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SENIOR FEMALE SCHOLARS IN SERBIA BETWEEN STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION AND EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES**

In this paper, the position of senior female scholars in Serbia is examined. Our goal is to provide an overview of the challenges and differences female scholars are facing on the one hand, while on the other we examine the framework regulating their labour and the possibilities for its improvements in the direction of providing gender neutrality. The analysis is situated in the academic field of studies of higher education (HE) combined with higher education policies and research & development policies analysis. Firstly, the overview of the problem of women's access to the academic sector has been presented from a historical perspective and perspective of existing research approaches to the problem. Afterwards, we examine the challenges women are facing within the ongoing globalisation trends, the strategic acting from a side of international organisations on the global and European levels, and the local reflection of these developments. Finally, we are proposing a novel approach to the research of the problem of the position of senior female researchers based on the combination of autoethnography and life-cycle studies with empowering policy measures.

Keywords: *female senior researchers, approaches, research policies, systemic empowerment, life narrative*

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1. Introduction

The engagement in the research sector has probably been one of the most challenging and demanding professions for women, yet not many detailed insights into their position and struggles to successfully cope with the rising demands coming from the region we have seen published. The academic profession as such is facing numerous transformations in the postcapitalist era of precarity and rising neo-conservatism, therefore a need to better understand and support this group of professionals, particularly in the phase of a life cycle in which the challenge of ageing comes along, thus seems even more significant.

Our focus here is on women scholars in general, coming from all disciplines, even though from time and time the difference between science, technology, engineering, and mathematics - STEM and social sciences and humanities - SSH streams will be pointed to. Instead of placing the focus on excluding mechanisms as previously was the practice of researchers, our focus is on comprehending the system of support and the possibilities for its improvement by learning from historical, comparative and international contexts. We are interested in setting the basis for well-grounded in-depth research based on understanding the life trajectories of concrete important figures in Serbia retrospectively. Since retiring and coming to age is the final phase of life bearing the rising vulnerability, we are curious to find out how this problem is addressed in higher education and related policies on national and international level. Our task in this paper will be to set out the state of the art about the topic, but also to prepare the conceptual and methodological basis which will serve as a framework for later fieldwork surveys.

The switch of focus on well-being rather than on mere survival is one of the directions related to women in later career stages of importance for our approach, especially because a model of a satisfying life course is more often defined by the absence of a problem than it is observed through the shared values of what it does contain. One of the solutions to this is to rely on the newly emerging concept of resilience or to develop an index of what supportive and empowering academic surroundings in late career phases of women in research should entail, and then to counterpose it to the given conditions with the aim to gasp the direction for the future improvements.

2. General overview of the contemporary challenges senior female researchers face

The history of the position of women in HE is an uneasy and delicate topic since women's struggle to get equal rights to access the highest levels of education was not an easy one while for a long time, their intellectual and scientific capacities were

neglected. Today, society did not completely stop reproducing mechanisms of gender inequality within the academic setting according to which women are understood as inferior, less capable and irrelevant, particularly the older ones.

The general improvements of the legislative mechanisms regarding the position of women in the research sector in recent years are the result of the two centuries of struggles of the feminist movement for equality, but also of the massive commitment of international agencies and organisations to empower their position. Numerous initiatives took part in the last two decades which have made a notable impact on HE and research and innovation (R&I) policies on a global level. These targeted initiatives became an integral part of numerous smaller actions targeting women in the field of R&I. Among the main stakeholders which should be here mentioned are the United Nations, UNESCO and the EU, since these international instances might be used as an example and model of how the gender balancing mechanisms operate on the international and cross-cultural level.

The international initiatives are mainly focused on STEM areas and often when the term “scientific” is mentioned and pointed to, it does not include nor relate to SSH (social sciences and humanities) disciplines, which is the fact that should be taken into account.¹ Among the initiatives of the United Nations (UN) most important to mention is that within *the Agenda 2030*, 11th February has been established as the International Day of Women and Girls in Science while gender equality was promoted as a core value for the UN. In the General Assembly, the importance of full access of women and girls to science, technology and innovation has been highlighted and the mechanisms for following the situation in practice have been established. As a specialised agency, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) prioritised gender equality and developed mechanisms for improving the representation of women in HE and research. In the case of UNESCO, gender equality has been linked to Sustainable Development Goals and two reports were prepared on how global universities are performing regarding the commitment to gender equality and their compliance with the following policy instruments. Based on these reports, it has been observed how universities are performing and what activities they are undertaking in their teaching, research, engagement and management areas to promote gender equality. The conclu-

¹ The practice to look at the two disciplinary blocks as separated became the dominant one and has two negative consequences for the general improvement of women’s position in sciences. On the first level, it gives an incomplete and wrong picture of women’s engagement in sciences, since for a while SSH area was the one where female researchers were more numerous and dominating. On the other hand, by underestimating the value and importance of SSH in comparison to STEM areas, policy mechanisms degrade and marginalise researchers and academics worked in the SSH area. This in consequence has double bad side effect since female scholars in SSH which are numerous are less valued, while their work in comparison to popular STEM areas becomes degraded and less financially and otherwise supported.

sion was that sometimes formal equality masks the actual inequality of opportunities for men and women, but also that regarding gender equality, the institutional culture of HE is slow to change (UNESCO 2020).

Of the highest relevance for the Serbian context is the effort made by the European Union towards improving gender equality within the other supranational HE reforms and policy initiatives, since Serbia is formally an integral part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Research Area (ERA). The promotion of women's participation in science on the European level began in 1998 and gender equality also has been included in the legislative documents of the highest level, such as *the Treaty of the European Community* under the Articles 2 and 3. The conclusion was that the problem or underrepresentation of women in sciences is persistent, therefore it should be prioritised in all policy areas (Dewandre, 2002: 278). In 1999, the European Commission established a plan for women in science and recognized two types of actions of gender mainstreaming as particularly important: 1) increasing women's participation in panels and assemblies, and 2) producing statistics which will help the monitoring the gender balance. At this point, gender equality became an integral part of the political agenda surrounding the ERA (id., 279). Many other consequent mechanisms were developed along with the EU's longstanding commitment to gender equality.

For example, the funding and grant application system of the European Commission embedded the requirements related to gender equality in R&I. In the funding schemes, Gender Equality Plans (GEMs) were introduced and integration of gender dimension into research and innovation content became mandatory. The EU terminology related to gender equality recognized two important concepts such as gender balance between women and men in research teams and gender dimension referring to considering the possible differences between men and women in the R&I content of the projects. Furthermore, there is a specific funding pillar for research equality under the Work Programme 2021-2022 "Widening participation and strengthening the ERA" within which two calls were launched in 2021, one of which is related to building a centre of excellence for gender equality, and another one to related to the policy coordination scheme to advance the implementation of gender equality and inclusiveness objectives within the EU Member States and associated countries.

However, despite these and many other initiatives and mechanisms introduced to tackle the problem of gender disparity developed by the international agencies, it does not seem to be adequately noticed that ageing female researchers might face different problems at different life and career stages. The numerous disadvantages the position of women entails related to the complicity of combining private and professional lives tend to accumulate and obstruct professional advancement which therefore

tends to flow slower and women tend to never reach the highest positions and productivity outcomes in amounts men do (Bogdanović 2006: 329; Ignjatović 2006: 140; Dewandre: 278). Therefore, the importance and significance of the collection of data on how the career trajectories of female scientists in the final stage of their careers and after retirement might help make the initial classification of the contemporary forms of career paths and map the challenges this specific group was facing. Retrospective over-looks might additionally be helpful for comparison between the historical periods and different political regimes, which also might help drafting the prospect for support and empowerment measures. It is important to place this research within the existing body of relevant knowledge, therefore in the following section, the conceptual basis for it on both international and national level will be presented.

3. French feminist sociology and philosophy as theoretical and conceptual framework

When the goal of the paper is to provide an insight and overview of a certain segment and population of the higher education and research system employees, the inevitable work to consult is *Homo Academicus* written by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1990). In this book, Bourdieu has accomplished an analysis of the composition and backgrounds of the people working in the French academic system. Despite this analysis did not target specific academic strata but rather the academic workforce in total has been examined from a class and social background perspective, there are some aspects which are in a conceptual sense useful for any analysis of the position of a certain group of people with specific characteristics within the system of academic labour and its power relations. The analysis of the university field by Bourdieu is a combination of structuralist and constructivist approaches to the effects of institutionalisation and homogenisation which operate through codification. Among the most important processes within the university field is the struggle to determine the criteria for membership and hierarchy and legitimate them (Bourdieu, 1990: 11). The principles of hierarchical organisation of the academic field are pluralistic and often conflicting, reflecting the characteristics and background of the people holding the positions. Understanding what determines the agency of academic actors is based on considering a set of indicators from the written material about academics that are collected and observed, such as social and geographical origins, religion, educational determinants, capital of academic powers (managerial positions), capital of scientific power, capital of scientific prestige, etc. (Bourdieu, 1990: 39-40).

As a reception which followed the publication of *Homo Academicus*, plenty of papers were written to address a gender perspective and dimension which according to many have not been adequately addressed there (see some of the examples: McCall, 1992; Skeggs, 2004; Pestaña, 2012). Despite the omission to take into consideration also an indicator of gender and eventually other intersectional indicators as well such as race, and age - the overall model used by Bourdieu was a step towards working on the more complex models and also the ones incorporating the dimension of gender into the theory of reproduction of power structures and gender and age-related inequalities within the higher education system which followed. The conceptualisation of the analysis of the academic field as a combination of intersectional analysis of sociocultural differences and hierarchies provided the basic ground for enlarging the list of characteristics and searching for the supporting explanations since the structural information does not tell us much about how the mechanisms of reproduction operate. It however provides a useful framework for placing the life narratives and career paths within.

To build the conceptual framework for approaching how the position of women as academic and intellectual figures has been shaped from a historical perspective, the case of Simone de Beauvoir as a life story including many of the segments of her relevant literary and publicist works also should be considered. The case of de Beauvoir as an intellectual figure is important and relevant for popularising the idea of an educated woman who also acts as a public intellectual (Moi, 2009: 2). She belonged to the first generation of women in Europe to enter the previously male-dominated academic institutions and participate in higher education on an equal level. Moreover, she became one of the leading intellectuals of the 20th century of remarkable productivity “five novels, one play, two collections of short stories, numerous volumes of autobiography, lengthy volumes of correspondence with several men, a war diary, and a wide variety of philosophical and political essays” (de Beauvoir, 2006). In her writings often topics of the position of women in society and ageing were tackled, while in the autobiographical writings, textual constructions of self and narrative representations of historical events in France are interwoven (Bainbrigge, 2005: 115).

The entire case of de Beauvoir entails valuable findings on how a concrete author has used writing to build personal and professional integrity and face the inevitable biological processes. Despite at that time similar terminology was not used and qualitative research has not reached contemporary level, de Beauvoir is the forerunner of modern autoethnographic research and self-administered life narratives. Her insights into the problem of elderliness portrayed in a study *Coming to Age* and in other writings on society's attitude towards it are among the first attempts to open the issue which has been openly avoided and tabooed (de Beauvoir, 1972). These lines of transhistorical

developments demonstrate many of the seminal structural and discursive obstacles the social structures and systems are imposing on women interested in sciences and academic labour which, in general, still operate. On a comparative level, they will help us to draw the horizon of expectations regarding the challenges and problems female researchers are facing now, including the indication of how the system of support might be transformed to better address inherited injustices.

4. Research about women in science in Serbia: Marija Bogdanović and Marina Blagojević-Hjusun

This segment of the paper is placing our analyses into the existing literature about women in research in Serbia. Speaking about the existing literature and research on the topic of the position of senior female researchers in academic labour, we could notice that the life cycle approach has not been included in this type of research in Serbia so far. However, there are several publications about the position of women in science published in Serbia, but none of them includes the dimension of age and/or life cycle in the analysis. One such publication is *Women in Science: From Archimedes to Einstein... Conquest of the Conquered* (original title: *Žene u nauci od Arhimeda do Ajnštajna... Osvajanje osvojenog*) written by Dragana Popović about the scientific contributions of women from different parts of the world from a historical perspective. At the same time, she noticed that a similar book about Serbian female scientists would be quite a challenge since not much of the evidence has been preserved and is still available (Popović, 2012: 9).

However, no less important are the efforts made by the Institute of Ethnography of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Art (SASA) in the form of a thematic conference on the topic of women in the sciences. The Proceedings from the Conference Held on 11–13 February 2020 at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade titled *Women Scholars and Scientists in Society* include more than 30 contributions accomplished by female authors on the topic of women and sciences (Stevanović; Prelić, & Lukić-Krstanović, 2020). None of them, however, did include a reference to the problem of ageing, life course approach or higher education policy approaches to the issue, which demonstrates again the need for this type of research to emerge in the local context.

We can detect the two main approaches from the two most prominent sociologists who worked on the topic of gender in higher education in Serbia, and in the following lines, we will shortly represent their main assumptions. The observed terms of gender equality and gender neutrality in academic endeavours in Serbia were mainly

identified through the structural presence/absence of women in academic institutions in the case of Marija Bogdanović, or through revealing the misogyny and patriarchal traditions still present in many academic systems in Serbia, as in the approach to women in science in Serbia developed by Marina Blagojević-Hjusun. The first approach of Marija Bogdanović seems to be mostly to follow the model of Bourdieu, while Blagojević included much of the additional theoretical content from feminist theory and gender studies of the second and third wave of the feminist movement.

The example of the first approach here named structural presence/absence we find in the paper “Women in Education and Science” published in the national academic journal *Sociologija* in 2006 in a form of a structural quantitative analysis of researchers working in the public institutes and at the University of Belgrade in Serbia. The number of institutes included in the analysis was 162 and the simple descriptive quantitative analysis showed that women and men are equally represented in the total number of employed researchers, but also if observed via the categories of research titles. In this simple analysis, the only difference which has been found between male and female researchers is related to the higher managerial positions, where the share of female researchers is much lower. Not much additional information about the differences between genders among the researchers in Serbia was provided besides these basic quantitative proportions, which is always a useful overview but does not help us to better understand the gender difference above the just formal official share in total number of researchers and the mechanisms of power and other types of disbalances which operate (Bogdanović, 2006: 332).

The sociologist Marina Blagojević-Hjusun is another author whose dealing with the problem gender equality in research and higher education is important to mention. While in several relevant publications on the topic she also used dominantly structural and formal comparison of a quantitative type, her engagement with the topic has been much more extensive and included more complex theoretical and methodological efforts than the work of Marija Bogdanović did. In two volumes of a book *Mapping of Misogyny in Serbia* (2000, 2005) she edited, Marina gathered numerous authors who have developed quite an extensive overview of the issues and problems of importance for feminist theory and research which is geopolitically positioned and pro-actively directed towards values of empowerment and emancipation of women as producers of knowledge, not only self-referent knowledge about themselves as women but as a part of universal bodies of knowledge. According to feminist epistemology and the concept of strong objectivity, including the subjective dimension does not undermine the objectivity of knowledge, but rather complements it. In the *Introduction* to the second volume of the collection, Marina identifies two contradictory trends occurring in the peripheries,

one of which is rising discrimination and misogyny in everyday life, while on the other hand, she noticed the importance of support on a level of nonprofit and legislative initiatives for gender equality on a discursive level. In comparison to a strictly structural overview which is more-or-less the basis of every analysis of gender relations in society, the understanding of female marginalisation in science by Marina Blagojević-Hjusion is much more based on cultural and non-material factors among which tradition and historically inherited understanding of the role of women in society stands out.² Furthermore, in terms of placing her work within the feminist theory, she stated it belongs to postfeminism which means “creating feminist post-communist discourse” about women in the local context (Blagojević 2005: 10).

What is different about misogyny in comparison to the concept of gender-based discrimination is that it is a more complete concept which explains the gender difference if it is understood and explained scientifically (Blagojević, 2005: 17). In general, according to this concept, the gender gap in society is not only a result of mere inequality but rather of long-lasting hatred and ambivalence men in power produced and preserved concerning women based on negation and devaluation of women’s qualities and abilities aside of their traditional role in the family and social reproduction. If we look at the written sources and cultural artefacts, we can always find plenty of evidence of this underestimation of women as equals. This more complex explanation of gender differences in academia goes much deeper into the causes of gender disbalance which is structurally reproduced, in values a society represents, not only in simple class and structural mechanisms which operate in society as it is the case in Bourdieu’s work.

Marina Blagojević-Hjusion framed her work from a disciplinary perspective of the sociology of knowledge which included activist and non-profit perspectives particularly important during the period of transition while many of the democratic initiatives came from outside of the university structures. Particularly, positioning gender knowledge in the theory of semi-periphery and applying the world-system theory model to this problem has been quite significant in addition to existing feminist and gender studies, initiatives and movements (Antonijević & Čopić, 2021). However, in her opus of relevance for the topic of gender and science in the context of coming to age and ageing, we have not found any traces she addressed the enormously important issue of elderly women and their status and position in the academy. For Marina, not only knowledge production according to her feminist approach was important, but also the influence of the feminist movement on public policy creation and its implementation. However, she was mostly focused on anti-discrimination and gender equality policies,

² In her own terms, Marina named her approach as “structural-constructivistic” (Blagojević, 2005: 30).

not on HE and research & development policies, which is the approach we here undertake.

5. Autoethnography and life narratives of female researchers concerning the existing legislative and policy mechanisms

Aside from the Constitution where elderly people are mentioned under Article 21 *The Prohibition of Discrimination*, it seems that the elderly people are not the main subject of other legislative documents of any level in Serbia except the strategic ones, therefore their position is regulated within other laws such as *Law on Gender Equality* and *Anti-discrimination Laws*.³ Some of the very basic and universal human rights and their protection such as the right to quality of life and human dignity protection also can be considered as used to protect the rights of the elderly indirectly (Ivanović, 2022: 667; Ćorić, 2022: 32). It is noticeable that numerous other human rights resonate with the rights of elderly people, but their inclusion into the legislative framework seem insufficient.⁴

To better detect the problems related to the challenges coming with the constant efforts women need to invest into balancing private and professional life as researchers, we think it is crucial to provide thick and dense information from them by utilising a combination of autoethnographic and life cycle narrative research methodology. Both these methodological approaches belong to a qualitative type of research and have recently become very popular ways to examine and affect some long-term negative trends via relevant policy mechanisms. The popularity and importance of this type of data collection for various problems and topics increased in the last few decades, and plenty of relevant sources have been published (Chang, 2008: 31). However, the reception of this trend in Serbia is almost non-existent, therefore this paper intended to contribute to change the dominant methodologies for collecting the evidence aimed to impact the policies.

The relationship between life course narratives and public policy analyses is the one which we see as fruitful to be worked upon to, firstly better understand the modifications that occurred with the life-cycle trajectories with the transition and changing conditions of academic labour, and secondly, to project how the system of support and empowerment function and might be improved by the additional legislative and policy

³ *Ustav Republike Srbije*, Službeni glasnik RS., 6p. 98/2006; *Zakon o zabrani diskriminacije*, Službeni glasnik RS, br. 22/2009 i 52/2021; *Zakon o rodnoj ravnopravnosti*, Službeni glasnik RS, br. 52/2021.

⁴ For example, the procession of human life and dignity, in general, is one such area (Simović & Simović, 2021:401).

measures. This line of research and policy analyses has not been much utilised in Serbia so far, and with this paper and the papers which will follow, the intention is to change this situation and explore the potential of life narratives to inform research policy and empower knowledge production among senior female researchers by additional gaps which can be detected by the evidence-based data collected by a survey designed as the combination of life narrative techniques. Here we will sketch our understanding of which type of self-narratives we consider the best in this sense, for the purpose of accomplishing the task of providing a better insight into the policy framework and into the concrete issues senior female scientists are facing in their attempt to pursue successful academic careers. One of the authors meritorious for the popularisation of life narratives in the field of learning and education is British sociologist Iwor Goodson, who understood the popularity of small-scale narratives as a countertrend in comparison to grand narratives of the 20th century (Goodson, 2006: 7). Since life narratives of contemporary times are more fragmentary, there is a need to combine life-histories and life-course research - narratives are to be complemented with the documentary resources and other testimonies.

If based on an autoethnographic approach, the analysis would in any circumstances need to include an autobiographical element, a life-course element, and contextualisation in the given knowledge production and research institutional infrastructure by either conducting a kind of Bourdieu-like analysis or by developing similar apparatus which might help us to portray the academic surroundings in which female researchers develop and work in Serbia, taking into consideration also the geopolitical circumstances and trends in knowledge and development sector. Despite the authors pointing to postmodernist, poststructural and feminist influences as dominant in the contemporary revival of narrative research, there are ways to otherwise design this kind of survey and theoretically frame it within the other traditions of critical social theory, since “narratives in sciences have a long history” (Adams et al., 2015: 18).

Self-narratives are bringing the personal perspective and experience to the ground, and they can be given in a variety of forms, from descriptive storytelling, more autobiographical facts-oriented narrative or life-story which tend to be more analytical and interpretative (Chang, 2008: 31). Narrative might follow the chronology or personal reflections or could be organised around various selected themes, and its ambition is to transcend the mere narration (id., 43).

On the other hand, life-course and life-span methodology has particularly been used in surveys of ageing and the last decades of life, because the retrospective view provides a structural insight into the look of a life trajectory, its phases and turning points. In comparison to autoethnographies and autobiographies, life-course has been

much more focused on this model which allows focus on external forces shaping the course of life. From life courses we see the transition from one state to another, since it is composed of sequences of events and social transitions (Bernardi et al., 2019: 2). The individuals are moved by the intention to maintain or improve their situation and this approach does not underestimate their agency as others do. What is important to notice are three characteristics of life-course analysis which are: 1) the path dependency based on a tendency of advantages and disadvantages emerging during the life cycle to accumulate; 2) the anticipation of the probabilities of occurrences and the related effects in the future, and finally 3) the turning points in the life trajectory signifying the bigger transformation of priorities. All of them could be observed through patterns whose description makes us get a broader picture of the conditions framing and shaping the lives of female scholars, including the prediction of how they might be modified and altered.

The idea that the evidence collected through life narratives could be utilised to inform policies is already elaborated on in the international literature. This methodology and description of life situations might be even more useful than simple quantitative data collected out of context. Brett Davidson is highlighting that it is not enough to advocate the usage of narratives for policy-making. Still, it always must be followed by concrete examples, and there are plenty of public narratives which have been overlooked but can be effectively utilised for this purpose (Davidson, 2017). The other authors point to the narratives as tools for policy transformations are numerous (McBeth et al., 2007; Crow & Jones, 2018). This all give additional relevance to our argument about the need for life narratives data from senior female researchers to be collected in order to get better insights into the difference they are still struggling with at work in comparison to male colleagues and consequently to be able to suggest more supportive solutions and policies.

6. Conclusion - some inputs for the systemic senior female researchers empowerment

In this paper, the main task has been to point to omissions within the HE and research policies in Serbia to recognize the senior female scholars, but also to inspire changes by proposing novel approaches to detect ways in which insights obtained from senior female researchers might be utilised for enabling better empowering and resilience strategies in the future, detected through the observed past experiences.

By examining the policy initiatives on the international level and later the conceptual framework for approaching the problem of female senior researchers on both international and national levels, we have concluded that crucial for designing more

supportive mechanisms for women in science is obtaining more detailed and contextualized information about their position through life narratives and autoethnographic supplementary sources in combination with suggesting the novel policy solutions fostering their systemic empowerment.

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