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Portuguese women scientists' perceptions on career discrimination

Abstract

This article reports preliminary findings about Portuguese scientist women's perceptions of gender issues in their institutions. Empirical data have been collected by means of an electronic open questionnaire sent to the AMONET (Portuguese Association of Women in Science) members. Basically, the study aims to examine the degree of satisfaction with their profession, the difficulties they meet in everyday professional life, and whether they feel or have felt gender discrimination in their institutions. Findings show that all respondents feel happy or very happy with their profession. However, discrimination is mentioned by a significant percentage, even if such discrimination assumes, quite often, an elusive way, suggesting that higher institutions still discriminate against women. Findings, articulated with literature, also lead to discussion about power and leadership, both in the hands of male academics, in the majority of the institutions, as well as the clarification of different perceptions of ambition both by women and man.

Key Words: gender inequality; leadership positions; power relationships; career development

1. Introduction

Although studies focusing on labour market entry confirm broader trends towards greater gender equality, there is evidence that gender inequalities have not been resolved (Brown and Hesketh, 2004), and much of the research evidence still show significant gender inequalities in terms of pay, promotion, and career development. In our information society, women have job positions requiring qualifications similar to men's, but they have lower salaries, lower employment security and lower chances of getting to higher positions (Castells, 2003). In European Union, there remains considerable diversity among countries, in terms of scientific infra-structures, as well as equality and conditions for women who try to pursue scientific careers. Moreover, the number of women at the top of the academic hierarchy remains a minority (Helsinki Group, 1999). This situation urges for studies to promote a better understanding of a

discrimination that still persists, but which assumes complex features, since it is mostly indirect and institutional. In Portugal, as well, few academic women ascend to decision making positions, even in one or two faculties where they are the majority. In order to change this situation, new forms of leadership, leading to new mentalities and new behaviours (Goleman *et al*, 2002) are needed. This is, however, very difficult to implement. As a matter of fact, because of their very nature, organisations tend to reject what is new and can appear like a menace. They normally live on their well established routines offering sometimes strong resistance to change. The culture of an institution or any other organisation has to be taken into account and one has to be aware that individual actions do not lead to any success against a powerful resistance. In practice organisations in general are deeply conservative (Dean, 2006) and reject those who try to break their routines and the status quo. Under these circumstances, new leadership is needed. However, this new form of leadership demands not only funding, but also support and resources. There has to be changing in culture, in the system and in the procedures, leading to new behaviours and new mentalities. Organisations can no longer be thought of as static models, and have to be viewed as dynamic models, that interact with their environment in a systemic way. Thus, small changes can have intense results (Gonçalves, 2004). Authority is linked to leadership, but authority must be based upon competence and expertise and not on power positions (Sadler, 2001).

2. Power in public institutions

Universities are political systems essentially depending on public national authorities, and now, to a certain extent, on European Union policies. Despite university autonomy, these institutions govern themselves by rules which are imposed to them, often in order to try to introduce reforms to a greater or lesser extent. However, such reforms can be condemned to failure if the power relationships which inform and control people behaviour within the academic system are not understood. This is an uneasy task, inasmuch as normally such relationships are viewed as natural, appropriate and untouchable (Senge *et al.*, 2000). It should also be mentioned that power and conflict within public sector organisations have been the object of very few studies. Power is inherent to the social policy-making process, and it “can be thought of as the capacity that some human beings possess to control others” (Dean, 2006:69). The same author reminds that the decisions policy makers *don't* make are just as important as those they make – issues that are never discussed, because the voices of those whom they affect are

suppressed. Thus, some voices remain unheard just because they were never raised to start with and also because people unquestioningly accept the status quo. And so, “representative democracy leaves some voices unheard, while the openness of the policy process to lobbying leaves it susceptible to the influence of those best organized or with the loudest voices.”(idem: 71 and 72).

Life in public organisations, likewise in companies, implies a great deal of organisational and individual fight for power. However, there is evidence of significant differences between public and private domains (LaPalombara, 2001). Research carried out by this author in the field of Political Science give some light on the matter and can help the understanding of this problematic of power within universities. One of the characteristics that, according to LaPalombara, differentiate organisations belonging to the public sector from the private one is that the former are deeply normative, resulting into an «authoritarian values imposition» (Easton, quoted by LaPalombara, 2001, p. 558); this can make the call to logic and rationality difficult, since policies seldom represent the choices from the organisations that should implement them. In our opinion, this argument should be taken into account when legislation *per se* is seen as a means to gender dimension integration.

Also as far as aims and methods are concerned, besides government orders often being quite vague and diffuse, they can remain unknown by many of the people in the organisation where they are to be implemented if information is not shared. On the other hand, in public organisations, action tends to be re-active instead of being pro-active, preventive and innovative. In such a context, different ideas or even governmental reforms often tend to be viewed as menaces to the delicate existing balance (Seidman, quoted by LaPalombara, 2001, p. 567) between internal and external forces, leading to conservatism. Besides, conservatism can also develop because these organisations are very linked to tradition, and it is even possible that they develop an «active inertia» (Dierkes *et al* (2001). In what concerns Portuguese universities, their organisation is frequently guided towards the consolidation of clusters of power, distributed by influencing spaces (Simão *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, according to the same authors, intramural power, because of this corporative vision, has demonstrated, during generations, difficulties in responding to challenges coming from the external environment. Also Grilo (2002:133) argues that a regulation should be carried out about the power structures and decision mechanisms within University, and declares that the most important thing to do is to “open institutions” and “break down” the existing

structures which are responsible for some of the worst faults the University has, naming, among others, leaving out those who do not accept the rules of “cooperation”.

Such issues are as much relevant as it is well known that, generally speaking, either in public or in private organisations, when the implementation of generalised changing is wanted, it is necessary to be aware of the fact that it is a struggle against a paradox. In fact, organisations live on routines and *status quo*, and their employees rely on established systems to execute their tasks with a minimum of resistance and tension (Goleman et al., 2002). We believe that to overcome gender inequalities and discrimination of any kind, it is important to bear in mind these arguments and that, also in the academic world, power still remains in the hands of men. Could it be that women are not as ambitious as men are?

3. Women and ambition

A research conducted by psychologist Amma Fels (2004) on this subject showed that the very word ambition has a different connotation for women than for men. While successful women who have been interviewed thought the word “necessarily implied egotism, selfishness, self-aggrandisement or the manipulative use of others for one’s own ends” (Fels, p. 54), none of them having admitted to being ambitious, men considered ambition a necessary and desirable part of their lives. As far as women are concerned, ambition seems to be linked to the desire to be recognised. However, according to Morgan & Moss (quoted by Fels, 2005, p. 54), it may be impossible to measure the desire to improve a skill independent of the individual’s desire for recognition. This is true both for male and female, not only in childhood but also in adult life.

By and large, Fels’s research has suggested that, to a significant degree, successful women show signs of “fear” of recognition. Nevertheless, such “fear” varies according to social contexts, girls and women more openly seeking and competing to affirm when they are with other women, but changing their behaviours when it comes to competing with men. Hidden barriers seem to explain these differences. Nowadays, women have greater opportunities to pursue their own goals than they had ever had. But doing so is socially condemned unless they have first satisfied the needs of all their family members: husband, children, elderly parents, and others. Subtle as it may be, this dynamic is a powerful one and militates against women’s goals in many fields.

Much institutional and social discrimination is now experienced by women who are starting their careers – in their twenties or thirties – at the time when they often marry and have children, for they must decide whether to try to hold on to their own ambitions, or to downsize, postpone or even abandon them. Institutions and organisations in general do not have structures to help in maternity and men seldom feel they share exactly the same family responsibilities as women do. Thus, if a woman chooses her career in the first place, she might be regarded – quite often by other women – as having problems with their femininity.

3. Portuguese scientist women and gender issues

Some findings about Portuguese scientist women perceptions of gender inequalities and discrimination in their institutions will be now presented. Empirical data for this preliminary research have been collected by means of an electronic questionnaire sent to the AMONET (Portuguese Association of Women in Science) members. The study comprises twenty-five respondents.

Basically, the purpose of the study was to examine the degree of satisfaction with their profession, the difficulties they meet in everyday professional life, and whether they feel or have felt gender discrimination in their institutions.

4. Findings

4.1. Professional satisfaction

Findings show that the entire number of respondents like their profession, twenty-five percent stating that they like it very much.

4.2. Positive factors

Among the most attractive factors in this profession, the main one is **freedom** (eighty-four percent), either freedom to manage one's time (sixty-four percent); just freedom, without any other specification (twelve percent), or intellectual freedom (four percent), even when there is awareness of the relativity of the concept – some freedom of movements (four percent).

Teaching/contact with students equals to **scientific research** (forty-eight percent each). Some comments suggest that academic women not only enjoy doing research, but they also have a desire to share their findings with students, in a few cases they are

more precise: “with young people”. Analysis of the questionnaires also suggests that the above percentage, mainly in what concerns scientific research, is largely surpassed. This argument is supported by statements like “permanent and updated contact with science”; “being aware of science and technology advances”; “possibility of creating and innovating”; “possibility of involvement in projects”. One respondent summed it up: “discovering, learning and sharing knowledge”.

Besides “doing what one likes”, these scientist women do not appreciate routine: some respondents mention “diversity”, “dynamism”; “regular and necessary contact with the world”, “permanent novelty” and the “constant challenge to oneself, in order to keep up to date, not only in the teaching activity but also in research, and having the chance to be always studying” as the most positive factors of their profession. The enthusiasm and the capacity to rely on science can even lead to think of “the possibility of changing people’s lives” as the most attractive factor in a scientific career.

4.3. Constraints

Although they appreciate their profession, this study also revealed some aspects scientist women dislike. The first critic falls upon **management and leadership**, forty percent of the respondents complaining of “little promptness in decision making on the side of management and leadership”. This fact sharply contrasts with the dynamism they feel, desire of novelty and diversity, as well as with the implementation and development of projects. In the second place (thirty-six percent) comes the complaint of “**lack of time for myself**”, along with (the same percentage) **bureaucratic and administrative tasks**, which, allied to the “lack of laboratorial support”, “exaggerated teaching load”, and “too many meetings”, mentioned by some respondents, may well explain such lack of time, and the difficulty in “time management”. This problem can be worsened if other ones are taken into consideration, like “difficulty in funding” or “lack of financial and structural resources, implying that a huge part of time is spent in getting resources, sometimes unsuccessfully”. Some feel under pressure, with “too many daily demands, causing many things to be accumulated and no time left to do anything very well, unless one spends twenty-four hours working”, feeling a “lack of time for personal life”, “lack of time for activities needed to teaching”; “lack of time for doing quality scientific research” .

Twenty-eight percent of the respondents point out **rules for career progression** as the most negative factor. One specification summarises other complains – “the way the so-

called academic career works, its corporative system and its arbitrariness or less justice”. Incompetence in general and “incompetence at the level of leadership and management” are also mentioned, one respondent criticising service organisation – “curiously managed by men”. Other difficulties like “fear of routine in the future”, “lack of future perspective for young researchers who want to follow a research career in Portugal” and “salary” are referred to – the last three from younger respondents. One respondent felt that “those out of the Lisbon circle” are “voted to discrimination”, revealing the problems felt by those who are placed in higher education institutions in the inner country.

4.4. Signs of inequalities?

Are such constraints common both to scientist men and women? Although fifty-two percent gave affirmative responses to the above question, one of them added that “occasionally, women, because they have other activities besides work, might have less time to devote to work than men do”. Being a fact that scientist men also have other activities besides their work, this statement can suggest a feeling that one do not even want to realize, but the feeling is there – women know that, generally speaking they have to carry on their shoulders the main family responsibilities, especially when they have small children. A significant number of respondents feel the difference, even if they are not quite sure – “Maybe men can be more favoured through a net of contacts in the «political circles», thus keeping better informed and participating in decision groups”. Some scientist women are aware that the Academy still remains a very traditional milieu and that power strategies are mainly based on a masculine career view. Women are more often subordinated to men and are, as a rule, a minority in academic decision taking organisms. In general, more male than female are part of privileged groups, occasionally benefiting in funding distribution. Women still are considered a higher cost, because of the stigma of maternity and absences due to family support. Additionally female discourse is less accepted than the male one, especially in predominantly male work environments. Women integration in a men’s world is not so easy, while for a men it is perceived as almost an «open door». Even if men are academically inferior, some respondents believe male newcomers feel more at easy, between pairs.

4.5. Causes of inequalities

Why do such inequalities still remain, even in our academies? According to respondents, the reasons are fundamentally cultural and educational. These seem to be responsible for the «ancestral» view of this profession – higher education teaching – which, unlike the other lower levels of education, has been considered typically masculine. “Work market, in general, at managerial level, is predominantly masculine. They are the majority of the employers and there remains a generalised notion that women are not so capable of carrying out their task comparing to men’s performance”.

Moreover, some women think that men who ascend to posts of leadership rapidly forget the problems that worried them as subordinates and adapt well to promotion without causing problems to the status quo. Besides, men have more time for dialogues with other colleagues, work lunches, for instance, as well as more interest for political power. In this line of thought, one respondent specifies – “more men than women belong to associations as Freemasonry, Opus Dei, or “«informal» circles basically masculine, where they help one another”. In the end, although generalisations should not be done, “till a great extent, political-institutional power prevails over intelligence, capability and intellectual honesty”. Last but not least, family responsibilities are also mentioned – house/family management and responsibility for children to a great extent still left for mothers. However, it should be mentioned that this awareness seems to be painful to admit, and complaints fall more often on institutions, that “should provide more help, namely nursery schools within the campus”.

4.6. How to eliminate such differences?

Respondents were asked what, in their opinion, should be done to change this state of affairs. Because it calls for a change in attitudes, difficult to carry out because they are rooted in cultural concepts and stereotypes, some of the inquired are not very optimistic – “it will probably take centuries”. Even so they propose some actions: the selection of managers and leaders should be made by application to public contests, with very objective selecting criteria and obeying to a strategic plan stating delays and goals to attain. More transparency and seriousness in the appointment of contests evaluators, in the evaluating processes, in the analysis and publication of contests is also required.

Taking into account difficulty in changing behaviours and cultures, one respondent suggests that maybe the compulsory existence of percentages of women in organisations

might make employers in general and academia in particular to recognise women’s capacities to carry out the same duties as men do. “That’s the eternal change of mentalities leading to value work instead of «gender»”. It is believed that if the same opportunities were given to men and women, it could be proved that women can exceed many expectations, maybe even demonstrate supremacy compared to men”.

More involvement of fathers in family life is suggested, too, although it seems to be mainly a question of educating future generations and fighting against the present state of affairs: “to inform, to form for equality, to fight and ridicule stereotypes, to *really* open the University”.

4.7. Gender discrimination – perception or reality?

The table below provides the responses to the question: “Do you feel discriminated by the institutions where you work?”

<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not directly</i>	<i>Maybe</i>	<i>No</i>
7	7	2	9

Those who admit the existence of discrimination were asked to describe the ways in which such discrimination takes place. Some answers are rather vague: old habits and practices, and badly adapted timetables. Others are very precise, complains falling mainly upon **career progression, exclusion from decision making, lower salary and exclusion from informal meetings** where information has a special environment to be shared.

In what concerns career progression, there is a perception that men, unlike women, can be promoted to full professorship with a poor curriculum. Selection of men for special tasks and «representation» is also perceived as just based on gender issues. Women have less career progression opportunities, especially in contests for academic career, but also more and more in other procedures of curriculum devaluation, like making tenures more difficult for women. This allusive «discrimination» is quite visible at leadership level, women being thus excluded from decision taking. It is unequivocal that such posts are mainly taken by men. Besides, some respondents have the perception that leadership positions taken by incompetent men – a fact that often occurs, according to some respondents – is generally viewed as «normal». In contrast, a woman in a leadership post must permanently prove her competence.

A respondent calls attention for the lack of solidarity between women, declaring that this state of affairs is also women's fault, since very often they experience mean, envious feelings for their colleagues who are successful, spreading rumours and gossips which men take advantage of. Another one believes that "in the academic milieu, discrimination occurs mostly by way of «built up groups» which are not necessarily based on gender".

Other than stating that women get lower salaries for the same tasks, some respondents feel that women are excluded from informal meetings, as stated above, where information flows and relationships deepen. References are made to meetings out of working timetable which are implicitly interdicted to female participation, like football games, hunting, and going out at night between «friends» to places not so frequented by females. This leads to strengthen relationships, to closeness and trust which, in turn, are highly valuable when the right person for the right place has to be chosen. The same happens with the accomplishment of more profitable and visible work, thus omitting information and cutting out opportunity for women to participate in any decision making.

4.8. Clear discrimination evidence

This research suggests that, till a certain extent, women do demonstrate some difficulty in admitting discrimination. In two cases, when asked if they feel discrimination in their institutions, respondents answered negatively. However, to the answer: "Do you feel or have ever felt discriminated comparatively to your male colleagues? Please, specify" they both described clear testimonies of discrimination against themselves. One explanation for this contradiction might be the subtle way discrimination is practised, making it difficult to prove – "when we analyse each case separately, it is difficult to prove, for each case, that discrimination is because you are a woman and not because you are who you are (worse than the other candidate)".

Most testimonies are related to access to leadership positions. Even in a Department with a majority of women, men are frequently nominated for several managerial posts or responsibility tasks. It is argued that there is an outstanding disparity relating to the percentage of women represented in the Department, where there has never been a woman director. Either for the presidency of international associations, or to become the head of a project, or when starting the academic career, some respondents declared they were left out or voted against for gender issues. There is even a case of sexual

harassment. Sometimes discrimination is totally explicit: “When I had my tenure, a male colleague of mine told me they needed more men, because there were already many women in the Department, and then they would start having children, benefiting from maternity leaves, etc; it was a disadvantage for the service.”

One testimony clearly criticizes women behaviour, those who accept the state of affairs and find odd ways to overcome it: “unfortunately, I have already seen female colleagues who use their feminine condition (some «emotional fragility», easy tears... issues associated with maternity...) to obtain, some additional sympathy from their male colleagues... The most ridiculous thing is that it seems to work!”

Two respondents do not belong to the Academic field and work for a private institution. Their testimonies lead to the hypothesis that, out of the University, things can be worse and happen more frequently: “often hierarchies find ways to subdue my intervention and avoid my initiatives when they displease them, and if there is a possibility to «punishment», they do not lose it”. “When there are vacancies for top managing, it is openly said that they are for men”. Maternity laws are not obeyed to (a respondent has been de-promoted for having taken child-birth vacancy. Women earn lower salaries for the same posts and responsibilities and they can be denied a training course abroad, where several men are included, just “because it is not possible to share a room with a woman”

4.9. Painful choices?

The question: «Do you feel that, because you are a woman, you have or had to renounce to something that your male colleagues do not have to?» obtained sixty-four percent of affirmative responses, most of them relating to time for the family; one respondent renounced to have a new child, and another one postponed her maternity. A woman can also renounce to her “personal life”, in order to enrich her CV (one case) or to time to dedicate to herself (“essentially time to myself). Only twenty percent declared “No” without any comments, while four respondents gave some kind of justification, all related to their family duties – “No, because I only have one child and my husband shares family duties, and because of that he is considered a hero”; “No, unless when my children were small”; “No, because I had good family support”.

Nevertheless, not all the “yes” responses are related to family life. One respondent, coming from private organisations, declared she had to sign up contracts under certain

conditions, namely accepting the compromise not to get pregnant, and in case it occurred she would be dismissed.

Conclusion

Findings show that all respondents feel happy or very happy with their profession. However, discrimination is mentioned by a significant percentage, even if such discrimination assumes, quite often, an elusive way, suggesting that even higher institutions still discriminate against women, although such discrimination can be worse outside the academic milieu. Findings also lead to discussion of power and leadership, both in the hands of male academics, in the majority of the institutions. Time is a word that appeared very often, in the sense of lack of something precious that is taken out by incompetence, lack of support and bureaucracy, time that these women want for themselves, for investing in their careers as they would like, in creative and quality research. This article raises some problems and points out to other research that might give a deeper insight on some issues that are not clarified so far, and to explain some contradictions. Besides, two concepts – time and freedom – appear to be especially valued by scientist women. It would be interesting to understand whether discrimination in workplace or other types of discrimination, as for example in sharing family responsibilities between males and females may be the reason for such value judgement.

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