

Introduction

Introduction

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Project overview

From a historical standpoint, precariousness tends to be represented as a dimension intrinsic to the female experience and to its unstable vacillation between different life spheres and domains. The etymological root of the adjective ‘precarious’ dates back to the Latin word for prayer, *prex*. Therefore, something that is precarious has been obtained by ‘praying for it’; consequently it is something that can be done only because someone else has granted permission and, because it is subject to the arbitrariness of the person granting such permission, it is not stable and hardly long lasting. This image immediately underlines how the concept of precariousness is not a neutral one, as well as how there are certain social norms and practices which, as observed by Judith Butler (2004), make some lives more precarious and vulnerable than others. Such an image calls to mind several actions of exclusion and discrimination that have characterised gender relationships in different ages and contexts. Precariousness then can be seen as a suitable perspective for the analysis of gender relations and the ways in which they are constructed and negotiated. On this basis, this volume will discuss the gender implications of the changes experienced by those who undertake academic and research careers. Particular attention will be paid to the academic system and how these dynamics are reproduced in the daily life of faculties and departments, with regard to both the life paths and the experiences of male and female early career researchers.

Studies that have dealt with gender differences in the academic system have thoroughly investigated the persistent existence of a considerable asymmetry in the positions at the top of the ladder, where women seem to be much less represented than men (Bain and Cummings 2000; Probert 2005; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012). Much less investigated is another issue, namely at what stage in a person’s career such differences begin to show up. In fact, while female university students perform better than their male counterparts, the situation suddenly changes in postdoctoral fellowship positions, and it further worsens through the next stages of academic and research careers (Blickenstaff 2005; Shen 2013). Women more often occupy precarious positions, either working part-time or working in conditions that lack stability or opportunities for career

advancement (De Groot 1997; Gill 2009). Therefore, the focus in this edited volume concerns the experiences of early career researchers and the process of precarisation currently affecting higher education, which is also closely related to cultural changes in the research sector, especially in the management models and in the emergent rhetoric within universities, marked by an increasingly widespread neoliberal ideology (Nikunen 2012; Morgan and Wood 2017).

The research presented in the following chapters is based on the outcomes of a three-year project, titled GARCIA – ‘Gendering the Academy and Research: combating Career Instability and Asymmetries’ – funded by the 7th Framework Programme of the European Commission. The project involved seven universities and research organisations in several European countries – Italy, Switzerland, Iceland, The Netherlands, Slovenia, Belgium and Austria – and was undertaken between 2014 and 2017.¹

The design of the comparative research has several elements of originality and innovation.

First, the project tackled the issue of gender asymmetries in higher institutions within the framework of the 2008 economic crisis and the neoliberal agenda, where scientific work becomes more market-driven and focused on dimensions such as performativity, competitiveness, project-based working and commodification, with significant impacts in terms of both generations and gender (Archer 2008; Bagilhole and White 2013). Therefore, it was decided to focus on the early stages of academic and research careers, and not just on the topmost positions, as has most of the existing literature on gender and science. In particular, the GARCIA project mainly considered the increase in positions based on unstable and temporary contracts (non-tenured), with important consequences from a gender perspective which, to date, have been insufficiently considered by the literature. Moreover, in order to fully understand the complex and non-linear trajectories of early career researchers, the target population included not only postdocs and lecturers working at the higher education institutions under study, but also PhD holders who had worked in the past in the departments involved in the project and then changed workplace and/or profession. Therefore, instead of looking at the ‘leaky pipeline’ phenomenon (Berryman 1983; Alper 1993) only from the point of view of women and men working in academia, our study also focuses on the perspective of postdocs and temporary researchers who left it, because they ‘chose’ to work outside the academic/research system or because they were ‘forced’ to leave it (in response to a failure to recognise their work; organisational gendered constraints; difficulties in work–life balance; unaffordable demand for international mobility, etc.).

The second element of innovation relates to the choice of case studies. The research was carried out in each of the involved higher education institutions both in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and SSH (Social Science and Humanities) departments, institutes and faculties, in order to understand differences but also similarities between disciplines in regards both to how gender is represented and to career opportunities. The fact that women are well represented in the SSH disciplines does not necessarily mean

that they are immune from gender inequalities and discrimination, as shown by the lack of their presence in prestigious positions, even where women represent the majority of staff members. The project was carried out in the following organisational contexts: University of Trento – Departments of ‘Information Engineering and Computer Science’ and ‘Sociology and Social Research’; the Catholic University of Louvain – Institutes of ‘Earth and Life’ and for the ‘Analysis of Change in Contemporary and Historical Societies’; Radboud University – Institutes of ‘Mathematics, Astrophysics and Particle Physics’ and ‘Management Research’; University of Iceland – Schools of ‘Engineering and Natural Sciences’ and ‘Social Sciences’; University of Lausanne – Faculties of ‘Biology and Medicine’ and ‘Social and Political Sciences’; Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts – ‘Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language’ and University of Ljubljana – ‘Biotechnical Faculty, Department of Agronomy’.

The final innovative feature of the GARCIA project concerns the fact that the comparative research that was conducted was not an end in itself, but rather a necessary and crucial step in the design of innovative organisational policies and self-tailored gender action plans, to be implemented in all the involved universities and research centres.² This means that the research findings also represented an organisational diagnosis, based on which different policies in the working environments of the research participants have been implemented. In doing this, a participatory approach was used, since the target population was asked directly about the most useful and effective actions to be introduced in the STEM and SSH departments involved in the project. In particular, the policies designed have aimed to intervene in five main areas: understanding national welfare and gender regimes; gender equality in financial decision making and management; gendered subtexts in recruiting and in defining the criteria of ‘excellence’; gender practices and gender stereotypes in universities and research institutions; and the leaky pipeline phenomenon.

In terms of research design, a multi-method and multi-level analytical framework was used, combining cross-national comparative research with a comparative analysis of organisational case studies and an analysis of individual professional and life stories of early career researchers. Therefore, gender differences in the early stages of academic and research careers have been studied at the macro, meso and micro levels, considering national welfare and gender regimes, organisational practices and cultures, and individual career trajectories. The volume is structured according to these different perspectives. The first part is dedicated to pointing out the different levels of analysis in the study of gender and precariousness in academia (Chapter 1), as well as to describing the transformations that have affected academic labour markets in recent decades (Chapter 2). The second part of the volume focuses on organisational analysis, by addressing financial decision-making and managerial practices (Chapter 3) and recruitment and selection practices (Chapter 4). The third part of the volume shifts its focus from the organisational to the individual dimension, by discussing work-life conflicts among early career researchers (Chapter 5) and the

phenomenon of the leaky pipeline (Chapter 6). Finally, in the last chapter, a set of policies for promoting gender equality and career opportunities for early career researchers is offered.

The chapters

The first chapter of the volume is dedicated to the discussion of the theoretical challenges and the different levels of analysis – the academic labour market, the organisational context and the subjective experiences – that are useful for exploring the relationship between gender and precariousness in higher education. In the first part, Rossella Bozzon, Annalisa Murgia and Barbara Poggio discuss the main macro and institutional trends affecting the structure of academic careers and the factors that fuel and (re)produce gender asymmetries. In the second part of the chapter, attention is paid to the organisational level; the process of commodification and limited resources, especially in the SSH fields, which have radically changed the management of human resources in higher education and research institutions. Therefore, one needs to understand how gendered practices play out on a daily basis, how the selection and recruitment procedures are thus reconfigured and what constitutes the features of the ideal early career researcher created within higher education institutions. In the last part of the chapter the focus shifts to the experiential and subjective dimension of such experiences, with attention paid to both emotional investment, and to the pressure and competitiveness experienced by early career researchers. More specifically, the authors analyse the ambivalent experiences of female and male early career researchers, who have a job which represents a source of greater freedom and autonomy on the one side, but are also exposed to significant social and economic risks on the other.

In the second chapter, Nicky Le Feuvre, Pierre Bataille, Sabine Kradolfer, Maria del Rio Carral and Marie Sautier offer an overview of the issues involved in studying the gendered precariousness of academic careers from a cross-national comparative perspective. The authors then return to the main changes that have affected the academic world and suggest that research on gendered academic careers needs to adopt a more sophisticated comparative perspective. Such a perspective involves recognising: (i) similarities and differences in precariousness across national contexts, gender categories and disciplinary fields; (ii) that academic institutions do not necessarily offer the most fulfilling and rewarding career options for PhD holders, particularly from a gender equality perspective; and (iii) that various forms of precariousness may affect researchers at different stages in their life-course. The chapter then focuses on the structure of academic labour markets, following the typology of academic career patterns proposed by Christine Musselin (2005). Building on this typology, the authors show how the changes currently taking place in higher education institutions across Europe actually produce specific forms of precarious employment at different life-stages, according to cross-national variations in academic career structures and normative gender regimes.

The second part of the volume is composed of two chapters which focus on academic and research organisations, and present project findings related to gendered practices in decision-making and managerial practices, as well as in recruitment and selection procedures.

In particular, in Chapter 3, Finnborg S. Steinþórsdóttir, Þorgerður Einarsdóttir, Thamar M. Heijstra, Gyða M. Pétursdóttir and Thomas Brorsen Smidt examine how neoliberal managerialism affects budgets and organisational practices in academic institutions and research centres, and how they foster the precarisation of academic employment. Particular emphasis is paid to the gendered consequences of the distribution of funding and resources and its impact on the working conditions and career prospects of early career researchers. Quantitative and qualitative data collected in the six academic institutions and research centres involved in the GARCIA project are then used to compare and contrast how policies and managerial instruments differently affect funding allocation in STEM and SSH departments, institutions and faculties, and how this fuels the precarisation processes. Gender impact assessments of policies, neoliberal management methods, and budgets show how organisational practices tend to favour male-dominated fields, with a significant impact on the positions and conditions of early career researchers and their career prospects in research and academia. Moreover, the chapter introduces gender budgeting as a theoretical and methodological instrument to demonstrate how the academic system creates inequalities while simultaneously encouraging academic institutions to reconstruct their budgetary policies and the distribution of resources to achieve a more gender-equal academic sphere.

The fourth chapter presents a comparative analysis of the gendered construction of excellence in recruitment and selection practices for early career researchers in the STEM and SSH institutes, departments and faculties involved in the project. Using a variety of data, such as job postings, appointment reports, HR documents, interviews and focus groups with male and female committee members in the six countries under study, Channah Herschberg, Yvonne Benschop and Marieke van den Brink explore what it takes for early career researchers to be perceived as potentially excellent candidates, and whether there are gender practices at work in the criteria and assessment of candidates. Delving deeper into the practices of recruitment and selection, the chapter analyses how gender is part and parcel of the construction and application of excellence criteria for male and female candidates, and what consequences this has for academics with precarious positions. In particular, two gender practices – welcoming women and assessing potential for excellence – are illustrated and analysed in their interconnections with multiple specific gender practices in the evaluation of early career researchers. Moreover, the authors point out the discrepancies in the various criteria and their application, showing how gender inequalities are embedded in the construction of the ‘ideal candidate’.

In the third part of the volume, the focus shifts from the organisational dimension to the professional and life trajectories of early career researchers, with attention paid to both those who complete their PhD and try for an academic career, and to those who abandon the world of research.

In the fifth chapter Sanja Cukut Krilić, Majda Černič Istenič and Duška Knežević Hočevar discuss how, in the six national case studies, the proliferation of national and organisational policies to better reconcile the work and family lives of academics is struggling to challenge assumptions about the ‘ideal worker’ – a full-time, all-encompassing devotion to academia – also because of the gendered expectations of family obligations. Early career researchers are thus of interest not only due to increasingly precarious employment conditions, but also due to the fact that crucial decisions about private and family life are usually taken at this life stage. Drawing on the concept of both academia and family as ‘greedy institutions’, the focus of the chapter revolves around the questions of how early career researchers, in the six higher institutions under study, reconcile their academic career with their family life, and whether and in what ways such balancing is gendered. Both the organisational culture related to family arrangements of academics and the micro politics of their everyday family lives are illustrated. The focus then moves to the complex effects of work–life balance policies on the individual biographies, and on the ways in which such policies may differently influence men and women in increasingly precarious research environments and across different welfare regimes.

The sixth chapter offers another perspective on the analytical construct of the gender pipeline, using a multidimensional and multilevel approach, thus underlining how such a phenomenon highlights different typical features according to varying social and organisational contexts. On the basis of a meta-analysis of the case studies conducted in the GARCIA project, Farah Dubois-Shaik, Bernard Fusulier and Caroline Vincke develop a typology where social, organisational and career-based dimensions are combined with costs at stake, i.e. those costs that each specific configuration generates for science, for organisations and for individuals, particularly in terms of gender balance and inequality. In particular, three types of careers and experiences are identified: (i) persisting in precarious career paths, at a high cumulative cost; (ii) continuing in ambivalent career paths, at moderate cost; and (iii) striving to win in competitive career paths, at a specific cost. Such a typology can be a useful tool for research institutions to allow them to think about their own leaky pipeline situation and to identify strategies that can reduce relative costs through the re-thinking of how work is organised, in particular in terms of workforce casualisation and its conditions, as well as that pertaining to its female components.

The final chapter focuses on policies and measures to promote gender equality, career opportunities and working conditions of early career researchers. In the first part of the chapter, Florian Holzinger, Helene Schiffbänker, Sybille Reidl, Silvia Hafellner and Jürgen Streicher consider and compare different kinds of policies developed in different European national/regional and organisational contexts to enhance career development and stability for early career researchers. In the second part, the authors present and discuss findings from an accompanying evaluation of implementation activities within the GARCIA project, summarising the main characteristics of the implementation project and highlighting tools and actions which have proved to be successful, as well as the

weaknesses and the resistances encountered. Finally, recommendations for implementing policies and measures to support early career researchers from a gender sensitive perspective are formulated.

Final remarks

Fighting gender inequalities and precarisation processes is a goal that goes beyond borders, both in terms of geography and in terms of production sectors. However, the academic sector exemplifies certain specific features and paradoxes that need to be taken into consideration. In fact, those who are driving forward research on precariousness from a feminist perspective and who use gender as their main point of view – and the same goes for those engaged in projects for gender equality – are in most cases women and/or gender-queer and gender non-conforming people, and are often early career researchers with vulnerable and unstable working conditions.

From this point of view, the GARCIA project was no exception. Being aware of this situation, an attempt was made to include all members of the project in the research part, as well as in the publishing stage and the presentation of the findings, so that everyone's work would be visible. Writing this book was largely a demonstration of this approach. However, now that the project is over, what has become of the researchers who developed it? Some of them have attained a permanent position at university, even though they had to move to another country in order to find more stable working conditions. Others obtained a scholarship or were hired for other new projects in order to advance on their academic path. Some have changed jobs, in some cases because university had nothing to offer, whereas others decided to start a professional career that would leave room for other parts of their lives, be it friends, family, the time to relax or political activities. The GARCIA project, like most projects, was then able to open opportunities for its members, and to fund PhD and postdoctoral trajectories, but at the same time it has contributed to swelling the ranks of early career researchers who have no idea whether they can have a future in the academic system, being therefore unable to offer any concrete perspective about their professional career.

The world of academia and research is not necessarily where the subjects find their professional fulfilment. In addition, one cannot expect to have an endless number of positions that grant free access to whoever is interested in an academic career. At the same time, it falls to us, as feminist scholars, to continue questioning the practices which can counter the casualisation in higher education that disproportionately affects women. What are the expectations awaiting new generations of researchers? What kind of investment is expected of them? How can one challenge and change a research system that is still governed by old-boy networks and which is still based on the grant rush, on competition, on hyper-productivity and on the fact that subjects are expected to be fully available at all times? The answers to these questions are to be found on multiple levels, from institutional reforms, organisational practices and policies to the subjective

dimension – all topics which will be discussed in this volume. Before approaching various analyses and thoughts about the matter at hand, though, one needs to point out once again how much the relationship between gender and precariousness was not simply the focus of the research and analysis of the GARCIA project, but was also part of the daily life and experience of the researchers who contributed to this project. Such people include brilliant scholars, passionate researchers, team-players and civically and politically engaged people, with a life full of experiences, love, friends and family, all features which are hard to keep within the neoliberal academia. It is important then to keep academic networks that are able to support early career researchers and workers who experience workforce casualisation in academia alive. In addition, the problem needs to be tackled directly, trying to fight and change the system itself, starting from gender inequalities to other types of inequalities, such as those based on sexuality, class and ethnicity. In short, it is about changing the very roots of the system. This is a struggle that can be won together, and which can no longer be postponed.

Notes

- 1 All information about the project is available at: <http://garciaproject.eu>. There were six participating institutions (University of Trento; the Catholic University of Louvain; Radboud University; University of Iceland; University of Lausanne and University of Ljubljana) from, respectively, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Iceland, Switzerland and Slovenia. The seventh partner was the Joanneum Research Forschungsgesellschaft – based in Austria – which was in charge of the internal evaluation of the project.
- 2 The implemented gender action plan is described in detail in the GARCIA working paper ‘Supporting Early Career Researchers through Gender Action Plans. A Design and Methodological Toolkit’, downloadable for free at: http://garciaproject.eu/?page_id=52.

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