

Gains, deeds and suggestions: A personal reflection on PhD study

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Experiences and achievements

When I look back to the time I spent doing my PhD in Vienna, I find it to have been hugely fulfilling. During my stay there I enjoyed exposure to the international academic environment. Beyond my academic experiences in the regular PhD programme at Vienna University, I had the pleasure of occasionally attending public lectures and seminars on a wide range of topics and of having the chance to travel internationally to participate in seminars and workshops. I am particularly grateful to the open-mindedness and flexibility shown by my academic supervisor and the OeAD in supporting me to undertake a rewarding academic experience as a resident scholar in the USA from September 2011 to February 2012. This experience has certainly boosted my potential as a woman in academia to give back my knowledge and skills to the society from which I came and to the world at large. Beyond the academic gains, I should mention the worthy rewards I enjoyed socially and spiritually. My stay abroad enabled me to meet wonderful, spiritually nourishing people from various cultures. I have always loved meeting new people and having fulfilling conversations about real-life issues and personal human experiences, about families and dreams. In short, my stay abroad has had a hugely positive impact upon my professional and personal life.

I was able to experience all this because of my individual scholarship application to the OeAD. I think such individual applications for scholarships should be encouraged because they offer chances to potential candidates who might for a number of factors not otherwise be selected for project-based scholarships. Moreover, this scheme allows the OeAD to fund unique and interesting smaller-scale research proposal topics from individual applicants.

The PhD research

The impetus for doing PhD research on a gender topic came from my years of experience as the first woman hired in the university where the case study was undertaken. I was the founding head of the gender office in 2003 and also served in other administrative positions. I took part in task-forces and committees. My day-to-day encounters with female students and administrative colleagues gave me the opportunity to hear about the overt and covert practices that undermine and disempower women. Discrimination, prejudice and harassment were some of the problems the gender equity office grappled with. There were many administrative and cultural challenges that impeded the ethical handling of gender problems. Our day-to-day interactional and administrative challenges were tremendous. Along with other (volunteer) staff members, I invested long hours in helping female students and staff resolve their troubles. Such problems indicated the pressing need for a sound

intellectual analysis of the possible solutions. My experience has helped me to perceive the gendered nature of behaviours, norms and practices within the academy.

These insights led me to initiate an advocacy-oriented research project that investigated gender from the perspective of institutional culture. Studying gender from this perspective enabled the explication of the often unspoken or hidden forms of inequality that exist between what people say and what they do. The research specifically looked at the extent to which Ethiopian universities of technology are different from or mirror the gender assumptions, expectations and stereotypes that exist in the broader society. It investigated gendered institutional norms, roles, and expectations, with attention to both micro- and macro-cultural processes.

The research mainly employed a qualitative approach; however, some quantitative data was also used to demonstrate obvious institutional gender disparities as well as to illustrate the importance of exploring the stories that lie behind numerical descriptions.

The results show there are some societally-gendered assumptions, expectations and stereotypes that stay unchallenged in the technological university. My research demonstrated the ways in which women in technological subjects are consistently marginalised by dominant gendered norms, assumptions, expectations and habitual, seemingly natural practices and interactions. The study also showed how women in universities negotiate domination within the oft-unaccommodating “university culture” and actively create strategies for survival. By way of addressing the major problem, the study looked at the institutional gender equality initiatives being exercised in Ethiopian universities and suggested some new perspectives based upon a democratic pedagogy which could introduce transformational change to advance gender equality, social justice and democracy at institutions of higher learning in Ethiopia.

The way forward for scholarship holders

From anecdotal evidence, I believe other scholarship holders had similarly rewarding experiences while in Austria. One APPEAR scheme has been encouraging scholarship holders to initiate cooperative projects and build professional networks. Cooperative projects and professional networks are important in bringing about richer, more comprehensive and innovative research results. Scholarship holders can also serve as ambassadors for such wonderful initiatives and need to be proactive contact persons and initiators for future collaboration projects.