

# Gender and Academic Career Development in Central and Eastern Europe

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## Aim

The nature of academic institutions is inherently gendered. This is because higher education institutions (HEIs) do not operate in a void but, rather, are part and parcel of patriarchal social structures. The current poster is to present the summary of the work that is to be published next year. This book offers a comprehensive presentation of the gendered and gendering academic career development. It will also explore various scholarly roles that academics face throughout their careers and how they are gendered in their nature. The book connects relevant literature on the topic with novel empirical studies to increase the understanding how gender is played in academia across different roles and different career stages. Moreover, I will critically analyze and investigate the increasing neoliberalism visible across academia, and how it affects academics, and specifically women. The empirical context is conducted in Central and Eastern Europe that sheds new light on the gendered and gendering nature in academia in the region. The book also offers propositions on how to *undo gender* academia to make it a more inclusive workplace for all. Based upon this, I will create recommendations for universities, academicians, managers, and policy makers surrounding how to better design equal and inclusive institutions of higher education.

## Novelty

The **novelty** of the book lies in its comprehensive examination of academic work, its focus on gender, and its location in the CEE region. Academic articles are often based upon one aspect of academic careers, without comprehensive consideration of various academic roles. As part of this book, I intend to look at a variety of roles in academia, as well as how these roles are evaluated. Next, this book is specifically focused on gender biases and obstacles, a topic that is under-researched in this context. Despite the fact that we are aware of the existence of gender inequalities in academia, little is known about whether, how, and to what degree gender biases impact academic careers and work. Absent this knowledge, the academic community does not have access to a comprehensive perspective regarding how to create gender equality and inclusive HEIs.

## Method

To better understand the experiences of women academics in CEE, I have adopted a qualitative approach, as dictated by the nature and context of the study. Qualitative research is suitable for exploring problems and developing a thorough understanding of how a specific phenomenon is experienced within the chosen context (Cassell and Symon 1994; Creswell 2012). These features are present in the current study, as it is exploratory toward providing an in-depth investigation of academic context in the region. I conducted 53 interviews with women across different stages of career, experiences, and career focus. Interviews were conducted in spring of 2022. The interview scenario consisted of questions on their experiences of professional work and life outside of academia. The interview scenario allowed a degree of flexibility for the participants to deepen their answers and to encourage them to voice their own narrative (McCracken, 1988; Miller and Glassner 1997; Riessman, 1993).

## Findings- the career development perspective

Both previous studies found that women tend to have different career patterns compared to men (Fritsch, 2016), they point to the existence of the leaky pipeline in the career development of women across the higher education sector. The higher the position the less women is a fact across countries and disciplines. The current study showcases that women face challenges and barriers throughout their academic careers that are not only gendered but gendering.

At the **early career stage** (pre-PhD), studies point to the less mentoring opportunities, more stress and lower social capital. The interviews also pointed to these barriers. However, what was typical for this career stage was the high dependency on the supervisor that brings to mind a pyramid scheme. The mistreatment from the side of supervisors, challenging students and high pressure all result in high levels of stress that junior faculty experience.

*"One of my colleagues [said]: Until you have a PhD at the academia, you're not even human." R4*

The poor treatment was visible across the interviews, junior faculty emphasized that they need to "work off" for the senior. The relationship between the PhD candidates and the rest of the faculty members is similar to "serfdom under feudalism" (R50). The sexist comments and jokes are still apparent and to fit into the hierarchical and gendered environment, women academics and *adjust* their identity to fit the academic culture.

*"I have studied some psychology, so I adjust even body language. I think it's also important like the way how you speak, the way how you are dressed, all this should be kind of appropriate." R14*

The **middle career stage** (assistant and associate professors), face have other barriers and challenges that early academics. This stage of career is characterized with a high teaching load and administrative work expectation. Nevertheless, both are unappreciated and often invisible, not leading to promotion. As these obligations are often gendered, women are often the one *stuck in the middle*. Thus, women are pulled away from work that is most rewarded by academia and most contributing to the development of their careers- research.

*"When someone that is higher in the rank proposes you something (...) I think that person would be offended if you said no. So, I say yes, even though I have more [tasks] than many others." R22*

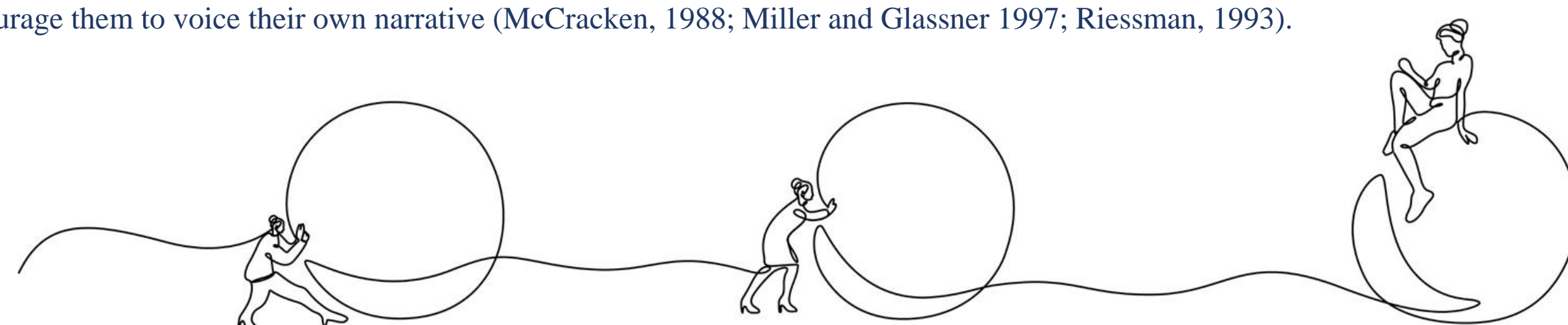
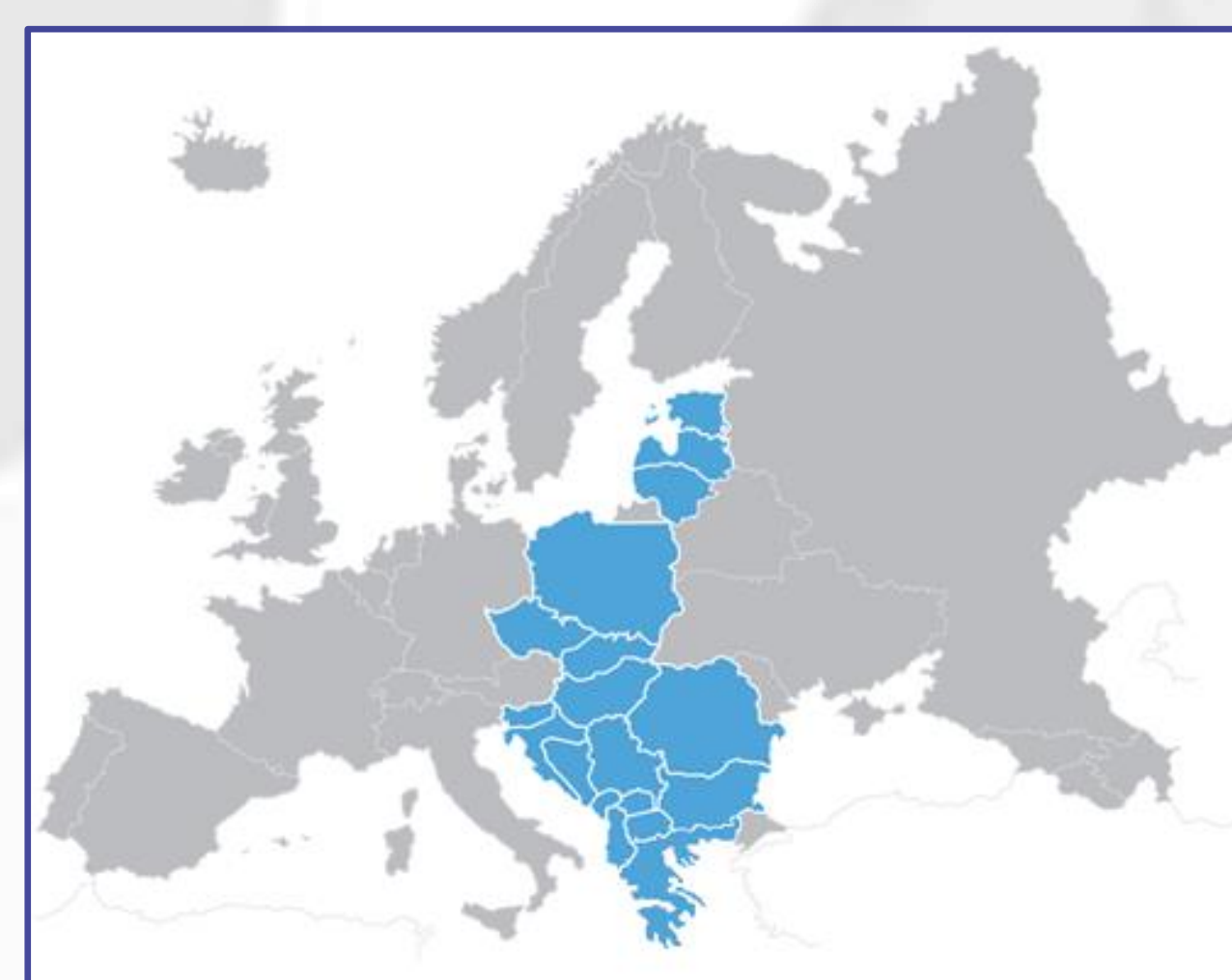
The overload of administrative work leads to the situation where women have no time to perform research and thus no possibilities to advance their academic careers. The important finding was also the deepening difference between the haves and have nots, which includes the access to financial resources, obligations (where teaching and administrative are seen as punishment, research as reward), and social capital. The social capital among middle career women was underdeveloped, which resulted in the lower empowerment and feeling of disengagement.

*"I know that some of my colleagues go out and are friends. But they would go to watch a football game or go out to drink. I went out with them once and I couldn't stand all the guy talk. So even though they invite us all, when it's in the evening it's obvious that women can't go because they have to put their kids to sleep and so on." R52*

## The CEE Context

Although the topic has increasingly received notable attention from the academic world, in the CEE region, the topic remains under-researched, and as a result, the extant literature lacks experiences and perspectives from our region. Amid the region's post-socialist transition following the demise of the Soviet bloc in 1989, CEE HEIs have undergone reforms that have introduced neoliberal, market-driven models of academia. These reforms involve the marketization of higher education, performance-based management, underpayment for academic work, dependence on scholarships and grants, and a focus on measuring performance by publications in highly ranked academic journals. These organizational trends constitute the essential context for the analysis of gender in academia.

Central and Eastern Europe has multiple definitions. According to the OECD definition that comprises of the following countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and the three Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (OECD, 2001). For the comparative purposes and due to availability of data in this book I specifically focus on the CEE countries that are also part of the EU, thus throughout this book I will not present data for Albania.



The **senior academic staff** (most often full Professors) seem to become the gatekeepers after going through all the stages and overcoming the barriers. They are the group who is often using sexism and sexist stereotypes to explain the situation of other women, often emphasizing that they had it worse. Women on senior positions emphasize that it was more difficult for them than for men due to the additional, gendered obligations as motherhood. Women senior academics who achieved success despite these difficulties now argue that junior and middle career women have the same opportunities as men now, and thus do not need support.

*"I had it much worse. It is easy now to be a mother and be successful. I was able to balance my private and academic life and I would not say it is an obstacle if you don't want it to be an obstacle. Women use it as an excuse, maybe they are just lazy." R7*

Often, they emphasize the hard work they have put into their career and lack of supportive environment and thus:

*"I think, nobody has ever helped me, why would I make it easier for them [junior and middle faculty], they have to work hard, and I will not make this easier for them." R31*

And:

*"They need to learn the hard way, I'm not making it easier for [PhD students], it is easier than it was for me, so I show them how it used to be" R53*

In each of the stages there are visible existent sexism, gender stereotypes and biases towards women. Interestingly, the most aware of the gender inequalities in academia seem to be among junior and middle career women, while senior seem not to notice the inequalities. They seem to believe in the meritocracy as a core of academia, despite having experienced the inequalities throughout their careers. It seems that senior academics internalized the masculine and gendered values. This has been reflected in the stereotypical and sexist comments targeted at the junior and middle faculty. Thus, this draws to the conclusions that having more women at the senior positions is not the end game (Bakker and Jacobs, 2016), while we should strive to change the masculine and gendered culture of academia to make it truly inclusive and hospitable for all.

## To be continued...

The final results including the analysis of research, teaching, administrative and leadership work, as well as propositions on how to create more equal and inclusive HEIs will be published in „Gender and Academic Career Development in Central and Eastern Europe” Routledge

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