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Gender Equality in Research: A Sociological Analysis of European Statistics and Public Policies

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Abstract:
This article explores gender equality within the research field through a sociological analysis. Drawing upon structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism, the study investigates the phenomena of the glass ceiling and the leaky pipeline, focusing on the persistence of gender disparities in European academia. Statistical data from sources like the European Institute for Gender Equality and the European Commission highlight ongoing disparities, despite increased female participation in higher education. The article also evaluates the effectiveness of current public policies and offers insights into sociological mechanisms perpetuating gender inequality.

Keywords: *gender equality, sociology, academia, structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, glass ceiling, leaky pipeline*

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1. Introduction

Despite significant advancements in gender equality observed over the past several decades, profound disparities persist within the academic environment, especially in positions demanding high research output and occupying senior administrative leadership roles. Although women's presence has notably increased at junior and entry-level academic positions, the progression into senior ranks remains markedly disproportionate, emphasizing the endurance of structural barriers and implicit biases that impede career advancement. These obstacles result in what sociologists frequently describe as the "glass ceiling," a metaphorical yet pervasive barrier that prevents qualified women from ascending to top hierarchical positions within institutions (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Structural functionalist perspectives explain this persistence by referring to traditional socialization processes that allocate different societal roles to men and women, thus perpetuating conventional expectations regarding gender capabilities and career paths (Parsons and Bales, 1955). Conversely, conflict theory suggests that ongoing gender inequalities in academia are the manifestations of deeper power imbalances and resource allocation conflicts, where “men traditionally maintain positions of authority and access to influential networks”, creating systemic disadvantages for women researchers (Connell, 2006: 112-118). Moreover, symbolic interactionism elucidates how subtle forms of discrimination, such as unconscious bias and gender stereotyping, systematically disadvantage women, shaping interactions and evaluations in a manner unfavorable to female academics, particularly in highly competitive contexts such as grant allocations and academic promotions (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012: 16475). Empirical data further reinforce these theoretical propositions, illustrating phenomena such as the "leaky pipeline," characterized by the disproportionate attrition of women at critical transitional points within their academic career trajectory, often exacerbated by institutional insensitivity towards maternity and caregiving responsibilities (European Commission, 2022; Rosa and Clavero, 2022). Consequently, this article aims to analyze the intricate dynamics of gender disparities in academia, employing these central sociological theories to illuminate how structural conditions and deeply ingrained cultural perceptions collectively contribute to sustained gender inequality within the research and higher education sectors.

2. Theoretical Framework

The most important sociological frameworks which offer valuable perspectives on gender inequality are the structural functionalism, the conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. These frameworks help explain why, despite decades of policy initiatives and increasing female participation in higher education, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior academic and research leadership roles across Europe. As the European Commission notes *"women make up 49.4% of PhD graduates in the EU-27, but only 26.5% of full professors and 24% of heads of institutions"* (European Commission, 2024: 18), demonstrating that structural change has not kept pace with educational progress.

2.1. *Structural Functionalism*

Structural functionalism suggests that “gender roles serve specific societal functions, promoting stability by clearly delineating roles within institutions, including academia” (Eagly and Carli, 2007). However, this perspective has limitations in

explaining ongoing inequalities as it often overlooks the dynamics of power and exclusion inherent in these roles. Structural functionalism interprets society as a system composed of interdependent parts that function together to maintain stability and order (Parsons, 1951). Within this framework, gender roles are historically understood as functional divisions of labor, where men are associated with productive, public roles and women with reproductive, domestic responsibilities. This perspective assumes that such divisions contribute to social equilibrium. In academia, these assumptions have implicitly shaped institutional structures, recruitment practices, and expectations regarding career trajectories.

As a result, traditional academic norms—such as uninterrupted career progression, long working hours, and geographical mobility—reflect what Acker describes as the *"ideal worker model inherently based on male life patterns"* (Acker, 1990: 149). From a functionalist perspective , educational institutions historically assigned men the role of intellectual producers and decision-makers, while women were expected to engage in teaching, caregiving, or supportive administrative tasks. Even today, *"women continue to be overrepresented in teaching-focused positions and underrepresented in research-intensive and leadership roles"* (European Commission, 2024: 33). Although structural functionalism helps explain how these divisions originated, critics argue that it insufficiently addresses how such roles become rigid and reproduce inequality over time.

Contemporary sociologists reinterpret functionalism to understand persistent institutional inertia. For example, despite policies promoting maternity leave and flexible schedules, academic cultures still reward constant availability and mobility—conditions that disproportionately disadvantage women. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), *"over 42% of women researchers in Europe report that caregiving responsibilities have negatively affected their research output and career opportunities"* (EIGE, 2024: 21). Functionalist thinking can therefore help explain the resistance to institutional change, as established gender roles are perceived as traditional and thus normalized.

However, modern functionalist critiques emphasize that what once functioned to maintain social cohesion may now produce dysfunctions. Merton's concept of *dysfunctions* is particularly relevant: academic systems that exclude or marginalize women create inefficiencies, limit innovation, and reduce the overall quality of scientific output (Merton, 1968). Evidence supports this claim—research teams with higher gender diversity *"produce more innovative and higher-impact scientific results"* (Elsevier, 2023: 44). Therefore, a revised functionalist approach advocates reconfiguring academic institutions to align with contemporary societal values—namely equality, diversity, and inclusion. This includes restructuring evaluation criteria to recognize parental leave, implementing gender-sensitive hiring practices, and promoting work-life balance policies. As Bleijenbergh states, *"institutions must move from gender-neutral to gender-responsive practices, acknowledging that equal treatment does not always yield equal outcomes"* (Bleijenbergh, 2022: 58).

2.2. *Conflict Theory*

Conflict theory (Karl Marx and, later, Sylvia Walby and Raewyn Connell) interprets academic institutions as arenas of power where resources, prestige, and influence are unequally distributed (Connell, 2006). Rather than viewing inequality as functional or natural, conflict theorists argue that gender disparities in academia result

from structural power imbalances that enable men to maintain dominance over institutional resources, leadership roles, and decision-making processes. This perspective is evident in persistent gender gaps in research funding, promotions, and representation at the highest levels of academic governance. As the European Research Council notes, *"women submitted 30% of grant applications but received only 22% of awarded grants in 2023",* demonstrating inequitable access to critical resources (ERC, 2024: 15).

A central concept in feminist conflict theory is patriarchy—defined by Walby as a *"system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women"* (Walby, 1990: 20). In academic institutions, patriarchal norms operate both formally and informally. Formal mechanisms include hiring committees, evaluation procedures, and tenure requirements that prioritize uninterrupted productivity and long-term mobility. Informal mechanisms include exclusion from elite networks, mentorship inequality, and implicit bias in peer review processes. In a paper from 2012, the authors provide powerful empirical evidence that *"identical CVs were rated as significantly more competent and hireable when bearing a male name compared to a female name"* (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012: 16475).

Conflict theory also explains how men benefit from accumulated academic capital—reputational and social advantages that increase access to grants, conferences, editorial boards, and collaborations. These cumulative advantages lead to what Merton (1968) termed the *"Matthew effect,"* where established scholars (predominantly male) receive disproportionately greater recognition for their work, while women's contributions remain undervalued or invisible. This results in a cycle where *"women are more likely to occupy precarious academic positions and less likely to secure professorships or institutional leadership roles"* (European Commission, 2024: 22).

From a macro-sociological viewpoint, conflict theory emphasizes that gender inequality is sustained by resistance to structural change. Initiatives like Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), although required under Horizon Europe funding rules since 2022, often face institutional pushback, limited budgets, or tokenistic implementation. As O'Connor argues, *"universities frequently adopt gender equality policies for compliance rather than transformation, prioritizing reputation over systemic change"* (O'Connor, 2023: 41). In addition, conflict theory highlights intersectionality—how gender intersects with race, class, disability, and ethnicity to produce layered exclusions. For example, *"only 2.7% of full professors in the EU are women belonging to ethnic minority groups"* (EIGE, 2024: 30), indicating that power operates along multiple axes of inequality.

2.3. *Symbolic Interactionism*

Symbolic interactionism focuses on micro-level interactions and the construction of gender roles through daily interactions and institutional cultures. This approach helps explain how stereotypes and biases are perpetuated within academic settings, influencing career trajectories, evaluation processes, and networking opportunities for women researchers (Rosa and Clavero, 2022). Unlike structural functionalism or conflict theory, which focus on macro-level institutions and power structures, symbolic interactionism emphasizes the *"socially constructed nature of gender and the ways in which individuals reproduce or resist inequality through daily interactions"* (Blumer, 1969: 12). In academic settings, this means that inequality is not only embedded in policies or institutional hierarchies, but also in language, communication patterns, peer evaluations, and expectations of competence.

One of the core mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced is

stereotyping. Research shows that women scholars are often seen as less authoritative, less objective, or less suited for leadership compared to men. As Moss-Racusin et al. highlight *"science faculty members rated male applicants as significantly more competent and hireable than identical female applicants"* (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012: 16476). These biases, though often unconscious, shape decisions about hiring, promotions, conference invitations, authorship order, and mentorship. Symbolic interactionists argue that these interactions communicate who is seen as a "real scientist," reinforcing gendered expectations.

Another key concept is ***labeling and self-fulfilling prophecy***, which we can explain in the following way: when women internalize negative expectations—such as being perceived as less competent in STEM fields—they may experience stereotype threat, which undermines performance and confidence. As Steele explains, *"awareness of being negatively stereotyped can itself impair academic performance, regardless of actual ability"* (Steele, 2010: 45). Women in academia often report needing to demonstrate higher levels of competence than men to be taken seriously, a phenomenon described as the "prove-it-again bias" (Williams, 2021). Symbolic interactionists also focus on the meaning of institutional rituals and symbols—such as titles, academic gowns, conference hierarchies, and office allocation—which subtly communicate status and belonging. When *"most conference keynote speakers, editorial board members, and Nobel laureates are men"* (European Commission, 2024: 28), this sends a symbolic message about who is considered a legitimate authority in academia.

3. *The Glass Ceiling* and *Leaky Pipeline* Phenomena

The "glass ceiling" and "leaky pipeline" metaphors describe barriers to women's progression in academia. Women outnumber men in undergraduate and graduate programs, yet disproportionately exit academia before attaining senior positions (European Research Council, 2022). Factors contributing to the glass ceiling effect include maternity and family responsibilities, unconscious bias, gender stereotypes, and discriminatory evaluation practices, such as lower grant application scores for women (European Research Council, 2022).

The concepts of the *glass ceiling* and the *leaky pipeline* are two of the most powerful metaphors used to describe gender inequality in academia and research. The *glass ceiling* refers to the invisible but persistent barriers that prevent women from reaching top academic and managerial positions, despite equal qualifications and demonstrated competence. The *leaky pipeline* describes the progressive loss of women along the academic career trajectory—from undergraduate studies to full professorships—due to systemic, cultural, and institutional factors (European Commission, 2024). Together, these metaphors capture both the structural rigidity and cultural inertia that sustain gender disparities in European higher education and research systems.

Despite decades of progress, statistical evidence shows that the glass ceiling remains firmly in place. According to *She Figures 2024*, *"women represent 49.4% of PhD graduates in the EU-27 but only 26.5% of full professors and 24% of heads of institutions"* (European Commission, 2024: 18). The *Glass Ceiling Index (GCI)*, a composite indicator used by the European Institute for Gender Equality, continues to show that men are more than twice as likely to reach top academic positions as women (EIGE, 2024). This suggests that even when women enter academia in equal numbers, institutional cultures, evaluation criteria, and work-life balance challenges systematically hinder their progression. Several factors contribute to this persistent inequality. **Unconscious bias** in hiring and promotion

processes remains widespread. Moss-Racusin et al. demonstrated that *"faculty members rated identical CVs as more competent when they carried a male name"* (Moss-Racusin et al, 2012: 16475). **Work-life balance pressures,** particularly related to motherhood, have also been identified as major contributors to attrition. As Elsevier's *Gender Report 2023* shows, *"female researchers publish fewer papers during the child-rearing years and are less likely to return to the same publication rate afterward"* (Elsevier, 2023: 46). Academic structures that reward continuous productivity and international mobility often fail to accommodate caregiving responsibilities, leading many women to opt out or stagnate in mid-career positions.

The *leaky pipeline* phenomenon further reveals that women's exit from academia is not simply a matter of personal choice but rather a reflection of institutional barriers. For instance, *"women account for 53% of PhD graduates but only 33% of researchers in the EU"* (Eurostat, 2024). Attrition rates are particularly high during the transition from postdoctoral positions to permanent academic roles, a phase characterized by short-term contracts, high competition, and limited job security. In STEM fields, the losses are even greater, with *"women representing less than 30% of researchers and only 17% of full professors in engineering and technology"* (European Research Council, 2024: 22).

3. Gender Disparities: Statistical Overview

Statistical analyses demonstrate stark gender disparities in European academia. Data from "She Figures 2022" indicates persistent underrepresentation of women in higher academic ranks despite nearly equal gender participation rates at entry-level academic positions. Women constitute only 15% of rectors in universities within the European University Association (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2022).

A comprehensive understanding of gender inequality in academia requires an examination of up-to-date statistical data that illustrates the persistence of structural disparities across European research systems. Recent reports, including *She Figures 2024*, Eurostat (2024), the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2024), and UNESCO (2023), provide detailed insights into gender gaps across educational attainment, research careers, leadership roles, pay equity, and research funding.

At the entry level, progress toward gender parity appears promising. According to the European Commission, *"women represented 54% of all tertiary graduates and 49.4% of doctoral graduates in the EU-27 in 2023"* (European Commission, 2024: 15). However, the data reveals a sharp decline in women's representation as academic careers advance—a phenomenon commonly referred to as the "scissors diagram." For example, *"only 33% of researchers in higher education and 26.5% of full professors are women"* (European Commission, 2024: 19). This indicates that while women enter academia in significant numbers, structural barriers prevent them from progressing to senior academic roles.

Leadership positions remain particularly male-dominated. Statistics from EIGE reveal that *"only 24% of rectors or university presidents in European universities are women"* (EIGE, 2024, p. 27). In national academies of sciences, the gender gap is even wider, with *"less than 15% of academy members being women"* (UNESCO, 2023; 41). Moreover, the *Glass Ceiling Index (GCI)*—which measures the likelihood of women reaching top academic positions compared to men—remains above 1.5 in most EU countries, indicating persistent inequality (European Commission, 2024).

Funding disparities further exacerbate these inequalities. The European Research Council (ERC) reports that *"women accounted for 30% of grant applicants but received only 21–23% of awarded grants between 2021 and 2023"* (ERC, 2024: 12). Additionally,

women-led research projects receive, on average, smaller budgets and lower evaluation scores than those led by men (Elsevier, 2023: 44). These funding gaps contribute to a cumulative disadvantage effect, affecting publication output, international mobility, and institutional recognition.

According to Eurostat, *"women researchers earn on average 13% less than their male counterparts in EU higher education institutions"* (Eurostat, 2024). In some Eastern European countries, this gap exceeds 20%. The disparity is partly due to horizontal segregation (women concentrated in lower-paid disciplines such as education and social sciences) and vertical segregation (underrepresentation in senior and well-paid leadership roles). Furthermore, work-life balance issues disproportionately affect women. Data from the European Institute for Gender Equality shows that *"41% of female researchers report career interruptions due to childcare or eldercare responsibilities, compared to 12% of male researchers"* (EIGE, 2024: 33). These interruptions reduce publication productivity and delay promotions, reinforcing the leaky pipeline phenomenon.

Table 1: Gender disparities in EU

Indicator	Women (%)	Men (%)
Tertiary (Bachelor + Master) graduates (EU-27)	54%	46%
PhD graduates (EU-27, 2023)	49.4%	50.6%
Researchers in higher education	33%	67%
Full Professors / Grade A positions	26.5%	73.5%
Heads of universities / rectors	24%	76%
Members of National Academies of Science	14–15%	85–86%
ERC (European Research Council) grant success rate	21–23% women	77–79% men
Average gender pay gap among researchers	Women earn 13% less	–
Career interruptions due to caregiving (EU researchers)	41% of women	12% of men
Women in STEM research fields	30%	70%
Women in SSH (Social Sciences & Humanities)	55%	45%

European Commission. (2024). *She Figures 2024: Gender in Research and Innovation.*
European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). (2024). *Gender Equality Index – Research & Academia Focus.*
European Research Council (ERC). (2024). *Annual Report on Funded Grants.*
Eurostat. (2024). *Gender Pay Gap in Science and Technology.*

4. Disciplinary Variations

In 2021, women represented 47% of PhD graduates in the EU-27, yet these figures decrease significantly at higher academic ranks in STEM disciplines (Guo et al., 2024). According to *She Figures 2024*, *"women represented 55% of graduates in SSH but only 32% in STEM doctoral programmes across the EU-27"* (European Commission, 2024: 21). This horizontal segregation begins early in education, influenced by cultural stereotypes that associate scientific competence with masculinity and caregiving or social

roles with femininity (Eccles, 2023). Symbolic bias and workplace culture play essential roles. Women in STEM frequently report experiences of isolation, gender stereotyping, and a lack of mentorship. As one study notes, *"women in laboratories often feel like guests rather than equal contributors to scientific innovation"* (Guo et al., 2024: 9). In contrast, social sciences and humanities disciplines tend to provide more flexible career trajectories and greater acceptance of interdisciplinary or gender-focused research.

5. Public Policies in the EU

The European Union has introduced various public policies and collaborative platforms aimed at promoting gender equality in research. Initiatives such as the Scientific Women's Academic Network support women's career advancement through mentoring, networking, and policy advocacy (European Commission, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these policies varies significantly across EU member states, reflecting cultural, economic, and institutional differences. Also, Over the past two decades, the European Union has progressively institutionalized gender equality as a core principle within the European Research Area (ERA). The policy shift became particularly explicit with the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Framework, which identified gender equality as a cross-cutting priority. This commitment was strengthened under *Horizon Europe (2021–2027)*, where, for the first time, universities and research institutions are required to have a ***Gender Equality Plan (GEP)*** in place to be eligible for EU funding. As stated by the European Commission, *"from 2022, the existence of a Gender Equality Plan is an eligibility criterion for participation in Horizon Europe"* (European Commission, 2024: 7). These plans must include measures for work-life balance, gender-sensitive recruitment, monitoring, and training on unconscious bias. At the strategic level, the ***European Research Area Policy Agenda (2022–2024)*** introduced Action 5: *"Promote gender equality and foster inclusiveness in R&I,"* emphasizing intersectionality, sexual harassment prevention, and gender budgeting. The European Institute for Gender Equality supports these initiatives by offering benchmarking tools and the ***Gender Equality Index***, which revealed that *"the domain of knowledge, including research and innovation, remains one of the lowest-performing areas in terms of gender equality, scoring only 64.9 out of 100 in 2024"* (EIGE, 2024: 15).

Conclusion

The theoretical perspectives applied throughout this article—structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism—demonstrate that gender inequality is multidimensional. Despite policy advancements and increased awareness, gender disparities in European academia persist due to structural, cultural, and institutional factors. Sociological theories provide a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, suggesting that sustained efforts in policy reform, institutional culture change, and structural adjustments are essential for achieving genuine gender equality in research. Addressing gender inequality in academia requires comprehensive policy approaches informed by sociological insights. Structural functionalism emphasizes the need for institutional reforms promoting equitable role distribution, whereas conflict theory underlines the importance of addressing power imbalances and resource allocation inequities. Symbolic interactionism highlights the necessity of challenging pervasive stereotypes and promoting inclusive institutional cultures. Finally, we must appreciate that European policies such as Horizon Europe's Gender Equality Plans, the ERA Policy Agenda, and the Helsinki Call for Action mark critical steps towards institutional reform.

However, without cultural change, strong enforcement, and accountability mechanisms, these policies risk remaining declarative rather than transformative. Genuine progress requires rethinking academic excellence to include diversity, work-life balance, and recognition of caregiving responsibilities. It also demands intersectional sensitivity, acknowledging that migrant women, ethnic minority women, and women with disabilities face even more severe barriers.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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