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Early Career Researchers in European Gender and Women's Studies: Professional Challenges and Ways Forward

A study conducted by ATGENDER, the European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation

With a summary of a workshop discussion at the 10th European Feminist Research Conference

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Introduction

This report discusses the challenges of early career researchers¹ in the field of women's and gender studies. The results of this report are based on an online survey designed by the European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation (ATGENDER). ATGENDER is a broad association for academics, practitioners, activists and institutions in the field of Women's, Gender, Transgender, Sexuality, and Queer studies, feminist research, women's, sexual and LGBTQI rights and equality. The association constitutes a permanent structure for the growing field of feminist knowledge and practice in Europe.

Women's and Gender Studies programmes have been the primary site for the institutionalization of feminist knowledge. For decades, feminist and queer knowledge production in the academy has facilitated the analysis of inequalities and structures of oppression while providing epistemological alternatives to the partiality of mainstream scientific practice (Taylor and Lahad 2018, Haraway 1988, Harding 1990, Lloyd 1992, Collins 1991, Narayan 1989). Feminist research has always been under considerable pressure and marginalization. Claims of it being unscientific, the neoliberalization of academia and heteroactivist attacks in the wake of far-right electoral gains have challenged the discipline over the past decades.

Feminist academic networks have been identified as crucial in the battle against the marginalization of feminist academic knowledge (Jones forthcoming). As an institutionalized network, ATGENDER facilitates career development for feminist scholars and also aims to combat the institutional marginality of gender studies, and the limited access of feminist scholars to academic networks. As an organization we have recognized early career scholars as particularly vulnerable to these institutional barriers. Thus in 2016 ATGENDER set up the *Early Career Researchers Working Group*. The working group, consisting of ATGENDER board members, aims to identify and deliver concrete actions that empower and support early career scholars, including PhD students.

The term and notion 'early career researcher' has been critiqued as a problematic formation (Taylor and Lahad 2018). It usually refers to scholars up to five years after the PhD phase. Amongst feminist scholars, the term is contested because it suggests

¹ We use the term early career researchers to refer to doctoral students and scholars up to five years post-PhD

a normative career trajectory (ibid.). We are using the term strategically, to draw attention to the particular challenges faced by PhD students and postdocs in the first years after obtaining their PhDs. We do not, however, want to suggest that these challenges disappear. What we do want to address are the hierarchies amongst feminist scholars along the 'junior'/'senior' axis. The frequent dependency of feminist PhD students and postdocs on more senior and established feminist academics is often denied in the invocation of the feminist academic 'we'. What we do not want to suggest; however, is the idea that feminist scholars who have been in academia longer, or have moved up the ladder do not face organizational inequality (Jones forthcoming).

In 2016, ATGENDER's *Early Career Researchers Working Group* designed a survey to gain insight into the current challenges and difficulties faced by early career researchers in European gender and women's studies. This report presents the results of the survey as well as concrete measures that were developed during a workshop at the 10th European Feminist Research Conference (EFRC) in September 2018. The report further illustrates the measures ATGENDER has piloted at the 2019 Spring Conference: a speed networking event and a peer-to-peer format.

1. Gender Studies in Europe: Between Academic Capitalism and Heteroactivism

Across the globe, higher education has undergone dramatic changes whereby the relationship between knowledge, research institutions and society has become a site of conflicting debates (Thwaites and Pressland 2017, Athelstan et al. 2011). Universities increasingly have to prove their 'worth' by measurable contributions to the economy and society. However, what qualifies as a valuable contribution is highly contested. Feminist research, and the discipline of gender studies, in particular, are increasingly facing the paradoxical politics of output-oriented neoliberal academia (Taylor and Lahad 2018), depoliticized gender and diversity agendas (Bracke 2014, Ahmed 2012) and the surge of heteroactivism that has accompanied the rise of the far Right across Europe (Browne and Nash 2017).

Browne and Nash (2017) propose heteroactivism as an analytical term to name and examine the political opposition against gender and sexual rights. So far, heteroactivism has mostly been discussed through explorations of anti-gender campaigns (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, Graff 2014) and concerted attempts to

intimidate gender scholars (Evans 2019). In Europe, the case of the gender department at Central European University (CEU) presented a moment of mobilization as the CEU MA gender studies programme became subject to the Hungarian war on 'gender ideology', leading to the MA programme losing its accreditation in 2018 (Daniszewski and Lehotai 2018, Pető 2018). The Hungarian example also shows that publicly funded universities under exclusionary regimes are particularly vulnerable to heteroactivist and anti-feminist agendas set by governments. While these latest developments present a real political risk for scholars and departments, gender studies have been under ongoing epistemic pressures from higher education, despite its institutionalization across Europe.

These difficulties include a systemic lack of institutional recognition, which links to a deep-rooted suspicion towards feminist epistemologies (Ferreira 2019, Taylor and Lahad 2018, Pereira 2017). As an appropriated and depoliticized notion of 'gender' is actively deployed to signal 'enlightened' scholarship, the idea that feminist knowledge is unfit for academic purpose prevails (Pereira 2017). The mobilization of the category 'gender' without feminism has been problematized as an act of appropriation and neutralization (Bracke 2014, Prügl 2015, Ferreira 2019). Feminist theorists have further highlighted that university gender and diversity initiatives often play on the emancipatory language of the feminist, queer and anti-racist movements while at the same time resisting real transformation, frequently using critical academics for institutional gains (Ahmed 2012, 2017, Taylor and Lahad 2018). While 'gender lite', or gender without feminism, becomes the guiding paradigm for good and 'modern' academic practice (Bracke 2014), feminist and particularly intersectional frameworks are actively resisted against (Bilge 2013, Boulila 2019). In Europe, scholars not only have to navigate these paradoxical epistemic politics, but also compete in an increasingly 'market-driven' higher education sector.

Feminist scholars have highlighted that universities, have aligned themselves with neoliberal agendas (Ahmed 2012, Pereira 2016, Sifaki 2016, Taylor and Lahad 2018). The neoliberalization of academia has taken various forms across Europe. In some contexts, Higher Education has quasi been privatized, and institutions compete for the high-paying student consumer, in other contexts, Governments have established a competitive funding landscape for their public universities. The increasing importance of university rankings, student numbers and competitive funding has led to managerial

discourses, and output-oriented processes and structures (Taylor and Lahad 2018, Sifaki 2016). Academics, including junior academics and PhD students, are increasingly subjected to performance indicators. These may include finishing a PhD in a set timeframe, publishing a set amount of papers per year, or securing funding. Early career researchers in women's and gender studies do not only have to navigate the neoliberal pressures of present-day academia, but also the multisided resistances against feminist scholarship.

It is in this context that ATGENDER has explored how, as a network, we can better support early career scholars who are more vulnerable to those processes. While we do not claim this report to be an all-encompassing analysis of the situation of early career scholars in European feminist and gender studies, we aimed to provide a basis for discussion on how to design concrete support measures with our members and network partners.

2. Methodology

The information presented in this report has been gathered from an online survey empowered by SurveyMonkey and distributed primarily through ATGENDER's social media channels, and also through the organization's bi-weekly newsletters. In total, 228 people responded to the survey between October 2017 and January 2018. The sample is not representative, and the study aimed to have an explorative character. The survey consisted of nine questions, eight of which were open-ended questions allowing for multiple responses. Participants were asked about their employment situation, the challenges they had faced or are expecting to face. Respondents were also asked to comment on the support they had received during their PhD and early career years, and on what kind of support they would like to receive in the future. As a result of the open questions, we received a great variety of answers, and differing use of language that also reflected on different academic contexts.²

Geographically, the survey respondents were from 25 different countries, with the majority of participants situated in Western-Europe. Researchers from Germany had the highest participation rate (24%), followed by participants from Austria (11%), Sweden (9%), Turkey (5%), Italy: 9 (4%), Belgium (4%), Portugal (3%), Serbia (3%),

² The answers were coded and are represented as relative values. Throughout the report, these percentages are rounded to one decimal place for clarity.

Switzerland (3%), the Netherlands (3%), Poland (3%), Spain (2%), France (12%), United Kingdom (1%), Australia (1%), Canada (1%), Finland (1%), Norway (1%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1%), Greece (1%), Ireland (1%), Kosovo (1%), Pakistan (1%), Slovakia (1%), and Brazil (1%). Of the 228 responses received, 57 % were PhD students at the time of data entry, and 43% considered themselves to be an “early career researcher”, within five years of completing their PhD.

67% of the respondents were employed by an academic institution, while 25% stated that they were not employed in academia. 8% marked their status as “other”, indicating employment outside of their field of interest, casual employment, scholarships or temporary employment. At the time of completion, 25% of respondents worked in a university or research assistant position while another 25% worked in a teaching position. 20% of respondents were in a position related to their doctoral studies, 14% held a postdoctoral research position, 14% worked outside of academia, and 3% stated their status as unemployed.

3. Findings

3.1 Challenges and Burdens

Asked about the major challenges they had faced in their careers in the past year, 21% reported research-related difficulties that were related to the epistemic challenges associated with being a gender researcher, and the lack of “mainstream” credibility of gender studies as a field of legitimate knowledge. Moreover, 24%³ stated that they had difficulties finding paid employment in the field, while another 15%⁴ stated that they had struggled with finding funding for their projects, and writing grant applications. 7% of respondents noted that they had faced financial challenges in general.

The responses illustrated that the respondents had actively struggled with the precarity of short-term jobs, temporary contracts, as well as a lack of open positions in the field of women’s and gender studies. Additionally, some respondents mentioned that they had suffered from work overload and had struggled to retain a work-life balance. The challenges of building an academic network and the isolation of working as a

³ Respondents mentioned finding employment (21%), finding paid positions (3%) and finding open positions (1%)

⁴ Respondents mentioned finding funding opportunities 14%, and writing grant applications 1%

researcher with interest in gender-related issues were also noted as collateral and additional sources of stress.

The early career scholars also expressed concerns about their professional futures in academia. When asked about what career challenges they expect to face in the next three years, 47% expressed concern about finding employment and feared financial issues and precarity resulting from unemployment. Some also linked uncertain employment conditions, and a mounting pressure to obtain funding to an unsatisfactory work-life balance.

3.2 Support During PhD and Early Career Phase

Participants were asked about their experience with non-financial support they had received in the past. 15% of the respondents said that supervision was one of the most important non-financial support factors during their PhD and early career researcher journeys. Most notably, participants strongly supported the importance of mentorship as a significant factor involved in assisting early career researchers (18%). The responses indicated that some forms of experienced support were deemed to have a particularly positive impact on the careers of early career researchers. Respondents noted the importance of research-related support such as open networks where calls and opportunities are shared, employment assistance and guidance, mentoring, financial support for research projects, help and advice from colleagues, and general encouragement and support from friends. Additionally, help with writing and research training were mentioned as useful as well. On a broader level, a space to have discussions and debates was also noted as important aspects of a supportive environment.

Respondents had made particularly positive experiences with in-person support including peer-peer support. Mentoring, feedback, career advice, advice on where to publish, joint publications and access to literature were mentioned as forms of interpersonal support. However, access to resources such as templates, blog posts about academia or academic literature were also identified as support. Institutional forms of support that were mentioned as particularly positive by the respondents included travel bursaries for conferences and field work, financial and accommodation support, visiting fellowships, academic exchange opportunities, administrative support regarding documents, office space, networking opportunities and access to academic networks, summer schools, childcare and job opportunities. The respondents also

identified training as an important form of development. Particularly training on grant writing, training for female post-docs with a focus on gender-based discrimination and exclusion, training about sexual and psychological violence as well as training on academic writing and methodology.

The responses also emphasized the importance of institutional support and the necessity of receiving legitimacy from public institutions. Institutionally, respondents noted that there needs to be more bureaucratic administrative support, financial support, help with proofreading for non-native speakers, employment opportunities, specific write-up grants for PhD dissertations and protected research time. Also, the responses indicated that there need to be more concerted actions against nepotism, discrimination and skepticism towards feminist scholarship.

When asked about unhelpful support, responses indicated that insufficient support was identified as a hindrance to development. Respondents mentioned online support instead of in-person meetings as insufficient. They also noted that unproductive and demeaning criticism disguised as support or patronizing training sessions uphold academic hierarchies. The responses also indicated that there is a general lack of information about difficulties as an early career researcher as well as a lack of relevant training opportunities. Training was deemed unhelpful when it was experienced as patronizing, non-personalized, pre-made or when discussions were mechanical.

When asked about what kind of support they would like to receive in the coming years, respondents listed:

- Opportunities to develop partnerships for projects
- Advice and feedback on research proposals in gender studies
- Support and training in feminist research methods
- Better access to resources such as archives and literature
- Childcare during conferences

Career-related help and support the respondents would like to receive included:

- Mentoring, advice from established scholars and long-term career counselling, specifically for gender studies
- Advice on non-academic career options

- Specific support for marginalized researchers such as women* of colour and working-class researchers

Additionally, respondents listed:

- Support for building a network
- An efficient lobby for feminist scholarship

4. Conceptualizing Support Measures

At the 10th European Feminist Research Conference at the University of Göttingen in September 2018, ATGENDER's Early Career Researchers Working Group organized a workshop to discuss the survey results. In small groups, the participants were asked to develop concrete support measures in the areas of mentoring, peer-peer support and training. For each of these areas, workshop participants were presented with the challenges and bad practices that had been identified by the survey. To develop the ideas, the participants were also given a set of questions for guidance:

- What measure/action in the broad area of mentoring/peer-peer support/training would be helpful?
- How would this measure/action be transformative and address challenges faced by PhD Students and early career researchers?
- What criteria would need to be in place for this idea to be transformative?
- How would this idea be put into practice? What resources are needed?
- Who would put this idea into practice?

The following ideas were then discussed amongst all participants:

Training

- Fully funded practical workshops on how to write grant applications, building a syllabus and feminist research methodologies.

Peer-Peer Support

- Conference Buddy Group
- Syllabus exchange platform

Mentoring

- Speed-networking/speed mentoring event at ATGENDER conferences

- International Mentoring Programme

Two of those ideas were further developed by ATGENDER's Early Career Researchers Working Group and trialed at the 2019 Spring Conference at the University of Oviedo. On the first day of the conference, ATGENDER facilitated a *Conference Buddy Group*, a peer-peer format aiming at connecting junior conference participants during breaks.

ATGENDER also organized a speed networking event that took the form of speed mentoring. 14 senior academics and 14 early career scholars took part in the event which took place on the second day of the conference. The aim was to provide early career scholars with the opportunity to have a series of 10-minute conversations about specific questions relating to their careers. Mentees were able to sign up for the event during the conference at the ATGENDER desk. The mentors were contacted before the conference. Mentors and mentees were paired for five rounds of 10-Minute mentoring conversations. Mentees were able to indicate upon registration what kind of mentors they wanted to speak to (language, discipline, geographical location). Mentors were provided with the questions of their mentees in advance so that they could prepare the conversations. The format proved successful, and both mentors and mentees recommended that ATGENDER continues the format at its conferences.

While ATGENDER will continue and develop these two formats further, it will also seek a dialogue with its institutional members to develop further ideas that improve the situation of early career scholars in Gender Studies.

5. Conclusion: Supporting Early Career Researchers in European Gender Studies

The increasing visibility of gender studies and its partially successful institutionalization has not eliminated the particular vulnerability of early career scholars in the field. As a field, gender studies is under attack both inside and outside of academia. While the depoliticized category 'gender' is promoted by the university sector and funding landscape, feminist scholars are questioned in their epistemic legitimacy and attacked by reactionary political forces. In addition to the neoliberalization of academia, gender studies thus present a particularly difficult landscape for early career scholars. The responses in our survey indicate that feminist early career researchers worry about their professional futures and the legitimacy of their work.

The respondents of this study report a systematic and emotional sense of job insecurity in the field of gender studies. Material consequences from gender studies' half insider status flagged up by the survey results include a lack of funding opportunities, open positions and the relatively small number of secure senior positions. The early career scholars that took part in this survey reported financial and professional insecurities, a constant risk of unemployment and low paid temporary positions. Additionally, the respondents also struggled with the isolation of being a feminist researcher. To meet these challenges, the survey responses highlight the importance of a variety of support mechanisms.

The survey responses indicate that a supportive environment can be curated by university institutions, senior scholars and peers. While supervision and mentoring were named as an important means of accessing guidance and feedback, open networks were mentioned as a means of accessing information such as calls. Institutions were mentioned in relation to providing financial support – most notably employment or fellowships, an office infrastructure or access to research resources such as libraries and journals. The provision of training was also mentioned as an important, alongside peer-peer support and exchange.

Challenges faced by our respondents illustrate that we need transnational responses to improving the situation of early career scholars in gender studies. The information collected for this report provides a broad and brief overview of the key challenges affecting early career gender scholars in the workforce. Further analysis would be beneficial in terms of understanding the short-term and long-term challenges of the field, as well as geographical and disciplinary specificities. Specific focus-group discussions, as well as in-depth interviews, could enable a more thorough analysis to be made. Going forward, ATGENDER will continue to pursue this issue in dialogue with its members. The great response to the survey and the positive feedback to the workshop carried out at the 2018 EFRC as well as to the piloted actions at the 2019 Spring Conference indicate that members are willing to become part of these conversations. ATGENDER will, therefore, develop a peer-peer format, based on the *Conference Buddy Group*, institutionalize speed-mentoring events as part of its conferences and engage its institutional members in an exploration of the regional and disciplinary dimensions of the issues raised in this report and in the conceptualization of possible solutions.

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