

## Conceptualizing academic sustainability

Ezgi Pehlivanli<sup>a</sup> and Hande Eslen-Ziya<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Media and Social Studies, University of Stavanger; Research Centre for Science and Technology Policy Studies, Middle East Technical University; <sup>b</sup>Department of Media and Social Studies, University of Stavanger; Honorary Research Associate, Gender Justice, Health and Human Development, Durban University of Technology

### ABSTRACT

Recently, academia has become an arena of political conflict that results in the corrosion of academic life in general. Restrictions of academic freedom and lack of research autonomy, in addition to standardized success criteria of neoliberal universities, have created an academic reality contributing to hierarchy, competition, anxiety, burn-out, and precariousness. Taking gender studies as a case, we aim to define and conceptualize *academic sustainability* in relation to attacks on the academic freedom and academic well-being of gender scholars.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 October 2023  
Revised 2 November 2023  
Accepted 3 November 2023

### KEYWORDS

Academic sustainability; gender studies; anti-gender mobilization; neo-liberal university; neoliberal university; masculinist restoration

## Introduction

This paper aims to explore the impact of contemporary anti-gender movements (David Paternotte and Mieke Verloo 2021; Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff 2018), and neoliberal university measures (Zeynep Gülru Göker and Aslı Polatdemir 2022; Emily M Colpitts 2022) on academics working on gender research. In doing so we refer to internal (i.e., neoliberal academic work ethic) and external (i.e., anti-gender mobilization) forces that attack academics and create vulnerabilities in contemporary academia. This work introduces the term *academic sustainability* in relation to mentioned threats of an academy in a sustainability crisis (Raewyn Connell 2019). We bring together an understanding of sustainability as maintaining the process of both academic life and research. By coining this term and exploring the possibilities for a sustainable academic life—both in terms of maintenance of free research and well-being of scholars—we hope to contribute to the future endeavours of scientific practice and academic knowledge claims.

In the past 10 years, gender studies programmes and research on the topic of gender have constantly been under external attack (Sally Gimson 2019). The attacks have been legitimized via the so-called anti-gender movement, who view gender studies as a new threat to the traditional family and so-called natural masculinity and femininity (Roman Kuhar and Aleš Zobec 2017). This has changed the dynamics of gender studies research, causing the disruption of research programmes, decline in social interest, and even

**CONTACT** Ezgi Pehlivanli  [ezgi.pehivanli@uis.no](mailto:ezgi.pehivanli@uis.no)  Department of Media and Social Studies, University of Stavanger & Middle East Technical University, Research Centre for Science and Technology Policy Studies, Ankara, Turkey

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

retrogressive mobilization (Andrea Pető 2019) by circulating traditionalist views on women and family, as well as anti-LGBTIQ politics. As for the internal attacks, neoliberal measures of academic success, such as competitive criteria for being tenured, impact-oriented publication policies, and precarity of academic careers, put scholars in a vulnerable position. We argue that anti-gender mobilization coupled with the neoliberal academic policies threaten academic maintenance by strengthening hierarchies and competition, normalizing stress, and increasing precarity (Jill Blackmore 2017; Klara Regnő 2017; Sevil Sümer and Hande Eslen-Ziya 2017), and thus put scholars working in fields related to gender and their focus of research at risk.

## **Attacks and vulnerabilities in academia**

Academia has always had gendered hierarchies in all disciplines. Neoliberal measures such as quantifiable publication standards, the constructed connection between academic performance and achieving a tenured position, and the harsh division between the professional rewards for teaching and research made these barriers even more difficult to cope with for gender academics (Sümer and Eslen-Ziya 2017). Although the positioning of anti-genderism and neoliberal university policies vary among national contexts (Korolczuk and Graff 2018), their locally specific nature simultaneously reflects a similar underlying conservative rhetoric. As gender scholars, we believe that understanding how outside and inside barriers monopolize and transform scientific knowledge, and how this in turn affects us, is crucial.

As we try to explore the impact of these internal and external barriers, we adopt Deniz Kandiyoti's (2013) concept of masculinist restorations that discusses how invisible masculine alliances are enacted when the taken-for-granted patriarchy is called into question. As a result of such masculinist restoration efforts against gender research, today, the institutionalization of gender studies in scientific organizations has become precarious, as in the case of the Central European University where the Department of Gender Studies has been marginalized and forced to move to Vienna, and in some instances gender studies departments have been forced to transform into centres for family research. In the following section we will elaborate on the concept of academic sustainability to systematize our approach.

## **Defining academic sustainability: a conceptualization**

We take *academic sustainability* as a matter of maintenance and welfare in general, consisting of the protection of academic autonomy and ensuring security and stability.

### ***Academic autonomy***

Some governments have been using national and international politics of science to erode academic autonomy, such as the freedom of academics to control their research agenda. (Guy Neave 1988). We consider academic autonomy as a synonym for academic freedom from a feminist perspective, touching the personal, professional, and political lives of many scholars, especially those whose research agenda includes the promotion of equity, freedom, and democracy within and outside academia. Losing such autonomy

leads researchers to pursue research agendas on the basis of their scientific significance for a peer audience; researchers are expected to produce results with respect to certain areas which are predetermined by supranational organizations, such as the funding bodies (Mary Henkel, 2004, 2017: 230). The limitations that affect academics' well-being in maintaining academic autonomy and restricts critical scholarship (de Jonge et al. 2021) might further affect academic practice and research quality.

Gender studies are particularly vulnerable in these circumstances, as their institutionalization in scientific organizations is often precarious and marginalized. This reflects the history of science and academia which is built on a long tradition of dominant patriarchal structures within academia and the exclusion or marginalization of some groups.

Also, women researchers are extremely vulnerable, as social inequalities related to gender and other social categorizations influence who has more opportunities to engage in academic research and international collaboration: age, religion, and ethnicity are dominant dividing lines that intersect academic life. Yet this very intersectionality opens up venues for critical thinking and thus brings forth the potential for autonomous scientific endeavour within academia.

### ***Security and stability***

The second component of our conceptualization is accountability measures as an model of reducing precarity. Higher education rankings are a compelling example of accountability measures because their precise comparisons generate intense competition among scholars being evaluated. Despite the dominant narratives in higher education, recent research shows that women academics consider gender to be at the very root of the struggles related to living up to the criteria of excellence (Rebecca Lund 2015, 2020). These standardized quality criteria mediate a new academic ideal, strengthening hierarchies, competition, and institutional bullying, and promoting and naturalizing stress, anxiety, envy, burn-out, and precariousness (Stephen Petrina, Sandra Mathison and E Wayne Ross 2014). The need for a careful consideration and knowledge of precarious conditions is significant for our understanding of academic sustainability, as it remains important to position oneself as driven by authentic concerns for knowledge and academic work, rather than by strategic or instrumental concerns for competitive advantage.

Sustainability of academic work and life is the overall maintenance and well-being of scholars while pursuing an academic career. How people evaluate their lives, and their overall state of subjective wellness, is the basis of our conceptualization. A growing body of literature (Wendy Nelson Espeland, Michael Sauder and Wendy Espeland 2016; Finnborg S. Steinþórsdóttir, Thomas Brorsen Smidt, Gyða M. Pétursdóttir, Þorgerður Einarsdóttir and Nicky Le Feuvre 2019) explores the intensification of neoliberal values and their effects upon academics' emotions and well-being, such as open discussion of anxiety, depression, alienation, and panic (Espeland, Sauder, and Espeland 2016). We invite readers to pay attention to this literature and refocus attention towards individual experiences where gender scholars' stories are listened to.

As we defined *academic sustainability*, we based our conceptualization to cover two main areas of academic life we see lacking. These are academic autonomy, and security and stability. We argue that the global rise of right-wing mobilizations against gender cannot be explained with references to political changes in general,

in our case a masculinist restoration effort against gender research and scholars. Hence, we formulated these subcategories as new fields to empirically seek manifestations of building power blocks against gender scholarship and to trace various forms of reproductions of hegemonic masculinist values as in gender subtexts (Regine Bendl 2008), such as highlighting the concept of family in the title of research centres in academic institutions. Thereby, by conceptualizing *academic sustainability* with respect to manifestations of masculinist restoration and seeking ways to better understand the current condition of gender scholars, our aim was to open a debate about resisting the manifestations of patriarchal power structures within academia based on intersections of gender, social class, or ethnicity.

### Concluding remarks: why we conceptualize academic sustainability

This article is grounded in our experiences of alienation from what was expected of us, while surviving in a precarious working environment and developing our own feminist epistemic and theoretical commitments. We believe that once *academic sustainability* is achieved, so would the opportunities for collaboration in interdisciplinary questions of feminism, ethnography, and counter-hegemonic knowledge production. We hope *academic sustainability* highlights alternative ways of doing academic work in a sustainable, transforming, and transformative academic community and thus further contributes to the quality of higher education and healthy democracies in the future.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

The work was supported by the Universitet i Stavanger and the Center for Advanced Internet Studies (CAIS).

### Notes on contributors

**Ezgi Pehlivanli** holds a PhD from Middle East Technical University (METU), Department of Sociology. She was a postdoc fellow at Lund University, Department of Gender Studies in 2018. Pehlivanli Kadayifci is currently double affiliated as a postdoc fellow at the University of Stavanger, Department of Media, Culture and Social Sciences and as a research assistant at Middle East Technical University. Her research interests are feminist science and technology studies, gender, body, science discourse, political sociology, discursive politics, and populism.

**Hande Eslen-Ziya** is professor of sociology and director of the Populism, Anti-Gender and Democracy Research Group at the University of Stavanger, and honorary research associate at the Gender Justice, Health and Human Development, Durban University of Technology. She has an established interest in gender and social inequalities, transnational organizations, and social activism. She recently co-edited *Populism and Science in Europe* (2022, Palgrave Macmillan) which provides a systematic and comparative analysis of the intersections of populism and science in Europe, from the perspective of political sociology.

## References

- Bendl, Regine. 2008. "Gender Subtexts: Reproduction of Exclusion in Organizational Discourse." *British Journal of Management* 19: S50–S64.
- Blackmore, Jill. 2017. "Leadership in Higher Education." *Death of the Public University?: Uncertain Futures for Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy.* 3: 90.
- Colpitts, Emily M. 2022. "Not Even Close to Enough: 'Sexual Violence, Intersectionality, and the Neoliberal University.'" *Gender and Education* 34 (2): 151–166.
- Connell, Raewyn. 2019. *The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why It's Time for Radical Change*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- de Jonge, Jan, and F. Huter Femke. 2021. "Does Match Really Matter? The Moderating Role of Resources in the Relation Between Demands, Vigor and Fatigue in Academic Life." *The Journal of Psychology* 155 (6): 548–570.
- Espeland, Wendy Nelson, Michael Sauder, and Wendy Espeland. 2016. *Engines of Anxiety: Academic Rankings, Reputation, and Accountability*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Gimson, Sally. 2019. "Macho Politics Drive Academic Closures: Academics Who Teach Gender Studies are Losing Their Jobs and Their Funding as Populist Leaders Attack 'Gender Ideology.'" *Index on Censorship* 48 (3): 101–104.
- Göker, Zeynep Gülrü, and Aslı Polatdemir. 2022. "The Quest for Gender Equality in Universities at the Crossroads of Neoliberal and Antigender Pressures: The Case of Turkey." *Globalisation, Societies & Education* 1–13.
- Henkel, Mary. 2004. "Current Science Policies and Their Implications for the Formation and Maintenance of Academic Identity." *Higher Education Policy* 17: 167–182.
- Henkel, Mary. 2017. "Gender Equality in Academic Career Progression: A Matter of Time?" *The Changing Role of Women in Higher Education: Academic and Leadership Issues* 195–207.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 2013 January. "Fear and Fury: Women and Post-Revolutionary Violence." *Open Democracy* 10. [www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/fear-and-fury-women-and-post-revolutionary-violence](http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/fear-and-fury-women-and-post-revolutionary-violence)
- Korolczuk, Elżbieta, and Agnieszka Graff. 2018. "Gender as 'Ebola from Brussels': The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43 (4): 797–821.
- Kuhar, Roman, and Aleš Zobec. 2017. "The Anti-Gender Movement in Europe and the Educational Process in Public Schools." *CEPS Journal* 7 (2): 29–46.
- Lund, Darren E. 2015. *Revisiting the Great White North?: Reframing Whiteness, Privilege, and Identity in Education*. Vol. 105. Rotterdam: Springer.
- Lund, Rebecca. 2020. "The Social Organisation of Boasting in the Neoliberal University." *Gender and Education* 32 (4): 466–485.
- Neave, Guy. 1988. "Education and Social Policy: Demise of an Ethic or Change of Values?" *Oxford Review of Education* 14 (3): 273–283.
- Paternotte, David, and Mieke Verloo. 2021. "De-Democratization and the Politics of Knowledge: Unpacking the Cultural Marxism Narrative." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 28 (3): 556–578.
- Pető, Andrea. 2019. "Eastern Europe: Gender Research, Knowledge Production and Institutions." *Handbuch Interdisziplinäre Geschlechterforschung* 1535–1545.
- Petrina, Stephen, Sandra Mathison, and E. Wayne Ross. 2014. "Threat Convergence: The New Academic Work, Bullying, Mobbing and Freedom." *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* 24: 58–69.
- Regnö, Klara. 2017. "Challenges to Feminist Solidarity in the Era of New Public Management." *Being an Early Career Feminist Academic: Global Perspectives, Experiences and Challenges* 169–194.
- Steinþórsdóttir, Finnborg S., Thomas Brorsen Smidt, Gyða M. Pétursdóttir, Þorgerður Einarisdóttir, and Nicky Le Feuvre. 2019. "New Managerialism in the Academy: Gender Bias and Precarity." *Gender, Work, & Organization* 26 (2): 124–139.
- Sümer, Sevil, and Hande Eslen-Ziya. 2017. "New Waves for Old Rights? Women's Mobilization and Bodily Rights in Turkey and Norway." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 24 (1): 23–38.