
Norma Blazquez Graf y Olga Bustos Romero (2013)

Saber y poder. Testimonios de directoras de la UNAM

México: UNAM, Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades, 199 p.

Reviewed by Anna Rabea Weis

Freie Universität Berlin

This book about female participation in high administrative positions at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) by Norma Blazquez Graf – researcher and director of its Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Sciences and Humanities – and Olga Bustos Romero – professor at its faculty of psychology – literally and metaphorically carries a lot of weight. The pink cover with purple ornaments and the multiple folding tables and diagrams are an immediate eye-catcher. By itself, the book stands out in the research on women's academic careers in Latin America, due to its large-scale research and detailed presentation of quantitative and qualitative data. It starts from the general assumption that whereas nowadays more than half of the students at UNAM are female, women in leading positions in an academic context are still hard to find; that being a “female scientist’ has been and partly still is an oxymoronic position” (Villa 2011: 173) – a situation the two feminist researchers want to show, explain and change.

The study, written from a critical feminist perspective, is based on life histories and

fundamental feminist concepts such as “experience”, “women’s standpoint” and “transgression”. It pays special attention to the tensions between the professional and private lives of the female scientists, to their way of understanding and exercising power and to the changes this provokes in their mentalities. Understanding these might ultimately change the rules of the complex game of gender discrimination. Despite their clear commitment to gender equality and criticism of androcentric power, the two feminists fall short of specifying their theoretical approach and analytical tools. This also inhibits them from carrying out a more profound analysis of their extensive research material.

After a short introduction (7-10), they give an historical overview of women's participation at UNAM since the year 1910 (11-35). In spite of the, at first sight, quite confusing terminology and subdivision of positions into directors of faculties, institutes and centers, the vast mass of data is presented in a digestible way. This is thanks to the various visual information which is provided divided by gender (see also annex 157-197).

In summary, the actual presence of women as directors of the three academic entities at UNAM has been on the rise over the last decades and is currently estimated to lie at about one third. This figure is, however, marked by substantial differences among the various disciplines.

In the main part (37-138), the reader can dive into the in-depth interviews from the years 2006-2009, which are displayed under six different subtitles that represent six different forms of exercising power in leading positions. These testimonies take up half of the book and are enriched with photographs and a CD of 165 minutes of video material displaying the extensive interview sessions. The actual analysis (139-151) of the vast empirical material, as well as the bibliography (153-155), however, are quite short: After developing a schema of the women's lives (139-143), in their final reflections the authors summarize and point out the most important aspects of the interaction of knowledge and power manifest within the few female role models who made it from the margins to the center of knowledge (145-151).

Consequently, the authors propose –instead of the famous “glass ceiling”– to speak of a “labyrinth” (*laberinto* (150)) built of “glass barriers” (*fronteras de cristal* (150)) and a “sticky floor” (*piso pegajoso* (150)) in order to describe the various difficulties women encounter during their careers, even though – in contrast to general assumptions – they do not show “fear of success or lack of ambition” (*temor al éxito o falta de ambición* (147)). In a nutshell, by providing a rich critique of their own institution from within,

the two Mexican feminists manage to make an historical gender inequality in higher education visible and suggest confronting it by sensitizing the academic population, as well as implementing affirmative action policies.

Without a doubt, the study is presented in the form of a unique book –fruit of the particular research interests and possibilities of feminists at UNAM, which have also resulted in a variety of studies and cooperation with other Latin American universities (cf. Blazquez Graf/Bustos Romero/Fernández Rius 2012)¹. But still, we should not forget that good intentions are hardly enough to alter the situation, above all concerning inequalities as persistent as the distinction made between men and women. This is why, even though it is a thorough and creative piece of research committed to improve gender equality at university, in some respects it falls short of being an inclusive feminist study.

Firstly, whereas it starts off with the intention of making the particular female academics' points of view visible, it does not manage to go beyond general stereotypes of the “scientific subject as a mere embodiment of intellect, genius, hard work, devotedness, etc.” (Villa 2011: 173)². That is, even though the authors emphasize a certain subjective perspective and support it with structural

1 Blazquez Graf, Norma/ Bustos Romero, Olga/Fernández Rius, Lourdes (2012): “Saber y poder: vivencias de mujeres académicas”, IX Congreso Iberoamericano de Ciencia, Tecnología y Género, Sevilla.

2 Villa, Paula-Irene (2011): “Embodiment is always more: intersectionality, subjection and the body”. In: Helma Lutz/ María Teresa Herrera Vivar/Linda Supik (eds.): Framing intersectionality: debates on a multi-faceted concept in gender studies. Farnham & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 171-186.

elements, in the end they do not break through the general assumption of science as being a mere question of excellence. It is a crucial affirmation in this context that “some of the interviewed female directors do not accept the existence of restrictions” due to their gender. Hence, the authors assume that gender exclusion exists equally for all women and they try to make these privileged females aware of their assumed restrictions, even though they might not have experienced discrimination.

Secondly, this contradiction makes it inevitable to include other categories beyond gender in the analysis of the empirical material. Intersectionality has been a popular tool in feminist research for the last two decades to address these multiple overlapping exclusions and power relations. Although the term has not met with vast interest, let alone application in academic contexts in Latin America, the present study quite easily shows that the phenomenon itself occurs throughout Latin American societies while going unnoticed. The absence of other groups of women apart from the white urban heterosexual middle-class or elite from Latin American universities is striking. Nevertheless, gender is generally still used as the only transversal category, even though other categories are being taken into account gradually by Latin American feminists. This is shown by a study realized within the same group of researchers at

UNAM, which includes class in its analysis (Buquet 2013)³.

To sum up, one can say that it is Blazquez Graf's and Bustos Romero's commitment to making their research material accessible and visible to others, which constitutes an important starting point that permits further critical analysis and an opening up of the unilateral focus on gender to other inequality-generating categories. In this context, above all those would be the two other categories of the “inequality triad”: class and race. This is why the book's raw material is such a rich source to promote further research at UNAM and beyond: it encourages us to ask other questions. First and foremost among them: Why have the “other” women not made it to top positions? Is it really just due to their lack of devotion and hard work? If one were to look at the phenomenon through an intersectional lens, such a finding would be rather unlikely.

3 Buquet, Ana (2013): “¿Sólo el género importa? Una mirada interseccional a los obstáculos que enfrentan las académicas”. In: Martha Zapata Galindo/Sabina García Peter/Jennifer Chan de Avila (eds.): La interseccionalidad en debate. Berlín: FU, Instituto de Estudios Latinoamericanos, 169-181.