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**Women's Careers in Higher Education: Theorising Gender Inequalities**

This paper aims to explore aspects of women's careers in higher education internationally. In so doing it considers research findings on gender equity in higher education specifically and more broadly on women in the professions. It also attempts to provide a range of theoretical frameworks to analyse gender inequalities. It considers inclusion and exclusion, gender and authority, gendered divisions of labour, horizontal and vertical segregation, critical mass theory, organisational culture, micropolitics, emotional labour, women in management and women and quality assurance.

**Joining the Procession**

Seven decades ago, Virginia Woolf (1938:184) asked:

Do we want to join the procession or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?

Many women are still asking the same question and more poignantly why, having decided to join the procession, they are still at the back of the parade. Gendered change has been slow. The history of higher education for women, black and working class people has often been portrayed as a bitter struggle that has had to be challenged via political and legal reform and policy interventions for change (Dyhouse, 1995; Mirza, 1998; Reay, 1998). In Britain, the first woman became an academic in 1893, and the first woman was appointed as a professor in 1894. By the

1970s, the proportion of women academics was virtually the same as in the 1920s.

When change has occurred, it can be attributed to a range of enabling factors. Driving forces for gendered change in different national locations have a variety of classifications and labels. Different national and international policy contexts have enabled interventions and discourses to emerge about rights, opportunities, outcomes and entitlements. Recent drivers include:

- organisational policies and legislation for affirmative action /equal opportunities/ social justice
- public sector reform
- commitment to transparency in governance
- human rights
- economic and social development
- social justice and inclusion
- new markets and the enterprise culture
- international competitiveness/
- the women's movement and networks
- state welfarism
- human capital theory/ fears of wasting women's labour and potential

Additionally, theoretical influences have challenged gendered hegemonies in the academy. Feminism, postmodernism and post-colonialism have all raised questions about the power/ knowledge conjunction in so far as what is taught in universities and disqualified knowledges. (Stanley, 1997). Questions have also been raised about how knowledge is produced and transmitted (i.e. methodologies for research and pedagogies) (see hooks, 1995; Ribbens and Edwards (1997). The power base of university governance, funding and management have also been challenged. Neo-liberalism in general and new managerialism in particular have been interrogated by feminist theorists to uncover the gendered processes involved in the formation and governance of universities (Brooks and McKinnon, 2001).

## Gendered Divisions of Labour

A persistent theme in studies on women in organisations is the gendered division of labour. Early theorists believed that women's essentialised nurturing qualities makes them more suited to support roles and the 'semi professions' (see Etzioni, 1969). More recently, Davis theorised gendered power relations in organisations to conclude that women are present in significant numbers in adjunct roles (Davis, 1996). That is, they perform assistant, deputy and administrative roles that serve to protect more senior men from everyday clutter and time-consuming interpersonal contacts.

The reproduction of women's domestic labour in the workplace was theorised by Smith as far back as 1987. She highlighted how women's invisible labour promotes men's authority. In higher education, this translates into the gendering of teaching/ student support as female and research as male (Ndungane, 1999). This gendered division of labour is being reproduced in current procedures for quality assurance in the UK, where women are being allowed into senior management positions to take care of domestic arrangements for audit and inspection (Morley, 2003). A significant aspect of the gendered division of labour relates to theories on emotional labour and greedy organisations (See Currie et al., 2000; Malina and Maslin-Prothero, 1998; Morley, 1998). Fineman (1993: 3) described emotional labour as employees being paid to smile, laugh, be polite, or 'be caring.' Nurturance becomes institutionalised. Nicholson (1996) coined the phrase 'sex role spillover' to describe how women have expectations of themselves (and others have expectations of them) in organisational settings which correspond with the traditional roles of females and mothers. Expectations of women in professional roles can sometimes be based on the patriarchal discourse of motherhood. The woman in/with power symbolises the space where all needs are met. (See Shaw, 1995). She is destined to outrage, frustrate and disappoint if she displays agentic rather than relational characteristics.

Women are frequently left to do the organisational housework in terms of student support, team-building and welfare and development services.

A further division is that while women's participation in higher education as undergraduates is increasing on a fairly global basis, women are seriously under-represented as producers and providers of knowledge (Morley, 1999).

## **Women and Knowledge Production**

While the gender composition of the consumer base is changing, structural and attitudinal barriers continue to exist in relation to women as producers of knowledge (See Howie & Tauchert 2001). Women, in general, apply for fewer research grants than men (The Wellcome Trust, 1997). The National Centre for Social Research discovered that women academics are less likely than men to be eligible to apply for research funding as a consequence of being on fixed-term contracts, or being in more junior posts (NCSR, 2000). Women are often positioned as research assistants, rather than research directors (Reay, 2000). In Sweden, Wenneras and Wold (1997) found that eligibility criteria were gendered, and that women needed to be two and a half times more productive in terms of publications than their male counterparts to get the same rating for scientific competence. Wyn et al (2000) note how research productivity has a hidden curriculum too, with certain areas being perceived as outside the mainstream e.g. qualitative inquiries, feminist research, research on or by women.

This creates a vicious circle. Lack of opportunities, sponsorship and mentorship for research means that it is more difficult for women to qualify for promotion.

## **Horizontal and Vertical Segregation: Globalising Inequalities**

Horizontal segregation is when women are under-represented in particular occupations, departments or academic disciplines. An area that has charted disciplinary cultures and women's exclusion has been that of women and science (Bebbington, 2001). In Britain, 24 per cent of education professors are women, while only 2 per cent of physics professors are. Horizontal segregation can sometimes lead to vertical segregation.

Women are under-represented in senior positions globally. For example, in UK higher education 68 % of all academics are men. 29 % of male academics are in senior positions in HEIs compared to 11.6 % of women. 9% of professors are women. These statistics are not confined to Britain. In the Commonwealth, women's under- representation is also startling. For example, in Sri Lanka, women are 31% of teaching staff, but only 13% are professors (Kalugama, 1999). 1999). In Kenya, women account for 7.1% of professors (Manya, 2000).

In the University of Ghana, women constitute 26% of the working population, but only 3.4% of the professoriate. Women hold 11 per cent of full professorships in Canada (Wyn et al 2000). In Australian universities 17.1 per cent of associate and full professors are women (Chesterman, 2002).

Scandinavia has some of the most sophisticated equity policies in existence, with quota systems, high state investment in childcare and careful monitoring of recruitment and promotion processes. However, women still only constitute 11.7 per cent of the professoriate in Norway and 11 per cent in Sweden (Husu, 2001). Women in German higher education do not fare much better. Women entered higher education only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fewer than 10 per cent now occupy senior professorial positions (Majcher, 2001). In their special edition on women in higher education in Europe, Husu, and Morley, (2000) noted how gender inequalities flow across the east, west, south and north of the continent.

### **Women's Worth in the Knowledge Economy**

A dominant policy discourse sweeping the globe is that of the knowledge economy. We are informed that the development of human capital will contribute to national prosperity and competitiveness. We are also told that higher education has a cash exchange value and that the graduate premium i.e. how much more graduates can expect to earn than non-graduates is approximately £400,000 over a lifetime (DFES, 2003). However, this discourse remains ungendered. Graduates are compared with non-graduates and not differentiated by race, social class or gender. In human capital theory, the emphasis is on wealth creation, not on wealth distribution. What is becoming increasingly clear is that the same qualifications, skills and competencies are worth considerably less for women than for men. For example, in the UK, women academics' salaries are lower than those of men at the same academic rank (Bett, 1999). Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show that the average female academic will earn four to five years' less salary than an average male colleague for the same number of years worked.

Even in nursing and paramedical studies, where 70 per cent of the lecturers are female - male lecturers earn £1,558 more on average. 42 per cent of women academics have full-time permanent positions compared to 59 per cent of men. Women are 33 per cent more likely than men to be employed on fixed-term contracts and 550 per cent less likely to be professors (Guardian, 1999).

Qualifications and experience are worth less for women than for men, raising questions about the gendering of professional, intellectual, cultural and symbolic capital. This has been described as working in an ivory basement (Benokraitis, 1998)!

### **Theorising Women's Under-Representation**

A wide range of theoretical approaches have been applied to the analysis of women's subordination in higher education. The structures/agency debate implies that women encounter material structures that disadvantage and discriminate against them e.g. lack of child care provision. However, there are also psychological barriers that emerge from the socialisation of women as second-class citizens. This effects their agency or ability to act powerfully and independently of oppressive structures (McNay, 2000).

Another theory relates to socialised patterns regarding application for promotion. Women have been socialised into believing that they do not deserve senior positions. Promotion also implies risk-taking and visibility which girls have been led to perceive as highly dangerous. Furthermore, there are strong cultural stereotypes about which jobs are suitable for women. Applying for seniority represents a dangerous transgression (Charles and Davies, 2000).

Gendered networks, sponsorship and mentorship are notorious in higher education. Collegiality in the academy is a term that is often used to make the gendered power relations and networks that exist. Women can be easily excluded unless they conform to the unthreatening adjunct roles. Even schemes specifically designed to mentor women academics, such as the Swedish programme described by Eliasson, Berggren and Bondestam (2000) are not problem-free. My concern about mentorship schemes is that they imply a rationality to women's career development, suggesting that there is a formula or code to be learned and transferred. The lack of senior women means that mentors often have to be men. This raises questions about the gendering of advice that women mentees receive. I was once told by a male mentor that I should stop writing about 'women's issues', and write more about 'mainstream higher education issues'. Let us not forget the Greek myth of Mentor, where the process was about induction into patriarchy!

A theme that runs alongside mentorship and sponsorship is sexual harassment. This appears as an issue in most national locations. Women are offered professional advantage if they grant sexual favours. Another interpretation is harassment on the grounds of gender. This can take the form of overt and covert bullying that is notoriously difficult to confront. The widespread existence of sexual harassment marks out the territory as male (Durrani, 2001; Thomas and Kitzinger, 1997).

Social psychology has produced a variety of explanations for women's lack of seniority in the professions. The concept of internalised oppression suggests that women learn to believe negativity about themselves and other women. Hence women (and other oppressed groups) are dogged by narratives of lack and deficit and the 'feeling like a fraud' syndrome (See McIntosh, 1985). This sometimes translates into the low self-esteem/ self-worth/ self-confidence rhetoric. While these frameworks can be helpful, I believe that it is important to keep the social firmly in the frame and ask questions about how this process occurs.

A problem with the low self-esteem discourse is that it could be judging women against male norms. It can also pathologise women by suggesting that they are psychologically flawed and are simply in need of cognitive restructuring. Meanwhile the massive discriminatory social structures remain unchanged.

Butler (1997) is highly successful in theorising the social, the cultural and the affective consequences of second-class citizenship. She argues that there is a psychic life of power.

Feminist organisational theorists have noted how organisational cultures are gendered (Calas and Smircich, 1992; Gherardi, 1995). This is regardless of the gender of the people who work there. Rather, the culture reflects patriarchal hegemonies in its symbols, images, metaphors, artefacts, beliefs, values, norms, dress codes, rituals, language, stories, legends and myths. Organisational culture can be overt such as dress code, expression of prejudice in promotions, recruitment etc. However, it can also be subtle and quixotic:

Recent efforts to alleviate gender inequality have made it socially, and in some contexts legally, inappropriate to express overt gender prejudice... However, gender conflict in organisations is often unspoken or hidden

'between the lines' of what people say and do... Such suppressed conflict is easier to deny, harder to detect and combat, and more difficult to study (Martin, 1990: 340).

For some women, not ascending the hierarchy is a decision and strategic choice. They do not like what they see when they look at the lifestyles, occupational stress and pressures on senior colleagues. Marshall (1995) has undertaken research on women leaving senior positions and found that women were rejecting management roles as the work was so unattractive and required such discomfoting performativity and conformity. Smashing through the glass ceiling involves too much damage to oneself (David and Woodward, 1998).

A common explanation for women's under-representation in senior positions relies on women's reproductive roles. Responsibilities in the private domain and time taken for maternity leave are frequently used as logical frameworks to explain some very illogical patterns. My problem with this explanation is that it relies on normalised discursive framings of women in relation to their construction within the traditional family. It assumes heterosexual lifestyles for women and/or traditional gendered division of domestic labour. Furthermore, even in countries with highly sophisticated family-friendly policies such as exist in the Nordic countries, women are still not ascending the academic hierarchy at the same rate as men.

One of the most potent explanations, in my view, for understanding why women have traditionally fared so badly, in so many national locations, in higher education relates to theories on the gendering of authority. Authority, leadership and intellectual superiority characterised as masculine. Who speaks in academia and from what position? Who can claim academic legitimacy? Clegg (2001) argues that power is exercised in the definition of expertise. Gill (1993) carried out a study in Britain on the ratio of male-female experts selected to act as spokespersons or expert witnesses on either TV, radio or both. Content analysis of 372 broadcasts over a 10-month period showed that the overwhelming source of expertise was male. Programme directors claimed lack of available women experts.

Leadership is also characterised as masculine. There is cognitive dissonance when a women occupy powerful positions. Her gender undermines the potency of her professional position. Women in leadership positions are perceived as impostors, second-rate and

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fraudulent (see McIntosh, 1985). Women are often socially and professionally characterised in terms of deficit and lack i.e. non-men and second class citizens. Professionally, this can often translate into potent psychic narratives of inferiority resulting in overwork, fear of assertion, occupational stress, and unrealistically high standards (See Morley, 2001). McIntosh (1985) suggested that senior women are under unacceptable pressure to live up to unrealistic demands of perfection. She quotes a woman psychologist's contribution to a faculty debate on affirmative action:

I am hearing a lot of talk about excellence. But then I look around me and see a lot of mediocre men. For me the real test of affirmative action will be whether or not I can stand up here in 20 years and see equal numbers of mediocre women and mediocre men (quoted in McIntosh, 1985: 4).

Getting to the 'top' also implies a competitive determinism that is actively discouraged in women. Ambition is perceived as greedy and desiring (see Walkderdine, 1990). Women have been socialised to be communal, rather than agentic and self-interested. Hence, career progress can be seen as 'unfeminine' (Onsongo, 2000). Attribution theory is also relevant. If women 'fail' they blame themselves. If women 'succeed' they do not necessarily attribute this to their qualities. For example, De La Rey's South African study (2001) found that success was perceived by women as luck, rather than a result of skill and competence.

### **Models to Promote Gender Equality: Critical Mass Theory**

A key question in change theory is whether quantitative change automatically results in qualitative change. Kanter (1977) believed that entry into the informal system of an organisations, and hence access to power and opportunity, is determined by the relative numbers of men and women in the organisations.

She suggested that a critical mass of women in the workforce is required to influence organisational change and remove women from their token status.

Critical mass theory implies that, in seniority, women will function differently from men, and therefore change organisational culture. This is reminiscent of Gilligan's (1982) study which argued that women

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occupy a different moral discourse; one which privileges empathy, compassion and relationship. These qualities according to Loden (1986), for example, mean that women are more effective in senior organisational positions. However, there have been many criticisms of critical mass theory. Just counting women in does not necessarily mean that different forms of knowledge and experience that women bring are given epistemic privilege. Changing numerical representation does not mean that power is challenged. Transformation is within set limits and norms are left untheorised. This approach is concerned with women (or other under-represented groups), not gendered power, feminist theory or practice, or masculinities (See Morley, Unterhalter and Gold, 2003). There are also dangers of an 'equity paradox' e.g. as more women enter a profession, it loses its value (See Morley, 1997). A process of feminisation takes place. There is little problematisation of subordinated identities and 'Woman' becomes synonymous with a spoiled identity.

### **Micropolitics**

There is a hidden (gendered) curriculum in higher education. Micropolitics theorises how power is exercised informally and subtextually in organisations. It exposes how informal relays of power alienate and exclude women (Morley, 1999). Micropolitical relays of gendered power are notoriously difficult to capture. Micropolitics is about influence, networks, coalitions, political and personal strategies to effect or resist change. Gendered power can be relayed informally via rumour, gossip, sarcasm, humour, and denial. 'throwaway remarks' and alliance building.

An informant in Morley (2003) reports how careers are progressed through informal homosociality, coalitions, networking and sponsorship:

it's very interesting the way it's done, it's not done upfront at all. It's done entirely through barbed comments and timed laughter in the bar basically. It took me ages to cotton on to this; for a couple of years I used to go down to where they all eat in the bar at lunchtime and hang out and think why am I hating this so much? Why is this so God-awful? And after a while I realised; a) no women go down, b) the culture is absolutely sexist in the extreme and also there's a huge kind of power wash going on in those informal meetings. So once I realised that I just stopped

going and I felt better ever since, I must say. But there is something I think about us four young women in the department who are, we're all quietly, you know, plugging away at it but it just interests me very much that all the young men who came in at the same time as us - one's a senior lecturer, two are readers and one is applying for a senior lectureship and we've none of us even applied. And I think that must have something to do with the prevailing culture of the department.

An informant in Morley (1999) also comments on women's exclusions from male social networks

The institutional culture works on the basis of who goes for a drink with whom and that's not changed. The people who go for drinks with each other naturally get on well... I think women fare very badly because they are not able to go down to the pub for a drink to talk about it for a start. I think there is definite undermining of women.

### **Making a Difference?**

Returning to the image of Virginia Woolf's procession, it is questionable as to whether women can make a difference to the 'procession of educated men' if and when they join. A pervasive theme in the literature on gender and the professions is whether women can effect change or are they incorporated into existing regimes of power? (Wyn et al., 2000). More recently questions have been raised about whether women in senior academic positions been trapped into promoting a neoliberal economic agenda (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996; Morley, 2003)? Iris Marion Young (1990:165) identifies the dilemma that many members of oppressed groups often face:

When participation is taken to imply assimilation, the oppressed person is caught in an irresolvable dilemma: to participate means to accept and adopt an identity one is not and to try and participate means to be reminded by oneself and others of the identity one is.

A further question to explore is whether women's access and success in higher education is making a difference to women's rights, entitlements and material well-being in the wider civil society.

### **Women and Quality Assurance: Opportunity or Exploitation?**

One of the dangers of new managerialism and the evaluative state is that there is increasing emphasis on domestic issues in the academy. Quality assurance requirements make greedy organisations even greedier (Currie et al., 2000). Preparations for audit are labour-intensive and onerous. Hence, they have provided a whole range of opportunities for women to enter management positions. Morley's recent study (2003) on quality and power in higher education found that women were being responsabilised for quality assurance of teaching and learning. There is a morality of quality that can be profoundly gendered, with women heavily responsabilised for services. Quality procedures require the activation and exploitation of a range of feelings in the service of effectiveness and point scoring, such as guilt, loyalty, desire, greed, shame, pride and anxiety.

Quality management is seen by some feminists as inherently authoritarian and naively preoccupied with orthodoxies, and socially constructed and decontextualised indicators of worth (Morley, 2001).

In relation to managing the quality of teaching and learning, some women move away from the status of research activity and into the world that ties them to organisational development, new managerialism, presenteeism and responsabilisation (Morley 2001).

Recent debates about whether there can be alliances between quality and equality concerns (Bensimon, 1995; Luke, 1997; Morley, 2003) evoke some of the dilemmas about women entering management in general. Management is seen by some feminists as inherently authoritarian. For many feminists, the move into management can often be accompanied by the imperative to moderate radical ideals and compromise values (Deem and Ozga, 2000).

New managerialism in the professions is perceived as reinforcing 'macho' styles of leadership, as it is very outcome-oriented, with emphasis on targets, performance, and measurement (Brooks and MacKinnon 2001; Deem and Ozga, 2000; De La Rey, 2001; Lafferty, and Fleming, 2000). A contradictory view also exists. Women entering the

managerial elite in organisations, and sometimes help fulfil ideological and career aspirations concerned with influence and change agency. In relation to quality assurance, there is a view that involvement in the management of quality can provide women with the opportunity to cast off the status of 'other' and demonstrate corporatism and their ability to make a difference in their organisation. Luke (2001, 57/8) argues that 'working creatively and politically within dynamic contradictions can mean rearticulating and using a managerialist discourse such as quality assurance for social justice means and ends in the interests of women'. Accountability and the alleged transparency of quality audits can bring equity issues to light.

## Summary

What does the future hold for women's careers in higher education? Different scenarios abound. One view is that there are dangers that women will gain entry to senior levels just as the power goes out of traditional sites of academic learning. As the academic profession is losing status via low pay, competition from new providers and sites, so highly qualified men will leave. Higher education will become feminised and academics will enjoy the status of workers in the service industries.

Another scenario is for women to challenge the restricted terms on which they are allowed in to the academy. If entry nowadays into the academic careers simply inscribes women in managerialist discourses, women must resist their gendered socialisation to be more easily responsabilised into adjunct and caring roles. This argument suggests that women must be more self-interested.

A further scenario is that women need to refocus on their collective interests inside and beyond the academy rather than supporting patriarchy, neo-liberal regimes and oppressive practices in academia. Academic women need to use their privileged positions, skills and expertise to make things better for women, in the widest possible sense. Just focusing on one's own career interests will not promote gender equality within or outside the academy. Equally, while it is tempting for junior women to seek senior male mentors and research partners to enhance their career prospects, this merely reinforces male dominance.

A contradictory view also exists. Quantitative representation does not necessarily affect qualitative change. The presence of senior academic women does not always challenge organisational culture and the power/knowledge conjunction. Why should it? Why should women be burdened with such a hefty change agenda in addition to their extensive professional responsibilities?

Liberal feminism has long believed in the power of legislation to effect change. In this scenario, policy is the answer. It needs to keep being refined to incorporate changing forms of discrimination. For example, as gender discrimination is often relayed micropolitically via informal practices, these must be challenged alongside policies and codes practice for affirmative action and gender equality. The transparency and accountability that are so revered in quality assurance procedures need to be transferred to equality procedures.

A radical feminist view would include the imperative for women to stop relying on explanations for women's under-representation in senior positions that use normalised discursive framings of women in relation to their construction within the traditional family. This seals women in to role relationships and oppresses women who chose not to live in heterosexual family structures.

A poststructuralist approach emphasises multiple interpretations. The academy, like any other organisation is full of contradictions - structures are both fixed and volatile, enabling and constraining. There are gendered sites of opportunity and exploitation.

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