

Doing Neoliberalism on Campus: The Vulnerability of Gender Equality Mechanisms in Estonian Academia¹

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Abstract: This paper explores the construction of a gendered neoliberal rationality in post-socialist academic settings. Drawing on interviews conducted with key stakeholders in four major Estonian universities, I trace how three key gender equality policy measures are conceptualised – quotas, workplace flexibility, and the involvement of men in efforts towards gender equality. The findings suggest that Estonian academic stakeholders fill these key gender equality policy ideas with meanings that distort the original purpose of these solutions, and thereby render these policy ideas counter-productive as mechanisms designed to bring about change in gender relations. Instead, these conceptualisations serve the interests of the neoliberal university, enabling and reinforcing the atomisation and exploitation of academic labourers, particularly women. Collectively, these articulations constitute, along with other practices, the ‘doing of neoliberalism’ in post-socialist university settings. Academic stakeholders do not (just) reflect an already established totalising neoliberal framework, but in fact discursively (and materially) create and reproduce what we have come to understand and refer to as ‘neoliberalism’ in academia. This has implications for devising and implementing gender equality policies in higher education in the post-socialist region, as the solutions applied elsewhere in Europe may not work in the same way in Central-Eastern Europe.

Keywords: gender, Estonia, academics, neoliberalism, gender equality policy, post-socialism

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In this article, I explore, in the example of Estonia, how academic stakeholders discursively produce what we could term neoliberal rationality. More specifically, I do this by examining the ways in which some key gender equality (GE) policy measures are conceptualised at Estonian universities.

In recent burgeoning literature on the neoliberalisation of higher education, processes termed 'neoliberal' in academic settings are often seen as a set of negative events, occurring irrespectively of the will and control of academics and usually externally imposed on universities or on individual academics. Contemporary academic organisations and people inhabiting these are treated as victims of these occurrences or passive carriers of the neoliberal ideology, seen as largely unable to exercise their agency in influencing these developments (Whelan 2015: 142). Specific ways in which what is understood as neoliberal ideology or neoliberal processes are transmitted in particular settings, such as the university, are mostly left unstudied (Whelan 2015: 137).

By far most of the existing scholarship on the neoliberalisation of higher education has emerged in and about Western contexts, with a largely Anglo-American empirical and theoretical focus. These processes have remained largely unexamined in many other settings, such as in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where market-centred thinking and governance seem to be equated with common sense, not only in the public discourse, but largely also in academia. Thus, critical perspectives on universities typically remain outside the scope of scholarly enquiry.

A pronounced difference between many Western and Nordic countries on the one hand and post-socialist Europe on the other relevant to my argument here is that policy-making in the latter region has had a much shorter history of considering gender. Indeed, in post-socialist EU countries, gender equality was typically only introduced into the national legal and policy frameworks when they entered the EU (Estonia joined in 2004). Pajumets (2012) argues, based on the Estonian context, that these institutional transformations have not translated into more egalitarian gender norms in individual practices. This has implications for devising and implementing GE policies in academic settings in the post-socialist region, as the solutions applied elsewhere in Europe might not work in the same way in CEE, due to different local conceptualisations of gender that could partly be associated with the legacy of the socialist regimes.

In contrast to research that sees people as simply reflecting or reacting to a neoliberal reality that is already presupposed, I trace some particular ways in which key stakeholders, in talking about gender in academic settings, actually *actively produce* what we understand as the neoliberal context and gendered subjects in this setting. Personal and institutional narratives therefore do not only index the neoliberal reality, but they constitute the very fabric of it (Aavik 2015: 73). The expression

‘doing neoliberalism’ (Luxton 2010: 179) consequently seems apt, referring to people ‘enacting the practices advocated by neoliberalism and normalizing them, confirming neoliberalism’s hegemony’.

In this paper, I focus on the question of how key academic stakeholders in Estonia produce a gendered neoliberal social reality in university settings by talking about gender and gender equality in the context of academic careers. I address this question by exploring a more specific one: how do these stakeholders relate to some key GE policy ideas in the context of Estonian universities – quotas, workplace flexibility, and the involvement of men in GE efforts?

Neoliberalism, higher education and gender

The concept of neoliberalism is primarily used to refer to an ideology and a policy model, which builds on the liberal political ideology. Central to neoliberalism is the promotion of *laissez-faire* economic policies, operating in the context of global capitalism (for a critical account of the rise of the global capitalist system, see, for example, Robinson 2014) and the gradual weakening or erosion of the welfare state.

Crucial to my engagement with the concept of neoliberalism in this paper are its wider implications reaching beyond the sphere of economic relations. In various critical scholarly accounts, processes labelled as ‘neoliberal’ are seen as reaching far beyond the market and profoundly reshaping the fabric of society with ultimately destructive consequences, such as the exacerbation of social inequalities. For example, neoliberalism has been conceptualised as ‘an agenda of social restructuring’, where inequalities do not occur as side effects, but constitute the very central elements of it (Connell 2013: 297). According to Brown (2015), neoliberalism is a ‘governing rationality’ that renders people as market actors. As such, she sees the neoliberal ideology as posing a risk to the functioning of democracy (*ibid*).

As in the liberal ideology, implicit in neoliberalism is a particular conceptualisation of human beings as individual actors making free choices (Rustin 2016:153). This particular feature of neoliberalism is crucial to my argument in this paper.

The emergence and functioning of this rationality, and the bureaucratisation it produces, has been discussed in the context of the public sector (see, for example, Graeber 2015). However, processes of neoliberalisation have probably been most extensively documented in scholarly accounts describing academic settings, in what has become a distinct field of scholarship, sometimes known as critical university studies. This work has thoroughly and critically documented (mostly in and about Western contexts) the ways in which the restructuring of higher education according to market logic negatively impacts the functioning of universities, the

lives of students and academics, and epistemological practices in academia more broadly. The birth of the 'corporate university' has been discussed in reference to the ever more prevalent tendency for higher education institutions to be managed according to market principles and sometimes reorganised as corporate entities. This orientation has profound consequences for the system of tertiary education and its participants (see, for example, Clark 1998; Slaughter, Leslie 1997; Marginson 2013; Rustin 2016).

While this literature has been deeply valuable in pointing out a wide range of problems in contemporary academic institutions and simultaneously functions as a kind of 'solidarising' action (Whelan 2015) between academics sharing these concerns, it is characteristic of these accounts that the specific mechanisms of the transmission of 'the neoliberal ideology' are left unexamined (*ibid.*). Neoliberalism is discussed on different levels of social reality, often as a 'totalising and monolithic system' (*ibid.*: 37).

My aim in this article is to explain and unpack some ways in which 'the neoliberal ideology' gets produced by concrete actors (Estonian academics and university managers) in a specific setting (Estonian universities). In this, I am inspired by micro-sociological perspectives, which examine the construction of meaning, including power relations (Dennis, Martin 2005) in micro-settings. Symbolic interactionist approaches place emphasis on human agency, conceptualising people as actively engaged in creating and recreating their identities (Pini 2005: 202). Just as gender can be understood as a situational accomplishment, according to the well-known social constructionist 'doing gender' approach (West, Zimmerman 1987), conveying the impression that it is a static and stable entity (Butler 1990), a similar logic could be adopted to understand what we label as 'neoliberal' and how it gets constructed in university settings. Focusing on the micro-level helps to deconstruct neoliberalism as a seemingly unitary and totalising system (Whelan 2015: 37) and prevent the reifying of this concept.

Existing critical work on subjectivities in the context of neoliberalisation has argued that neoliberalism produces significant changes in subjects. They are said to become self-interested and oriented towards 'entrepreneurial values, and consumerism' (Barnett 2009: 270). Literature focusing more particularly on higher education has highlighted the emergence of the regimes of performance under neoliberal conditions. This results in academics engaging in practices of the normalised self (Morrissey 2015: 614), including self-monitoring and accepting new forms of auditing (Gill 2010). According to Ball (2000: 16), we 'enact our academic selves in terms of productivities and tables of performance'.

An increasing body of work pays attention to the gender dimension in the context of the transforming universities and in the production of neoliberal academic

subjects. It has been pointed out that the seemingly gender-neutral requirements for academic workers are implicitly gendered. For example, the 'ideal academic' is conceptualised as a competitive individual free from caring obligations outside the university (Lynch 2010). The increasing precarisation of academic work has been found to be gendered, with disproportionately more women working in precarious positions (Garforth, Cervinkova 2009: 182). Gender segregation and gender stereotypes hinder particularly the careers of women (Löhkivi 2015). Meyers (2013) sees parallels between neoliberal rationality and post-feminist ideas, with both valorising individualism while downplaying structural obstacles. Marling (2015: 43) understands the neoliberal feminist subject as someone prioritising and awarding her own initiative in success, while downplaying and undervaluing collective practices of support and solidarity.

Some work on inequalities and hierarchies in contemporary academia has considered other categories of differentiation alongside gender, noting that the 'elite positions in the university are disproportionately reserved for white, heterosexual, middle-class, (en)abled masculine subjects' (Berg et al. 2014: 66), while 'feminine and racialised subjects' are largely responsible for the reproduction of the university (ibid: 64).

To challenge these biases and forms of inequality in workplaces, including in universities, policy measures have been devised at the national as well as the supranational level.

Key gender equality mechanisms: quotas, workplace flexibility, and the involvement of men in gender equality efforts

At least for a decade, policy approaches to gender equality in the EU have increasingly moved from 'fixing the women' towards 'fixing institutions' (Lipinsky 2014: 12). Within the latter approach, gender quotas, as temporary measures to increase the proportion of women in decision-making positions, have become an increasingly used policy measure in the EU, with at least 18 countries implementing them in some form or another (Lipinsky 2014: 12). In higher education, quotas have been implemented, for example, in Norway and Sweden.

Other key measures to tackle gender inequality in research and science include paying attention to work-life balance and flexibility (see, for example, Ruest-Archanbault 2008). The concept of flexibility often figures in literature on how to better organise workplaces. By flexibility, I refer to employers' consent and/or encouragement for workers to 'adjust working life and working hours to their own preferences and to other activities' (Jepsen, Klammer 2004: 157). Flexible work practices, as part of the broader theme of 'work-life balance', are often recommended and implemented as institutional measures to

enhance gender equality and equal opportunities in work organisations and more broadly on the labour market. Increasingly, however, even GE literature is employing the language of 'profit', arguing that work-related flexibility gives employees more motivation and a sense of independence, resulting in more 'productivity'.

Within gender studies, the relational nature of gender has long been recognised. In recent years, more practically oriented academic work has started to emphasise the importance of men in gender equality initiatives (see, for example, Flood, Howson 2015). Particularly in the past decade, men and masculinities have begun to receive increasing attention in EU gender policies (see Scambor et al. 2013: 1; The European Institute for Gender Equality 2012) and in national policies of some member states (European Commission 2014). Behind calls for the involvement of men in GE policy are insights from critical studies of men and masculinities, such as changing masculinities (for example, the emergence and valorisation of 'caring masculinities'), recognising diversity within the group 'men' and unmasking male privilege (Scambor et al. 2013: 2–3). Compared to quotas and workplace flexibility measures as rather concrete mechanisms for advancing gender equality in organisations and decision-making, the inclusion of men in GE initiatives is a new and developing policy area, and has thus far remained significantly broader and more vague, with specific policy solutions largely yet to be proposed.

In the area of gender, EU policies, including the three measures I outlined above, do not however always translate into similar GE policies in all the member states.

The restructuring of Estonian universities

Mirroring similar processes in many Western universities, structural reforms, primarily aimed at cutting costs and transforming higher education to better correspond to the needs of the labour market, have also been implemented or are under way at major Estonian universities. This has involved the introduction of practices of new public management in universities, the rise of audit culture, increasing bureaucratisation, the merging of units and curricula, the precarisation of academic work, and the dependence on external funding.

However, the Estonian higher education system features certain specificities, some of which are characteristic of academic settings in post-socialist CEE more broadly. Compared to Western and Nordic countries, academic wages, particularly for early career academics, remain low.² This, sometimes in combination with part-time work

² As of the end of 2015, the average monthly salary of academic workers in Estonia was 1551 euros (Raudvere 2016: 3). The average monthly salary in Estonia in the last quarter of 2015 was 1105 euros (Statistics Estonia 2017).

contracts, often pushes them to find extra work, typically outside the academia, to make ends meet. This means that many, particularly those employed primarily in teaching positions, are not able to fully commit to research. The almost complete lack of unionisation of academic workers, as a legacy of the Soviet period,³ makes it difficult to combat the increasing precarisation of academic labour. Consequently, increasingly atomised academics are entering into individual negotiations with university administrators for better working conditions. These recent developments have received surprisingly little critical engagement and resistance by academics in Estonia.

Despite a legal obligation to prevent unequal treatment and to enhance equal treatment and GE in their organisations, these aims have thus far not been prioritised by Estonian universities. There are no units or administrative positions dealing with these questions. Only one university – University of Tartu – has recently issued basic guidelines for equal treatment in the university, propelled by an institutionally mishandled case of sexual harassment. Other universities have no such strategic documents or equality plans.

The current labour force in tertiary education consists of roughly equal numbers of women and men, with 47.2% of all academic positions in major Estonian universities filled with women (Raudvere 2016: 2). However, there is considerable vertical and horizontal segregation of the academic labour force and other inequalities. Women hold only 26% of professorships (*ibid.*). A considerable gender pay gap exists between academic salaries, with men earning on average 20% more in major Estonian universities (Raudvere 2016: 3).⁴

The current structural reforms and inequalities in Estonian higher education should be understood in the context of post-socialism, shaped by a complex interplay of cultural disruptions and continuities. While on a structural level all ties to the country's Soviet past have been cut, certain continuities are present on the level of subjectivities (see, for example, Pajumets 2012).

The socialist system created ambivalent structural conditions and subjectivities regarding gender in academic settings. Within the broader Soviet public discourse on egalitarianism, official policies on gender equality emphasised women and men's equal right to and obligation to perform full-time employment and their right to

³ In post-socialist Eastern and Central Europe, trade unions are facing a crisis of legitimacy. They are largely seen as a relic of the socialist past, where they did not represent workers' interests but instead functioned as 'the means of integrating workers into the state socialist system' (Clarke 2005: 3). In post-socialist neoliberal capitalist democracies, popular sentiment values minimally regulated markets and labour relations. In this context, trade unions might even be seen as hindrances to the development of entrepreneurial culture and the accumulation of profit.

⁴ The overall gender pay gap in Estonia is 26.9% (Eurostat 2015), the largest in the EU.

obtain education (Blagojević 2003). State support included the wide availability of childcare for working mothers. Yet at the same time the Soviet regime enforced horizontal and vertical segregation in all areas of employment, including in education and science (ibid.).

Neoliberal policies and the rhetoric implemented by the state today co-exist with memories of a former system, in which various political and social aspects offered an alternative to the current state of affairs. Yet, the use of any discourse that involves collective pursuits towards egalitarianism is often regarded as resembling the collectivist rhetoric of the Soviet state and on this basis can be easily dismissed as illegitimate.

Instead, in contemporary Estonia, neoliberalism tends to look like a 'normal' ideology, taken for granted, with no alternatives assumed (Luxton 2010: 171). In CEE, the lack of a collective imagination for alternatives is evidenced, for example, by only marginal anti-capitalist social movements. Here, 'radical Left organizations ... are unable to get any resonance for their anti-capitalist demands discredited by the former Communist regimes' (Císař 2013: 997). At the same time, there is widespread support and encouragement for enterprise culture. This makes identifying and resisting the processes of corporatisation in various spheres of social life, including in higher education, a challenging endeavour.

Research materials and method

The empirical material used in this paper was collected in 2015 in the framework of an initiative (known by the acronym ENEKE⁵) led by a group of sociologists (including the author) at Tallinn University, in partnership with colleagues from three other Estonian universities. ENEKE was the first major attempt by Estonian research institutions to do 'equality work' (Adsit et al. 2015: 25). The project mapped and evaluated from a gender perspective existing institutional practices, policies, and documents focusing on GE and equal treatment in Estonian universities; examined institutional discourses on gender and gender equality in the context of academic research and universities as work organisations; studied the experiences of early career researchers; and sought to devise practical measures for advancing women's research careers.

In the framework of ENEKE, 13 individual interviews were conducted with key stakeholders at four major Estonian universities (including one private university): heads of academic and administrative units, professors in the field of social sciences, and academic trade union leaders. The second set of data consists of 9 focus group

⁵ The acronym is formed out of the formulation of the aim of the initiative in the Estonian language and stands for 'the enhancement of successful career paths for Estonian women scientists'.

interviews with early career researchers in the social sciences (in total, 24 women and 10 men participated). From both groups, we inquired about their views on gender in the context of academic careers, focusing particularly on women's careers. While we had pre-determined topics to be covered, the interview design was relatively open, which enabled research participants to introduce related topics that they deemed important.

The collected interview material was analysed using a qualitative thematic approach (Braun, Clarke 2006), aiming to identify common themes and patterns around the issues that I explore in this article.

Drawing on micro-sociological perspectives, the analysis also took into account interactional aspects occurring in interview situations between the academics, including the interviewers, taking part in the interviews. While micro-sociological methodologies, including symbolic interactionism, prioritise the study of naturally occurring data, interviews can also generate illuminating insights to understand the dynamics of the production of the 'neoliberal rationality' in everyday settings. The interview situation in which the data for this analysis was produced, constitutes a setting in which 'doing neoliberalism' can be studied, as the interviews involved interaction between differently positioned academics (interviewer and interviewees) on matters related to the organisation of academic life. In these situations, we can trace the discursive production of academic subjectivities. According to micro-sociological perspectives, agency should not be identified with the individual, but it 'arises in [local] interactions' and face-to-face encounters (Collins 2004: 6).

'Doing neoliberalism' in the Estonian academia – findings

Resistance to quotas

The question of quotas provides a good example of how institutional attempts to deal with gender bias and women's disadvantaged position in academic settings are generally perceived. While resistance to quotas is a phenomenon observed elsewhere as well, it is worth exploring its particular manifestations in Estonia, in the context of the Soviet legacy as well as in the framework of more general reluctance, particularly by privileged groups, to see various forms of inequality as problematic (Aavik 2015).

Research participants displayed caution towards the implementation of any institutional measures to enhance gender equality and particularly to advance women's careers. While explicit resistance to quotas was expressed, examples given in interviews indicated that the purpose and functioning of quotas was typically misunderstood:

Peeter, M (professor, management):⁶ I would say that you have to take into account the person's qualification, skills, knowledge, teaching skills, and career motivations, all of those things, not that we just appoint someone to take the chair because she is a woman. In my view, this is the most erroneous decision ever, to make someone do something because she is a woman, if she does not want to lead and does not have skills. This is a very wrong approach. Today, we are in a situation where you can only choose the best ones, because otherwise you won't survive in this competition and internationalisation and all this. Gender does not matter at all here. Sometimes the person must be available for work for 24 hours a day. If a woman is ready for this, let her do it, nobody is stopping her.

Here, an implicitly masculine academic subject or ideal worker (Acker 1990) is constructed, one who is constantly available for the employer if need be. This subject is constructed in extremely individualist terms – his/her career is only dependent on his/her autonomous choices. This academic subject is not bound by external constraints. This conceptualisation of people is incompatible with the key assumptions behind gender quotas – that structural obstacles prevent particularly women from performing equally with men.

The quota system was seen as alien to the Estonian society and the university was considered an inappropriate place to implement quotas. Estonia was deemed as 'not ready' for quotas:

Katrin, W (early career researcher): Well, you see, the idea of quotas still causes mental shock in our society. In Sweden, this is a long tradition already, right? It's not alien there. For me, this idea is alien. I would prefer for people to get positions through successful entrance exams where they demonstrate that they are interested in the job, that they want this. It is an absurd situation where someone goes to study how to build bridges not because she's interested in it, but because a quota enabled her to do it.

Here, an implicit reference is made to the Soviet era, where people were often appointed to jobs and a general ethos of egalitarianism was promoted.

Quotas were also seen as an 'unnatural' intervention:

Mari, W (early career researcher): I think this is partly a natural process. You cannot ... well, if women themselves do not go into [the hard sciences] and do not see

⁶ Pseudonyms are used to refer to the interviewees. Interviews were conducted in the Estonian language, translations into English are provided by the author. I use the abbreviations M (man) and W (woman) to refer to the gender that the interviewees identified with.

any potential to go into [them], then to go out on the street to find a woman [to do so] is very strange.

The evoking of the word 'natural' in this context is telling. As an interesting contrast, while the recent structural reforms that most Estonian universities have recently undergone were generally not challenged or seen as externally imposed, possible measures to promote gender equality and equal treatment at the university were considered externally enforced, unnatural, and unnecessarily interventions, which endanger the autonomy of the organisation.

The unpopular perception and misunderstanding of quotas is also demonstrated in the next excerpt where the interviewee questions the identity of a 'quota woman':

Ingrid, W (early career researcher): My personal opinion is that I do not want special treatment at work because I am a woman or because I am capable of having children. I would feel like a disabled person who requires differential treatment by the employer. A decent employer, like the university or some enterprise, will always make exceptions if you need to fetch your children from day-care. You can organise your work rather freely at the university. I don't want anyone to advance me. I mean, I find it insulting that I need some kind of an external formal system to boost me, while men are capable of advancing on their own.

A minority of research participants were more receptive to the quota system, but only if well designed and not only implemented in one particular university but throughout the entire higher education system. This reflects a fear of losing one's competitive edge – in case quotas detract (male) talent – in a system where competition is seen to be happening and is valorised between genderless individuals.

Resistance to quotas could also be partly explained by the relatively equal numbers of men and women in the Estonian academic workforce. This might lead academic stakeholders to think that due to the more or less equal visible presence of men and women in universities, gender equality might not be an issue here. More invisible indicators of gender inequality, such as the pay gap or the distribution of administrative tasks, remain hidden and can therefore be easily left unconsidered.

Instead of quotas more unofficial or indirect measures were preferred, such as offering personal solutions according to the needs of specific employees in particular situations. This was seen as a less aggressive mechanism of intervention. As such, 'soft measures' were favoured: offering flexibility to employees in reconciling work and family life and promoting female role models in the top hierarchies of science. I discuss the conceptualisation of flexibility in the next section.

Flexibility as an individual-level solution

Research participants brought up the issue of workplace flexibility as an appropriate way of enhance gender equality by 'informal means' in Estonian universities. The enabling of flexibility – more precisely, allowing employees some liberty to decide on when and where they work – was viewed as a significant and sufficient measure for enhancing gender equality in Estonian universities, where institutional gender equality mechanisms are lacking:

Meelis, M (professor/management): The university, and particularly our institute, is a very good place for planning a family. If you work in the public sector and go back to work while caring for your child, you work from nine to five; you don't have a choice. In the cases of several people we have used this [flexibility] as a tactic. We said to them, we offer you much more flexibility. And if that is important to you, then we are very accommodating. I know that this is very important for some people. The academy may not be able to compete [with other workplaces] in many respects, but we can with flexibility.

Typically, gender-neutral language was used in discussing the alleged benefits of flexibility, however the discourse is implicitly gendered, as it is primarily women who are expected to be interested in and to benefit from flexible workplace practices.

All stakeholders, including and especially early-career women researchers, viewed academic institutions more generally and their own universities in particular as flexible workplaces compared to other organisations, and thereby as more egalitarian:

Marko, M (early career researcher): I think that the university is one of the few places where there is perhaps less gender inequality than in the country on average. It is a relatively secure and less ambitious career environment. ... The whole system is extremely flexible. It does not matter whether a man takes a free semester or a woman spends half a year longer at home with the child.

Claims of gender equality were attributed by respondents to academia generally and to their own universities in particular, but without any empirical evidence to support this.

Flexibility was interpreted as family-friendliness, which, in turn, was equated with women-friendliness. The said flexibility was seen to benefit women in particular:

Katri, W (early career researcher): I am no different. Among the reasons why I chose a part-time academic career was the opportunity to reconcile work and family life.

The emphasis on individual choice figured throughout the interviews. The opportunity to work from home was seen as an attractive personal choice for women:

Marko (early career researcher): I would say that perhaps in the social sciences women have an advantage when they can work from home. The child is already in childcare, but if for some reason women prefer to continue to stay at home, they can do their research in peace.

In this excerpt, the respondent puts forward a masculine understanding of science as an individual endeavour, not as a collective accomplishment in which the central elements are networking and cooperation. This comment is a good example of how neoliberal academic subjectivities are produced through discourse.

As part of the general scepticism towards 'official' or institutional gender equality measures, the respondents favoured and expected individual approaches of an 'unofficial nature' over the implementation of flexible work practices, tailored to the needs of particular cases. The feasibility and appropriateness of an individual approach was rationalised on the basis of the small size of Estonia:

Marika, W (early career researcher): What you can do is be flexible. In Estonia there are so few researchers that you can implement this on a personal level.

The perceived flexibility and implied family-friendliness were seen as making up for the relatively low salaries that some segments of the academic workforce earn at Estonian universities, as illustrated in the following excerpt from a focus group interview with early career women researchers:

Liina, W: I generally think that the university, like many other organisations, is feminised. The level of salaries means that mainly women come and remain here. This is because the salary is low...

Mari: But it is enough.

Liina: It is enough, and you have relative time flexibility.

This is also known – or at least assumed – by university managers:

Imbi, W (professor/management): I can share another reason why women might agree to be here. I mean, I have just talked to some of them. I don't know if this affects everyone, but they are willing to work for slightly lower wages compared to other places, but here you are relatively free to organise your time. Well, you just do your hours, and whether you do your research, whatever time suits you, is your own free choice. Or if you need a free day, you can arrange it yourself.

Interviewer: So you mean flexibility?

Imbi: Flexibility, and, let's be honest, a long vacation.

In response to the perceived flexibility of the university, interviewees attempted to present themselves as employees loyal to their employer – for example, by accepting additional assignments and not placing too many demands on the employer:

Selma, W (early career researcher): On the contrary, I am quite satisfied with the university in this respect. I took parental leave for both of my children. We [myself and my employer] have both made compromises: I have helped my department when they needed it and they have made some compromises regarding payments to me ... It was okay with them when I reduced my workload. They didn't stop this. And after the birth of my first child, they didn't say to me, 'you will likely have another child so you cannot come back' or something. I'm satisfied. Actually, the job of a researcher means that sometimes I can take care of my children at home during the week and write papers on weekends. The flexible schedule encourages this. In return, I guarantee that at this and that hour I am certainly available for teaching or at least I'll let them know if I am not and make up for it. I am not critical of the university in this regard.

What was presented and valorised as flexible working hours and the opportunity to work part time is increasingly not a choice at Estonian universities for many academics, especially early career researchers, as many are not given full-time contracts. This is becoming increasingly uncommon today, as Estonian universities are forced to comply with regulations limiting successive fixed-term contracts resulting in permanent contracts being signed, but with only a select few academics⁷. This considerable limitation remained unacknowledged by the interviewees.

Flexibility was constructed as a significant gender equality measure that the university is already implementing, regardless of the fact that it is not an institutionalised measure nor is it collectively carried out. Its benefits were emphasised, without considering its possible downsides.

Notably, men were largely absent from this discussion around flexibility at the university. As Plantenga and Remery (2010: 79) note, 'as long as flexibility is still considered a "female" way of organising working time, flexible working time schedules are more likely to confirm gender differences than to change them'.

⁷ In fact, what had for years been presented to academic employees as a 'flexible' employment relationship by university managers was declared unlawful by the European Commission in 2012. In 2012, the EC gave Estonia two months to comply with EU regulations on the protection of workers in the academic sector. As of 2017, the process of implementing permanent work contracts is still on-going.

'Vulnerable' academic men

Some scholarly attention has been paid to academic masculinities (see Armato 2013), including in the context of the neoliberalisation of universities (see Berg et al. 2014), and has drawn attention to men's 'unearned privilege' (Berg et al. 2014: 68) and 'enlightened sexism' (Armato 2013: 578) in academic settings. The findings that I present below contribute to the discussion of how male privilege and forms of (implicit) sexism are manifested at universities.

The interviewees were of the view that if attention should be paid to gender in academic contexts at all, then equal consideration should be given to the problems and specifics of men and their careers in academia, which were seen as at least as serious as women's. A good example of this construction of men in academia is provided by the following exchange:

Interviewer: So, the second-last question. What could your university do to ensure gender equality and to enhance women's careers?

Liis, W (human resources manager): And to also advance male researchers' careers, to add to your question. In other words, what could be done?

While the interview questions were centred on issues relating to the careers of women researchers and possible solutions, some interviewees attempted to reframe the topic, highlighting that men's well-being in academia is at least as important or offering examples of what they saw as the discrimination of men at universities. This discourse also signifies that the stakeholders – both women and men – did not see women in academia as at a particular disadvantage.

Gender stereotypes applied to men, such as pressure to work and earn an income, were seen as contributing to men's vulnerability in higher education. While the question of low academic wages was raised in relation to women and work flexibility, it emerged again in discussing academic masculinities. In this context, the low wages were seen as preventing men from assuming the breadwinner role expected of them. The situation was seen as discriminatory and unfair towards men:

Liis: If we compare universities to other organisations, whether in the business or public sector, but particularly the former, then I think that universities do not discriminate against women. Rather, as universities are definitely not places where you go to earn a high salary, I would say that perhaps, if we talk about financing, the question is about discriminating men. In other words, if the expectation is that men have to support all those families that they will start during their lives, then ... it might well be that they will not choose a university career because the pay is

low ... So, if we talk about external funding from a gender perspective, I believe it can be discriminatory towards men.

Another interviewee, aiming to make a similar point, presented a hypothetical situation where an early career male researcher becomes a father and is suddenly faced with the duty to financially support his family, likely resulting in him leaving academia completely.

Low salaries were highlighted as an obstacle for men's research and teaching careers:

Imbi (professor/management): I know a lot of very qualified men who don't come to work with us because the salary is ... For example, I know several men working at the Bank of Estonia who would join us if the salaries were different.

Imbi expresses regret that these talented men do not seriously contemplate a career in academia. Curiously, the same scenario for women never came up.

While the discourse of men's vulnerability in academia drew overwhelmingly on opinions and secondary anecdotal evidence, there was an instance where it was also argued on the basis of personal experiences:

Marko (early career researcher): Well, I sometimes feel sad, as I am effectively this homespun lecturer. I am fulfilling some kind of in-between role at the university. At some point, a PhD graduate will come from some university abroad and start working here. But in the meantime, you have to keep this university going. Effectively, you don't have any bigger challenge. Those talents will come one day and take your job. And you have to accept it with a smile.

In this narrative, Marko expresses his sense of inferiority and the perception that his job, career, and status at his university are at risk. He does not associate his vulnerable masculine academic self with the 'dominance of women' and 'women's preferential treatment' in academia, as expressed in several other accounts, but links his insecurity to the increasing globalisation and internationalisation of universities, and the implications of these processes. He feels disposable, awaiting to be replaced on any day by another academic with better qualifications.

The 'women-centredness' of Estonian universities as work organisations was emphasised, and implicitly seen as a disadvantage to male academics. This opinion was based on the gender ratio of academic workers. This observation was used to construct an argument according to which larger or equal numbers of women compared to men in academia means that gender inequalities do not exist or that women are enjoying some advantages over men in this setting. The organisational culture, particularly in the humanities and social sciences was thought to favour the recruitment of women:

Lembit, M (management): It seems to me that attitudes have somewhat favoured women in recruitment practices at our university. I cannot claim whether this has been a conscious policy or that is just happened ... I mean, just visually, when I think about it, well above half of our employees, including faculty, are women. In the case of faculty, the principle of recruitment has been academic competence, and as we are dealing with the social sciences and humanities here, then, it has happened that in more than half of the cases these competent people have been women. So, we have not needed any targeted policy, but our organisational culture, in my view, does not exclude, but rather favours women.

The discourse of vulnerable male researchers was occasionally extended beyond academia, seeing men as disadvantaged in the context of balancing work and family life, and women as in an advantageous position in various work contexts. For example, it was suggested that employers in Estonia increasingly prefer women employees over men, as the former are seen as more loyal and motivated.

There were calls for preferential treatment of men in certain respects:

Luule, W (early career researcher): In many workplaces, women are in power, not in a bad sense, but perhaps in academia, we should apply affirmative action to men, to increase their numbers here. In my field, however, people do not enter academia because the working conditions and opportunities are significantly better elsewhere. Those who join the university are those seeking an alternative expression of the self or who have some kind of ambition to fulfil here. You won't go looking for your main job here. And this seems to be the reason why men, who compared to women have more material ambitions, do not come here. Or if they do, then [it's] those who want to become distinguished leaders in their field, and the university is a good tool for helping you reach the top and be seen as a leader. This is what usually attracts men to the university.

As evidenced by the excerpts presented in this section, a particular construction of the masculine academic subject emerges from the interviews. Academic men are portrayed as vulnerable and fragile. This should be understood within the broader discourse in Estonian society constructing men and boys as victims of the education system. The popular discourse about 'failing boys' and 'fragile men' in the Estonian education system and about girls as the 'winners' in this context (Kuurme 2010: 263) was strongly (re)produced here.

The principle of paying equal attention to the concerns of women and men, advocated by the interviewees, resonates with the more recent directions of GE policy in the EU and also of the Estonian state to pay more attention to men in efforts to achieve gender equality. While this approach in principle does help

to highlight the relational nature of the categories of woman and man, the way it was presented by these academic stakeholders risks diverting attention from the specific problems that women are facing at universities. Furthermore, such conceptualisations serve to obscure the fact that in most spheres of public life, including in academia, women as a group are still more disadvantaged than men. The more or less equal ratio of men and women in higher education, used by some respondents to argue that Estonian universities are gender equal, however, de-emphasises other, more telling indicators, such as the gender wage gap, vertical and horizontal gender segregation, and various more or less subtle disparities of a qualitative nature.

Conclusion

I started this paper by introducing and questioning some prevalent tendencies and assumptions in the literature on the neoliberalisation of the academia. Namely, I pointed out how neoliberalism is often treated as a totalising entity imposed from the outside on academics, who are seen as passive recipients and victims of the agenda of neoliberalisation. As my second starting point, I suggested that some key gender equality measures devised and implemented in EU gender policy and in several Western and Nordic countries might not function in post-socialist Europe, at least not in the same way, owing to local understandings of gender.

My aim in this paper was to bring these two points together by examining how key stakeholders at four major Estonian universities relate to three prominent conceptual focus areas and tools of GE policy: quotas, workplace flexibility (as part of work-life balance), and the role of men. I argue that the particular framings put forward by Estonian academics on gender and gender equality measures constitute instances of doing neoliberalism in university settings.

The findings suggested that possible measures to promote gender equality and equal treatment at universities, particularly quotas, were typically not supported. Resistance to quotas was based on arguments about individual freedom and autonomy. Quotas were constructed not only as unnecessary, but also as something more sinister: as externally enforced interventions that threaten the sacred autonomy of the individual and the organisation, construed as sovereign.

An implicitly masculine academic subjectivity was constructed in the discussion of quotas. In this, all academic achievement was individualised, while structural inequalities and gendered obstacles to academic careers were dismissed. While academic subjects or ideal workers in universities were implicitly masculine even before the transformation of universities, the restructured university with its corporate management practices certainly enforces this ideal.

Here, the relationship between the conceptualisations of and resistance to quotas put forward by the academic stakeholders and neoliberalism should be clarified. Central to neoliberal ideology, as to liberal ideology, is an emphasis on individual achievement and responsibility, while structural obstacles faced by 'individuals' are dismissed and collective efforts in human endeavours are downplayed. However, gender equality efforts stem from the understanding that some individuals experience disadvantages due to their structural positioning in terms of the category of gender (and other categories, if we take an intersectional perspective). Therefore, I understand the resistance to quotas by these academic stakeholders to be an instance of doing neoliberalism. In fact, thought of in this way, the neoliberal agenda seems to be fundamentally incompatible with feminist efforts to build gender equality.

Instead of quotas, less 'aggressive', softer measures were advocated. Flexibility was valued as a key characteristic of the university as an employer. This helps to create the illusion – particularly for early career women researchers – that they are autonomous academic subjects. The perception that the university offers considerable independence through flexibility discourages the expression of criticism of several negative attributes of neoliberal academia, such as increasing workloads, low wages, and the increasing burden of administrative tasks, which disproportionately affect women academics. These activities prevent them from contributing equally to research, compared to male colleagues. It is the latter activity, however, that is valued and measured in neoliberal academia, and that a successful academic career largely depends on. Furthermore, this conceptualisation of flexibility, favouring individual-level solutions and negotiations, without any collective policies, makes workers in academia vulnerable. It leaves academic workers, particularly women, at the whim of increasingly powerful university managers and creates room for exploitation, particularly in a context where trade unions cannot be counted on.

Certainly, compared to quotas, flexibility is a less politically charged measure for advancing GE. Flexibility as a tool for promoting GE is a more ambiguous mechanism than quotas and can lend itself to various interpretations and implementations, including those that serve corporate aims, as demonstrated here. Thus, offering flexibility is much more palatable to university managers than implementing quotas. It is an acceptable measure because it can be offered individually, in particular cases, conveniently avoiding collective measures and institutional intervention. The preference for individual agreements in specific situations leaves academics to face their employer as individuals and thereby renders them vulnerable. Encouraging individual negotiations (over salaries and working conditions), whose outcome depends on various factors, including how academics are positioned in terms of gender and other categories, does not help to decrease hierarchies and may instead exacerbate them. Despite being

implemented on an individual level and on a case-by-case basis, offering flexibility can be presented by university managements as significant 'equality work' (Adsit et al. 2015: 25) that the university is engaging in, without it in fact implementing any institutional change regarding GE in the university setting.

There was also an emphasis on the need to pay equal attention to the concerns of male academics, who were constructed as vulnerable, which is consistent with the broader discourse that portrays 'boys and men as victims' of the education system in Estonia. This conceptualisation of academic masculinities has important implications for efforts to build gender equality in the neoliberal university. What this effectively means is that men cannot be counted on as equal stakeholders or serious partners in gender equality commitments and in efforts to advance women's careers at Estonian universities. Indeed, as the findings imply, men, as vulnerable themselves, can hardly be expected to have a moral obligation to be involved in these initiatives. Therefore, according to this discourse, any preferential treatment schemes should include men as well. This effectively gives gender quotas a whole new meaning in the Estonian context, one that defeats their original purpose as a policy measure to mitigate structural disadvantages faced by women. In constructing academic men as vulnerable, the phenomenon of male privilege, and particularly, intersectional privilege (Aavik 2015) – as a structural feature – remains unaccounted for.

I argue that, collectively, these articulations constitute instances of 'doing neoliberalism' (Luxton 2010) in post-socialist university settings. In other words, academic stakeholders do not (just) reflect an already established totalising neoliberal framework, but in fact, discursively create and reproduce what we have come to understand and refer to as 'neoliberalism' in academia. This approach recognises their agency in creating neoliberal rationality. In talking about gender and GE measures in university settings, a neoliberal context was discursively produced largely through the reiteration of the notion of the individual who is free to choose – in this case, an academic entrepreneur – and the promotion of the ideal of the autonomous organisation. As such, any consideration of structural elements, such as gender, and the possible implementation of GE measures are seen as obstacles that get in the way of implementing 'real' research work.

Throughout this paper, I have collectively referred to the interviewees as 'academic stakeholders'. Yet, I draw here on empirical material collected from groups who might be expected to have at least somewhat divergent interests and discursive positions. As a surprising and significant finding, however, these groups – academics in different stages of their careers, managers, and administrative employees – in conceptualising gender and gender equality appeared to be doing collective discursive work to co-construct a neoliberal rationality in the university setting. Another crucial finding was that no significant gender differences could be discerned in these discursive

efforts. Further research should be conducted, for example, on the role of women in constructing and upholding the idea of 'vulnerable academic men'.

It is important to note that the views put forward by the academic stakeholders on these three themes were not evidence-based. Yet, this does not mean that these constructions can be easily dismissed or that they do not have significant material implications. Discursive constructions, irrespective of their basis in 'reality', have material effects. By producing these meanings on gender and gender equality, some forms of action are legitimised and pursued, while others are ruled out and become unthinkable (Jørgenson, Phillips 2002: 5). In this case, these particular conceptualisations of gender and gender equality give rise to neoliberal subjectivities left vulnerable to exploitation. Indeed, with the university imagined as a collective of equally positioned, autonomous individuals, gender is dismissed as a relevant category in shaping academic careers. As a result, collective solidarity and action to resist the neoliberalisation of universities, where gender and other inequalities are increasingly rife, becomes a meaningless action.

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