S-15 – Gender and Scientific Research: New Public Management in Higher Education or How to Take two Steps Back

Commission on Women and Gender in Science, Technology, and Medicine

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Abstract:

This session brings front and center issues of gender in the new academic order. We ask how the changes brought about from what is called the New Public Management in higher education and research institutions have affected gender in the scientific world. How could we make relevant to this new situation our work on history of women and gender in science and technology and the lessons we learnt from it?

Recent institutional changes in universities almost worldwide, the increase of individual competition for even less and less resources in research and development, and the rearrangement of the geopolitical map have great impact on scientific careers. For at least the last decade, governments around the world have been engaged in widespread reforms of their public higher educational and research institutions. In most cases driven by social and political ideologies and backed up by the excuse of economic recession, these reforms focus on privatization and on the introduction of market logic in academia. This so-called initiative of New Public Management (NPM) intends to address the inefficiency and bureaucracy of public educational and research institutions and draw financial support from the private sector.

As a result the implementation of NPM in academia has fostered fierce competition for financial and personal resources within and between academic institutions worldwide, intensifying the differences between the local and the global. Yet, competition has been enhanced not only among universities but also on a micro level affecting the producers of scientific knowledge as well. Academic success based on qualitative markers gave place to new managerial control mechanisms based on quantitative indicators of academic performance. Flexible work contracts, fewer tenured positions, extended insecurity, lower basic salaries, and the increase of the number of early career, highly qualified academics without work prospects are some of the NPM consequences. Moreover, and probably more worrisome, NPM has resulted to a questionable scientific production depended on external financial resources and on a highly hierarchical system of international peer review.

The fundamental changes that take place in national and international science landscape, both locally and globally, seem to affect men and women quite differently. Drawing on historical cases such as the third wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, we realize that female academics in the past, focusing on issues of equal rights opened multiple avenues for activism using political and legal resources. How do we respond today to the new challenges? Participants to this session will draw on their extensive historical knowledge on gender and
scientific/technological institutions to access the new situation, provide their insights, and open up the discussion to a broader audience.

Important note: we would like to propose this as a roundtable discussion instead of a traditional symposium with individual papers. Presenters will have 10 minutes each to present their ideas and then we will allow, hopefully, a fruitful discussion with the participation of our audience.

**Keywords:** gender – new public management – science and technology – higher education – history of women in science.

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