Gender Equality in Academia and ICT Companies: Still Doing or Undoing Gender?
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Abstract: There is no agreed definition of the term/concept gender in the scientific community. Its meaning has evolved and can be applied to a variety of theoretical perspectives in gender studies. This variety, evolving in time and influenced by different academic traditions, is substantial and may disconcert the academic field and the general public alike. The paper draws on previous literature, in particular, the concepts of doing, undoing and queering gender, as well as on new research conducted by the author through interviews with 33 experts in gender equality and diversity in the Academia and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Companies. The paper explores the theoretical and practical implications of the empirical results to provide insights into different interpretations of the term "gender" emerging from the participants' discourses, influencing formal and informal institutional practices, and their impact on the implementation of gender equality strategies in Academia and ICT companies. Referring to a two-sex model and promoting the notion of a binary sex-gender, organisations may conceal the crucial issues of intersectionality and critical reflections regarding the impact of neoliberal policies and societal challenges on the progression towards gender equality and diversity. In conclusion, it would be worth further investigating if and to what extent awareness of the multiple meanings and varied use of the term/concept "gender" may lead to different transformative practices and impacts on science and society.

Keywords: gender equality and diversity, LGBT, Academia, ICT companies, Gender Equality Plan.

Introduction

Starting in the 1960s, gender has been theorised as a contextually specific process. Not until the 1980's did people start to consider gender "a fluid, multi-level set of practices embedded in social relations shaped by race⁄ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality" (Nawyn, 2010, p. 749). The binary approach to the sexes also came under discussion at this time (Fausto-Sterling, 1993). As a consequence of this shift, gender analyses widened to include a number of new theories: gender relation (Connell, 2002); critical social (Silvey, 2004), sex-role (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford, 2006), and post-modern conceptions of gender including the vision of gender identity as a performance (Butler, 1988). The discursive approach, seeing gender as performative, runs parallel to an interactionist approach, investigating the interactional achievement of gender. More recently, the potential of queering the normative gender process has emerged, adding new perspectives to the field (Nordmarken, 2019). A different perspective is adopted by the European Union (EU) Horizon 2020 (H2020) programme (European Commission, 2011), that refers to "gender" as a cross-cutting issue to be mainstreamed in each of the different parts of its Work Programme. The variety of definitions is substantial and may disconcert the academic field and the general public alike.

The objective of this paper is to contribute new perspectives to the body of literature on women's underrepresentation at senior levels in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines (both in Academia and in ICT sector). The paper focuses specifically on how faculty and staff with specific gender-related expertise working in Academia and information and communications technology (ICT) companies consider the current status and future perspectives of gender equality in the two sectors. Moreover, the paper identifies how experts themselves conceptualise or make sense of the problem, including

obstacles and benefits and the relation of academia and ICT companies to broader societal and cultural challenges.

In the following pages, I will first present a brief literature review. I will then describe the research broader context, the methodology and process, including analysis and results, before drawing conclusions and making suggestions for future research.

Literature review

In 1987, West and Zimmerman defined gender as something we do, moving masculinity and femininity from individuals' essential properties to social, interactional properties of a system of relationships. Gender was seen as "a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" (1987, p. 126) produced in social interactions. This ethno-methodological perspective was later extended to the simultaneous interactions of gender, race and class (West and Fenstermaker, 1995). People started being considered as "doing difference" by creating sex, race and class categories, transforming these categories into essentially different natures, and creating institutional arrangements based on them. Twenty years after the West and Zimmerman seminal article, Deutsch lamented that doing gender has become a "theory of gender persistence and the inevitability of inequality" (2007, p. 106). She suggested adopting "a new convention, namely, that we reserve the phrase 'doing gender' to refer to social interactions that reproduce gender differences and use the phrase 'undoing gender' to refer to social interactions that reduce gender difference" (2007, p. 122). Deutsch's perspective raised questions as to whether and how gender might be undone in interactions and institutional domains. Undoing gender may entail different activities, from giving less importance to gender, to performing gender in discordance from the assigned sex, and interpreting gender in different, unexpected ways to change others' expectations.

While this debate about gender was flourishing, other scholars started observing gender in organisations. Acker defined gender as a "conceptualization, gender stands for the pervasive ordering of human activities, practices, and social structures in terms of differentiations between women and men" (1992, p. 567). Acker's theory of gendered organizations shows that gender inequality is tenacious because it is built into the structure of work organisations. In Acker's theory, five processes reproduce gender in organisations: the division of labour, cultural symbols, workplace interactions, individual identities, and organisational logic. Since Acker's work was published, organisations have changed considerably. Downsizing, computerisation, and globalisation have reshaped individual working trajectories (Kalleberg, 2000), leading to studies observing how gender is embedded in the organisational logic of the new economy, in which "work is precarious, teams instead of managers control the labor process, career maps replace career ladders, and future opportunities are identified primarily through networking" (Williams, Muller, and Kilanski, 2012). Other research has developed a feminist and post-feminist sociological perspective, documenting how gender essentialisation and female devaluation are interwoven in the reproduction of gender inequalities in the organisations (Acker, 2006; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Ronen, 2018).

A relevant body of international research on masculinities has re-introduced male perspectives to gender studies. Connell (2005) mentioned, among others, the multiplicity, hierarchies, and ongoing change in the history of masculinities. Masculinities have also been studied in relation to management in academia and private companies (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Collinson and Hearn, 2005; Hearn, 2001). Roper (1996) added to the categories of power, authority and competition, more commonly applied when studying masculinities and management, new categories: "homosocial desire", and "seduction and succession mechanisms", creating a flow of power among men. These categories make it possible to examine management as a complex series of processes that involve and invoke seduction and succession among men. A similar concept has been echoed by Prichard: "This suggests that embedded in particular locales are relations between men that revolve significantly around homosociability or the male camaraderie of being 'mates'. The masculinity here is woven with a strong egalitarian ethic between men which flattens overt institutional differences, such as being a dean or a manager, and enforces an ethic where members don't 'get above themselves'" (1996, p. 231). More recently, the study of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) led to a tentative new typology of masculinities in academic organisations that has identified four types of masculinity: careerist, enterprising, pure scientific masculinity and family oriented breadwinning (O'Connor, O'Hagan, and Brannen, 2015); in the authors' view,

these types "all reflect the persistence of an underlying system of male privileging in the changing landscape of higher education" (2015, p. 529).

Currently, the term gender is understood as an element of social relations which are based on perceived differences between women and men. The differences are socially constructed and culture related; this is seen as a primary way of signifying and naturalising relationships of power and hierarchy (Scott, 1986). "Gender, therefore, not only operates at the level of the subjective/interpersonal (through which humans identify themselves and organize their relations with others); but is also a feature of institutions and social structures, and a part of the symbolic realm of meaning-making, within which individual actors are 'nested'" (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell, 2010, p. 580).

When more empirical activities address gender issues, such as in EU-financed projects promoting gender equality in research and funding organisations through the implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEP), "gender" is still often associated with women's issues and the gender imbalance is seen as the main problem to be addressed. The female underrepresentation has been studied through various lenses, including human capital, culture and privilege, and institutional organisation (Marschke et al, 2007). There is agreement on the key factors helping women to reach top positions in the academy and in companies: mentoring and the role of leaders' interpersonal characteristics (London et al., 2019), the importance of integrating with the right networks (Bagilhole and Goode, 2001; O'Connor, 2014), awareness of unconscious bias (Strachan et al, 2018), and the role of work-life balance as a strategic objective (Drew and Murtagh, 2005). Theoretical stances are seldom addressed in doing gender equality through GEPs, exploring for example the concept of feminist resistance, applying the Foucauldian notions of power and resistance (Ikävalko and Kantola, 2017). To support applicants – who may work in Academia as well as in High Tech companies - interested in learning about "gender", the EU documents cite the definitions provided by the EU-USA Gendered Innovations project (Schiebinger, 2008); this focuses on a sex/gender division, in which sex refers to the biological and gender to the social aspects overlapping gender. The H2020 programme is a powerful tool in promoting gender equality, thanks to its request to take into account gender in all new research projects, however concerns have been raised about "the lack of intersectional perspectives and the lack of challenges to the prevailing heteronormative gender model" (Bencivenga et al, 2014, p. 214).

This short analysis of the literature shows that a substantial variety of perspectives has appropriated and interpreted the term/concept gender, that is evolving in time influenced by different theoretical approaches and research fields. What is still not clear is if all those in charge of promoting gender equality and diversity in Academia and ICT companies are aware of this variety and have a clear idea of their personal and professional positioning at this regard.

The research wider context

This paper refers to the first step of a research project titled FIAGES, a Feminist Institutionalist Approach to Gender Equality in STEMM, about the progression of gender equality in the Academy and ICT companies, focusing on Italy and Ireland to explore variation in national approaches to gender equality and engendering knowledge. Women represent a minority in academic and industrial senior management in both countries. National statistics show the difficulties faced by women's career progression, in both sectors.

The Gender Equality Index (GEI) measures the closeness to achieving a gender-equal society and the Glass Ceiling Index (GCI) reflects the women's difficulties in moving to senior positions. The GEI and GCI results for Ireland and Italy are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 National Gender Equality Index and National HE Glass Ceiling Index

	National Gender Equality Index (2019)	National HE Glass Ceiling Index (2016)
Ireland	71.8	2.16
Italy	63.0	1.68
EU28 Indexes	67.4	1.64

Sources: EIGE website: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019; She Figures 2018 (European Commission, 2019, p. 124).

The representation of women in corporate boards is improving in most EU Member States. According to EIGE data (https://tinyurl.com/slpwrhw), Italy shows an increase of around 29.4 percentage points, above the EU28 average of 13.4, and Ireland 9.1. The Italian performance is due to the introduction of the Law 120/2011, prescribing gender quotas for boards of directors.

Eurostat data about technology and knowledge-intensive sectors, including the ICT, show a general decrease in women's employment in technology and knowledge-intensive sectors in average in European Countries, show a female higher percentage for Ireland than Italy (Table 2).

Table 2 Employment in technology and knowledge-intensive sectors at the national level, by Gender

	Men		Women	
	2008	2018	2008	2018
EU28	77.8	83.5	22.2	16.5
IE	72.9	81.2	27.1	18.8
IT	83.4	85.0	16.6	15.0

Source: EUROSTAT, https://tinyurl.com/sdly6zv

In Academia, both countries have adopted initiatives to promote gender equality through the Athena Swan Charter (AS) in Ireland (HEA, 2016) and the "Comitati Unici di Garanzia" (CUG) committees in Italy combining the competences of the Committee for Equal Opportunities and the Anti-Mobbing Committee, charged of producing and implementing positive action plans (PAP) (Galizzi and Siboni, 2016).

Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative approach involving two stages. First, the collection of secondary data on the strategies currently applied in academe and ICT companies, in the EU and United States, to support gender equality. Second, empirical research, through semi-structured interviews with gender equality and diversity experts, in Italy and Ireland. To be considered an "expert", the people selected had to have published and/or spoken on this topic at academic or national/international corporate conferences, be current or past members of committees promoting gender equality, or a CEO/ HR manager in ICT companies.

Participants were chosen using a non-probability sampling technique, snowball sampling, as the intent was not to generalise the results but to select "experts" who could provide valuable insights into the research questions and possibly add new ideas and perspectives. Eligible experts were initially contacted through a formal email invitation, followed by other emails and/or telephone contact to define the details. All those interviewed were mentioned by at least two other interviewees or academics/CEOs during the research.

A total of 52 organisations comprising universities, companies, professional associations, national/regional committees and four consultants/freelance experts, were contacted. This process led to 33 interviews. The sample consists of nine men and 24 women, faculty or human resource (HR) members in academe and chief executive officers (CEOs) or HR managers in ICT companies. (Tables 3 and 4 give other details).

Table 3 Sector/Country of Interviewees

	Academia		ICT Company		Total
	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Ireland	6	2	4	1	13
Italy	5	1	9	5	20
Total	11	3	13	6	33

Table 4 Profession/Role of Interviewees

Profession/Role	Number
Academia	7
Academic (Emeritus)	3
HR (Academia)	1
HR (ICT Sector)	4

CEO/Manager	5
"Gender and Diversity" Office in academia or private company	3
Cross expertise (Academia/ICT Company)	3
Other type of expertise in the field	7
Total	33

The data collection and analysis proceeded with semi-structured, in-person or online (Skype), interviews, recorded by the interviewer between November 2018 and June 2019. These were transcribed, anonymised and coded, having consulted with two members of the Advisory Board of the FIAGES research project. The aim was to understand what discourses gender equality experts, in academia and ICT companies, use to make sense of the progress toward gender equality; how do they explain female underrepresentation; what advantages do they see in gender equality; and what hinders the process toward gender equality in specific sectors and society. The interview guide included: the interviewee's vision of gender equality in the specific sector; measures/actions contributing to an increase in female representation; impediments and benefits; successful strategies/tools; the influence of broader changes; the most urgent challenges at cultural/societal level; and a final section about other aspects not addressed during the interview but deemed relevant. Interviewees were sent the questions in advance to allow personal reflection and/or collection of data and information. The interviews averaged 45 minutes. Participants are identified through a unique assigned code, including a progressive number, followed by the sector (A for Academy, IND for Industry), IT (for Italy) or IE (for Ireland) according to the country they work in, and M or F to identify their gender (e.g. 01_A_IT_F identifies a female academic working in Italy). The progressive number reflects the order in which the interviews were conducted.

A constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Mills, Bonner, and Francis, 2006) was used as an analytical framework, incorporating constant comparative analysis as a method of qualitative data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). While large grounded theory projects aim to generate theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) the procedures and techniques are also a useful framework for smaller studies where theory will not be generated, in particular when the interest lies in understanding more about a specific issue as in this research. With the small sample of interviewees used, the aim was to explore the current and prospective vision of experts on the progression of gender equality. There were no pre-defined hypotheses applied to the analysis which was inevitably influenced by ideas derived from the theoretical framework and literature in the sector.

Findings

The following section relates to a theme that emerged from the interviews, namely the unexpected variance in the use of the term "gender". Although participants were not asked to define "gender", it soon appeared evident that, while agreeing on the importance of promoting gender equality in organisations, they interpreted the term in different ways. This was evident in the responses to two questions: what would characterise an organisation that had achieved gender equality; and the second asking them to describe the benefits of a greater gender equality in academe or in the ICT sector.

The responses to these two questions fell into two main groups. The first group referred to systematic approaches designed to transform the organisation. Experts working in academe with experience of producing Gender Equality Plans, through the Athena Swan Charter in Ireland or Positive Action Plans? in Italy, or involved in EU-financed projects addressing either gender related issues gave similar responses. Their responses were similar as regards the initiatives taken by organisations which have achieved gender equality, described by the participants as actions designed to create a numerical balance or other types of initiatives designed to stimulate scientific contribution from women and men in equal measure. About what would characterise an organisation that had achieved gender equality, the following answer represents well this first group: "I would say the likelihood of the head of university, be it rector, provost, president, the odds [of gender balance] are 50/50 and these would carry through to deans, heads of schools, heads of disciplines, heads of department and when you do not have subject domains like economics or philosophy or physics which are predominantly one gender or the other, and that would, to me, be part of it. The other part of it that is equally important is that you have a working environment that stimulates everybody to be creative, innovative and want to succeed and in which the conditions are laid down that allow them to, for instance, have a life outside the work as well as a wonderfully successful career" (03_A_IE_F). The responses of this

group were similar for Irish academics who have experience of the Athena Swan Charter; they take up the fundamental elements required to obtain an Athena Swan Award and include almost all of them in their response to the first question. Italian participants list the same aspects in a different order.

The second group includes mainly company employees and freelance professionals who referred spontaneously to aspects of achieving numerical equality resulting from impartial staff selection and promotion procedures: "…in our case, when we promote staff we ask ourselves whether we are promoting a number of women that matches the percentage of women in our organisation. This also applies to hiring procedures, pay procedures and work placement procedures." (31_IND_IT_M). It was often necessary to ask a specific question to obtain additional comments by stimulating reflection on company processes and outputs. "Other motivations stem from specific studies, particularly the Mckinsey Study (Hunt et al, 2018 Author's note), which shows that companies with a balanced leadership perform better than similar companies with a predominantly male management. The market is also determining radical change: "80 per cent of all purchasing and investment decisions are now taken or influenced by women. Only by achieving balanced male/female management teams is it possible to create product strategies and policies which reflect diverse markets. Finally, companies that have been nurturing talented women for many years have women in decision-making positions who prefer to do business with their own sex. This is why we need more women at all levels." (25_IND_IT_F)

When responses turned to analysing the benefits of greater gender equality, the participants gave a range of reasons often verging on essentialism: "in the age of artificial intelligence, the future of work will become hybrid: the blend of winning traits will include technology, creativity and empathy, a blend provided mainly by women. After all, creativity and empathy, the famous soft skills, are more feminine traits" (11_IND_IT_M); "some traits and behaviours are intrinsic to men and women, in our society, and they trigger different behaviours" (20_IND_IE_F); "women look at the details while men have a wider vision; both traits are useful to a company, and that's why we need equality" (02_IND_IT_F); "that lightbulb moment that an individual has when he realizes that the way they are behaving in the team, the language they use, how they listen or don't listen, how they behave as a man versus how a woman behaves, those are where you really start to see those light bulb moments occur" (23_IND_IE_F). Reference was made almost exclusively to a binary vision, with characteristics that are mutually exclusionary. In these answers, gender is biologically determined, an individual binary category ascribed at birth. Less often, the term gender is understood as an element of social relations which are based on perceived differences between women and men. Changes occurring in time in the female and male behaviours are attributed to the society, but hindered by the family and the education.

Diversity is mentioned as another important aim, almost automatically attached to gender in the expression "gender equality and diversity", but almost no mention is made of how it can be concretely achieved in companies or universities. The three people who mentioned their homosexuality during the interviews referred spontaneously to the importance of adding diversity to the concept of gender, in particular referring to addressing a non-binary concept of gender. They described drawing attention to the issue in their working environments: "We need a general cultural overhaul, which requires huge amounts of training, the inclusion of women's history, gender studies and queer theory" (15_A_IT_M); "I think companies should examine and in some way prioritise their approach to gender. There's no doubt about it. But we need to achieve a fundamental goal, recognising what other people are and asking ourselves basic questions such as: how am I equal to others? how are others equal to me?" (24_IND_IT_F).

Discussion

The interviews extend prior research by shedding light on how experts in promoting gender equality in academe and ICT companies understand and make sense of the progression toward gender equality and diversity in the workplace along with the factors promoting or hindering this process. In general, all participants consider gender inequality as an urgent problem requiring change. In their professional roles, they support administrators and, where possible, policymakers to promote structural change.

The numerical disparity between men and women, defined as "gender imbalance", is still a reality in STEM. The loss of women scientists working in academia at each stage of their career pipeline and their underrepresentation at senior levels (Ovseiko et al, 2017) are well documented. The gender deficit resulting

from this under-representation hinders gender-sensitive innovation in academia and is a negative influence on society at large (Forsberg and Stenbacka, 2018). These aspects are well known to the participants, who mention all of them and express their concern toward the slowness of organisations in moving forward.

The key factors helping women to reach top positions in the academy and in companies mentioned by almost all the participants correspond to what the literature commonly considers winning strategies. In this regard, there is a common agreement, with minor differences in the emphasis put on one aspect or the other.

The problems arise when we consider how participants describe people's characteristics, roles, stereotypes and discriminations. Very few participants refer to the pathway which changes the concept of gender. All of them seem to agree that prejudice and stereotypes are the main barriers to equality at all levels, but when it comes to explaining the advantages of equality, many cite what they see as innate differences. These differences between women and men are seen as positive, since if they are balanced they help create academies and companies which better reflect social variations, albeit based on "natural" characteristics.

Currently, at least in the gender studies field, the term gender is used less and less frequently in its earlier sense, that is an individual binary category ascribed at birth. When moving from the individual level to the social one, social and organisational aspects are rarely mentioned by participants in the research, who waver between a "natural" individual component and social and cultural forces which they cannot influence or can influence only marginally: social institutions, families, society in its widest sense.

Insights into the different interpretations of the term "gender" influencing formal and informal institutional practices, and their impact on the implementation of gender equality strategies in Academia and the ICT sector appear focused on perspectives that mask gendered relations and power imbalances, which infact are rarely mentioned by the experts. The literature shows that women's and men's roles in performing and reproducing gender are still being debated, and essentialist perspectives reintroduce supposed "natural" diversities in the debate. This is visible, in particular, in the so called "egalitarian essentialism", the simultaneous endorsement of social progress/equality for women coupled with accepting the idea that women and men are essentially different (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman, 2011). Referring to a two-sex-model and promoting the notion of a binary sex-gender, organisations may conceal the crucial issues of intersectionality and critical reflection on the impact of neoliberal policies and societal challenges on progression towards gender equality and diversity.

Conclusion

The need to address "gender equality and diversity" leads many organisations to appoint staff interested in gender equality, but not necessarily with any competence in Women's or Gender Studies. This hinders understanding the ways in which cultures and subcultures produce gender, and the potential to deconstruct formal and informal institutions in their gendered aspects. Personal experiences and beliefs influence the behaviours and actions of those leading organisations towards a more equal gender balance and the inclusion of gendered perspectives.

This paper places particular emphasis on diverse approaches to the concept of "gender" since the scenario is multi-faceted. The participants hold roles enabling them to influence progress towards gender equality in their workplaces, in theory or practice, depending on their posts. Most of them have not trained in Gender Studies, but have acquired knowledge and competences in the workplace, before or after taking on the role that leads to being identified as "experts".

As a consequence, the participants' views vary widely: at one extreme are those who consider biological aspects important, referring to anecdotal experiences, at the other are those who have post-structuralist perspectives offering an alternative paradigm for the study of gender. In the first case, the prevalent view is that the natural behaviours of men and women might favour greater balance in working groups, hence the importance of mixed male/female groups. The characteristics are not at individual level, but people are assigned to two mutually excluding groups, having different characteristics. In the second, held by a smaller number of experts, gender is merely a moment of transition towards actions favouring diversity. In this case, emphasis is placed on the diversity that distinguishes all human beings, making it preferable to adopt an individual approach to every person's needs. The personal and professional vision of the gender issue will

shape whether and how action is taken to address it. While all the respondents stated that diversity is as important as gender, at least nominally, the conversation tends to focus on different aspects. Relatively young, female CEOs who mentioned having a husband and young children focused on promoting the work-life balance, while male and female lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) faculty and company staff were more interested in promoting diversity and recognising discrimination, include sexism, heterosexism and discrimination against transgender people.

The presence of LGBT staff among the experts interviewed, while in no way indicating wider representativeness of the data collected, contributes to the literature. It suggests that the path from gender equality to diversity and inclusion might advance further if those in charge of coordinating or promoting gender equality and diversity are not only sensitive to LGBT perspectives but are informed about the specific needs and actions to be implemented to promote diversity and inclusion.

In most interviews the focus was on belonging to one of two mutually exclusive genders, sometimes on being gendered, less often on doing gender, and rarely on undoing or differentiating gender. It appears legitimate to ask to what extent this variance affects the view of organisational power relations and practices. Future research should focus on the potential of this variance to the reproduction of gender asymmetries, keeping women and other underrepresented groups on the gender spectrum in a condition of subordination, preventing progress towards doing difference, undoing gender or queering gender.

Acknowledgements

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