



**Liisa Husu**

Researcher, Department of Social Psychology, University of Helsinki, Finland

**Gender equality in Finnish academia: Contradictions and interventions<sup>1</sup>**

*Women in Finland have historically had a stronger presence in higher education and academia than their sisters in many other European countries. Despite this and despite steadily rising numbers of highly qualified women, both vertical and horizontal gender segregation persist in Finnish academia. After completing their doctorate, the careers of many women seem to stagnate. The article discusses the contradictions of gender equality in Finnish academia and major public interventions promoting gender equality in research and academia since the early 1980s.*

Finland offers an interesting setting to study women's conditions in academia from a global perspective. In European and Nordic comparisons, Finnish academia shows higher numbers of women in universities and research than most other countries in Western Europe. Furthermore, most of the academic women in Finland aim to combine professional work and parenting. Women currently entering the scientific community, that is women pursuing doctoral studies, are predominantly married or cohabiting, and most of them are mothers (Raehalme 1995). Finnish social support systems, including good quality day care guaranteed by law to all children under school age (since 1996), and long maternity and parental leaves are relatively favourable, though not unproblematic, to the combining of professional work and parenting.

The Finnish tradition of women's inclusion and participation in the public sphere is also an exception from a global perspective. In Finland, the tradition of women's labour force participation, education and political participation is longer than in most other European countries and other Nordic countries (see, for example, Husu & Niemelä 1993). It has been estimated that already in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Finland had more female university students in

---

<sup>1</sup> An early version of this article was presented in the European Commission Conference Women in Science in Brussels, April 1998, and later included as a national report on Finland in the "Women and Science" Communication of the European Commission (1999). The speech was held at the project conference in Warsaw, March 2001.

relation to population than any other European country (Elovainio 1971: 262-273; Korppi-Tommola 1984: 144-148). Among Finnish and European pioneers it is worth to mention Agnes Sjöberg, the first European woman to earn a doctoral degree in veterinary medicine and first European woman in this profession. She studied in Germany and defended her doctoral thesis in University of Leipzig in 1918 (Sjöberg 1965).

In the Nordic context, Finland has had a pioneering position as regards woman in academia. To use the Nordic comparative context is illuminating, because the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – are culturally and socially quite similar: small and modernised Northern welfare states, and globally rated as the most advanced societies when it comes to gender equality. In a Nordic comparison, Finnish women entered higher education earlier and in larger amounts than women in other Nordic countries. As early as in 1908, 21,4 % of all students were women in the University of Helsinki (then the only university in Finland), while an equivalent level was reached in Norway and Denmark over 25 years later (Ståhle 1996).

Two thirds of the world's illiterate population is female. On the other hand, in many industrialised countries half or the majority of university students are nowadays women (see, for example, Stolte-Heiskanen & Fürst-Dilic 1991; Seager 1997: 86-87). From a global perspective, Finland may look like a paradise for educated women: in upper secondary schools there has been a female majority among students since 1940s, and more women than men have matriculated since mid-1950s. The majority of university students has been female since mid-1970s, and since mid-1980s women have earned a majority of the MA level degrees. Currently 4 out of 10 of doctoral degrees are obtained by women. In health-related areas like medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, health care and pharmacy, but also in humanities and education women now gain over half of the doctoral degrees (Havén 1998).

In the whole population, women in the under 55 age group have been better educated than men<sup>2</sup> since 1995, and in the under 40 age group women more often have an academic degree than men (Women and Men in Finland 1998).

Compared to other Nordic countries, in Finland there are more women as teachers and researchers in universities, in professorships as well as lower level posts, and in all disciplinary areas (Ståhle 1996: 98-106). Furthermore, Finland currently has the highest proportion of women among professors (18.4 % in

---

<sup>2</sup> In every second European Union country women under 35 years are already better educated than equivalent men. In European Union countries only in Ireland, Sweden, Portugal and Finland are women better educated than men among the working age (25-64 years) population (figures from 1994), whereas in Austria, Germany, UK, and Netherlands men's educational level is still clearly higher than women's (over 10%). (Havén 1998).

1998) of the fifteen European Union countries (KOTA-database; Osborne 1998). One reason for an unusually rapid increase of women's proportion among professors in only one year (from 14 % in 1997 to 18.4 % in 1998) was that in August 1998, the academic category of associate professor was abolished, and all associate professors were upgraded to professors. There were clearly more women in the associate professor category than among full professors, 22 % in 1996, which means that the reform automatically increased women's proportion in the professoriate. However, the reform did not include upgrading the salary levels of the upgraded associate professors to the full professor level. The total amount of professors has decreased from 1997. In 1998, there were 371 women out of 2011 in the Finnish professoriate, when in 1997 the figure was 376 women out of 2126. The absolute numbers of women in the professoriate have thus not increased at all from 1997 to 1998 (KOTA-database).

Some leading educational sociologists (Kivinen & Rinne 1995: 103) have characterised this development as "Women taking over universities". I would argue that their view is highly exaggerated. The picture of Finland as a paradise of educational gender equality crumbles when looked at more closely. Despite the large increase of women among students and higher degree holders, women continue to be in a minority position (around a third) among university teachers and researchers and are mainly to be found in the lower levels in the hierarchy. The proportion of women among professors has now reached the level of women's proportion among those obtaining their doctoral degrees around twenty years ago. The recent increasing trend to appoint professors by invitation and not through open competition has clearly been more disadvantageous to female academics (Husu 1997, 1999).

The recent Academy of Finland (The National Research Council) report on the advancement of women in academia concluded that in many fields women are currently gaining doctoral degrees in equal numbers to men. According to the report, the crucial time for women's careers seems to be after the doctoral degree, because it is then when their careers start to stagnate (*Women in Academia* 1998). However, many research findings on the Finnish setting (for example, Melkas 1999; Mankkinen 1995; Voutilainen 1996) and the preliminary results of my ongoing qualitative study on experiences of discrimination among Finnish academic women support the notion of cumulative disadvantage that women experience in academia (see Rossiter 1993; Caplan 1994; Schiebinger 1999). The process of exclusion does not start after women obtain their doctorates but accumulates gradually during an academic career (Husu 1998a).

## **Finnish interventions promoting gender equality in academia**

In the remainder of this chapter, major public policy interventions aimed to promote gender equality in Finnish academia are discussed. The discussion is based on my long term engagement as an actor in the field as the National Coordinator of Women's Studies (1981-1996), member of various committees and working groups, and more recently as a full time researcher of academic gender inequality. Thus far, there is a surprising lack of evaluation and research on Finnish equality policies both generally as well as in the field of higher education and research.

Issues around gender inequality in academia already came onto the Finnish science and university policy agenda nearly twenty years ago. However, there have been clear fluctuations during these decades in the weight of the issue in the main stream science and educational policy. Times of high activity and visibility have been followed by times when gender issues have nearly been pushed aside or defined as a problem that is soon solved by the steadily rising numbers of women among students and especially those earning higher degrees.

The key instances promoting gender equality in research and academia have been since early 1980s, on the one hand, the central educational and science policy authorities: the Academy of Finland (the National Research Council), and the Ministry of Education, and on the other hand, the national gender equality authorities, consisting of the Council for Equality between Women and Men and the Equality Ombudsman (see Husu 1998b). The measures applied can be divided into measures monitoring and promoting gender equality in academia, especially the position of female researchers and university teachers, and, on the other hand, into measures promoting Women's Studies and Gender Research.

Starting from early 1980s, the Academy of Finland (the National Research Council) allocated funding for Women's Studies for research projects, national co-ordination, and networking. In 1981, the Academy of Finland and the National Council for Equality between Women and Men created a full-time post of a National Co-ordinator of Women's Studies, that was located in the secretariat of the Council. This post was in the Council for Equality Secretariat (first located in the Prime Minister's Office, later in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health). The Council for Equality, founded in 1972, is a parliamentary advisory committee with a permanent secretariat. Its task is to monitor and promote gender equality in all areas of society. The Council's Subcommittee on Research was founded in 1981. The main tasks of the National Co-ordinator and the Subcommittee on Research are to promote Women's Studies and Gender Research, and to monitor and promote gender equality in academia through conferences, publicity, lobbying, advisory and information services, including a national quarterly newsletter published since 1981.

---

## **National Committees make career obstacles visible**

In 1982, the first national committee was appointed by the Ministry of Education to monitor obstacles in female researchers' careers, with a follow-up working group in 1986 (*Naisten tutkijanuran ...* 1982, 1986). The Committee consisted of high-profile female academics, including the internationally recognised science studies expert Veronica Stolte-Heiskanen, and was chaired by one of the pioneers of Finnish Women's Studies, Elina Haavio-Mannila. In 1982, women's share of the doctorates obtained in 1982 was 16 % and among the professors 7 %. The key conclusions of the Committee were, that in a scientific career "the double burden of women did not seem to be the worst obstacle, but their weaker and unequal position in the scientific community". On the much-debated family issue the Committee concluded that children and family can slow down women's scientific career, but according to empirical studies, they also seemed to have positive influences on both men's and women's scientific productivity. The message was: "if women do want to go for a scientific career, they do not have to choose between family and career".

The 1982 Committee made several proposals for action, part of which have been realised, and part which still remain unsolved issues. Among the proposals which have been more or less realised are the following: women's representation should be increased in scientific decision making bodies and in allocating grants; postgraduate guidance should be developed; Women's Studies should be promoted and included in university curricula; research on women should be funded; costs for child care should be taken into account in grants for study and research abroad; parental leave should be compensated for by an equally long extension of the term in fixed-time teaching and research posts. Several suggestions on improving child care were made as well; the rapid development of the Finnish child care system during the 80s and 90s has clearly improved the possibilities to combine work and family.

A proposal on gendering the higher education and research statistics was made by the 1982 working group as well. Currently, contrary to many other European countries, national statistics on universities include sex as a variable. The Ministry of Education national statistics database on universities, the KOTA-database, is currently also searchable online on internet and includes, from 1988/1989 onwards, sex as one variable for students, degrees, and academic positions.

The most radical 1982 proposal was made on positive discrimination in student and postgraduate recruitment as well as in recruiting into research posts, especially in fields with very few women. Positive discrimination was suggested in its moderate form, only to be applied when a decision was to be made between equally qualified male and female candidates. This proposal did not receive support, not even from academic women themselves. Positive

---

discrimination or quotas in favour of women in appointments have until this day not been used in Finnish universities, although the Equality Act from 1987 would enable such a procedure.

Another issue that remains unresolved is the age issue. The 1982 committee suggested that age should not be used as a criterion in recruitment and fund allocation. Officially age is not used as a recruitment criterion, but unofficially it certainly plays a role, though how extensively is difficult to assess. In the current Finnish science policy, there is a strong stress on supporting young researchers. Whether this goal is incompatible with the goal of recruiting more women into research remains to be seen, knowing that women have traditionally been somewhat older than men in all career stages.

A national monitoring on women's position in academia was conducted again in 1997 by an Academy of Finland working group (*Women in Academia* 1998) referred to earlier. The proportion of women among those obtaining a doctorate had increased to 40 %, and the proportion of women among professors had risen to 14 %. The 1997 working group's key conclusions were that women's advancement seemed to have stagnated on the doctoral level, and that the entry of women into the professoriate had slowed down, even stopped in some fields. The gatekeepers of academia were revealed to be predominantly men – only 13 % of the members in the largest research foundations were women, and among the State Research Council referees and advisers only 17.5 %. However, the measures suggested by the 1997 working group were rather moderate.

### **General gender equality policies and academia**

National gender equality policies have also been influencing gender equality in higher education and academia in many ways. The Council for Equality Activities was mentioned earlier. The Finnish “gender equality machinery” was strengthened in 1987, when the Equality Act aiming to prevent discrimination on the basis of sex and to promote equality between men and women came into force. The function of the Equality Ombudsman was created to supervise observance of the Act. The Equality Act especially mentions training and education as important areas of implementation and states that educational institutions shall ensure that instruction, research and instructional materials promote gender equality.

In 1990, the Equality Ombudsman issued Guidelines on Promoting Gender Equality in Universities. These guidelines were prepared together with the National Co-ordinator of Women's Studies and the Council for Equality

---

Subcommittee for Research, and were later included in the Equality Plan of the Ministry of Education (see Husu 1998b).

The Equality Act made it also possible to complain about discrimination on the basis of sex (including pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood) in recruitment, working conditions or termination of employment. Between January 1991 and May 1997, 33 complaints were made from universities. The person alleging discrimination has to take his or her case to the court to claim for compensation. The court can rule that the employer has to pay compensation (maximum 50,000 FIM). Several cases from universities have proceeded to the court and compensations have been paid in some cases, but the data on these has not yet been analysed systematically.

In 1995, the Equality Act was amended and a quota paragraph was added. The Act now stated that the minimum percentage of both women and men in government committees, advisory boards and other corresponding bodies shall be 40, unless there are special reasons for the contrary. This has also affected the four National Research Councils as well as the Board of the Academy of Finland. Half of the members in these are now women except in the Research Council on Natural Sciences and Technology where 30 per cent of the members are women.

Another amendment in the Equality Act since 1995 concerns equality planning. All employers with a staff of at least 30 shall include measures to further equality between women and men at the workplace in the annual personnel and training plan or the action programme for labour protection. This is relevant for all universities, research institutes and equivalent. However, there are no sanctions in the law in case when this is not done.

### **Increased activism in late 90s**

Women's Studies has developed rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s, but as a new and interdisciplinary field it has chronically suffered from inadequate resources. A national action plan, Women's Studies 2000, including several concrete proposals, was jointly launched in 1995 by the Council for Equality and the National Association of Women's Studies in Finland, SUNS (*Naistutkimus 2000*).

Women's Studies resources were strengthened considerably during 1995-1997, when the Ministry of Education created eight professorships in Women's Studies for five years. After this five year period, the decision on the funding of these lies with the universities. In addition to these chairs, there is only one (fixed term) chair in Women's Studies in the whole country. A five year research professorship in interdisciplinary Women's Studies and Gender

---

Equality Research, the Minna Canth Professorship, was created by the Academy of Finland in 1998, and additional research professorships are under discussion. A Research Programme on Gender, Power and Violence was created by the Academy of Finland in 1999.

Since 1998, the Academy of Finland has encouraged female researchers to apply for funding in the general call for applications for research funding. Among the concrete measures of the Academy of Finland, which facilitate combining research and family are:

- for Academy of Finland research fellows: extension to their term will be granted on the basis of a written request for a period corresponding to the duration of a maternity or parental leave and military or equivalent service;
- for researcher training abroad, grant are higher for researchers with dependent children.

In 1999, the Academy of Finland is setting up a new plan including concrete measures and policies to promote gender equality throughout the Academy research funding and research management. The new plan is expected to be finalised in late 1999.

In universities the situation varies, but in most of them there are:

- equality committees, which usually do not have executive power or ombudsman functions, but more agenda setting, planning and information functions;
- equality plans or equality issues included among other plan, for example Personnel Development Plans.

In addition,

- guidelines on how to prevent sexual harassment have been issued in several universities
- gender equality surveys have been conducted in several universities;
- an Annual Prize on Promotion of Gender Equality (25,000 FIM) has been established in the University of Helsinki in 1996.

Since 1995, the Equality Committees of Universities have organised an annual National Conference, and one example of the cooperation between equality committees of universities was the conference upon which this book is based.

## **Concluding remarks**

It has been said that one serious obstacle for obtaining gender equality in Finnish academia is a widespread myth that claims that gender equality has already been achieved in Finland (see Husu 1994). Academic women are the most critical group in this respect: according to the recent nationwide gender equality barometer (Melkas 1998: 10), dissatisfaction with gender equality in working life increases among women with increasing education, whereas for men, their opinions on this vary with age. Only one quarter of women with university education think that women and men enjoy equal opportunities in working life, compared to one third of women with only basic education and a good fourth of women with secondary education.

No large-scale surveys have been conducted on how women and men assess and perceive gender equality in Finnish academia. Several recent studies (Mankkinen 1995; Voutilainen 1996) suggest, however, that there are clear gender differences in how academic men and women experience their own position within the university and how they perceive gender equality being realised within the university. Women are more dissatisfied and critical, whereas the overwhelming majority of men see the situation rather unproblematic from a gender equality point of view.

Despite the higher numbers of women and the relatively early mass enrolment of women in Finnish higher education and research, it is obvious that the structures and culture of Finnish academia have remained clearly and persistently gendered. The case of Finland indeed illuminates how gendered structures – vertical and horizontal gender segregation, male-led hierarchies – and gendered cultures show surprising persistence over time, regardless of the last decades' interventions, backed as they have been by good intentions on both national and university level. Interestingly and alarmingly, the position of women in academia has not radically improved during the times of rapid growth in female recruitment potential and rapid increase in the size and funding of the R&D sector in the late 1990s. However, there are clear signs that the hard work in the academy that has been done in various fronts to make gender inequalities more visible has borne some fruit: the late 1990s have witnessed an increased engagement and awareness with gender inequalities in academia in Finland, both in the main stream science policy, in the media and in universities.

---

## References

- Caplan, Paula (1993). *Lifting a Ton of Feathers. A Woman's Guide to Surviving in the Academic World*. Toronto – Buffalo – London: University of Toronto Press.
- Elvainio, Päivi (1971). Opiskelijakunnan suuruus ja rakenne Suomen korkeakouluaitoksessa. [The size and structure of the Finnish university student population]. *Sociologia*, 262-273.
- Havén, Heikki (ed.) (1998). *Koulutus Soumessa*. [Education in Finland; Statistics Finland]. Suomen Virallinen Tilasto: Oulutus 1998:1.
- Husu Liisa (1994). Crumbling the myth of gender equality: promotion of women in science and in universities in Finland. (also in German). In Ursula Mättig & Brigitte Mühlenbruch (eds.): *Frauenförderung an Hochschulen in europäischem Vergleich: Dokumentation eines internationalen Workshops im Rahmen des Frauen-Technik-Tages in November 1994 in Köln*, 49-51, Bonn: Universität Bonn, Koordinationsprojekt der Bundeskonferenz der Frauen- und Gleichstellungsbeauftragten an Hochschulen.
- Husu, Liisa (1997). Kutsu käy, mutta kenelle? Professorinimitykset ja sukupuoli vuonna 1996. [Professor appointments and gender in Finland in 1996]. *Naistutkimus – Kvinnoforskning* 10 (3), 33 – 35.
- Husu, Liisa (1998a). Mustan aukon mysteeri. Naiset ja tutkijanura Suomessa 1990-luvulla. [the mystery of the black hole. Women's scientific careers in Finland in the 90s]. *Naistutkimus – Kvinnoforskning* 11 (1), 37– 42.
- Husu, Liisa (1998b). Tasa arvoasiain neuvottelukunta naistutkimuksen asialla. [The promotion of Women's Studies by the Council for Equality]. *Naistutkimus – Kvinnoforskning* 11 (4), 45 – 61.
- Husu, Liisa (1999). Gender Discrimination in the Promised Land of Gender Equality. Academic Women in Finland. Paper presented at the 7th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Tromsø, Norway, June 20-25.
- Husu, Liisa Pirkko Niemelä (1993). Finland. In Leonore Loeb Adler (ed.): *International Handbook of Gender Roles*, 59-76. Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press.
- Kivinen, Osmo & Risto Rinne (1995). Korkeakoulutaioksen kastijako. [The caste division of higher education]. *Janus* 3 (2), 97-116.
- Korppi-Tommola, Aura (1984). Naisten kasvatuksen ja koulutuksen tutkimus. [Research on women's education]. In *Naiskuvista todellisuuteen*, Hämeenlinna: Gaudeamus.
- Kota-database*. Ministry of Education database on higher education.
- Mankkinen, Teija (1995). *Akateemista nuorallatanssia. Sukupuolinen häirintä ja ahdistelu Helsingin yliopistossa*. [Sexual harassment in the University of Helsinki]. Helsinki: Yliopistopaino.
-

- Melkas, Tuula (1999). *The Gender Barometer 1998. Equality between Men and Women in Finland*. Helsinki: Statistics Finland and Council for Equality. Statistics Finland, Gender Statistic, Living Conditions 1999: 1.
- Naisten tutkijanuran ongelmat ja esteet* (1982). Komiteanietinö 1982: 33. [The problems and obstacles on women's scientific career. Report of a committee, Ministry of Education].
- Naistutkimus 2000* (1996). Naistutkimuksen valtakunnallinen kehittämissuunnitelma. Suomen Naistutkimuksen Seura ja Tasa-arvoasiain neuvottelukunta. Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö, Naistutkimusraportteja 2. [Women's Studies 2000. National Action Plan for Women's Studies by the National Association for Women's Studies and the Council for Equality].
- Osborne, Mary (1998). Unpublished statistical data presented in the EU Women and Science conference in Brussels, 28 and 29 April.
- Raehalme, Outi (1995). Lahjakas nainen tohtoriopiskelijana. [The gifted woman as a doctoral student]. *Acta Universitatis Tamperensis A*: 509.
- Rossiter, Margaret (1993). The (Matthew) Matilda Effect of Science. *Social Studies of Science* 23, 325-41.
- Schiebinger, Lona (1999). *Has Feminism Changed Science?* Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press.
- Seager, Joni (1997). *The State of Women in the World Atlas*. New edition. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Sjöberg, Anges Hildegard (1965). *Euroopan ensimmäinen naiseläinkääkäri*. [Europe's first woman veterinary surgeon]. Vaasa: Vaasa Oy:n kirjapaino.
- Stolte-Heiskanen, Veroncia & Ruza Fürst-Dilic (eds.) (1991). *Women in Science – Token Women or Gender Equality*. Oxford: Berg.
- Stähle, Bertel (1996). Universiteten och forskarna: från stagnation till förnyelse. [University and researchers: from stagnation to transformation]. *NORD* 1996: 39.
- Veikkola, Eeva-Sisko & Tarja Palmu (eds.) (1995). *Women and Men in Finland*. Helsinki: Statistics Finland: Living Conditions 1995: 1.
- Voutilainen, Jarkko (1996). Naisten akateemiseen uraan vaikuttavista tekijöistä Turun yliopistossa. [On factors affecting women's academic careers in the University of Turku]. *Turun yliopiston hallintoviraston julkaisuja* 1.
- Women in Academia* (1998). Report of the working group appointed by the Academy of Finland. Helsinki: Publications of the Academy of Finland 3.
- Women and science* (1999). Mobilising women to enrich European research. Brussels: Commission of the European Communities, Communication from the Commission, Com (1999) 76.