

Towards Gender Equity at Tilburg University

Marjolein de Boer

Three years ago, I was sitting at a bar, discussing the pros and cons of pursuing a career in academia with three of my colleagues. We are all women and we're all doctors: two postdocs and two assistant professors. One of us is resolute: she does not want to stay in academia. Although she is very passionate about her research and courses, she does not want to have the insecurity that comes with working on temporary contracts. Nor does she want to sacrifice her weekends and holidays to do her research because her education tasks and bursary applications take up so much of her time. But most of all, she longs for a working environment where she would have ample female role models, where she would not be asked - as the only (young) woman in the room - to take notes, where she would not have to work twice as hard as her male peers to get the same promotion, where she would be able to have a family, work part-time and have a career. Me and the other two women nod: although we love our research and education practice, we all recognize the heavy demands a career in academia places us.

When I talk about these kinds of issues with being a woman in academia, my objections are often reduced to a mismatch between individual priorities and what it requires to be a (successful) academic. It is nothing that leaders in a university or society should be worried about: dissatisfaction with (or even leaving) academia is a matter of individual preferences. This idea not only silences the existence of bias and discrimination against women at the university but also implicitly places the responsibility for the existence of this culture largely with women. They should have gotten their priorities straight, right? So when female academics critique the female unfriendly culture at the university, they are nudged into believing that it is not the university, not society, but that it is they that are the problem.

Combatting a biased and exclusive university

Despite this tendency to question and undermine women's experiences of discrimination, there has been an increasing number of initiatives to protest the exclusive culture at universities. Under the name *Athena's Angels*, four female professors have combined forces to address bias against women in academia and defend their interests. On their website, they publish long lists of evidence of discriminatory practices at the university – from research reports, to shocking personal stories, to excerpts of university websites where male pronouns are consistently used to refer to academics and university leaders (see: <https://www.athenasangels.nl>). Another good example of a protest against the biased university culture is the popular *Tumblr* website 'All male panels' (See: allmalepanels.tumblr.com). Here, people send in programs of conferences featuring panels with only male participants. These so-called 'manels' are then named and shamed on the internet and social media. And then there is, of course, the monitor of the Dutch network of female professors ('Landelijk netwerk vrouwelijke hoogleraren'/LNVH). Every year, this network publishes a report about how many female professors work at Dutch universities. Its statistics and figures are not pretty. Although numbers are rising, only 25,7% of the professors in The Netherlands was female in 2021 (See: www.lnvh.nl/monitor).

I think about all these different naming-and-shaming protests because I wonder what is needed to combat the current biased and exclusive university culture at Tilburg University. And yes, our university *is* biased and exclusive. The most eye-catching piece of evidence is that, according to the *LNVH*, Tilburg University is currently the lowest scoring non-technical university when it comes to the number of female professors. In 2020, only 23,9% of the professors was female. With that, the university not only scores below the national average (i.e. 25,7%) but also fails to reach its own target figure for 2020 (i.e. 25%).

In 2027, Tilburg University wants to be ‘Curious’, ‘Caring’, ‘Connected’, and ‘Courageous’. In becoming this new and improved university, gender and diversity aspects need to be accounted for. The university seems to acknowledge as much in sketching out its challenges in the strategic plan ‘Weaving minds and characters’. “Diversity, inclusion, and a safe working and study environment (social safety) are essential” the report reads, “but [such an inclusive environment is] not self-evident yet”. But the future may be bright(er). “We want to be caring” (p. 37), the university states. And then these sentences grab my attention: “We [...] pay attention to diversity, inclusion”. “We strive for diversity in teams and exploit the diversity and complementarity”.

While these words are beautiful, they give rise to two pertinent questions: what does it mean to pay attention to diversity and inclusion? And how to actually attain diversity in teams? In formulating an answer to these questions, I argue that the strategic plan misses a couple of crucial c-words. In ‘paying attention to diversity’, the university needs to have and keep a **Critical lens towards Categorization and Counting**. And in ‘attaining diversity in teams’, the university has to **Commit with more Cash** for diversity recruitment programs and to develop and foster **Creative solutions towards Culture Change**.

Paying attention to diversity: being critical towards categorization and counting

‘We need to pay attention to diversity’, the university writes. In doing so, inequalities and discrimination need to be named so that they can be tackled through appropriate measures. In addressing the exclusive university culture, it is important to state – again and again – that women are underrepresented in academia. At the same time, calling out inequalities can also create and sustain discrimination. Naming, defining, and categorizing are colonial practices. They do not only help to understand those who are named and categorized, but also – and perhaps pre-eminently – construct perceptions of people who are being defined (Claire and Denis 2015). The act of naming and defining departs from the premise that there is someone (or something) that can take – and has the right to have – that defining role. It also encloses the invasive and sometimes violent demand to be made understandable, to be a subject for investigation. Leaving aside the actual content of the definition, the act of categorizing in and of itself already puts the one being named in a marginalized position over and against the superior one who does the naming. Such discriminatory dynamics are inherent in important questions like ‘who are women in academia?’, ‘how many female professors are there?’, and ‘why don’t they make it to the top?’. In asking these questions, we do not only attempt to understand the underrepresented – where they come from and what their struggles are. In doing so, the one

being questioned is also made to be the deviant, the enigma, the non-normative. The one who asks the question, in turn, is (made) the norm. This person, after all, does not have to be investigated or explain themselves because their position in academia is perceived as self-evident.

Counting is often a vital part of naming and categorizing. Again this colonial gaze: counting is and was being used to see how important or threatened (or threatening) a certain species – human or otherwise – are. Counting is often used to calculate an average or a mean. When there are a hundred ladybirds with eight dots on their backs and twenty with six dots, the hundred ladybirds are ‘normal’. This normality is not a descriptive fact, it is normative. Indeed, what is normal is also considered the norm, the status quo. Non-normality, then, is considered deviant and that deviancy is often understood to be a (potential) threat to that which is considered the normative normal. This makes counting far from an innocent act. Even more so because in revealing what is and is not normal through counting, we also run the risk of sustaining and (re-)enforcing harmful normativity. If there are hundred academics in a room and 76,1% is male and 23,9% is female, male academics are not only revealed to be the normative norm. They may also come to see themselves as such - whereas women may come to consider themselves as deviant. Counting and sharing numbers, in other words, is not a descriptive act. It reveals normative constructions and constructs how people come to see themselves as (non-)normative.

It is important to name and measure inequalities, to count how many females work as academics in The Netherlands. Percentages such as that there are only 23,9% female professors at Tilburg University are pivotal in addressing that the university needs to work hard(er) to attain a more inclusive working environment. But we always have to adopt a critical perspective towards such practices. Here, relevant questions are: why and how are we measuring inequalities? What is the impact of these measurements on the inequalities that are investigated? And how can we communicate these measurements so that they do not reinforce those inequalities but rather help to dissolve them? While a univocal and definite answer to these questions is, of course, not possible, it is important to constantly ask these questions in order to maintain a critical lens.

Diversity in teams: committing with cash for diversity recruitment programs

‘We strive for diversity in teams’, Tilburg University writes. In order to attain this vision and to become a more inclusive and female -friendly university, it is important to take measures of equity. In discussions about fighting bias and discrimination, the term ‘equity’ is often used interchangeably with ‘equality’. Acknowledging their differences, however, is vital in forming a (more) female-friendly university. At the university, where women are systematically disadvantaged in relation to men, ideals that determine what it means to be a successful academic are formed against benchmarks designed for the advantaged group. For women, becoming a successful academic is therefore harder and often untenable and unrealistic. An equitable approach assumes that one can only change these marginalizing benchmarks by customizing solutions based on individual and sub-group needs, rather than providing everyone

with the exact same resources. An equitable framework is thus based on fairness and takes into account the unequal context from which we need to work towards an equal university (Gaudet et. al. 2022).

In the coming years, more women need to be recruited for professorships at Tilburg University. The university itself envisions to have 28% full female professors by 2025. Measures to reach this may include more diverse selection committees and offering gender-sensitivity training for those committees. In my view, however, we have to think of more radical and quicker measures if we want to reach this wonderful but ambitious target: the university needs to allocate and distribute more cash in equitable ways. Here, we can think of a substantial investment in setting up (or reviving) diversity recruitment programs such as the Philip Eijlander Diversity Program. Such programs have extensive emancipatory power. They will, of course, immediately increase the number of women in full-, but also associate and assistant professorships. Such an increase in female professors will also improve the university's gender balance in the long run as it allows women to kick-start their career and get promoted easier and earlier. And such recruitment programs will lead to more female role models, thereby showing younger women that a career in academia is achievable. In this sense, taking equitable measures by investing in diversity recruitment programs will work as a catalysator to eventually form a generation where gender equality is the norm.

Diversity in teams: foster creative solutions towards culture change

While working towards attaining equity – and eventually equality - at the university may begin with money, it never ends with it. Investing in a more equal gender balance is only a prerequisite: truly obtaining equality at the university necessitates a culture change. Discrimination on the basis of gender is often part of a deeply ingrained social mechanism. It is in our language: how we use male pronouns to describe academics. It is in the prejudices that we have and act on: that when thinking about scientists, people often think of men. It is in the fact that a man 'gets the benefit of the doubt' more easily in a job interview, whereas a woman has to prove her qualifications more explicitly (Couch 2012; also see Athena's Angels website for more examples). Because such implicit (or 'modern') bias is often unconscious and unintentional, it is not only harder to prove than explicit discrimination – such as pay gaps, unequal gender distribution in employees, and plain sexist comments –, it is also hard to fight. Such discriminatory practices are nevertheless very harmful for those who are confronted with this kind of language use, these prejudices and such quality assessments. Drawing out and changing these persistent biased structures therefore requires an elaborate action plan that focuses on creative solutions. While there are many steps one can take to combat implicit gender bias, I want to briefly focus on three approaches that effectively stimulate a gender-inclusive culture at the university.

First of all, there is a lack of female leadership at the university. This is not only because women are outnumbered, but also because women are less visible because of persistent gendered norms of modesty and leadership. That is, while self-promotion is often applauded for men in managerial positions, the ideal for women is to be modest. This social ideal perpetuates the

lack of female involvement in top management positions (Budworth and Mann, 2010). One promising way to increase women's visible profiling is to train women in the power of storytelling. For thousands of years, people have been using stories to not only inform, but also persuade others, elicit emotional responses and build support for culture change. Teaching the art and theory of emancipatory storytelling to female academics is therefore an important tool for provoking change – for increasing the visibility of female scholars and eventually breaking down the ideal of being modest for women (Guaraldo 2013).

Second, young female academics need to be supported through an interdisciplinary and international mentorship program. In doing so, people from various disciplines and national contexts with various challenges and successes can learn from each other. It is significant that such a program should not only include female mentors but also men or people with other gender-identities. This circumvents the risk of making only women responsible for attaining a more gender-inclusive university.

Finally, gender-inclusivity at the university extends beyond the representation and support of faculty and staff. It also encompasses how universities teach and what programs they offer. Herein, diversifying the curriculum is key: more female authors need to be included in mandatory reading lists for students, and female thinkers and scholars need to be systematically acknowledged and discussed in the classroom. Thus, only by giving women a powerful voice as leaders, by explicitly supporting them in their career, and by acknowledging their credibility as knowledge producers we can begin to think about a real culture change at the university.

Envisioning a female-friendly Tilburg University

Back to the women at the bar. We're a couple of years down the road and we still see each other regularly. One of the women does not work at the university anymore, one is thinking about another career path, and me and another woman want to stay. In fact, I cannot think of another job I would love so much as I love this job. But my love affair with the university is also a bit perverse. I (and other female academics) have to constantly deal with the biased culture at the university. It is impossible to overstate the many ways in which we, as women, have to fight this bias on a daily basis. We have to work harder for promotions than our male peers; we suffer from the pay gap; we have to make a career without a lot of female role models; we may feel responsible for protecting younger female colleagues against this institutionalized bias; we have to fight harmful stereotypes that a scientist, an academic, a genius is not a woman but a (middle aged, white) man; in salary negotiations, we are asked whether that raise is really necessary and whether our partner does not make enough money, and we have to prove - again and again - that institutionalized bias and implicit discrimination at the university still exists. And finally, if we address these issues, it is often perceived as 'being difficult', qualified as 'exaggerated', or met with the suggestion to 'just keep our head down and work'.

I often wonder how I would experience my academic life if I would not have to deal with these issues. Would I have more energy left? Would I be more productive? And for my female

colleague who has left the university: would she still be working there if it would be a more female-friendly place? These questions are, of course, rhetoric: the answer is yes. Thus: for all those passionate, clever and capable women that worked, still work or want to work at the university it is of the utmost importance to achieve a more inclusive and diverse university. And it is my sincere belief that with commitment, cash, creativity, and a critical lens such a new and improved Tilburg University is possible.

References

Budworth, M. H., & Mann, S. L. (2010). Becoming a leader: The challenge of modesty for women. *Journal of Management Development*.

Clair, M., & Denis, J. S. (2015). Sociology of racism. *The international encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences*, 19, 857-863.

Crouch, M. A. (2012). Implicit bias and gender (and other sorts of) diversity in philosophy and the academy in the context of the corporatized university. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 43(3), 212-226.

Gaudet, S., Marchand, I., Bujaki, M., & Bourgeault, I. L. (2022). Women and gender equity in academia through the conceptual lens of care. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(1), 74-86.

Guaraldo, O. (2013). To the Narrative Turn and Back. The Political Impact of Storytelling in Feminism. The travelling concepts of narrative, 63-81.