

NON-EVENTS AND WOMEN'S ACADEMIC CAREERS. IVA ŠMÍDOVÁ TALKS TO LIISA HUSU

Professor Liisa Husu is a Finnish sociologist and gender studies scholar with a research focus on gender in academia, science and knowledge production, and strong European and international engagement in research and policy development in this field. She is Professor of Gender Studies at Örebro University, Sweden, and Co-Director of the GEXcel International Collegium for Advanced Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, a three-university Gender Studies hub in Sweden, and also affiliated to the Department of Management and Organisation at Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki, Finland. Previously, 1981–1995, she served the Finnish government as the Senior Adviser and National Coordinator of Women's Studies in the governmental gender equality machinery. Her publications include the books *Hard Work in the Academy* (1999), *Sexism, Support and Survival in Academia* (2001), *Science, Knowledge and Gender* (in Finnish, 2005), *Leadership through the Gender Lens* (2010), articles and book chapters. She was awarded the University of Helsinki Equality Prize, the Maikki Friberg Prize in 2009.

Iva Šmídová: What are the recent projects that you've been working on?

Liisa Husu: One large recent project is European Union funded and is based both on research and policy knowledge. Its goal is to build a European portal on gender and science issues, understood very broadly, that could serve various actors across Europe and beyond in research, policy and action. It is a big, big project, called GenPort.¹ Our team is only one part of it, it is based on intense international cooperation, and is coordinated from Barcelona by the Open University of Catalonia, with significant participation of Italy, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Germany and Sweden. The aim is to create one entry-point where people who are interested in research on gender and science, in gender, science, technology and innovation, as well as representatives of organizations trying to promote gender equality in science and scientific organizations and attempting to create different kinds of actions, can easily find information – very detailed information – and relevant documents. On the portal, they can also advertise their actions and create a transnational community. That is the aim of this project. And my task is to bring the research expertise I have in the area of gender and science and gender in aca-

demia into the project together with my policy experience, and contribute to building up this consortium and this portal in a way so that it is well organized and responds to the needs of both researchers and policy-makers and different other stakeholders.

Iva Šmídová: I understand that you keep doing projects that are related to gender and science and women in science. What is for you the core feminist problem or question in the area of your research?

Liisa Husu: I work really a lot both in basic research on gender and science and gender and academia, but I also work all the time with policy development, trying to promote knowledge transfer from research to policy. That is: how to transfer the information and knowledge we create in the field of gender and science research into the policy field, and to those who are shaping the scientific arena nationally, Europe-wide or more broadly, and their specific scientific organizations. So that is one recurrent issue and a big question that reappears in my professional trajectory. Let me go back a bit. For decades, the issue of gender and science was framed as a women's issue. It was seen as our problem, the problem was that women were doing or not doing this or that, they were not motivated enough, they were not more successful, something was basically wrong with women. And that was the frame of the problem, and the remedy was of course to fix the women or try to make women fix their problems, to change. But both the research and policy frames have gradually changed, the focus in both has changed significantly since the late 1990's. Not everywhere, not in every organization, but in a sort of global scene and in the most advanced organizations and the most advanced research.

So the question we ask today is, what are organizations doing in order not to create gender equal environments, what are organizations doing so that gender differences and gender inequalities are reproduced and produced and rarely challenged. The focus has shifted more to exploring the organizational approach, to what leaders do, what so-called gatekeepers of science do, in order to either hinder, block or promote gender equalities, or better gender balance. So that is a big move, and I think it is absolutely necessary. We can, of course, we have to look at individual women and what women are doing, but at the same time we need focus-

ing on and broadening the question of gender and science to look at all organizational levels, players, and organizational processes and practises.

Iva Šmídová: You've also initiated and participated in several comparative European studies. Do you see any trends in various regions of Europe concerning this institutionalized approach to gender equality and this potential of organizations to change or not to change?

Liisa Husu: Absolutely, there are clearly these hotspots of activity, and then there are areas where not much is happening, and there is quite little interest, maybe some spots of interest. One could say that Europe can be divided into regions which are proactive, and regions which are less proactive, to put it politely. And I would say the most proactive areas are the Nordic countries, especially Norway and Sweden, and UK to some extent, and German-speaking Europe: Germany, Austria and Switzerland. A lot is happening in these countries, a lot of research is done, and several organizations are engaged with gender equality promotion – from research councils to universities, to rectors' organizations and so on. And then there is Central-Eastern Europe, France, and Greece, where very little is going.

Iva Šmídová: Where do you see the roots of these differences, how would you explain why France and Central-Eastern Europe and Greece fall in the same group?

Liisa Husu: One line of explanation is the kind of general, societal context. I've been looking at the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index, which ranks practically all countries in the world according to how well they have managed to diminish the so-called gender gap in education, in working life, in political empowerment, leadership and organizational leadership, and in health. So it's a broad societal look, and countries have been ranked on the basis of this, not on the basis of how rich they are, how many resources they have, but on the basis how evenly these resources are distributed between women and men. And it's clear that the countries which have a small societal gender gap in general, are also more – and have been more – active in promoting gender equality, also in the fields of research and science. So this trend is quite clear.

And of course their small gender gap is a societal gender gap. It can mean that the countries which have a relatively small gender gap, can be countries where there are lots of women in research or fewer women in research. And the German-speaking Europe belongs to those countries which have a small societal gender gap in a global sense, but only a few women in research but they are doing something, actually a lot, to remedy this issue.

Iva Šmídová: Do you find links between your own work in research on gender and science and your own career as

a scientist? Have you experienced the things that you're describing in your research yourself or in the organizations where you've worked?

Liisa Husu: Absolutely. Every day (laughs), every day. It is even amusing sometimes. A long time ago, I did my doctoral thesis on sexism in the Finnish academic settings, and especially about the hidden sexism, hidden discrimination. And when I was starting this doctoral work, I got friendly advice and a question from a middle-aged male professor who was one of the professors at the sociology department where I was doing my thesis, and he said to me: but Liisa, are you really sure about this topic for a doctoral thesis, isn't it like studying your own problems when you look at sexism in academia? And this was a very friendly comment, not hostile, he was trying to give good advice to a young doctoral student. At the moment, as a doctoral student, you think it's an appropriate question and of course, I had to think about whether it would be OK. And later I realized that this male professor had been studying the excessive mortality of middle-aged Finnish men for several decades but that was not seen as studying his own problems all this time.

But absolutely, I witness frequently these different kinds of subtle and hidden forms of discrimination in university and scientific environments, in my own setting or when visiting other universities in Finland, Sweden and other countries. I get access to data easily, that's the thing when you study your own environment broadly speaking, and colleagues have also frequently contacted me to share their experiences when they know about my research interests. If I were studying for example Roma migration in northern Sweden, I wouldn't encounter data on my research topic all the time, but since I study academics and science and sit inside an academic setting, I just get the data and thus actually corroboration of some research results practically on a daily basis.

But I see various gendered processes taking place in academia, even in the Nordic countries which are considered as quite gender equal, relatively speaking. And I'm quite astonished that there are quite many academics who don't see these things at all. And that's why I wanted to explore this phenomenon of hidden and subtle discrimination in academia, I wanted to open these issues systematically, to make people more aware because if you are aware of what's going on, you're able to do something even if it is not easy. Many forms of subtle and hidden forms of discrimination are something people take for granted, as "the way things have always been done in there". But with more awareness you won't end up blaming yourself, like many women academics do, for not getting there, not getting ahead, being discouraged, not getting support. So far they see it as their own fault, whereas often it is a systematic undercutting, systematic under-valuing or, to put it differently, various systematic non-events.

This is one issue I've been writing on. I think one perhaps key contributions of my qualitative research has been to highlight these kinds of non-events in women's academic careers, which are blocks, stumbling blocks or roadblocks in women's scientific careers. What I mean with non-events, is that what happens is actually or can be that nothing happens. What is supposed to happen is not happening in one's career, women academics are not affirmed, are not validated, are not invited. We are not invited or asked along to join new projects, networks, as co-authors, speakers in conferences, we are not recruited. We can still find today major academic conferences in Europe with no female keynote speaker. Women are side-lined. These non-events are not easy to recognize but they can have a powerful effect on your career.

Iva Šmídová: Do you think it makes any sense to work on a common European policy or strategy in gender equality and science, or should there be particular strategies for different regions? As you've described there are huge differences. What do you think about that?

Liisa Husu: I think these kinds of common principles which have been highlighted in European cooperation on gender and science since the 1990's have been very important, and different countries can then adopt what fits into their particular contexts. But some kinds of goals, like for example increased transparency in everything, are beneficial for women. That can be applied everywhere. The less transparent a system, the worse it's for women. And that is not nation-specific or system-specific or organisation-specific, it's a sort of good common principle. And this is due to the fact that there's a huge gender imbalance in the leadership positions in academia across Europe, in the gatekeeping positions, so women are not present where decisions are made, or there are very few women there. There is a huge gender imbalance, and women are excluded from powerful key informal networks to quite a large extent. One can generalize that in scientific networking, which is very important for career advancement in academia, women are not getting their fair share. And that's why transparency in recruitment, in decision making, in resource distribution, in funding, is actually one key thing. Definitely.

So that is one basic principle, which can be applied everywhere. And I really think and have witnessed that the European work, which was heavily initiated by the European Commission since the late 1990's, highlighting different good practices in different countries, and underlining this kind of key principles, has been hugely influential. Different countries have been able to take on different ideas, but for example the issue of quotas is a much contested issue. I come from the Nordic region where we apply quotas, and it's been no problem, it's been largely accepted in decision-making bodies, I would say, and we have very good results,

and nobody can claim our research quality or competitiveness have collapsed. These are countries which use the quota system in decision-making and are among the most research-intensive and the most competitive, and are doing very well, so the quota has not ruined them; on the contrary it has made the countries and their research environments more equal.

Iva Šmídová: You're one of the directors of a certain section of the GEXcel,² the centre of gender excellence in Sweden. Would you tell me more about the centres of excellence for gender research?

Liisa Husu: For five years (2007–2012) the Swedish research council funded three centres of excellence in gender studies, centres of gender excellence. This was a one-time Research Council initiative, at least that's what it looks like now. One of the centres which got funding in the competition for these centres was a two-university consortium, consisting of Örebro University where I work, and Linköping University, which is a neighbouring university, so these two universities formed one of these three centres of gender excellence, called GEXcel. This Research Council funding period has now finished, and what we have been developing in GEXcel since is something more permanent. We have created a research platform called GEXcel International Collegium for Advanced Transdisciplinary Gender Studies. Now a third university, the Karlstad University, has joined us, so this is now a three-university centre, and we aim to promote excellent gender research, cooperate with each other, get joint projects, create and promote international networking, and provide joint support for doctoral students. It's this kind of a research development level, and we have various research fields we are developing, including gender in knowledge production, gender in organisations, intersectionality research, critical studies of men and masculinities, and love studies.

It is a contract-based cooperation between these three universities, meaning that the rectors have signed contracts guaranteeing some basic support provided by each university, for infrastructure and coordination, sort of seed money for the next six years of this endeavour.

Iva Šmídová: How do such negotiations go? It is quite a dream, to have rectors of various universities cooperate, especially on gender issue. So was that an easy task or not?

Liisa Husu: The fortunate situation was that the Swedish Research Council launched competitive funding for centres of excellence for gender studies in 2006, nationwide. This type of centre of excellence funding in Sweden (as in many other countries) had before then mostly gone to the natural sciences and technological fields, but it was quite extraordinary that there was an opportunity opened

to apply for excellence funding which was earmarked for gender studies. The gender studies units, professors and scholars at the two universities, Örebro and Linköping, formed a consortium and decided to apply jointly for a centre of excellence. The organizing team saw that it was important to engage the rector of each university very early on. They negotiated with the rectors and wanted to form an official base for their co-operation, this kind of two-campus gender Institute as a basic co-operation platform. It is called the Institute for Thematic Gender Studies, shortly Gender Institute. They managed to convince the rectors about the importance of cooperation among these universities, which are not among the oldest and most established in Sweden, but among the most highly ranked of the new universities, and with active gender studies environments and more generally high-quality research in the humanities and social sciences. And that Gender Institute was created through a contract between the universities, with some internal support funding from the rectors and this base or team then applied for the centre of excellence funding. And then this consortium received the five-year lucrative centre of excellence funding, from the key funding organisations of Sweden. So that obviously had the rectors smiling; they realized that this was something and that it was worth supporting. Without the excellence funding it might have been difficult to argue for long-term internal university funding for gender studies. It's been definitely very important to keep the rectors informed all the time; we invite the rectors to our launches and events, to say opening words at conferences, and keep them informed and make visible for the university what we have been doing. And after the grant for the centre of excellence was finished, we applied, and received from the Swedish Research Council, funding for a large research project on intersectionality and transversal dialogues in feminist research on intersectionality.³ And this a big project again, one million euro project for several years and it is also a two university project.

But generally, I think it's important to keep decision-makers continuously informed about what we are doing and really be proactive and transparent in that. And, of course, one has to deliver good research and results. One has to publish, and one has to demonstrate the competences.

Iva Šmídová: Is there anything you would like to talk about, to have the Czech gender academics read in the interview with you?

Liisa Husu: What could I say? I'm not sure (laughs). I think you could make a link to the *Nature*, the *Nature* dossier on the state of the art of women and science, which was published in the International Women's Day in 2013 theme issue about women in science.⁴ It was a large dossier and I have a short piece there about invisible roadblocks in women's scientific careers, which

is about the non-events I was talking about earlier.⁵ And then of course, among other things I'm doing now, this GenPort project can be yet another source for inspiration (see <http://genport.uoc.edu/>). But then I would stress the importance of the kind of comparative work as I really think comparative approach is very important in this area. Another thing that could be mentioned is this European Network on Gender Equality in Higher Education. I've been involved in creating this kind of European dialogue in the field of gender equality in higher education, and between researchers and equality advisors and administrators. The first European conference on gender equality in higher education took place in Helsinki in 1998 and as a result of that conference we created a list called EQ-UNI⁶, European Network on Gender Equality in Higher Education, and basically, it's like a channel, through which you can distribute information and get in touch with others in Europe and elsewhere, who are interested in this thematic area. This list has been running since 1998, and now over five hundred members from over thirty countries are involved. This community has managed to organise seven European conferences on gender equality in higher education across Europe, from Genoa to Oxford, Stockholm to Zurich, and Berlin to Bergen. And next one will be in Vienna in September 2014.⁷

Iva Šmídová: A rather stereotypical final question, do you have a message for Czech women in science?

Liisa Husu: I strongly believe in international co-operation and exchange, not only in conducting your research but in actions to improve gender equality in academia and science. Network internationally, get inspired by what seems to work in other contexts and borrow ideas for actions, initiatives and strategies, from colleagues and networks in other countries. You can also learn a lot from other countries on forms of resistance against gender equality, gender research, women in science, by exchanging experiences with foreign colleagues. In small countries such as the Nordic ones and the Czech Republic, it is of course very important to try creating effective national alliances and co-operate nationally both to improve gender equality in science and to support gender studies and gender research. Nordic countries can show here several good examples of successful co-operation between universities, learned societies and politicians.

By getting inspired by international co-operation I mean here ideas for strategies and actions to support women in research, actions to promote gender equality in research, to change science organisations towards gender equality – what's been going on and done elsewhere with success. That's what we have been doing in the Nordic countries for years, exchanging notes and borrowing ideas, getting inspired from each other. We just look: OK, they're doing an interesting thing in Norway, and why don't we try the

same? So for example, a gender studies marathon was an action I think the Norwegians did for the first time but Swedes and Finns borrowed soon. A gender studies marathon means this kind of event where gender studies scholars spend one day or half a day presenting their research in ten-minute nonstop presentations. It's open for the general public, and it's held somewhere in a easily accessible place. You advertise it broadly and people can come in, and listen to one, or five of such presentations, showcasing how interesting, relevant and broad gender research can be. So, that's one thing. I think Swedes and Finns have borrowed from the Norwegians happily.

So get inspired and borrow ideas and preserve them. Don't give up, change is happening slowly, it takes time. There is so much resistance against any gender reform to happen in academia, it is no news that academia is very resistant to change. I think it is important to understand and accept the fact that trying to make change toward more gender awareness and fairness happen is never easy, but you should not give up. Instead be persistent, be creative, co-operate, and try new approaches and tools if the old ones don't seem to work.

Endnotes:

1 <http://www.genderportal.eu/>

2 <http://www.genderexcel.org>

3 <http://www.sciencenet.se/converis/publicweb/contract/16247;jsessionid=82d20b029e050b22398a07151bd9> and <http://www.oru.se/English/Research/Research-Environments/Research-environment/HS/Center-for-Feminist-Social-Studies-CFS/Research-projects/Research-project/?rdb=961>

4 *Nature*; thematic issue on International Women's Day 2013: <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v495/n7439/>. News coverage for example here: http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2013_03_08/caredit.a1300037

5 Laboratory life: Scientists of the world speak up for equality. Al-Gazali L, Valian V, Barres B, Andrei EY, Wu LA, Handelsman J, Moss-Racusin C, Husu L. (2013) Laboratory life: Scientists of the world speak up for equality. *Nature* 03/2013; 495(7439):35–8. DOI:doi: 10.1038/495035a; <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v495/n7439/full/495035a.html> (you need to have e-access to Nature to download the article, most university libraries provide that).

6 <http://www.helsinki.fi/tasa-arvo/svenska/equni.html>. You can join the eq-uni by sending an email SUBSCRIBE EQ-UNI to the email address MAJORDOMO@HELSINKI.FI.

7 http://gender2014.conf.tuwien.ac.at/about_the_conference/

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