Women in Higher Education in Argentina

Equality or Job Feminization?

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Les progrès accomplis par les femmes de l'Argentine en science et en études supérieures ont été remarquables. Toutefois une étude approfondie sur les causes de cet avancement a révélé que les postes d'enseignantes et de recherche ont été féminisés et des inégalités substantielles sont encore très présentes dans les échelons supérieurs.

El progreso de las mujeres argentinas en ciencia y educación superior durante la última década ha sido notable. Sin embargo, un examen más profundo acerca de las causas que facilitaron el avance de las mujeres en el ámbito académico revela que el trabajo de docencia e investigación ha sufrido un proceso de feminización y que numerosas desigualdades de género aún persisten en la educación superior.

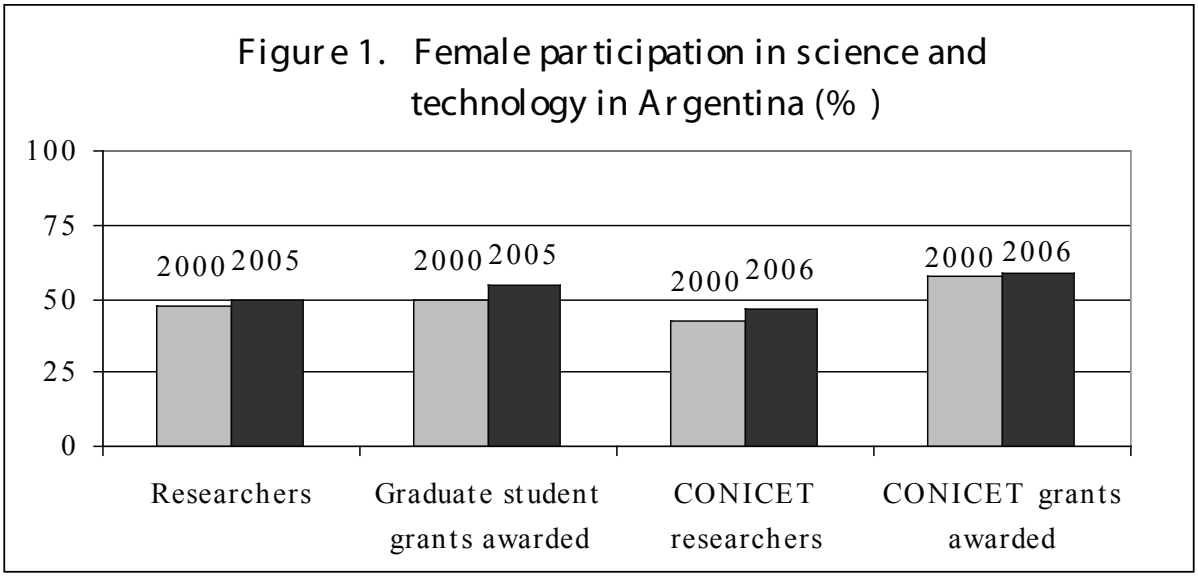
Women in Science and Higher Education

Recent data about female participation in research and science in Argentina look promising. They suggest that during the last decade women have made important progress= in fields which, in the not too distant past, were mostly (if not exclusively) reserved for men. Figure 1 shows that, indeed, equality between women and men in science and technology seems to have been achieved. By 2005, 50 percent of researchers in Argentina were female and more than half of the grants were awarded to female graduate students. Taking into account only those researchers affiliated to CONICET—the national council of scientific and technical research, a prestigious institution established in 1958—female participation has been increasing, reaching nearly 50 percent in 2006. In turn, over the last few years, CONICET graduate student grants have been awarded mostly to women.

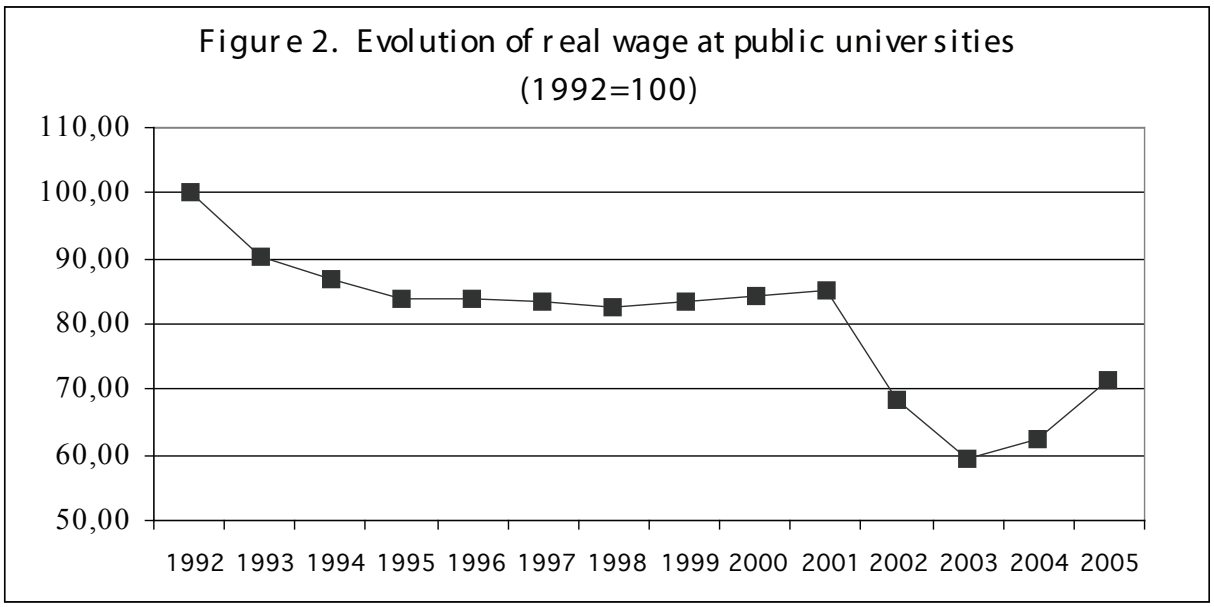
Research in Argentina is also intimately related to higher education. This is because, in order to have their projects approved, researchers must be employed by a national higher education institution or by one of a few national government technical offices. In practice, research is mostly carried out at public universities.[1] Private universities have been expanding in the last decades but their weight is relatively small compared to the massive public universities, which account for more than 85 percent of the students nationwide. In addition and with few exceptions, private institutions are focused on teaching and on offering practical, market-oriented degrees (in social sciences, business administration and the like). Although some well-established private colleges have managed to organize research departments (which often operate as think-tanks and offer consulting services to external customers), research is in general not regarded as a priority within the private sector.

Moreover, at public universities there is no strict separation between teaching and research. Positions are normally associated with teaching duties, with the understanding that part of the time will be devoted to research activities.[2] All this leads to the conclusion that an increase in female participation in science and technology in Argentina, is strongly correlated to a greater participation of women in higher education, especially as members of staff at large public universities. In 2006, 48 percent of all the positions at national public institutions were held by women.

Certainly this achievement is a positive and encouraging sign. It is legitimate, however, to wonder about the causes that brought about such a change in gender composition and, more generally, in the attitude towards women in research and higher education. Could it be explained just by a national outburst of women-awareness and/or by the introduction and enforcement of non-discriminatory university policies? Possibly not. In the next few sections it will be suggested that one of the reasons behind the rapid access of women to university positions has actually been the feminization of jobs in higher education. While this argument does not deny that there has been real progress towards gender-equality, it helps to put things into perspective and to realize that there is still much to be



Source: based on data published by RICyT (2008) and CONICET (2008).



Source: human resource departments.

done to foster women's equitable participation in higher education and science.

High Quality, Low Price

It is worth noting that the advance of women in teaching and research positions has not been the result of active encouragement by (public) universities. In fact the change took place rather spontaneously over the last two decades, thus lending support to the thesis of a feminization of higher education jobs. The concept of "feminization" is not taken here to imply a quantitative statement about numbers of women relative to men. It is rather a qualitative notion, indicating that something in the nature of the job has changed. In other words, the feminization of university teaching and research jobs means that these types of activities are now perceived—based on prevalent social constructions of gender and role identities—as being more "suitable for women."

There are several features of higher education jobs in Argentina that support the feminization hypothesis. The steady decrease in public university salaries is crucial among them. Figure 2 depicts the evolution of real wages for a full-time professor with 20 or more years of service.

Other categories (various types of professorships and assistantships) are not displayed but follow a similar trend. In nearly 15 years, salaries lost 30 to 40 percent of their original purchasing power. The slight increase around 2001 coincides with an economic crisis and widespread price deflation and should not be interpreted as a real improvement in teaching and research remunerations. Since 2005, the government has granted moderate wage increases; nevertheless inflation has been accelerating, resulting in salaries unable to keep up with prices and most likely intensifying the downward tendency of real wages.

Salaries are also low when compared to national standards or to wages paid for professional services requiring similar training. A full-time professor with maximum qualifications is currently earning around US$18,000 a year; a full-time lecturer US$14,500; a part-time, high-rank assistant US$6,000; and a part-time beginning (graduate) assistant US$1,000. Check these figures against the minimum wage that has recently been announced for the whole economy: US$5,000 per year approximately. It is a striking fact that salaries for most teaching and research positions at public universities in Argentina are below, or barely above, the minimum wage level. Union leaders have been reporting this situation for years, complaining that a substantial number of faculty staff at higher education institutions are effectively earning wages below the poverty line.

Opportunity costs are difficult to assess because, depending on the field, location, nature of the employer and so on, wages for alternative career paths can vary widely. However, as a reference point, it could be safely said that a young professional in Argentina (e.g. an accountant working for a consulting firm, or an engineer working in industry), is making today, just after graduation, a minimum of US$8,000 a year (and sometimes considerably more than that). This is a much higher income than the one they would be making by starting a career in academia (see above). Needless to say, after a few years of experience, professional salaries can grow substantially and rapidly overtake university wages.

Why has the decrease in real wages caused a feminization of teaching and research jobs? Although women are ccurrently more independent and in many cases fully capable of supporting themselves and their dependents, there is still a widespread conception ascribing to men the role of the "breadwinner" and "head of household." Men thus feel discouraged by salaries in higher education—which are barely enough to survive and to support a family—and, consequently, they are compelled to look for opportunities elsewhere. This is more marked in fields where professional positions outside academia are easy to find. Many men have chosen to stay only part-time at the university, to keep in touch with teaching and research while they earn their living elsewhere. Those who have stayed full-time are often engaged in dozens of complementary activities (usually teaching) to manage some extra income. In this state of affairs it is not difficult to conjecture that many women came to occupy academic positions vacated by men.[3] There is, in effect, a generalized idea that women can "afford" to stay at a university and do research, especially if they are married, because their income is secondary to the household. On the other hand, women are frequently disadvantaged in the competition for the more attractive professional jobs (that are now actively sought after by men), which also contributes to their concentration in higher education institutions.

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Qualitative Aspects Explaining Feminization

Higher education jobs have also become less prestigious, not only in monetary terms, but also taking into account several non-monetary qualitative aspects.

First of all, university jobs are nowadays heavily *routinized*. It was mentioned above that positions at public universities in Argentina are largely associated with teaching rather than research duties. Although teaching can be a challenging and creative task in itself, massive classes and few quality controls have contributed to make lectures little more than a routine. Year after year, teachers repeat the same lectures, using similar reading materials, in classes of 300 (or even more) students who are packed in small classrooms. The situation might be slightly better at higher-level courses or at private institutions—which take fewer students and have better facilities—but in principle it remains the same. Teaching has become commodified: a university lecture is no longer a unique and innovative experience, but a more or less standardized task for which the performer gets a salary based on the number of hours/courses s/he teaches. Of course there are many exceptions and some lecturers showing real vocation and initiative, but this is due to personal effort rather than institutional commitment.

What about research? Does it involve more creativity

and innovation? It certainly does but, as research has traditionally been regarded as secondary to teaching, it has not always been strongly encouraged at public universities (with the possible exception of certain natural science departments). As of 1993 the government has offered a monetary incentive to those who do research at public universities, leading to the incorporation of several people—including some staff who had never done research before and/or were close to retirement—to research groups. The program was well intentioned but its results remain controversial. Once again, there have not been enough quality controls, which in practice led many newcomers to engage in any sort of research project with the sole purpose of increasing their salary. Thus research has also become, to a certain extent, little more than a bureaucratic process.

An additional feature of the system is that personal qualifications are not adequately rewarded or promoted. The majority of teachers at public universities, including those who do research, do not hold a Ph.D. In the case of those who have a doctoral degree, there is no distinction based on the quality of the program. In general, there is no distinction based on the number of articles published per year, or the quality of the publications either. Participation in conferences, studies abroad, research collaborations and the like, are limited to four months every two years(?), usually without payment. This situation causes many difficulties for young researchers—who are often invited as visiting scholars at foreign departments, or who are actively engaged in many conferences—because they risk losing their jobs and/or have to finance their trips (partially or totally) with their own money. Mobility and flexibility are currently highly valued by higher education institutions worldwide. On the contrary, and with few exceptions, the tendency in many departments at Argentinean public universities is to praise those who have "stayed at home, sacrificed themselves, and helped to cope with the everyday teaching of massive classes."[4]

To summarize, routinization and bureaucratization of teaching and research practices, together with the lack of an adequate merit-based reward system, have made the job devoid of personal challenges and have affected its social status. There are many good researchers who owe their achievements exclusively to their own motivation and drive. As for the rest, it is just another job.

The importance of pointing out those qualitative aspects here is that, in addition to the deterioration in real income, they may have also contributed to the feminization of higher education teaching and research positions. Tradition in patriarchal societies has been to associate more demanding and challenging jobs—not only physically but also intellectually—with men, and those jobs that are more repetitive and entail great doses of patience and thoughtfulness, with women. Stanfors illustrates this tendency when she comments, "[t]he more lucrative a job was financially, the more its practitioners were men, while women often performed monotonous and standardized duties" (17).

Last but not least, there are other characteristics of the job that are often perceived as more '"suitable for women." One is the possibility of working part-time (25 hours a week) or even "half part-time" (ten hours a week). This is a convenient arrangement for most women who seek flexible jobs to be able to cope with the reproductive activities for which they are still largely responsible. Also, the rise in social violence and the many failures experienced by the education system over the last two decades mean that university teachers are currently required to be especially tactful, patient, and understanding in their interaction with students, who in many cases are conflicted youth showing signs of frustration or emptiness. The nature of the job has therefore changed in yet another sense: the

Figure 3. Women's performance in public universities in 2006

	Percentage of women
1. Highest position in the academic hierarchy (professor)	35%
2. Lowest position in the academic hierarchy (assistant)	56%
3. All professorships	40%
4. All assistantships	52%
5. Highest research category	38%
6. Lowest research category	64%
7. Researchers in natural sciences and medicine	55%
8. Researchers in social sciences and humanities	70%

Source: Secretariat for University Policies (2006).

quality of "caring for others," with a typically feminine connotation, is seen as a crucial requirement for those involved in today's higher education.

Inequalities Within Public Universities

The existence of standardized remunerations—negotiated between the government and the unions—for different categories of teaching and research positions at public universities, together with many (also standardized) administrative regulations that do not allow for employees with different qualifications to be rewarded differently, have made higher education jobs less attractive in terms of: i) income; ii) prestige; and iii) personal challenge and satisfaction. It was argued before that such features might have been conducive to the feminization of teaching and research jobs.

The situation is far from being homogeneous within the higher education sector though. The advance of women in academia has not occurred evenly across fields, disciplines, and research hierarchies. In effect, men still dominate in higher positions, research rankings, natural sciences and higher-level courses; which agrees with the feminization hypothesis and is but another way of showing that the celebrated "gender-equality" in higher education and science should not be overrated. Figure 3 displays a few indicators revealing that discrimination against, and marginalization of, women, continues to exist at public universities.

Looking at more disaggregated data (see, for example, Escudero), it is interesting to find that the majority of teachers/researchers holding the *highest* positions in academia are male, regardless of whether they are full-time or part-time. Women, on the other hand, outnumber men in all the remaining *full-time* positions, as well as in the *lower part-time* positions. The higher the position and the lower the time involved (i.e. 45, 25, or ten hours a week), the more men predominate. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that men devote less time to teaching and research activities because they usually have other professional occupations, which are more prestigious and better paid. However, when they are committed to academic life, they get hold of the better positions.

Research figures lead more or less to the same conclusion. There are five research categories in Argentina and it is significant that, as we go down the scale, the proportion of female researchers correspondingly increases. With respect to different types of disciplines, female researchers are highly concentrated in the social sciences and the humanities, which agrees with the perception that such disciplines are somehow more feminine. Actually, for the social sciences, the proportion of men and women in the highest research category is very similar (nearly 50 percent each), with women being hugely represented in the lower categories. By the same token, while there are slightly more women than men doing research in the natural sciences in general, the distribution shows that researchers in the two highest categories are for the most part male (men double women in the top category).

Finally, although they are difficult to quantify and do not appear in official statistics, there are other indicators suggesting that women might be relatively disadvantaged in higher education. There is, for instance, a lower proportion of women in higher-level undergraduate and postgraduate courses, which are usually more challenging and demand greater qualifications and, at the same time, have fewer students. Many women are left to deal with lower-level undergraduate courses, massive classes and thousands of papers to mark each semester. In addition, they often get a greater teaching load, with more courses per semester than their male counterparts. As Bonaccorsi *et al.* point out, "There is a veiled discrimination in the distribution of responsibilities [between women and men] in universities."

To conclude, numbers show that today, in Argentina, there are as many women as men in higher education and research. Nevertheless the idea that gender-equality has been achieved just because women hold approximately 50 percent of the research grants and public university positions nationwide, might be misleading. Fine-grain data reveal that there is still a certain degree of discrimination *inside* higher education institutions. Understanding the nature of feminization of academic jobs as well as internal inequalities arising at public universities is crucial for developing policies that truly foster the advancement of women in science.

Getting the Institutions Right

Most of the factors that have contributed to the feminization of jobs in higher education in Argentina are, above all, manifestations of institutional failures. Public university salaries are administered by the state; hence the downward trend in real wages taking place over the last decades is a powerful indicator, in fact, of the extent to which higher education has (not) mattered to Argentinean authorities. Inflexibility, routinization and bureaucratization of teaching and research activities are also caused by inadequate and/or anachronistic institutional rules (or the lack of them), embodied in administrative regulations and, more generally, in social custom.

Thus the real challenge remains at the level of public policies. In order to render higher education competitive and first-rate, serious institutional changes ought to be promoted, including more flexibility, more merit-based rather than standardized incentives, more quality controls, and, to ensure the protection of women and other minorities (provided they are suitably qualified) a comprehensive and active non-discrimination policy.

With respect to women's participation, the progress made by female teachers and researchers during the last years is crucial. As a result, women are more confident,

have developed their self-esteem, and have established themselves in academia. In this way there is little risk of them being threatened by a more competitive environment. It is only when women flourish and are allowed to demonstrate their full potential and capabilities in a highly challenging and innovative research atmosphere, that gender-equality in higher education will be a more tangible reality.

Breve información acerca de la autora; Estudió economía en Argentina, en la Universidad Nacional de Córdoba y el Instituto Torcuato Di Tella. Realizó una maestría y obtuvo su Ph.D. en la Universidad de Cambridge, Inglaterra, especializándose en temas de economía heterodoxa. Actualmente es Profesora Asociada de la Universidad de Córdoba y la Universidad de la Patagonia Austral, dictando cursos en Economía Heterodoxa y Metodología. Sus investigaciones más recientes incluyen temas de economía institucional, delito y violencia social, clientelismo político y ecofeminismo. No English equivalent in the original doc.

[1]By "public" universities we mean state-controlled universities. Although they enjoy a high degree of autonomy, public universities are financed by the federal state, which also sets uniform wages for different types of jobs, and issues general regulations on administrative matters.
[2]This is especially the case for high and/or full-time positions.
[3]This phenomenon has been acknowledged explicitly by the Academic Secretary of the National University of Tucuman, in a recent article published by the Argentinean University Network (UNIVERSIA 2008).
[4]Quoting a high-ranking secretary of a large public university.

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RONNIE R. BROWN

Free Associations on RUMPELSTILTSKIN

Part I (Rumpel [sic])

He is smiling,
his green eyes looking
into hers. Is there's anything else
she wants from him, he asks,
and, suddenly, she
is speechless.

Yes, the word resonates
within her brain *yes,*
yes! I want to take you home,
rumple my bed with you, ride
your body from crest
to crest. Experience
the wave as it overtakes us,
sweeps us to shore
and leaves us there
damp and weak, but…

before her words
make their way
from mind to mouth
her husband, tired and rumpled
after a long day, intrudes
dismissing the man
of her fantasies with a curt,
"Nothing else for us, thanks,
just the cheque."

Ronnie R Brown's poetry appears earlier in this volume.