Gender equality as a matter of care for the "caring university"

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Abstract:
In this text, the author explores the possibilities of the ethical transformation of the university's academic environment in favor of gender equality. She draws on the feminist ethics of care, in particular the concept of democratic care practice and the caring institution, which enable the implementation of gender equality policy at the university to be understood as a democratic practice of caring for the university and its community.

Keywords: gender equality, university, care ethics, caring institution

Introduction

Gender equality is gradually becoming an accepted part of university policy in liberal democracies, but there is still considerable discussion over how this policy is implemented and whether it has the chance to achieve the goals it declares - justice, equality, and an ethical environment - in its present form. On the one hand, individual universities exist and operate within local contexts which are historically and culturally conditioned. The role of formalism and instrumentalism in the implementation of gender equality principles and policies are clearly apparent, especially in environments that approach gender equality as either culturally foreign or as a resolved issue, an understanding which is typical of the academic environment in post-communist and post-socialist countries. However, if gender equality policy is implemented only instrumentally as a formal condition for ensuring continued access to economic resources[1] without a deeper appreciation of its value and the fundamental impact which it can have on improving the work and lives of the specific people who comprise the university and academia in general, it cannot deliver the desired result. Also relevant in this context are the global factors that are influencing the implementation of gender equality policies in universities, such as the prevalence of neoliberalist ideologies in the field of education and research throughout the world. All of these factors can have a specific effect on determining the implementation of gender equality policy. One consequence of this, and the synergistic effect which it often exerts, is that the needs of individuals and groups of academics in gender equality issues are overlooked, with the result that gender-based inequalities can be ignored and become more deeply entrenched.

The reductive perception of the university as an institution through only some of its aspects and dimensions, especially economic and organizational ones, can be identified as one factor which complicates the shift toward gender equality in the university environment. A consequence of this reductionism is the strengthening of the managerial approach in university governance, a trait which is associated with the tendency to apply the economic principles of management from the fields of industry, trade, and banking to the academic environment and the university. The subsequent overreliance on quantification, commodification and marketisation, not only in terms of education and research but across all of the university's activities, has an adverse impact on the internal environment of the academic community through, among others, increasing competition among academic staff and reduced levels of solidarity, cooperation and collective responsibility (Višňovský 2014: 44).

The university is not just an institution; it is, by the same measure, a community.[2] Although the academic community of the university is heterogeneous, its members are connected through their shared activities - teaching, learning, and conducting research. Academic staff have common interests in research, and also through their profession of scholar and teacher. Equally important are the links which staff and alumni forge with a particular university. However, the university community is not kept together exclusively through its organizational structure and the administrative order set out in its set of written legislative and ethical rules. The life of the university community is also conditioned by unwritten rules, informal social relations, declared values which can be either implicitly or explicitly expressed, and a wide range of beliefs, attitudes, and meanings. In order to transform the practices, activities, and results of a university, it is necessary to transform its rules and organizational settings. However, without an effective understanding and acceptance of the values which are to be protected and reproduced by those principles, rules and organizational structure, no effective transformation of the environment can succeed. The acceptance of values within an institution such as the university is formed through social and political practices and in the actions and behavior of individuals and groups which constitute the university community. A willingness to participate in these practices requires solidarity and the cooperation of the whole community, a condition which can be affected either by the mutual trust and recognition of their scope and form, but also by the absence of trust and recognition between the individual actors in the specific practice. A deficit of trust and recognition within the community can lead to a weakening of its social cohesion and, ultimately, to a reduction in its capacity to carry out an authentic ethical (value-based) transformation of the university as a community as well as an institution.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that caring for a university as an institution requires caring for the human community which exists within that institution. To this end, the paper argues that the university must be a caring institution, emphasizing that the most effective means of caring for a university as a community lies in caring for a democratic university. This approach means that the community which constitutes the university must address the issue of gender equality in the academic environment. In the first part of the text, the concepts of the caring institution and caring practices are introduced within the contemporary context of the feminist ethics of care. This concept is applied to the university as an educational and research institution, presenting the university as a specific institution with specific goals and a specific position within society. The second part of the text examines how gender equality is both part of and also a prerequisite for shaping the university as a democratic community based on the values of justice and equality, with the mission of developing the creative potential of its members for the benefit of its broader socio-cultural environment and human community.

The caring institution from the perspective of the feminist ethics of care

Contemporary care ethics offers an alternative approach to morality and politics through its insistence that care is a fundamental human activity which is carried out not only in the private sphere and in individual and intimate relationships but also in the public sphere, primarily in our public lives as members of society, in social practices, and in social institutions of various types and purposes. This shift in emphasis from private and individual care ethics to public care ethics (Kittay 1999, Noddings 2002a) and socialized care ethics (Hankivsky 2004, Hamington and Miller 2006) first appeared in the writings of Sara Ruddick (1980) in the 1980s, in which she introduced the concept of social practice into feminist thinking. The ethics of care as a full-fledged political and moral theory of care which was formulated by, among others, Tronto (1993, 2010, 2013), Sevenhuijsen (1998), and Engster (2007), shows that the

institutional approach to care is not only possible but is also highly desirable. Discussions on the ethics of care have focused on the possibility of an institutional approach and the application of the concept of care to institutions (Urban 2020). Petr Urban (2020) argues that institutions offer a distinct perspective on the ethics of care, which takes a broader definition of caring as a social practice as its starting point. This approach views caring as a social responsibility that must be realized through various social and political institutions (Urban 2020: 301). Urban clarifies that an "institutional approach" in care ethics provides the means of challenging the current institutional arrangements of caring with respect to the idea that access to care-giving and care-receiving should be relatively equally distributed and that the responsibility and actual work of caring should not fall disproportionally on disadvantaged sections of society (Urban 2020: 301). This also allows the assumption that care, and care practices can be provided by different institutions, not only those dedicated to caring purposes, and also that fair care based on relative equality is a desirable goal.

The first assumption is acceptable if we examine the definition of care offered by Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto (1990), who understand care as "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ´world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Fisher – Tronto 1990: 41; Tronto 1993: 103). They also elaborate further on the concept of integrity in the practice of care by dividing care into four phases : 1) *caring about* - involving the identification and recognition of the need for care; 2) *taking care of* – which moves from the recognition of the need for care to the acceptance of responsibility for meeting and fulfilling the identified need for care; 3) *care giving* - representing the direct activities of care giving; and finally 4) *care-receiving* - a phase consisting of responsiveness, which allows for feedback on care giving (Tronto 1993: 105-8). In *Caring Democracy* (2013) Tronto added a fifth phase of care - *caring with*, which corresponds to the values or moral qualities of plurality, communication, trust, recognition, and solidarity. This fifth phase refers to the repeated provision of the caring process over time in which habits and patterns of caring are formed and the moral qualities of trust and solidarity are developed. The conditions for the growth of trust are created by the reliability of care practices performed by others. If people can expect their needs to be met, both by themselves and also by other people, their trust in others increases and they can perceive solidarity as a universal value which defines their relationships with others. This phase is characteristic of a democratic form of care, i.e., care that leads to an increase in equality. Tronto generalizes that democratic caring is the best form of caring because it ensures the highest levels of care. She argues that any attempt to understand care as an alternative approach to morality requires that it be understood within the context of democratic life. Only democratic institutions are capable of guaranteeing the kind of "expressive-collaborative" practices that Margaret Walker deemed necessary to ensure the appropriate allocation of responsibility in a society, arguing further that the "caring with" phase is only possible in democratic societies and that caring forms of democratic life result in stronger democracies (Tronto 2013: 155). Tronto goes on to argue that democracy is the best form of political regime because it is the kind of political arrangement that best permits humans to care for one another, for other animals and objects in the world, and for the world itself (Tronto 2013: 156). Tronto also raised the question of whether institutions themselves can care. In order to consider an institution in the public sphere, including an educational or research institution, as a caring institution, three elements must be present in its practice and structure: firstly, a clear account of power in the care relationship and, thus a recognition of the need or politics of care at every level; secondly, a way for care to remain particularistic and pluralistic; and thirdly, clearly defined and accepted purposes for care (Tronto 2010: 2013).

If we take Fisher and Tronto's broadly defined understanding of care as a starting point, almost every act that we perform can be understood as care. Education and research are also understandable as a form of care both for us and for our world. As institutions providing the highest education and the highest quality research in our society, implementing scientific knowledge and training the most qualified professionals in various fields of life, universities can be seen from the perspective of care ethics as one means of taking care of us and our environment, our world, so that we can live happy and productive lives within it. Universities are tasked with creating and realizing the best (i.e., the truest, most adequate, most useful) understanding of ourselves and our world. A comprehensive understanding of ourselves and the environment in which we live is a prerequisite for coping with our ever-changing and highly complex environment. At the same time, there is a need to educate those who can continue to create and share such knowledge and understanding in the future. From a care ethics perspective, universities should therefore primarily serve the good life by exploring and understanding its conditions, causes, influencing factors, mechanisms, creation, reproduction, threats, and potential, and pass on all of this knowledge, experience, and skills to future generations. Research and education are thus a concern for all of us, and access to it should be available to all. The approach to creating the best understanding and education should therefore be democratically (inclusively) supported and perceived as an opportunity to maximize the potential of caring practices for us and our environment, to achieve excellence, to utilize the approach to care better together with others.

Within the ethics of care, detailed analyzes of the educational process and considerations concerning the structural conditions of educational practices and educational policies have been developed (Noddings 1984, 2002a, 2002b; Held 2015; Tronto 2013). According to Nel Noddings, the most important task for human development is to formulate effective methods for both providing and receiving care (Noddings 2002b). Noddings criticizes contemporary liberal education and its reliance on a fixed set of traditional disciplines, arguing that an increased focus on human care should be seen as a morally defensible mission for 21st century education, with the main educational goal to be encouraging the growth of competent, caring, loving and loveable people (Noddings 2002b: 94). According to Noddings: "All children, all students should be engaged in general education that guides them in caring for the self, for intimate others, for global others, for animals, for plants, animals, the environment, for objects and instruments, and for ideas" (Noddings 2002b: 94–99).

Joan Tronto (2013) criticizes the encroachment of economism and neoliberalism in educational policies and institutional practices and rejects the idea that production and economic life are the most important political and human interests. She points out that politics often ignores care, pushing the concept to the margins despite the dominant role which care plays in our personal and private lives. Both Noddings and Tronto are convinced that a transformation of values is necessary in modern society which places care at the center of not only our personal lives, but also our social and public lives. However, the transformation of educational practice cannot be brought about without changes in educational policies nor without corresponding changes in the political agendas of democratic societies.

A number of authors have analyzed university settings using an ethics of care perspective (McBee 2007; Bozalek et al. 2014; Bergland 2018; Lu 2018). Noddings' work again offers a unique inspiration that aims to change the central issue of the university as we know it today. She suggests that the main aim of education should be a unity of purpose: the need to produce better adults. She defines a morally better adult as one who offers help where it is needed, who avoids the deliberate or careless infliction of harm and suffering, who has the capacity to use critical thinking and reflection on both personal and public affairs, and who is committed to using that capacity for moral purposes (Noddings 2015: 70).

Similarly, Victoria V. Verdera (2019) points out that our current universities are burdened by the need to meet quantifiable, objective indicators with the potential risk that we lose sight of what is truly important. At the same time, universities are called upon to build organizational cultures that are tolerant, open, and diverse and to adapt their internal narratives and attitudes in order to become more inclusive for people with various cultural or individual differences. Unfair discrimination or less favorable treatment should not be considered acceptable on the grounds of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, or disability. According to Verdera, universities can act as models for the creation of inclusive and safe environments, reporting discrimination or even harassment, and playing an active role in allocating time and support to attend to people's needs (Verdera 2019: 90-92).

Verdera believes that the problem lies in the institutional denial of the different realities of care work and care relations at universities, arguing that this leads to highly gendered and unsustainable outcomes that must be overcome (Verdera 2019: 94). She also argues that the link between caring responsibilities and women's work also means that care elements of professional teaching practices are often unrecognized and under-valued. She refers to Warrin and Gannerud (2014) who argued that this is especially pronounced in pedagogic work with older students in the later age phases of educational systems, where the emotional and bodily aspects of teaching are separated and dismissed from the processes of teaching and learning. A study by M. M. Pereira (2021) which analyzes gender inequalities in academia during the COVID-19 pandemic draws attention to the invisibility of certain forms of academic work, in particular of academic care. She clarifies that if we explain pandemic gender inequalities in academia as a consequence of asymmetries in private or personal labor, which are external to academia, we neglect the many gender inequalities that result from asymmetries in professional labor, which are internal or, some might argue, intrinsic to academia. One example of COVID-19 gender inequality internal to academia is the tendency to assign the material and emotional labor of caring for students and colleagues during the pandemic to women (Pereira 2021: 503). She notes that this unequal distribution of academic care based on gender (and race) is, of course, not limited only to the specific context of the pandemic; it has long been identified as a crucial feature of academic workloads and hierarchies and as a direct obstacle to increasing equality in academia. However, if the pandemic has both deepened and revealed the scale of this invisibility of the work of care in the academic environment, then the experiences of these invisible forms of academic work must, therefore, receive much more attention within discussions of academic labor, either within the pandemic or in a wider context.

Verdera (2019) believes that any change in beliefs and behaviors that can reorganize the times, spaces, and rules regarding what constitutes the university, professionalism, citizenship, womanhood (femininity) and manhood (masculinity) require more than a mere appeal to universities that they enact policies of co-responsibility and work/family balance. Instead, the university itself must take the initiative in assessing its own curricula, the conditions for faculty and staff career development, procurement policies, lines of funding, and many other factors. However, the question remains of how the perspective of care ethics and the vocabulary of care can be applied to universities that strive to meet neoliberal expectations and principles.

Care for gender equality in the context of neoliberal university and academic capitalism
According to Ľ. Kobová (2014), the term *academic capitalism* has been an apt characterization of higher education, science, and research in Slovakia and in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe since the 1990s. Academic capitalism and the conception of universities as complex economic and political institutions form part of the neoliberalist understanding of society (Kobová 2014: 84). Under neoliberalism, according to Apple (2001), choice-making is placed at the center of democratic freedom even in situations in which people do not have the equal opportunity to make choices. Bay-Cheng, Livingston, and Fava (2011: 1170) have linked

this view with the concept of meritocracy: the endorsement of individuals' rights to seek out and seize opportunities for their own personal gratification is coupled with the expectation that they will accept full responsibility in the case of failure. Within meritocratic, neoliberal logic, there are rich rewards for excellence and natural consequences for inadequacy; put briefly, you get what you deserve. Joan Tronto (2013) suggests that neoliberalism refers to an economic system in which government expenditures are limited, in which the market is viewed as the preferred method for the allocation of all social resources, the protection of private property is taken to be the first principle of government, and social programs are limited to the provision of a "safety net". This type of economic system is supported by a political form of limited liberal democracy and an ideology of limited government involvement (Tronto 2013: 37).

This system incorporates all the essential subsystems of academia: legislation, management, funding and the evaluation of processes and results. It is not the "failure" to meet these requirements which distorts academic life fact, it is these very qualities themselves. Their basic features are: 1. Marketization - the tendency to introduce market principles into all areas of academic life governance (administration) and the evaluation of its importance, thereby resulting in the absolutization of competition at the expense of cooperation; also relevant here is the commodification of academic education and research, and the transformation of students into "clients" and "consumers" of university "services", with the concomitant creation of absurd "league rankings" of universities and faculties, etc.; 2. corporatization - the tendency to shape universities and academic life along the lines of corporations as "education / knowledge factories"; 3. Managerialism - the tendency to incorporate principles of management from other areas (such as industry, trade, and banking) into universities and academic life; 4. economism - the tendency to prioritize the application of economic and financial principles to the management and evaluation of universities and academic life; 5. bureaucratism - the tendency to introduce administrative principles into the administration of universities and to manage them as an "office" or as a state institution dependent on officials, or to transform the work of academics in a bureaucratic manner by introducing a confusing number of standards, regulations, or orders (Višňovský 2014: 38-39).

Viviana Meschitti (2020) points out that the academic world has undergone dramatic changes in the last twenty years, listing the following aspects as the most significant: an increasing entrepreneurial drive, a market-orientation in relation to attracting students; managerialism and increased demands in terms of accountability; a benchmarking culture, and the consequent pressure on academics to perform (in terms of publications and grants) in order to improve the position in university rankings. These trends can contribute to the creation of new professional profiles and the opening of new career pathways both within academia and without, but they nevertheless come at a time of falling public funding and fiercer competition for resources, and a limited availability of permanent academic positions (Meschitti 2020). Meschitti refers to Slaughter and Rhodes (2004) who note that this process of academic capitalism forces universities to become increasingly integrated into the knowledge-based economy, to side-line their single core mission (education) and to place greater value on activities which can generate income for the university. As a result, current universities are becoming increasingly characterized by neo-liberal discourses in which results are prioritized over processes, numbers over experiences, procedures over ideas, and productivity over creativity (Meschitti 2020:1).

At the same time, neo-liberal discourse is shaping the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, feeding a vicious cycle where women's contributions are disregarded and denied a voice, and relegating women to unrewarding and invisible activities (Meschitti 2020: 3-5). Meschitti (2020) argues that two interrelated issues are at play here: firstly, the demand for accountability means that universities devote more time to administration and service provision; these activities are undervalued and under-rewarded and are thus often delegated to women.

Also, the practice of teaching, in which women tend to be more heavily involved, is not as highly valued as research activities, a perception which itself perpetuates gender inequality. Secondly, there is a more general problem related to the definition of "excellence", a term which Meschitti also sees as gendered: women are less likely to be considered as excellent without any apparent reason (Fassa and Kradolfer 2013). Academic excellence is said to be based on performance; however, the way in which performance is defined privileges specific types of outputs and hinders equality (Teelken and Deem 2013).

A study by Riegraf and Weber (2017) shows that management by performance disadvantages female academics by favoring male patronage, but also notes that gender equality can be introduced through the instruments of the new governance as a core principle of excellence criteria. On the basis of two case studies of German universities, their research shows that the nexus between 'excellence' competition and masculine culture is eroding, partly due to new 'quasi'-market mechanisms being combined with gender equality policies. Their findings shed light on new gendered work patterns and the inequalities of contemporary academia. Academia is gradually opening up to "excellent" high-performing women, but other women remain disadvantaged (Riegraf, Weber 2017: 92–112).

Ferree and Zippel (2015) argue that universities today are being reshaped not only by the pressures of neoliberalism but also by the globalizing aspirations of classic political liberalism and the continuing critique of its gendered and racialized exclusions. As multiple discourses are forming and determining processes and establishing new regimes in universities, there is a clear need to pay careful attention to the similarities and differences in the paths which universities are taking in order to gain a fuller understanding of academic capitalism in general.

Ferree and Zippel understand higher education as an institution that has always been shaped organizationally by debate over its meaning and purposes. Universities are enormously complex organizations which produce and reproduce knowledge as a form of power, and as, a result, they serve as important sites for struggle (Ferree, Zippel 2015). Ferree and Zippel examine how gender equality measures are being introduced into university governance systems by looking at two powerful and contested claims for inclusivity that intersect with liberal and neoliberal discourses: the Anglo-American "diversity management" model being globalized in the corporate sector and the "gender/diversity mainstreaming" approach the UN and EU have institutionalized into the state sector. They argue that the relevance and attractiveness of these models vary across different kinds of higher education systems, but in general both systems offer only imperfect approaches to academia. The research university has an institutionally distinct role in knowledge production and transfer and is not merely a state agency or a business operation, even when it is regulated and reformed as if it were. Ferree and Zippel conclude their study by asking how these corporate and state models for advancing equality shape and are shaped by specific discourses of merit in higher education, highlighting the fact thar accountability and excellence are terms whose meritocratic meaning is particularly contested since they connect gender equality differently to the systems of value that prioritize liberalism (individualism, modernity, democracy, humanism) and neoliberalism (efficiency, productivity, managerialism, scientific–technological control). This attention to the specific ways in which liberalism, neoliberalism, and feminism become actual reform values and practices will be crucial for determining what gender equality advocates have accomplished, what new forms of intersectional conflict are emerging, and what roles universities will play in the new regimes of stratification currently being formed. They refer to Fotaki (2013: 1271), who note that universities differ from both state bureaucracies or private businesses in that they are important sites where knowledge is defined and reproduced and also spaces in which the meanings of the symbolic order, including knowledge systems, are contested. Academia is a uniquely self-reflexive and socially powerful site of contestation over the meanings and values of a society's institutions and struggles over what kind of knowledge matters are played out

openly and extensively within its precincts. Ferree and Zippel (2015) suggest that it may be most useful reflect on the different perspectives which liberal, neoliberal, and feminist paths can bring to the process of gender transformation (Ferree, Zippel 2015: 578).

Conclusion

The neoliberal university demands high productivity in compressed time frames, and the stresses of academic life are continuously increasing (Mountz et al. 2015). In such an environment, how it is then possible to educate, to teach, to learn, to communicate, to study, to examine, to research, to write, to read, to review, to criticize, or to think with care? Tronto argues that the complexity of care requires a political space within which to make decisions aimed at supporting caring relations and caring practices of any kind. She continues:

> At the heart of change toward democratic caring is this critical fact: care is about relationships. And relationships require, more than anything else, two things: sufficient time and proximity. Among the most important considerations in rethinking society from a caring perspective, then, is creating time and space for care.
>
> <div align="right">(Tronto 2013: 166)</div>

Indeed, the narrowing timeframes in which academics are expected to do more and more are an everyday feature of academic life. At the same time, while much of this academic work requires real time and intellectual, emotional, and physical energy, the results are often not visible or are difficult to quantify; and if they cannot be measured, they cannot be converted into financial income. If the academic work of care is deprived of the type of resources, either material or symbolical and structural, which would create and ensure the conditions for its implementation, then the inevitable consequence will be a deficit in all of those activities that are included in academic work. A society that focuses exclusively on economic production and efficiency is not able to create the conditions for the freedom and equality of all its members. Similarly, an institution that focuses exclusively on efficiency and performance will not consider, and in fact may actively ignore, some of its members, by disregarding their perspectives, their experiences, and their needs. If we strive to transform the academic environment into an ethical and just one, one that respects creative freedom, equality, and human dignity, it requires a careful approach and constant careful practice, especially on the part of all those who make up the university and its community. If we want to offer the best possible care, then we must care democratically, inclusively, and pluralistically, with a critical understanding of the dynamics of power in the particular network of relations that make up the community which we care about and for which we have taken responsibility. This means that everyone is responsible for the scope and quality of gender equality; all members of the community should participate in the processes of allocating specific responsibilities in democratic care. Only in this way is it possible to know, acquire, understand, express, and consider the specific needs, experiences, knowledge, and ideas of everyone in all their diversity in the creation of political strategies of the university (and academic communities). Only in this way will the life of the university be the result of an expressive-collaborative practice that creates a common good based on an understanding of the lives and practices of the academic community and its members.

Notes:

1. Since 2022, gender equality policy, also expressed through the adoption of the GEP, has become a prerequisite for applying for funding from the Horizon Europe Structural Fund. Access October 11, 2021.

https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/strategy_on_research_and_innovation/documents/ec_rtd_gender-equality-factsheet.pdf
2. A university is an institution of higher (or tertiary) education and research which awards academic degrees in several. The word *university* is derived from the Latin *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, which roughly means "community of teachers and scholars". For more on the traditional idea of the university, see: Višňovský, E. 2014. Idea kreatívnej univerzity: prečo univerzita nie je fabrika, biznis ani úrad? In Višňovský, E. (ed.) *Univerzita, spoločnosť, filozofia: realita versus hodnoty, 32 – 48.* Bratislava: IRIS.

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