

Book review

New and Persistent Gender Equality Challenges in Academia, by Mathias Wullum Nielsen

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The question of how we can understand and explain women's persistent underrepresentation at the upper levels of academia has been high on both the political and academic agendas for decades. From a Nordic perspective, particular attention has been paid to the "Danish case", with a high level of overall gender equality and research intensity, but relatively poor performance and a relatively low degree of involvement when it comes to gender equality in research. Accordingly, Denmark has frequently been framed as puzzlingly different from its Nordic and Scandinavian neighbours, both in terms of gender balance and its (lack of) attention to gender equality in academia. The question of how issues of gender equality are currently reconstituted in a rapidly changing Danish academic landscape is thus an interesting one.

These overall gender issues, as well as the more specific questions related to the Danish case are addressed in a convincing and comprehensive recent PhD thesis - "*New and persistent gender equality challenges in academia*" - by Mathias Wullum Nielsen from the "Danish Centre for Studies of Research and Research Policy" at Aarhus University. His thesis is an ambitious, theoretically driven endeavour to explore contemporary gender equality challenges in academia related to issues such as: the framing of gender equality in academia in Denmark in a cross-national comparison; the gendered processes of evaluation of talent, especially through the use of bibliometric indicators; the dynamics of recruitment and selection in practice, and the exit of women, or "leaky pipeline", from academic careers. The dissertation comprises no less than 415 pages and is written in an integrated paper format consisting of a total of ten chapters. The dissertation includes seven scholarly papers, but it also presents a fairly comprehensive and convincing framework in the chapters surrounding these papers. These introductory and concluding chapters discuss key theoretical, methodological and empirical issues in order to situate the empirical findings in the appropriate context and not least in order to connect the different studies to a coherent overall picture.

In pursuing the selected research questions, the thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach located at the crossroads of several major research fields: sociology; organisation studies; education and higher education studies; gender studies and feminist research; science and technology studies; and policy studies. One of the major strengths of the dissertation is thus its theoretical breadth and depth as it cuts across several disciplines, contributing to our understanding of gender and academic career paths and gendering of academic organisations in

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novel ways. This is also reflected in the literature review which draws on and discusses relevant literatures from several relevant fields. This part is very up-to-date and shows that Wullum Nielsen is well-read and informed on what is state-of-the-art in the interdisciplinary research field, and is able to succinctly summarise key elements of earlier research. However, rather than contributing to independent theoretical development, the thesis makes its most important theoretical contribution in connecting and synthesising literatures which can be fruitfully, but infrequently are, brought together. The dissertation is similarly impressive in its research design and in the broad range of methods and data types put to use throughout the work. The thesis operates at macro, meso and micro levels and combines quantitative and qualitative methods and a wide variety of datasets. Based on this interdisciplinarity, mixed methods and multi-level approach, the thesis makes several valuable contributions to the research field.

First and foremost: Wullum Nielsen focuses on key debates concerning gender disadvantages in academic settings, in performance measured in publications and their relations to (gendered) valuation and evaluation standards and practices, recruitment practices, gatekeeping, as well as the continued debate about choice or agency. The sum of this body of research makes significant contributions to the scholarship on gender and academia by making a compelling argument for how a myriad of organisational and structural factors shape career paths for women rather than individual explanations. He also contextualises his project through university approaches to gender equality in ongoing national and global transformation processes in higher education, where governments have responded to perceived global economic transitions by introducing rankings and other forms of competition. He shows how these developments put renewed emphasis on the importance of how performance is valued in evaluation processes and who is seen as an academic talent etc.

Second: The comparative analysis of Denmark, Sweden and Norway deepens our understanding of gender in the Danish setting and teases out the differences in structures of responsibility in gender equality; the frame of the interventions and actions; the strategic implementation; the discourses; and the overall frameworks. For instance, he shows how the Danish case compares to Norway and Sweden, with the Danish approach to gender equality more particularly focused on elites and less rights-based. It focuses on a utilitarian approach of using “talent” and thus reflects a managerial case of gender quality approaches in academia. As Wullum Nielsen’s analysis reveals, the underlying assumption still seems to be that women are just not as suited and competent for science as men, and that emphasis is therefore laid more on fixing women than interrogating what is wrong with the academic institutions. Wullum Nielsen argues that particularly in the Danish case, the link of gender equality to innovation “sweetens the message” given the hesitance of universities to embrace gender equality as a project. Yet, this managerial, utilitarian justification also serves to “depoliticise” the project. This is an important contribution, both methodologically and substantively, to comparative cross-country research on gender in academia.

Third: The analysis of and results of the gendered implications of the use of bibliometrics in assessment of merits is a welcome contribution to the current science policy debate and related research on gender and excellence. The Danish Bibliometric Research Indicator is shown to amplify the existing gender gap in research performance, and, rather compellingly, the suggestion is that this is a result of gendered gatekeeping in constructing the model, as well the model privileging collaborative work which puts women at a disadvantage. By pursuing how gender matters in valuation and evaluation of performance in academia, the dissertation contributes to the key sociological question of how formalisation and bureaucratic procedures with demands for transparency etc. can improve meritocracy. These debates are particularly pertinent to gender scholars and practitioners alike who are seeking to improve fairness and gender equality. So the question is: can gender equality be achieved with more open, transparent procedures of evaluation that are tied to standardised measures of performance? Wullum Nielsen's compelling argument is that as long as these standards and evaluation criteria are based on the dominant groups' career paths, academic outputs, and practices of men, these valuation processes remain biased against academics who do not fit these standards (often women).

Fourth and finally: Interrogating the recruitment processes in which the department heads are key gatekeepers produces highly interesting results, illuminating the dynamics and discrepancy of seeming transparency, highly formal procedures and belief in meritocracy, on the one hand, and persistently gendered outcomes, on the other. The last section thus deals with another long-standing sociological debate, that of agency versus structure in explaining the underrepresentation of women in the higher ranks of academia. The argument here seeks to provide middle ground for why women decide to leave academia. By skilfully drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, Wullum Nielsen demonstrates the complex interplay between the individual and organisational climate and institutionalised beliefs about who is sufficiently "talented" for an academic career. Rich interview material and surveys further investigate the rationales women use when leaving academia, where they, for example, perceive that there is less room for them, while they observe how their male colleagues build networks and are considered "in line" for promotions. Here Wullum Nielsen's multiple data sources are particularly powerful – the triangulated data of hiring processes, along with the applicant pools and demographics in universities, combined with interviews and surveys with this group of academics and interviews with chairs, reveal a number of subtle mechanisms. The lack of encouragement and support that women perceive provides a solid argument for how women's agency is confined in an academic institution with embedded cultural norms constructed and practiced around promoting young men, but not young women's academic careers.

Although the overall dissertation is impressive as outlined above, there are some minor drawbacks which mainly relate to the grand ambitions of the project as a whole. An obvious risk of covering so much ground theoretically, methodologically and empirically is that it may be difficult to go into each question ad-

dressed in the study with sufficient depth. A few signs of this can be found throughout the dissertation: for instance, some of the theoretical and methodological discussions in chapters three and four may lack a little depth. A slight imbalance can be found between the very thorough presentation of the meta-theory of critical realism and the use of the critical realist tools in the empirical analysis. The same type of imbalance (but here the other way around) can be found with regard to the rather brief presentation of the four central strands of scholarship framing the actual empirical investigations. However, while this presentation and the interconnectedness between the theories might appear somewhat superficial in places, the theories are put to use convincingly in the subsequent chapters. To some extent, these issues reflect some of the trade-offs associated with the integrated paper format. In general, however, the benefits of combining a broad range of theories, methods and datatypes clearly outweigh the disadvantages.

To sum up, the dissertation is a fantastic achievement which particularly stands out in terms of its breadth and depth. While the seven scholarly papers included all are of a high quality and well worth a read individually, the true qualities of the dissertation shine through when all the studies and the framework around them are read as a coherent piece of work with each sub-study adding to the overall puzzle.