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Ten Years of Studying Gender and Equal Opportunities in UK Universities[1]

BACKGROUND

There has long been opposition to women in universities. As Marge Piercy (1987) points out in her novel of women fighting to make their way in a man's world: 'But universities are tight and prejudiced against women. It's rotten hard for a woman to get a decent job around a university' (149).

Historically, Higher Education was declared inappropriate for women. Aristotle wrote that 'woman was essentially different from man in nature and hence that the former cannot profit by this higher education to be given to citizens'. Rousseau argued that 'a woman of culture (i.e. education) is the plague of her husband, her children, her family, her servants – everybody'.

Many young women faced opposition from society in their attempts to undertake a university education on both sides of the Atlantic. In the USA, the best selling book by Edward C. Clarke, *Sex in Education; or a fair chance for the girls,* predicted that if women went to college their wombs would atrophy (Kimmel, 2000). In the UK, Vera Brittain's mother was criticised for allowing her to go to university in 1914: 'How can you send your daughter to college, Mrs Brittain! Don't you want her ever to get married?'

STATISTICS

In the UK, women make up 52% of all full-time and 58% of all part-time undergraduates. However, there is a difference in the disciplines that men and women

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[1] This paper is based on a speech held at the project's reunion in London in April 2002.

study. Women constitute 77% of education students, but only 15% of engineering and technology students. Also, women academics have not enjoyed the same success as women students. Their position has moved from one of total exclusion to the maintenance of relatively stable horizontal segregation, especially by discipline, and vertical segregation by grade. Although the first woman became an academic in 1893, and the first woman was appointed as a professor in 1894, since then there has been very slow progress. By the 1970s, the proportion of women academics was virtually the same as in 1920s.

Despite the introduction of Equal Opportunities (EO) policies by many universities in 1990s, academic staff continue to be male-dominated. Overall women hold only 35% of full-time academic posts (including both teaching and research), and account for only 10% of professors. The figures are even more revealing, if we look at different disciplines and grades. Whereas 24% of education professors are women, only 2% of physics professors are, and there are none at all in civil engineering.

Also, the proportion of women academics in the most prestigious and older established universities has always been lower than those in newer institutions. There are significant differences in the proportion of women staff between the 'new' (post-1992) and the 'old' (pre-1992) universities; 42% and 27% respectively. Women academics are also in less secure and lower paid positions than their male counterparts. Only 42% of women academics hold full-time permanent positions compared to 59% of men, and women are a third more likely than men to be employed on fixed-term contracts. Universities pay women less than men for doing the same jobs in the same subjects. A big gap exists in almost all subjects, and at every grade. Topping the list is anatomy and physiology, with a £8,000 difference in male and female professor's pay. Even in nursing and paramedical studies, with the highest proportion of women, where 70% of lecturers are female - male lecturers earn £1,558 more on average.

Opportunity 2000 singled universities out as 'under-performing employers' who had 'signally failed to make enough progress in promoting women' 'one of the last bastions against the recognition of "women's worth"'. The Hansard Society Commission Report argued that 'generational change does not appear to have done the trick and the evidence suggests that waiting for it to do so may well take a long time'.

Therefore, although 90% of universities have formal EO policies they are described variously as 'feeble', 'too little too late', and fewer than a third have action plans to back up their policies. Thus, universities remain persistent sites of inequality for women academics.

MY STUDIES

The following section reports two research studies undertaken by the author to investigate the issue of women academic's underachievement in universities. The first study took place in 1992, because by the early 1990s, it was recognized that qualitative data on women academic's experiences were needed. EO policies and practices were introduced in the mid-1990s, and therefore the second study was undertaken in the late 1990s/early 2000s to evaluate their effect.

Study One

In the early days, there was little qualitative data around. Women academics had not been studied in the UK, and most of the work available was from the USA. There was a need to move away from blaming the women to look at the social and institutional environment, which was responsible for women's lack of access and advancement in the academic profession. Universities themselves are an important part of this environment.

In 1975 (nearly 20 years prior to the first study), there was statistical evidence of discrimination against women in British universities, but little empirical knowledge about its nature and the mechanisms that served to maintain it. Statistical surveys draw attention to phenomena, but cannot of themselves show the causes or the processes involved.

Therefore, the purposes of the study included:
- to explore women academics' perceptions and experiences of discrimination
- to discover what factors had influenced their own professional career and what seemed to them to be the conditions relevant to the access of women to the academic profession
- to get a sense of what being a member of this profession felt like to women
- to explore effects of the reality of being a small minority working in a male dominated environment on women's perceptions of themselves as full members of the profession and being true academics.

A total of 43 women were interviewed from a university where women made up only 11% of the full time academic staff (58 women out of 510 staff). The sample consisted of all the women who were available and willing to be interviewed during the period of the research project. They came from across all departments where women were present, and across the range of academic posts. They came from the four schools in the university; Engineering, and Pure and Applied Sciences where there were only 4% women, Human and Environmental Studies

where there were 18% women, and Education and Humanities where there were 29%. Out of the sample, 77% were Lecturers, 16% Senior Lecturers, and 7% professors.

The majority of interviews were undertaken by a research assistant, although the author interviewed most of the women in the higher grades and those working in traditionally male disciplines. This was due to the practicalities of a short project and the author's desire to get a feel for the data being collected. Both the author and the research assistant were mature women, and both were unknown to the women, which hopefully encouraged frankness and openness from the respondents.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to explore the organisational and professional issues, which had been identified in previous studies of women's inequality in the academic profession. This contained open-ended questions about their experiences in recruitment, probation, career development, appraisal, committee membership, and their academic role. They were also asked to suggest solutions to the problems they identified. Also, their experiences and perceptions of being in a minority, role models and networks, relationships with male colleagues, and views on being a woman academic were explored.

The interviews usually lasted between one and two hours, and sometimes longer. As research subjects, women academics are ideal. They are enthusiastic and willing interviewees, ready to talk analytically and frankly about their experiences.

There was found to be a commonality of experience across the disciplines, with common experiences of marginality within the institution. Although the research was undertaken in a single institution, and therefore there should be caution about generalising, these women's experiences were confirmed in later studies. Also, it is important to note that these women were the survivors in the institution and therefore may be could not recount the most telling evidence of prejudice. For that we may need the 'absentees', those who leave.

Findings
The following are a summary of the findings:
- The women had difficulties combining an academic career with marriage/permanent relationships/children. (56% were married/partner, and 30% had children).
- There were informal approaches in recruitment, and confusion between the formal and informal processes. The nature of application forms were inap-

propriate, interview panels large, male, and intimidating, with inappropriate questions,.
- During probation, they received inappropriate and lack of support and advice.
- There was a lack of career advice, and mentors.
- Appraisal was by men who had different perceptions of academic jobs.
- The women held positions of responsibility in departments, but not power in institution.
- They were good campus citizens, with higher teaching and administration duties, and pastoral care of students.
- They had experienced direct discrimination in recruitment and selection, and indirect discrimination in representation on committees (professors), difficulties with family responsibilities, lack of support for gender research, workload balance, time pressure, type of responsibilities given, not included in networks, and generally excluded.. Some of the discrimination was subtle and intentional.
- They suffered from the duality of invisibility and extra-visibility, isolation, and lack of confidence, because they were in a minority,.
- There was a lack of role models, mentors and networks for informal tutelage.
- They had some problematic relationships with male colleagues, treated as outsiders, and experienced sexual harassment.. They felt they did not belong, the idea of a women academic was problematic. Some had become honorary men, and were ambivalent about feminism and women's studies

The following are some solutions suggested by the women:
- Training of recruiters to raise awareness of women's career patterns and remove prejudice and discriminatory practices.
- Positive action for women, career development, and mentors.

Study Two

This study examined and evaluated of the impact of gender initiatives in universities via a combination of analysing existing university data, and conducting additional qualitative fieldwork with staff.

The following research questions were addressed:
- How woman-friendly is university culture?
- What is the current awareness of gender issues amongst staff?
- How effective is the operation of existing EO measures in relation to gender?
- What are the training needs of women staff?
- What is the impact of universities' image on the recruitment, retention and promotion of women staff?

- Does the curriculum design take on issues of gender?

Methodology

Operationalising the research questions above involved addressing a number of issues, both theoretical and methodological.

They included:
- Identifying and accessing relevant statistical data
- Covering all the research questions and encompassing the University as a whole rather than only one part of it.
- Defining the concepts used in the research questions.

Identifying and accessing statistical data
- Figures on gender were difficult to access. Recorded information did not always include gender. This highlights the value of proper monitoring.
- Statistics were held in many different locations.

Breadth of research: covering all the research questions, covering the whole university.
- Decisions about drawing of a sample of staff to be interviewed were directed by a combination of practical and theoretical criteria.
- Initially a number of information-gathering interviews were conducted with key informants in personnel and training sections.
- Then there was a sample of in depth-interviews. These were of an hour to an hour an a half in length, be tape-recorded, selectively transcribed, and analysed using the Nud*ist software package, by a single researcher. This made between 20 and 30 such interviews a feasible sample size in the six months research project.
- Concepts of the 'academic career', the 'culture' of the University, and 'gender' were then identified as key concepts for theoretical sampling.
- Issues of recruitment, retention and promotion, which formed part of the research questions were conceptualised in terms of the 'academic career,' and this suggested that staff at different points on the ladder should be included. Probationary staff, staff who might be considered eligible for promotion, and staff at professorial levels were therefore included.
- Heads of Departments (HoDs) were selected for inclusion in the sample. Most HoDs were professors, and therefore 'successfuls' on the academic career paths being examined. In addition, most staff primarily experience the 'culture' of the University through their membership of a department. HoDs were seen as key figures in the production and reproduction of the 'culture'

of the university. They were also key figures in implementation of change, and therefore likely to have valuable insights into the changing culture of Higher Education.

- Selecting HoDs from all four of Schools ensured representation from the whole of the university.
- The research questions required paying particular attention to experiences of women, but addressing the impact of 'gender' dictated that both men and women should be included in the sample. It was an important opportunity to incorporate men's awareness and perceptions of gender issues as they affected their own and their female colleagues' working lives.
- There were so few women, it was also felt to be important to include as many as possible from those groups where they are least represented, such as HoDs, and professors.

Semi-structured interview schedules were designed, addressing all the research questions, but tailored to different respondents - probationary staff, those who might be considering promotion, the 'successfuls,' and HoDs. A few additional interviews were conducted, as respondents offered themselves or were suggested by others, so that the final sample included some students, and some technical staff together with their 'line managers.' It was also felt to be important to interview Deans of Schools and the Vice-Chancellor.

In all therefore, 37 interviews were conducted: men and women; students, academic staff, personnel, training, and technical staff; 'new recruits' to the University, staff with some years experience, senior lecturers and professors; at least two Heads of Department from each of the four schools and other staff with managerial responsibility. Again the research assistant and the author were both mature women. Most of the interviews were carried out by the research assistant, and the author interviewed the Deans and the Vice Chancellor.

Defining terms used in the research
- Points in a career covered by the terms recruitment, retention and promotion were familiar. As the necessary resources for a successful career were identified by the respondents, the gendered nature of the career became visible.
- EO measures have been documented and disseminated. Terms were defined, even if they were not familiar to, or understood by all.
- Common understandings of what 'training' and 'curriculum' refer to were explored. It became apparent in interviews that individuals could operate 'broad' or 'narrow' definitions of these terms. Curriculum might be taken as simply referring to the topics to be covered in a particular course or module, rather than the whole process of teaching and learning and all the activities in their various contexts which take place during that process.

- The strength of qualitative research is to be able to incorporate respondents' own definitions. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have working definitions of such terms as 'culture,' 'gender,' and 'women-friendly.'
- Culture is slippery and elusive; because it is part of taken-for-granted, every-day reality, it is hard to see. University is a social institution and the organisation of the institution (the way business is divided up and administered from the centre to the peripheries, ways in which staff careers, academic and non-academic, are organised and administered via promotion systems and pay structures, ways in which teaching and learning is organised and delivered) are 'social facts', even if the costs and benefits of these systems are differentially distributed. All of these influence the 'culture' of the university as a place of work, but it is not sufficient to rely solely on formal systems to define 'culture.' The 'organisational culture' also includes shared symbols, language, practices ('how we do things round here'), and deeply-embedded beliefs and values in operation in the organisation.
- The term 'gender' was used in three contexts: individual's gender, gender-balance, and gender-relations.

   'Gender' is used to refer to ways in which the biological sex of a man or a woman is socially constructed – the attributes and roles.

   'Gender-balance' used to refer to the relative proportions of men and women in the university, and the 'representation of women' refers to how far women are numerically represented in a group (such as a university, a department, or a Committee) in relation to the overall numbers in any given population from which that group may draw. Numerical status may have implications for the symbolic status - representation of a group can therefore determine how far its views, values, and practices are legitimised, or devalued .

   'Gender-relations' are ways in which gender acts as an organising principle, usually in conjunction with other factors (such as ethnicity, age or class), in the activities of a social body or group.

Findings

- There was a gender dimension' of both the 'narrow' and 'broad' curriculum.
- The management of change was gendered.
- There was a social construction of gendered equal opportunities in UK Universities.
- The contradiction of the myth of individual merit, and the reality of a patriarchal support system existed in academic careers.
- National initiatives for women academics in the British university system was assessed as 'Too Little Too Late'.
- Equal opportunities needed to challenge the changing and adapting male hegemony in academia.

- The reproduction of unequal opportunities for women, was facilitated by academic's professional autonomy, their isolationist culture, and the management of EO.

CONCLUSION

The underachievement and disadvantage experienced by women academics is unfinished business. Also, it is getting worse. There is a growth of student numbers in universities, with minimal additional resources. This involves more intensive use of resources, longer teaching days, and Saturday exams. Also, administration is increased through modularisation, semesterisation, and flexible learning. Appraisal is used for promotion assessment, and performance related pay, and promotion involves self selection, plus reputational status from peer review.

Women's emphasis on teaching disadvantages them as the number of students have grown, there is an open access philosophy, and more part time students without formal or conventional qualifications. The pastoral care of students has increased and fallen on women. Also, the increase in part time and short term contracts for teaching and the growing casualisation and hierarchisation has disproportionately affected women.

REFERENCES

Piercy, Marge (1987) *Small Changes,* London, Penguin.