaga, 2004). This may be all the more interesting for the international reader because there are very few similar analyses for small countries that have experienced the “transition”.

During this period, Slovenia was characterised by relatively rapid growth in the proportion of students included in higher (long- and short-cycle) education (tertiary education). This was not, however, reflected in the number of students completing their studies. On the one hand, the latter was due to the high number of dropouts, which has been a constant factor in Slovenia and has received relatively little attention from researchers. In the context of gender studies, it would be interesting to investigate, for example, the ratio between male and female dropouts. On the other hand, this was a time of complex social activity that hindered the productivity of higher education. The movements of the time showed signs of an accelerated growth in the proportion of women in higher education, despite this being the period when the transition from the elite phase to mass education had only just commenced in Slovenia.

Unlike the 1970s, the 1980s brought stagnation in the growth of the student population and even a decline in the number of male and female graduates, which was a result both of the looming social crisis and a reform of “specialised” education. Only in the early 1990s was the trend reversed, with a return to constant and increasingly exponential growth (Zgaga, 2004), giving mass higher education a solid foundation and enabling the transition to its universal phase, which was achieved at the beginning of the new millennium. At a somewhat lower level, this trend was followed by the growing productivity of higher education: in 1990, a mere 10% of the population aged 15 years and older had completed higher (short- or long-cycle) education, which in the context of Europe of that time was a relatively modest
achievement. By the turn of the century, however, this proportion had increased to 13%, and in the last census (2011) it had risen to over 17%.

In this period, we can observe another important change, which has already been highlighted above: while in 1991 the group with tertiary education is still dominated by men, this is no longer the case in 2002 (see Table 1), and since this time women have only increased their majority standing in the group. As can be seen, the proportion of educated individuals in the entire population is increasing for both genders, but the proportion of female graduates is growing faster. Statistical data on enrolment in tertiary education today and potential enrolment in the next few years indicate that the overall number of students will stabilise or even decrease, while the proportion of women is likely to continue growing. This prospect is in line with most other European countries.

Table 1: Proportions of the population aged 15 years or more with at least tertiary education, overall and according to gender. The Republic of Slovenia, census of 1971, 1981, 1991, 2002, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CENSUS</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>M : W</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>1.574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>1.170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>0.947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>0.786</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia

The rapid growth in the proportion of young people enrolled in tertiary education also requires growth in teaching staff. Men dominate in this group worldwide (Jacobs, 1996, 171; see chart on pp. 158–159), but a gradual upwards trend in the proportion of women is evident. The aforementioned monograph (Danowitz Sagaria, 2007) investigates this trend in great detail from the perspective of gender, with the findings confirming a perception that is widespread in academic circles: the higher the academic level, the lower the representation of women.

The authors of this study observed and analysed shifts in the proportions of women in five countries (Austria, Finland, Germany, Great Britain and the USA; the 2002–2003 academic year) in the entire career trajectory: from the first degree to a PhD and Full Professorship. From the data and findings brought together in the concluding section, it is evident that, in the spectrum from the beginning to the peak of academic careers, the participation of women falls steadily. In the countries studied, the best result is achieved by Finland, with the ratio of female Full Professors at an enviable 39%, followed by the USA with 16%, Great Britain with 13%, and Austria and Germany with 8% (Danowitz Sagaria, 2007, 216). And where does Slovenia stand?
The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SORS) recently reported: “Among higher education teachers, men still dominate, with a fifth of them being 60 years of age and older” (SORS, 2012). The Slovenian higher education system displays features known to a similar extent in other countries. The past two decades have witnessed a considerable increase (by a factor of almost 3.5) in academic staff, with the participation of women rising both in absolute and relative terms (see Table 2). If this trend persists, women should, in the second half of this decade, become the majority within academic staff.

Table 2: Higher education teachers according to gender, 1991/92 – 2011/12

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,568</td>
<td>3,566</td>
<td>4,666</td>
<td>6,896</td>
<td>8,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>987</td>
<td>1,643</td>
<td>2,584</td>
<td>3,633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of women</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia

However, this only clarifies one, rather superficial aspect of the issue. When considering the growing numbers of staff in the academic world, one should remember Bourdieu’s conclusions: feminisation or the extension of the age span of the staff under observation is an indication of “less prestigious disciplines”, i.e., the lower ranks of academic power and responsibility. This is evident firstly in the gender structure of staff belonging to individual scientific disciplines or professional fields, secondly in slowed or obstructed individual academic advancement, and thirdly in the occupation of decision-making positions in higher education institutions. A brief glance at the statistical data confirms all of this for Slovenia. Let us first examine the distribution of habilitation titles according to gender in the period between 2002 and 2011 (see Table 3).

Compared with similar data for some of the states of Western Europe and for the USA, the proportion of female Full Professors in Slovenia was (and probably still is) slightly higher than in Austria and Germany, and slightly lower than in Great Britain and the USA, but it is far lower than in Finland. Although, in the period from 2002 to 2011, the proportion of female Full Professors increased steadily, it has not yet reached a quarter of the staff with this title. The proportion of women grows as we descend the “steps” in the hierarchy of university titles: in recent times, the proportion of women Assistant Professors is close to a half, while only a decade ago it stood at less than a third. Thus in this area, too, we can observe a long-term trend similar to that which Trow designated as mass or universal access to higher education. As this trend remains very slow at the highest “step”, we can expect that the

3 On condition that a comparable methodology was used: due to the differing systems of academic advancement, this is not easy to verify.
majority participation in academic power and responsibility will, for a long time to come, belong to male Full Professors (“men [...], a fifth of them being 60 years of age”).

**Table 3: Higher education teachers participating in the pedagogical process, by title and gender; 2002–2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Habilitation title</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Prof., total</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>1,177</td>
<td>1,593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- women</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- proportion of women</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Prof., total</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>1,018</td>
<td>1,187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- women</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- proportion of women</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Prof., total</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>1,248</td>
<td>1,715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- women</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- proportion of women</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistants, total</td>
<td>1,896</td>
<td>2,263</td>
<td>2,552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- women</td>
<td>802</td>
<td>976</td>
<td>1,101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- proportion of women</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia

A somewhat different trend can be observed at the “preparatory” level, i.e., assistantship: the proportion of women has been relatively high over the years (slightly over 40%) and remains constant. Why should this be so? Does it mean that at all of the other academic “steps” female ratios will come to a halt once they exceed 40%? This and other similar questions suggest that these ratios need to be monitored systematically and constantly in the future.

A third possible perspective concerns participation in decision-making positions at individual institutions themselves. With regard to rector positions, it should suffice to note that, in the entire history of the Slovenian university, we have only witnessed two female rectors, both after 2000. Even at the faculty level, women are rarely present in key positions. We have collected data pertaining to the two largest Slovenian universities, which are taken to be

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4 A change might come about only as a consequence of a thorough transformation of the higher education system of governance, which, in the last two decades, has actually taken place in some parts of the world: the transfer of power and decision-making from “inefficient academic circles” to “academic managers”. However, another of our investigations shows that there is a pronounced aversion to this option amongst the Slovenian academic public (Zgaga et al., 2013, 42). Furthermore, we have serious doubts that this type of change could benefit women in regard to the question of gender structure in decision-making circles.
representative in view of their domination of the Slovenian higher education space. Based on information found on the websites of these universities, only about a tenth of all of the leading faculty positions are occupied by women: at the end of the 2012/2013 academic year, there were three female deans (11.54%) at the head of the faculties and arts academies of the University of Ljubljana, and two female deans (8.5%) at those of the University of Maribor. At the next level, i.e., that of associate deans, the situation is slightly better, although women are still very much in the minority: the faculties of the University of Ljubljana boast 21 female associate deans overall (30.0%), whereas the faculties of the University of Maribor (with the exclusion of student associate deans, which are a special feature of this university) have 19 female associate deans (35.9%).

To sum up, with the transition to the mass and universal phase of higher education, the proportion of the population enrolled in tertiary education and of those who complete their studies successfully have both begun to increase in Slovenia. Within these ratios, the proportion of women has been growing more rapidly: in terms of structure, women caught up with and surpassed men at the turn of the century. However, the higher education institutions where these important changes are taking place remain “male dominated”; they themselves have been affected by waves of “feminisation”, but the cliffs of prestigious disciplines, the highest academic ranks and decision-making positions are seldom conquered.

The institutions on the inside perpetuating “male domination” produce more and more woman graduates, professionals in various fields. We would therefore expect that, in the fields where higher education is of particular significance, their proportion would grow at a higher rate, as would their participation in political power and responsibility. We have attempted to verify this assumption by an analysis of the education structure of the members of the Slovenian Parliament (hereafter: MPs) for the period after 1990. The result was very different from what we had expected.  

Much has been said about the comparatively very low proportion of women in the Slovenian Parliament (e.g., Antić Gaber et al., 2003, Antić Gaber, 2011), but the specific question addressed here has not yet been asked. First, we will determine the trend regarding the proportion of MPs with tertiary education in the perspective of the past two decades. In so doing, one must take into account the fact that their level of education is above average with regard to the whole population (which confirms the postulated importance of education for participation in political power). Our key finding, however, is that the dynamics in the educational structure of Parliament does not in the least follow the general trend in the growing proportion of the population – particularly women – with tertiary education (see Table 4).

The data collected indicate that, in terms of tertiary education, the composition of the Slovenian Parliament after 1992 has stagnated or even regressed. If we focus particularly on the doctoral and master’s level of education, the Parliamentary Assembly (hereafter: PA) of

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5 Although the gender structure is better here, more than half of the positions are still in the hands of men.

6 Due to a considerably different political system prior to 1990, and also in view of this research being focused on modern times, we shall not seek comparison with the past in this limited space.
the RS after the 1992 election would rate the highest. It is worth keeping this fact in mind, but it cannot be treated in greater detail at this point; we will instead focus on an analysis of the dynamics of the proportion of male and female MPs with at least tertiary education in the past two decades. First, a few methodological and other clarifications are needed. The composition of Parliament changes during its mandate, and consequently the data of interest to us changes as well. In principle, the data we have used refer to the beginning of the mandate. The survey data for the earlier assemblies is largely available (the sources used are listed in the notes under Table 4), but for the parliamentary term beginning in 2011 data were not yet available at the time of writing. For the evaluation of the assembly 2011–2014, we have therefore used the data available on the websites of the PA and the parliamentary political parties.

**Table 4: Ratios regarding shifts in the number of male and female members of the Parliamentary Assembly RS (PA RS) with at least tertiary level education (TLE), 1992–2013.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 All female MPs N: 12</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>N: 7</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>N: 12</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>N: 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Female MPs with TLE N: 11</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>N: 7</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>N: 11</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>N: 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Coefficient in women (2 : 1)</td>
<td>0.9166</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
<td>0.9166</td>
<td>0.8181</td>
<td>0.8333</td>
<td>0.8709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 All MPs N: 78</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
<td>N: 83</td>
<td>92.2%</td>
<td>N: 78</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
<td>N: 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 MPs with TLE N: 65</td>
<td>85.5%</td>
<td>N: 65</td>
<td>90.3%</td>
<td>N: 61</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
<td>N: 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Coefficient in men (5 : 4)</td>
<td>0.8333</td>
<td>0.7831</td>
<td>0.7821</td>
<td>0.7975</td>
<td>0.7564</td>
<td>0.7797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Total / all with TLE</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** The data on education was collected as follows: the number of those with doctorates + master’s degrees + higher education (long cycle) + higher education (short cycle); since 1996, higher education has comprised professional and university programmes. For 2011, there are (for now) no available official data; we have collected the relevant data from the websites of the PA and the parliamentary political parties (status: August 2013).

**Sources:** Antić Gaber et al., 2003; Antić Gaber, 2011; Bartelj, 2011; Gašparič, 2012; Zgaga, 2004; SORS; PA RS and parliamentary political websites; websites of the Delo, Dnevnik and Večer daily newspapers.

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7 Our survey was conducted in the second half of 2013, so we were not able to include and consider the changes that occurred in the parliamentary elections in July 2014.
It is astonishing how difficult it was to acquire transparent information on the (tertiary) education of MPs from the relevant websites. In individual cases – particularly when, as verified, this level has not (yet) been achieved – the relevant information is often missing on the website. In some cases, we have therefore taken recourse to scrutinising reports in the public media; as a consequence of some notorious scandals, the education level of Slovenian MPs has become a popular topic recently. In fact, the experience of searching for data demonstrated a need for this data to be collected systematically and presented publicly.

The question we have raised is concerned first and foremost with relative ratios; these are accessible through the coefficient obtained by calculating the ratio between male and female MPs with tertiary education and the total number of MPs. This coefficient is notably higher amongst female MPs (in 1996, it was actually absolute, at 1.0, while it was the lowest in 2004, at 0.8181) than amongst male MPs (here it fluctuates between a maximum of 0.8333 in 1992 and a minimum 0.7564 in 2008). In the second half of the previous decade, a moderate decline in this coefficient is observed regarding female MPs, with a subsequent return to the more or less long-time average. In the same period with regard to male MPs, this coefficient is – despite certain minor oscillations – in a state of moderate, but constant decline.

In the past two decades, the trend of expanded access to higher education and the increase in the proportion of the population with at least tertiary education has accelerated more amongst women than amongst men. However, this trend is not reflected in the dynamics of the gender ratio in the PA. It can only be established that, in principle and on average, women have to be slightly better educated than their male colleagues in order to have a chance of getting into Parliament. On the other hand, the importance of education remains an emphasised quality, albeit in a sort of “inverted” way: if, in an individual case, tertiary education has not been achieved, this may, for example, be withheld in the CV and concealed by other achievements. Scandals related to the dubious education levels or qualifications of individual MPs demonstrate that, in the world of politics, education is (or can) be assessed in a distinctly instrumental way.

**Education and power, power and education**

What conclusions can thus be reached and what new questions can be asked on the basis of the collected data?

Let us first reiterate the initial question: Does higher education contribute to the possibility of women entering politics and occupying the most responsible positions in society (including academic positions) in higher numbers? We certainly could not claim that this is not one of the factors; however, it would be difficult to claim that this factor is by itself of crucial importance. This is not only shown by the data on the changes in the education structure of the PA, but also by the comparative monitoring of the effects of the increased proportion of women with academic titles inside the higher education system: the proportion of women in teaching and research is on the increase, but universities remain “male dominated”. Education alone cannot, therefore, be the key determining factor; the “secret” is obviously in the complex processes of the structuring of power within the political field (political party,
Parliament) or within the central social fields (in “societies of knowledge”, universities and institutes in particular should be counted amongst these fields).

Why is education important for participation in political and social power, and what specific significance does it acquire in the perspective of gender? We have seen that, on average, women need a somewhat higher level of education than men to enter Parliament, but they nonetheless remain in the minority or at the lower levels of the hierarchy. This paradox seems even more surprising if we consider the fact that “some […] professions from which politicians are most commonly recruited have become strongly feminised” (Antić Gaber and Selišnik, 2012, 403). However, on reviewing the results of the higher education system, we again observe that women are more productive than men but still have more difficulty entering the academic world with their acquired academic qualifications and occupy lower academic ranks within it. There are obvious similarities between the two systems, but important differences also exist.

The question needs to be asked whether engagement in and entry into politics merely requires the educational “badge” – that is, a status that legitimises such entry instrumentally – or whether perhaps higher education is in fact needed to equip an individual for successful engagement with the problems and tasks that people in politics have to deal with. We have witnessed indications that the former may be quite realistic with regard to participation in political power, but this does not hold for participation in academic power: here, education is a conditio sine qua non, it is the substance of its meritocratic essence. On the basis of these and other indications from the above analyses, we can also conclude the following: gender has an important effect both on the attractiveness of the educational “badge” (in order to achieve this “attractiveness”, more is expected from women than from men) and on the recognition of academic merits (to recall Hearn: it is possible that a respected male academician in the social sciences does not read, support or cite the discussions written by women). What is actually recognised as “education” in a given horizon is thus decided in another horizon where power is structured and allocated.

Women are not the only underrepresented group in politics; youth are a similar case. In contemporary developed countries, voting abstinence and “a lack of interest in politics” is not an uncommon research topic, but investigations carried out in the light of gender and education are less common. Among the rare studies of this sort, it is worth mentioning a report by the American institution CIRCLE (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) on a study that investigated whether, and to what extent, gender is a salient factor in developing norms related to the behaviour of citizens and their political engagement, particularly with regard to education. One of the findings of this study was that “[e]ducation does little to change the story”; it is true, however, that it “gives a sizable boost to the activism of both men and women, but few gender differences are apparent regardless of college attendance” (Jenkins, 2005, 6–7). The author establishes a lower cognitive engagement in young women (25% as opposed to 35% in young men), but this seems to be at the expense of young women often better understanding that engaged citizenship is a matter of duty rather than choice (51% as opposed to young men 43%).
Why then insist on the importance of education if education has so little impact on this “story”?

The finding that women (or the young generation) score lower on the scale of participation in political (or academic, etc.) power and responsibility does not only speak of the powerlessness of these social groups, but also of the way the spheres of power are structured. It speaks of the paradigms in which we perceive the state and active participation in politics: Do we perhaps perceive it as the “duty” of a citizen or a personal “duty”, a “vocation”, “a professional challenge” and similar, or, as the case may be, as an “experiment” with no rationally assigned coordinates, which appeals first and foremost to “the daring” and “adventure seekers” without (higher) education? Today, we may well be seeing signs of the latter prevailing. Would it be possible to conclude that male adventure seekers outnumber female ones?

In dealing with our question, the significance of the dominant political culture has to be taken into account: particular ways of political engagement, entering personal and social relations, communication, shaping and/or respecting hierarchies, etc., can play an important role in the decision of certain groups not to engage politically or enter politics. Gender and education can also be markers of such groups. If I have the possibility to develop a career in my profession, why should I risk an “excursion” into politics that can end badly for me? Such and similar questions point to “a different understanding of the sphere of politics, which is most likely the result of both a specific political and general socialisation in terms of gender” (Antić Gaber and Selišnik, 2012, 413). If politics is all too often reminiscent of a “men’s game” (Jenkins, 2005, 3) this can, of course, have important effects on the perspective of gender (both male and female), but it also has causes that need to be identified and explained with great precision.

References


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