

ENGENDERING HIGHER EDUCATION AT PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

SAGE (Systemic Action for Gender Equality) is an EU-Horizon 2020 funded project designed to seek stronger action on gender equality in higher education and research. Through the design and implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), the SAGE consortium is developing, refining and testing a replicable model for gender equality for extension across EU higher education and research institutions. As International University of Sarajevo (IUS) is one of seven partners in Project consortium, within WP 2 (Institutional Self-Assessment) qualitative strand, focus groups and interviews were conducted with academic and administrative staff alike. The purpose of this qualitative research was to determine the major gender-related (dis)advantages and obstacles experienced by women who have been working in academia. In order to contribute to answering the research question, a three-week long field work at IUS has been conducted. Convenient sample of 18 female academics, 5 female administrators, and 5 male academics willing to participate in the study was recruited. Prior the actual data collection, interview and focus groups protocols were slightly adapted from the original provided by the Trinity College Dublin, and academics and administrators were informed about the main purpose of the study and signed the consent form. They were not asked any personal data that may in any way reveal their true identity. Narratives were tape-recorded, transcribed, subsequently analyzed and main themes elaborated. The main findings are presented along two lines – *challenges and opportunities/strengths*. Main themes identified after initial coding were subsequently reduced to several overarching categories: gender-related obstacles, work-life (dis)balance, managerial positions (among challenges); and equal access to resources and organizational climate (among strengths). Several recommendations for improvement were mentioned and further discussed.

Keywords: gender, higher education, academics and administrators, challenges

Method and Materials

Participants:

In order to identify and select individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest, qualitative methodology framework, and given the total population of administrative and IUS staff that does not exceeds 250 (therefore only limited number of people can participate), purposeful sampling was considered the only viable option and 50-60 informants were envisaged. However, due to very low response rate, number was reduced, and convenient sample of 18 female academics, 5 female administrators, and 5 male academics willing to participate was recruited. Informants had to have at least five years of experience working in academia, preferably at IUS. Total of 13 interviews (female academics, age range 25-60) and 2 focus groups (five male academics, age range 25-55; five female academics, age range 35-60; five female administrator, age range 30-55) were carried out. Due to small sample they were not representative of each program, but faculty (FASS, FBA, FENS, whilst no participants were identified from Law school or Faculty of Education). As they were similar in age and experience, they were not segregated by age, working experience and position. Due to specific administrative organization, such segregation would not be feasible, nor relevant for administration focus group participants. Participants were informed of the discussion topics in advance.

Instrument:

Questions for the focus groups and interviews were adapted from the Interview Protocol (2006) developed and employed by WISELI, University of Wisconsin-Madison, under the research project In-Depth Interviews with Women Faculty and Staff in STEM. Available online at:

<http://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/interviews.php>

Procedure:

Data collection took three weeks. Prior the actual data collection, interview and focus group protocols were slightly adapted, and academics and administrators were informed about the main purpose of the study and signed the consent form. They were not asked any personal data that may in any way reveal their true identity. Narratives were tape-recorded, transcribed, subsequently analyzed and main themes elaborated.

Results

The main findings are presented along two lines – *challenges and opportunities/strengths*.

1. Challenges

a. Gender-related obstacles

All female informants stress that being a woman never in any way played a role in terms of their career path or right to promotion, but believe women are in worse position everywhere, globally and in Bosnian society, making tough choices constantly. It is more about prejudice that still exist in the whole country, regardless where women work, and girls are often indirectly pushed to incline towards certain more “feminine” occupations. One informant mentioned that she had a problem with her PhD defense as the dean at the time had a problem with her “being too young and a woman”. It seems easier to work in certain fields, mostly humanities and social sciences, for women dominate in that field. Two informants raised question of discrimination against single women at IUS, being perceived as less worthy and given more workload. In addition, during maternity leave, women somehow professionally stay behind their male colleagues, and are more concerned about professional mobility. Unpaid maternity leave is also a big issue. Women in general do not feel discriminated at IUS, but it was also mentioned by several informants that managers talk differently and negotiate on better terms with men and employees from different nationalities which has to do more with cultural differences, as well as lack of respect of male students from particular nationalities toward young female professors.

b. Work/life (dis)balance

Managing work and life is always challenging with IUS working hours and lack of flexibility which is perceived uncommon for academics at university, making it difficult to balance life and to do research. Therefore research has to be done outside work, and job taken home, which is very demanding. All women try to balance work and life but it is a bit hard. Not much time left for hobbies, rest of time is distributed between children and work. However many reported that they draw energy for work from their private life.

c. Managerial positions

Line managers are mostly women, top management men only (1 acting dean woman at the time). Most informants had a managerial role (middle level) at least once, but not too keen (except 2) on having one in the future, since program coordinator/dean position may be very demanding. Things changed for the better in terms of management sensitivity towards female academicians in recent times. Informants reported that when females earned the trust of decision makers, and through the constant exposure to different culture and dominant women, there was growth on top management side. Managers gradually changed their behavior, and since most of them are coming from patriarchal society, current situation is considered a great improvement. Several participants stressed that IUS will be more pleasant place for women in the future, but women should also be given more opportunity to prove themselves.

2. Strengths

a. Equal access to resources (academic promotion/benefits)

Many women stated that they used to perceive IUS, as one participant vividly expressed, “a bit of a boys’ club”, yet they believe that things are changing for the better now as more women are being employed and appreciated.

b. Climate

Most participants, with the exception of four, report that they find the current climate satisfactory, if they do not have close relationships at the Program level they still try to help each other and remain professional as much as possible. Situation is a bit different at faculty or IUS level since there is no cohesion, and employees hardly know each other. Management/leadership training and communication skills training for both middle level and top management is deemed important, particularly for the newly appointed managers and employees alike. Better information flow and consultative decision-making from top - down and bottom-up would be welcomed.

Conclusion

Similar to global trends women do not reach the most senior and leading positions at IUS in the same proportions as men do.

Even though both men and women perceive to have equal access to resources, women are supposed to balance between work and home duties, and such practice is being supported by fixed working hours and lack of academic freedom and flexibility.

Data obtained through semi-structured interviews reveal the lack of support for women in terms of paid maternity leave, research budget, and paid research leave and sabbatical.

It is recommended to re-modify organizational climate in a way that supports women and enables them to successfully balance academic career and private life (without discriminating between women who are mothers and those who are childless). That is specially directed towards providing more academic freedom and flexible working hours. More women should hold managerial positions (Vice rector, Dean, Head of Department) and more women should be included into decision-making processes. Also, it is recommended to prepare special budget for research and sabbatical leave to support women to leave their home institution and spend some time abroad without financial problems.

Still there is room for improvements should following items be taken into consideration by IUS higher management.

a. Cooperation

International institution such as IUS should ensure institutional initiatives to establish cooperation with other institutions, everything done so far was done via private channels.

b. Research/working hours

It is perceived that there is more time for professional work at public universities than at IUS, so greater support for research and development is needed. There is a need for greater research funding.

c. Maternity/Paternity leave

General conclusion was that fathers should be given equal opportunities as mothers to spend time with their children and women should be financially supported during the maternity leave.

d. “Single-woman” etiquette

Both in interviews and focus groups women claimed that they experienced embarrassing situations when they were asked to stay overtime just based on the fact that they are single.

e. Soft skills training and leadership training

Trainings should be organized in order to help both administrative and academic personnel improve their leadership and communication skills.

In order to tackle issues identified above, IUS SAGE Project Team drafted the IUS Gender Equality Plan (GEP) which is designed to be employed to remove barriers to the recruitment, retention and career progression of female researchers; address gender imbalances in decision-making processes; and strengthen the gender dimension in research programs.

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