Susanne Baer

Options of Knowledge – Opportunities in Science

Ladies and Gentlemen!

I have been invited to deliver this first keynote to the Berlin conference on Gender Equality in Higher Education – and it is my pleasure to be here among all of you, colleagues, experts in the field, friends, to do that.

So let me welcome you in Berlin.

At Humboldt-University, we are, bluntly, as bad as others if we look at the numbers, that is: at quantitative gender relations among professors, or, worse, in leadership positions. But this conference at Humboldt University nevertheless picked the right place. We do host the largest German speaking gender studies program around, with more than 15 disciplines collaborating in research and in a B.A., in an M.A., and in supervising transdisciplinary Ph.D.s in Gender Studies[1]. We also just got our academic programs accredited officially. We host a junior research group working on gender as a category of knowledge[2], and we run the GenderKompetenzZentrum, or GenderCompetenceCentre[3], funded by the German Federal Government, to transfer knowledge from gender studies into the administration and mainstream politics. And yes, there are some people around who question our work. Among them has been the president of this university, and I am delighted to see he changed, since that according to his opening remarks to this very conference, he now recognizes the immense potential of gender studies in a university. When it comes to a serious assessment of quality, we do well anyways, as transdisciplinary gender studies, in cooperation with universities and institutions in the area. So again, to participants of this conference, welcome in Berlin.

It is the right place, yet the task to deliver this first keynote is nevertheless rather **delicate**, and this is so for at least two reasons.

First, there is **no *one* way** to address these topics. There are different academic cultures – different research institutions, different disciplines and research fields, and different more or less national, sometimes transnational or even global settings – such differences give a certain flavour to science, a little different each time. In the global knowledge economy, there are homogenizing trends and centrifugal forces, but there is no one answer to anything in science, no truth to find. Rather, facing so many options of knowledge, there is always an unknown number of ways to address a topic. So there is no one recipe for all. Rather, it is *this conference* which will provide you with *many* recipes, and then inspire your own cooking.

Second, this task is delicate simply because ***you* are the experts**. If one reads the wonderful abstracts people handed in to come here, it becomes very clear: You already know about everything there is to know about Gender Equality in Higher Education … and don´t we all already agree. We have been on the road for about 25 years, as Professor Wintermantel, acting president of the German rectors conference, stated in her opening remarks today.

[1] http://www.gender.hu-berlin.de/

[2] http://www2.hu-berlin.de/gkgeschlecht/

[3] www.genderkompetenz.info

For a long time, we have talked about women, and for a little shorter while, about gender in science, and a little bit yet also about men. But we seem to agree on two big points.

- There is an obvious problem regarding **numbers,** or, as Ms Hadulla-Kuhlmann from the German Federal Ministry of Research pointed out today: there is clear language, since there is no plausible explanation as to why there are so many men with similar biographies in science, and so many women who do not make it into these jobs, so little diversity.
- There is a less obvious, but by now quite well documented problem regarding **content,** or knowledge itself, since there is ample proof that the disciplines developed and some still work with utter disregard of gender as part of what they are doing. Science simply missed and still misses a lot in living with that limitation, politely called a *blind spot*.

In addition, we agree not only on that, but we do agree with many people in the world of science.

There is significant o**fficial political will** around gender equality in higher education: National Research Councils call equality one of their goals, the EU, the US, the Swiss, the Australian and other national agencies support programs to further equality, the German excellence competition among universities declared gender equality a criteria, most politicians who administer science endorse sex or gender equality, last not least to guarantee for qualified "human resources" in the future, in the wake of global competition and demographic changes.

So where is the problem? Tons of best practices, evaluation and monitoring, assessment and comparative analysis, lots of official rhetoric –why then, did you come here, and not really to celebrate success, but to again discuss efforts towards equality, and face the challenges ahead? It seems we have a long way to go, as Liisa Husu said in her welcoming remarks.

Do we really all agree? I think that we do not agree sufficiently on some things yet, which are crucial. In particular, I see is the need to address quality in science, seriously, applying it to mainstream work as well as to gender studies. And we need to be very clear when it comes to the standards. This is why I take this opportunity to focus on just that: **quality**. In the world of knowledge we live in – the knowledge society, the knowledge economy even, after the technological revolution, globalized, fast, and diverse -, we need to **revisit quality**. It is quality which governs science, inspires excellence, is the criteria in competition. Sometimes, such quality is called innovation, as in OECD assessments of national growth potential. Sometimes, scientific equality is labelled excellence, as in national competition games and in many processes of massive organizational change in universities and research institutions. But overall, quality is the norm by which we are governed, the norm we also believe in, and it is quality we want. And: It is not clear what "quality" is, today. So let me raise **six points** on the matter.

1. Quality between myth and norm

First, quality is a myth, but it is also the powerful leading norm we adhere to in higher education, in science.

Depending on the disciplinary culture you live in, you may accept that people measure the quality of your work, most likely in the natural sciences, or you may reject any attempt to measure your scientific efforts as fuzzy at best, most likely in the humanities.

But overall, there is a strong belief that "quality really counts".

All attempts to document the role of context, of institutional and social factors, of politics, simply, do somehow vaporize when it comes to the foundational myth that after all, it is

quality which reigns in science. An interesting case of cognitive resistance. Yes, everyone will admit that there are politics, too. But when it comes to one´s own decision about the next faculty member, about the next grant, about the next review**, it is quality, after all**. And after all, it is quality which brought oneself in a position.

Therefore, an attack on the quality regimes in science tends to also reveal the privileges and the politics one may not want to see out in the open. I at least have not seen a researcher say in public that he is a quota man, as some women have said that they are quota women, meaning they got their position not because of objective quality assessment, but because of affirmatice action policies. Maybe this is because the men´s quota is so large, but maybe it is also because we want to keep the myth: that quality counts.

2. Quality and Equality

Second, for most researchers, quality is not only fundamentally a good thing, and they believe it works, but equality is rather different, and for science, seen by many as a bad idea.

Particularly in science, equality is not sexy, not a winnner, no fun to pursue it. IT is not seen as intrinsic to the field. This is why in the world of science, men and often, successful women, tend to react funny when you really call for more equality – suddenly, they turn impatient, angry, even aggressive, they take "it" personal, they do not want to be bothered with "such affairs".

Such adverse reactions rest on solid cultural ground. Deep down, and buried in Western philosophy, **liberty**, and thus: academic freedom, and **equality**, and thus: calls for fairness, do actually collide rather than coexist and foster each other. Liberty is framed as an individual good, related to rational autonomy, while equality is construed as the site of the social, limiting personal freedom. Therefore, to most scientists, a call for equality is a disturbing call, external to their cause, has nothing to do with their work, is not about academic performance. Equality, then, is the business of women´s officers. Or that of those women in gender studies, often confused with the former. Or an administrative task. Or an outdated call, back from the 80s.

If we want to harmonize quality and equality, we need to change this. We need to argue that **equality fosters academic freedom**, because excellence can only develop under conditions of fairness. Equality, then, is an intrinsic factor of quality in science. I hear this call already, at times. But we need to hear it more often, and support it with data, too. Most importantly, we need to be clear about what we mean when we say "quality", then.

3. Problems with Quality

Third, quality standards are changing, but both traditional and new standards are biased in several ways.

Traditional standards of quality have not only been inconsistently applied, but are inherently biased. In short, the truth regime has been built on very specific assumptions of a universal mind, of a genius, applying specific kinds of othering, of exclusion. The traditional culture of science is heavily influenced by all kinds of forces, including religions, okzidentalism and colonialism, and, last not least, normative constructions of gender. It is the culture of the disembodied scientist, in a lab or in a library. This scientist leaves the body and emotions at the door. And since bodies and emotions have been coded female, women stay out of it, too, as researchers. More precisely, this scientist also has no needs, since a private life takes care of those, has no vulnerability, is white and entertains particular civilized habits. Thus, all others stay out of research, too. Science, then, is the activity of affluent and able-bodied, white and Western rational being, coded as male. And since science requires this scientist to not acknowlegde such limitation, to not have research be "disturbed" or "tainted" by such

other, thus irrational aspects, research focuses on "purely" disciplinary, or "precise" work and "clearly" relevant topics. Again, gender is other, irrational, subjective, not relevant. Absent a recognition of body and emotions, of location, relationships and needs, it is a specific myth of Western middle-class able-bodied heterosexual masculinity which came to count. Deep down in the cultural sediments of this knowledge universe, quality has been coded as such.

But as I said: Quality standards are changing. There is an intense debate around new standards of scientific quality. In the context of the knowledge economy, in which knowledge becomes subject to measurement, such attempts to measure performance are sometimes rejected. I am afraid such rejection often serves to maintain privilege rather than save academic freedom. What is more relevant to my point is that even today, quality standards tend to be biased.

- In some cases, and particularly in the knowledge economy, research is excellent if a **product** based on it is marketable. This is particularly true for engineering, natural sciences and medicine. However, as long as traditional marketing as well as traditional medicine take a a paradigmatic male heterosexual middle-class Western customer and a paradigmatic white middle-aged male patient into account, such criteria support inequality.
- In other cases, research is excellent if **many colleagues** take explicit note of it. This is what bibliometric performance often tells you. As long as studies show that work beyond the mainstream and work by women is not referred to explicitly, but rather rephrased, and that women serve as illustrating rather than foundational, this is one of the mechanisms which fosters inequality.
- In yet other cases, research is excellent if **a selected few** consider it as such. This is peer review in funding, peer review in publishing, and peer selection in hiring. As long as women and other others are not part of the selected few in positions of power, as long as people carry unconscious bias along, as long as admission procedures are not thoroughly blinded, and as long as people tend to favor similarity to themselves over difference generally, this is yet another mechanism which fosters inequality.

4. **Current Uses of Quality: Objectivity and Blind Spots**

Fourth, quality is an ambivalent standard, from a gender equality perspective. There are at least two distinct strategies in which it is precisely **quality which blocks equality**, a repercussion of the historical normative stance.

The first strategy may be called **the objectivity-strategy**. There, quality is the argument used by the science establishment to preserve sex inequality regarding numbers. "Equality is political – and should not interfere with objective and neutral science". Or: "It is not important who does research or teaches – the output counts". Such arguments are employed to reject measuring quality per se. Again, I am afraid this defends privilege rather than saves freedom. Such is the case with many references to **academic freedom,** directed against the economisation of the academy. After all, we intellectuals are deeply sceptical when market rhetoric enters our world. The economisation of the academy, the privatization of research, the output-pressure – such innovation hinders creativity, it is said. We do not want to be a market. Rather, we emphasize the special nature of ideas, imply the image of the inspired mind, of thinkers, sometimes even poets. And in that ancient world, there is nothing to be measured, and there are few formal rules. At the same time, it is rather obvious that knowledge needs resources, thus is a market, and that there are many rules, however obscured. There has always been a market dynamic with competition as a driving academic force. The fight against "economisation" today is either a fight against inapplicable rules, and then rightly so. Or it is, and more often, it is rather obviously a defence of privilege.

It then resembles the **chorus of anti-Bologna-songs**. If performance is measured, reputation may suffer. If income is output related, some may put out more than the old boys, and they may not like this. Just as in the Bologna case: if I have to define what students will take home from class, I will need to rethink what I give them, and I may have to change things, and many don´t like that. So the routines and privileges which come with academic freedom traditional style may end the minute the academy applies some rules, including the rule of fairness and transparency. If performance is measured fairly, specific men do not fare better by default. If teaching is valued, some women may fare better in the academy, but be sure that if good teaching is also paid adequately, many men go into teaching, too. And if leadership or excellence are about good performance, things may be a little different from the image many still hold.

The strategy of objectivity – "equality has nothing to do with science" - is also used when researchers **reject a funding criteria** of gender equality in research teams. This is when "purity" and "simply science" enter the room, and women and all other others tend to leave. And I see this strategy at work when some declare that the **disciplines** should be strengthened to ensure the quality of research, for "objective reasons". It is the disciplines which guarantee for canonical exclusion, and which function as reproductive institutions of privilege. A call back to the disciplines may be a call away from exactly those emerging fields in which diversity matters, and counts. And the moment the disciplines come back, women and other *othered* may tend to stay outside.

The second strategy in which quality is used to block equality may be called the **"blind spot" strategy**. It is employed when gender equality is a criteria – success! -, yet usually referring to numbers only. Then, researchers or institutions argue that everything is fine since after all, there are some women there, and women in the field are an issue, and work-life-balance is a goal, too. This is a complicated case indeed, and it has not been the case 25 years ago. It is a rather current phenomenon. Here, we get back to the official political will: everyone wants equality these days.

Put differently: It is my impression that all favour equality as long as it does not mean more than that, like serious change. Gender seems to be o.k. as long as it doesn´t hurt, and it is rejected aggressively as soon as it targets the real issues, and would induce lasting change. Again, this makes things really difficult. It is important to note that when the blind spot-strategy is employed, we do not encounter a paradox. There have been discussions of whether we live in that paradox of success and immobility, but I believe it is none. Rather, we do encounter an interesting effect of our fights for equality: We have come a long way, know a lot, and everyone has learned from us. We do, as Peter Strohschneider, president of the German Science Council, said earlier this year, now face the "lateral effects of our success": we made it on the level of rhetoric, but things tend to stay just there. Some (meaning few) women in science are a nice idea ("nice" indeed), but the more than that – really …

Under the veil of nice rhetorics, bias prevails.

And indeed, we definitely do see better rhetorics. Yet we also see outright aggression, as some studies presented at this conference aptly document. You may say this is the usual story, that's how it goes. But I think we need to understand that nice rhetorics are the reaction to equality demands *of a specific kind*, while aggression is the reaction to *other demands*, demands for equality with quality.

- Today, if you want some extra funding for mentoring, or some money for junior women, or a little centre of gender and equality in your institution, you may get it. And you will have the rhetorics in place.
- But if you want mentoring *and* money for junior members of scientific minorities, including women, *and* an equality office and a gender studies unit, and gender in all curricula and as part of required research questions, and

transparent and accessible funding schemes and performance evaluation and men and women represented on all levels of the institution and and and … you face a fight. Or, as President Wintermantel said: you confront the unbearable conditions at universities today.

The pro-equality rhetoric is a reaction to a specific kind of demand, and it waters down any more radical calls for real change. **It is rhetorical progress in the face of factual immobility.** One lateral effect of success is to loose a radical grip on the issues. So why not take some radicalism back on the agenda, and really follow the term: grab the problem at the root, the radix.

The quest for serious quality standards, as a quest for fairness is, I believe, more than having some junior women, a small institution and interesting books out. Calling for quality means to address the utter inequalities which still pervade academic life.

5. The Meaning of Quality today

Fifth, then, when we say quality, what do we mean?

Educational profile, scope of issues covered in research, research and teaching activities manifest in publication records, knowledge transfer records or funding records, administrative activities, activities in networking, mobility or lack thereof, etc.? What do you think really counts, as an indicator of quality in research? We need to discuss this. And to be sure, quality is a standard we demand for all of science, including gender studies. This is important to **move beyond the blind spot strategy.** It is very nice to point to blind spots – they are so tiny, and they are so easy to fix. But I think we need to do more.

We need to point out the effect of gender as a category of knowledge which deeply impacts upon how people judge work and what people think are the standards in their field. And we need to address the gender of quality. **If we say gender, we should do gender.** This means not to do work on women as quasi-natural entities, and neither on the heuristic happy couple, women and men. Work on the gendered nature of science reveals the brain´s sexism out there, as bipolar heterosexism, men invisible, women othered, and it points to the interwoven racism, classism, ageism and and ableism in the fields.

Quality in science regarding gender – what would that mean?

- It is great that in medicine, the "gender knee" has been "invented" in 2006, and please consider the timing, to fit women´s knees as well as men´s knees, after decades of such surgery. Now some medicince thinks of women, too, great. It does not hurt them, either, quite the contrary. It is a starting point. But it is not excellent, really.
- It also wonderful that economics now start to, in some areas, take account of the private sphere, as a sphere of consumption and production, which has been neglected because the market seemed to happen elsewhere, for a long time. This ideological distinction between the public sphere as male and the private sphere as female pervades economics, political and social sciences, law, history or philosophy. If all these disciplines now start thinking of the private, too, great. It may hurt a bit, since policies really tend to shift then. And it is an indicator of quality, since it is based on systematic considerations of gendered space. But again, it is not all there is.
- Similarly, it is very interesting that there is work on women in history, or work on female figures in religions, or on women in national iconographies. It is an important first step on the way to adequate systematic research, including gender. Yet today, top quality is more than that. To reach that standard, work has to scrutinize the shape and effects of gender as a regime, a sexualized and heterosexual matrix. So if research does that, wonderful.

- Some research is, then, not only good and interesting, but , from the perspective of gender studies, excellent. It systematically considers that gender is really **nothing without** and yet **more than only** about men and women. For example, if gender is taken seriously, studies in engineering reflect upon practices of othering, upon ideas on masculinity and femininity in design, upon gender roles, role ascription and effects of stereotyping in engineering processes or user schemes, and more, I guess. This means to use gender as a category intersecting with ethnicity, class, age, or ability. Here, you may find excellence, based on the quality criteria you use.

So a quality debate is **not only an issue just for them, but for us, too.** researchers need to discuss quality, and leaders as well as responsible administrators, including gender equality officers, need to ensure that this discussion is participatory, transparent, under conditions of fairness. This will be easy in gender studies, since this field fosters a rather deliberative culture, but it will be more difficult to create such discussions in other academic fields. The grand scene which needs a quality debate is, as we all know, the mainstream of science. And there, transparency is key.

6. Indicators of Quality

Sixth, and finally then, when we ask for quality, in all fields and in all decisions which affect science and higher learning, what do we want to see?

We want to see more than a nice reaction to a tiny blind spot, and aggressively negative reactions to anything beyond that. In particular, we want leaders and peers to tackle male bonding, tackle biased images of excellence, tackle the contingency of disciplines if they preserve privilege rather than contribute to the world of knowledge, tackle the outrageously simplistic bias in review, tackle the quality assumptions about "interesting" research topics, tackle the sexism in the hallways, on publication boards, in the meeting rooms, in the offices – tackle the quality procedures and the quality standards.

The issue is, then, in positive terms, **fairness and diversity**, but in necessary negative terms: **discrimination, stigma and bias, stereotype and prejudice**. The issue is not a neutral academic concept, not even a procedural strategy like gender mainstreaming.

Be sure that many people in science react very allergic to this kind of talk. If we argue that women do not all leave science because they want children, and not all leave because their partners do not get a double-career-job, people get really nervous. "Do you want to say that we discriminate against anyone?" "Do you really want to see we have prejudices?" I think, yes, I do. The leaky pipeline, the floor below the glass ceiling, the space for token women – wonderful analytic terms. They capture effects of pervasive sexism, and systemic othering. Have the resistance indicate how on target you are. And let´s be clear: we want quality, for all. Try it out, in case you haven´t yet – and all those who have: talk about it, pursue it,

don´t stop.

- Have people judge recommendations for candidates, coming from a female or coming from a male professor, from someone called Peter White, or from someone called Chantal Makeba.
- Have people judge papers, coming from people with female first names, male first names, or non-gendered first names, or with names which sound East German, or West German, as a recent study documented.
- Have people judge the value of a statement identified as from the woman in the room, or from a man, or from the "Ausländer", or the disabled person, or the "old guy", or someone else not mainstream.

- Do all this in different disciplines, in different settings, and change variables: gender, ethnicity, class, religion, ability. There are projects out there which are very interesting. The Advance project at the University of Michigan seems to be a good example. Not that they quickly solved the issue. But it is clear to me that there is no progress without getting into the heads of those who decide about quality in science. It is a task for researchers competent in gender studies to inspire the debate, and it is a task for leadership as well as gender equality officers to make sure the debate happens.

The issue, on a positive note then, is subject to deliberation, in that quality should govern according to the norm of equality – the issue is excellence under conditions of fairness. Since we live in a world of diverse options of knowledge, in a world beyond one truth, we need to take the opportunity to revisit quality, and reframe it beyond bias. We need to ensure the quality of research by inviting diverse modes of thinking, under conditions of fairness, beyond discrimination. We need to apply quality standards we agree upon as rigorously to ourselves as to the mainstream. E**xcellence under conditions of fairness -** in a world of science which uses all options of knowledge, and opportunities accordingly. That should move things a bit.