

**“BACKWARDS . . . AND IN HIGH HEELS”:  
EXPLORING WHY WOMEN HAVE BEEN  
UNDERREPRESENTED AT SENIOR ACADEMIC  
LEVELS, 1985–2010**

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**ABSTRACT**

In this article, we examine themes of repetition, forgetting, and searching for what’s next for gender equality in Irish universities. Our contribution will be to examine this issue longitudinally (1985–2010) to see what may have been forgotten but bears repeating, 25 years later, in connection with gender equality issues for academics. The data are based on a comparison of the number of women at each academic rank in one Irish university in 1987 and 2009, and contextual data from a survey conducted by the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 1985. This is followed by a qualitative investigation of faculty experiences of work practices. We interview faculty across a spectrum of career length (ranging from those employed when the original HEA survey was conducted in 1985 to new entrants). Our aim is twofold: (i) to search for connections between past and present organizational practices that reproduce unequal outcomes; and (ii) to explore positive changes that have been, or could be, made to help assign gender inequality to the pages of history.

Many related factors, of course, pertain to this issue (gender norms, domestic and care responsibilities, impacts (or absence) of relevant legislation and/or policy, and institutional practices, to name only a few). We are

also aware of contestation around the concept of gender itself (see Bendl, 2008; Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008; Marshall, 1995). In the confines of this article we choose to focus on the lived experience of academics in their work organization. In what ways (if at all) do they see gender and gender relations impacting on their work and their progression? What does this tell us about the way gender is constructed and enacted in academic environments? We focus particularly on organizational practices of work allocation, appraisal, and promotion as being of specific interest in understanding the stark absence of women from senior positions in academia.

## INTRODUCTION

Sure he was great, but don't forget Ginger Rogers did everything he did backwards . . . and in high heels! (Thaves, 1982, on Fred Astaire)

Let us take you back to 1987:

- Prozac makes its debut in the United States.
- The Simpsons are seen on TV for the first time.
- The Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* is sunk when French agents plant a bomb on the hull.
- Margaret Thatcher is elected as prime minister of the United Kingdom for the third time.

In 1987, the Irish government's Higher Education Authority (HEA) published a report on women academics in Ireland. The report stated that "striking imbalances are evident between men and women academics in third-level [postsecondary institutions], both in the level of post held, and in the fields of study" (see Table 1).

Table 1. Numbers Employed in Irish Universities as Presented in HEA (1987)

Grade	1984/1985		Females as % of total 1984/1985	Females as % of total 1975/1976
	Males	Females		
Professor	260	5	2.0	4.5
Associate Professor	92	5	5.0	6.5
Senior Lecturer	385	30	7.0	3.0
College Lecturer	536	160	23.0	11.5
Associate Lecturer	48	25	34.0	26.0
Total	1,321	225	14.5	10.5

The authors of the 1987 HEA report noted the very poor representation of women at the higher grades in the universities, and in particular the fact that though the overall representation of women in universities had increased since studies in the 1970s, the proportion of women at the two highest grades had actually decreased. While the report starts out by commenting strongly on “striking imbalances” and comments that “serious impediments to the advancement of women in academic life still remain,” there is an absence of critical tone with regard to the underlying reasons for such an imbalance.

The main recommendations emanating from the 1987 report can be summarised as follows:

- The development and promulgation of a positive action programme;
- A review, and clear publicising, of the criteria governing assessment procedures in relation to recruitment and promotion;
- Improved training in nondiscrimination and gender balance on interview boards;
- “working arrangements within institutions should facilitate staff who are parents in combining family and vocational responsibilities”;
- “There is a specific need to encourage women to register for postgraduate degrees, to go abroad for research or further study after graduation, and to elect to pursue an academic career.”

The final word on changing such discriminatory practices comes from Michael Gleeson of the HEA, who commented on “The need for women to get things done themselves and to actively promote change” (HEA, 1987) The subtext of the report is of a “feminine lack” (Bendl, 2008) in relation to male norms. Roll forward to the present; have outcomes changed? How many of the report’s recommendations were implemented and to what effect?

### **2010: Back to the Future**

- The first African American president of the United States is inaugurated.
- The Simpsons celebrate their 20th birthday.
- The global economy suffers its worst crisis since the 1930s.

And in the Irish university system, what has changed? Table 2, based on our own research for 2007 and the HEA report for 1987 figures, presents sequentially the vertical distribution of female academics in 1987 and 2007 in the second largest Irish university—University College Cork (UCC), which can be taken to be representative of the wider university sector in Ireland.

While overall the degree of female representation has increased, the issue of striking gender-based inequalities in the higher grades remains. As can be seen from the third column of Table 2, the low average annual changes in female representation suggest that hiring and promotion practices have not changed very much in the past 20 years. Of the recommendations from the 1987 report, the

Table 2. Vertical Distribution of Female Academics in UCC in 1987 and 2007 and % Average Annual Change Across 20 Years

Grade	Females as % of total 1987 (UCC)	Females as % of total 2007 (UCC)	Average annual % change in female representation
Professor	4	12	0.4
Associate Professor	0	22	1.1
Senior Lecturer	5	29	1.2
College Lecturer	19	50	1.5
Total	11	39	1.4

only one that has been specifically addressed is the requirement for gender balance on interview and promotion boards—though this does not require equal representation; it requires only that both genders are represented.

There is a stated commitment to equality in university policy, but a 2008 review found gender still to be the most significant equality issue at the university level:

I feel UCC should appreciate that while many married women with children wish to achieve the dizzy heights of promotion similar to their male colleagues, they take longer to get there and the criteria for assessing suitability for promotion should be domestic friendly and flexible. (quotation from UCC Equality Committee presentation to UCC governing body, 10 February 2009)

Our discussion of women's progression (of lack thereof) in academia is contextualized by a national context of growing female participation in the labour force (from 57% in 1997 to 67% in 2007) but still significant evidence of vertical segregation within occupations identified by the Economic and Social Research Institute (Russell et al., 2009) as being due to the interaction of individuals' choices and preferences, employer discrimination, exclusionary processes, and structural constraints. Also of note are the numbers of women attaining doctorates. The latest report from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on PhD enrolments shows that women comprise 48.2% of all full-time PhD enrolments. Women significantly outnumber male PhD students in education, humanities, arts, social science, business, and law. Science and engineering remain the only areas where male PhD candidates outnumber females (HEA, 2009).

It is unfortunate and also quite incomprehensible that women should be marginalised in any occupation, least of all perhaps academia, and that this is an issue that has been repeatedly raised (e.g., Acker & Armenti, 2004; Bagilhole, 2000; Guth & Wright, 2009; Neville, 1996; O'Connor, 1999, 2000; Thomas,

1996; Wilson, 2005) but not resolved in the last 25 years. In fact it is quite “tempting to regard universities as hospitable places for women—places where academic excellence and the merit of an argument are the overriding values, places where there is a detached and impartial consideration of issues” (Davies & Holloway, 1995: 11). However, we will argue that the notion of merit is by no means neutral in the hallowed halls of academia.

## METHOD

In both a national and an international context, the evidence for vertical gender-based segregation is overwhelming. The aim of our qualitative research is to examine the salience of gender in peoples’ aspirations, experiences of work, and outcomes. To do this, we interviewed a cross-section of female academics at different stages in their academic careers, from new entrants to those who were employed at the time of the original HEA survey. Our interviews focus on participants’ knowledge of, experience of, and reflections on academic work allocation and progression practices. We focus on understanding how the lived experience of participants and specifically the interaction between their choices and behaviours with institutional practices produce such vertical gender segregation.

We present findings from our interviews in a thematic manner. We investigated each interview transcript in terms of the key questions asked, for example, what was interviewees’ knowledge of the system and the criteria for career progression, how would they advise junior colleagues seeking to progress, did they feel that gender was an issue in work allocation or progression decisions? We compared interviewees’ accounts both in terms of the substance of what people had to say about their lived experience of work but also in terms of the language they used and the way they constructed issues of gender, merit, hard work, and so forth. The data below are based on 10 interviews, each lasting between 1 and 2 hours, with a mixed sample of women employed since the 1980s, 1990s, and the early years of the first decade of the 21st century. Our analysis broadly fits within a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We looked for patterns in interviewees’ responses but also differences within and between people’s accounts. We coded each interview in detail and worked up to thematic codes based on constant comparisons across our data. The following section both presents the key themes emerging from our initial data and makes connections to the wider literature.

### BACK TO THE FUTURE: WAS GENDER AN ISSUE?

A key theme in all the interviews was the belief that gender equality was no longer perceived to be an issue by those at senior management level in the university. Longer-serving interviewees said things like “It’s off the agenda” and

“It’s done,” and said that the issue of equality was raised only for “legalistic reasons,” so that “we [UCC] can’t be got at.” It was raised with regard to situations like ensuring gender representation (although not balance) on interview boards, but was not pursued so far as ensuring gender representation at senior management levels. One participant suggested that senior male academics “didn’t get” equality issues because these issues were so different from, or “outside of, their own experience” of having a stay-at-home, supportive female partner. So, for example, a senior male would not see it as a problem to “take off next week for 10 days to North America if required.” Another interviewee commented:

People who are making the decisions about this are all here at 8 am; they’re not getting kids off to school [and] they don’t appreciate just how much of a stress that is.

A common theme was the perception that senior decision makers were simply disconnected from the realities of others’ work experiences.

Some senior female interviewees spoke about gender equality in terms of technical/ legally mandated issues. For example,

Well, I think it [UCC] facilitates them [women] in terms of maternity leave, sick leave; you know we’ve got very good entitlements but I’m not sure they [the university] can do more than that. I don’t really feel in terms of equality that you can say this is a man and I’ll treat him this way and this is a woman [and] I’ll treat her that way because it is an equality issue, but as a woman I think the various roles a woman has to play, I think you almost have to be twice as good as a man to come through, but that isn’t the university’s fault. I think that is a woman’s place in society in our culture. I have come to the conclusion over the years that we do need to work exceedingly hard as a woman.

The interviewee frames the organization as meeting its requirements by complying with legislation and by giving, for example, paid maternity leave—beyond that, equality is a societal and cultural issue in which the university is deemed to have very little in the way of a role or responsibility. A point to note here: though these systems are in place, women still feel awkward and “guilty” about taking leave, as you can see in the quotation from a more junior faculty member below:

It’s not overt, certainly; it’s not in your face with people saying, oh God you are going again [out on maternity leave] sort of thing, but there’s undertones and the fact that you go off on full pay, I think there’s a slight bitterness to that and that you can’t be replaced while you are out; I think there’s more bitterness about that and I think I’m very conscious of that and it puts extra pressure thinking that you know somebody else has to cover your teaching or admin work.

Some younger/more recent appointees seemed to distance themselves from the gender equality issue, suggesting that it was no longer a concern or issue in their experience of university life. Interestingly, when asked, they would verbalise that they did not see gender as an issue, yet they often went on to detail instances of different treatment/outcomes/behaviours based on gender: “No, not in my experience but . . .” Our interpretation of this pattern would be that perhaps older faculty had more awareness of, and the language to discuss, gender equality issues, as they would have experienced the feminist rights movement in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s.

Longer-standing employees believed that gender was still very much an issue:

[There is] one rule for the men and one for the women to be quite honest,  
as bad now as it ever was.

There were two quite divergent views on what one should do about this:

Be tough, play the game  
Step back, don't play the game

### **Be Tough, Play the Game**

In the “be tough” group there was a very clear assertion that the rules of the game were quite clear, and that women could choose to play if they wished:

You've got to shine on all elements, like what is very difficult because  
by shine I mean SHINE! You've got to be a good lecturer, a good researcher,  
a good administrator; you know you've got to be all things to all men  
really, and you've got to put yourself out there as well.

While formal promotion criteria assess three areas of activity (teaching, research, and administration), most interviewees felt that research achievement was really the key to progression:

My own sense is that any promotion would be down to research.

We will return in a later section to discuss why it may be that international travel and excellence in research appear to be valued above all other academic activities.

A key aspiration emerging from the 1987 report has been achieved—that is, a review and clear publicising of the criteria governing assessment procedures in relation to recruitment and promotion. All of the women we interviewed were very clear about what the terms for advancement were. Was gender deemed to be a relevant issue? Well, yes and no, as illustrated by the response below:

I don't think that it matters if you are a man or a woman, but you are expected to work all hours at all days and I think that is definitely that is easier for unmarried single people and for males. I think that for the married women in the department it is a huge struggle, because the kids have to be collected at 5 and the dinner has to be made and the men in most cases in our department seem to be able to stay longer than the women and they can get

more done and then get promoted faster. I can see the men in the department are definitely more ambitious to get promoted, and I think in our heads we see it as probably greater likelihood that they will get promoted anyway, whether [or not] you just say there's no point and back off.

Here one can see that the rhetoric of progression via merit and hard work alone is quite strong—it doesn't matter if you are male or female once you can put in the hours, get more done, and thus be promoted. However, the interviewee also recognizes that this presentism and/or perceived work requirement may be more difficult for "married women" with "kids" and suggests that some women may "back off" from competition if they perceive that men are more likely to be promoted anyway.

Many interviewees spoke of the characteristics required for progression in terms of a combination of merit (long hours and hard work) and personal traits. The kinds of traits required were described in the following terms: "tough as nails," "ambitious," "determined," "ruthless," "selfish," "formidable." Some participants thought these traits were equally possible for either sex to have and/or develop, whereas others felt that such traits were more natural for men, for example:

There's more ambition in men to overcome than there is in women.

Some longer-standing faculty had a slightly different take on the merit argument, saying that this could let the organization off the hook on equality issues by placing the responsibility to achieve squarely on individuals. For example, one senior female academic spoke of the "self protection" in the mindset of senior men who proclaim, "I am the best in my field—that's why I'm here," that is, I got where I am on my merits and so too can you; if you can't, it's due to your failings and not a problem with the system.

What then happens if women don't "back off" from competition and do try to play the game? Practically all of our interviewees claimed that one would have to make serious choices and sacrifices to succeed. Women spoke about making choices about whether to have a family, about the timing and number of children, and about how much leave should be taken. For example, one participant told a story about a female colleague:

who felt she had given up the chance to have a private life to have a successful work life . . . didn't have children as a conscious choice . . . to do the work she loves . . . but if she could do it over she is not sure she would make the same choices.

Another participant recounted:

I remember one of them saying to me, "Well, it's okay for you; I sacrificed children for my career," and I think, oh god almighty, and there's a pride in saying that sacrifice for her career but that's not the kind of institution you want to work for.



One senior female academic asserted that since the criteria for career progression were clear, women could and did choose to plan their family lives around their careers:

With the younger ones I have, they want to do what I've said and they're watching and they won't have that baby until they've done X. I've had a number of them who came in without finishing their PhD and they'll make sure that during their PhD they'll have their three publications, [and] they'll make sure they'll after that have the baby.

However, there are dangers if you are seen to “play the game” and attempt to progress:

I mean, that sounds strange: either they don't or else they put themselves out there twice as much as a man does and get a lot more stick actually. I think because if a woman is ambitious and goes forward and pushes people out of the way, she is ruthless; she's considered a demon.

Also noteworthy was that among those we interviewed, women who had progressed to senior levels had atypical domestic arrangements. For example, one woman explicitly acknowledged that it was her male partner's atypical support on the domestic front that had helped her career, as “it takes two people to ‘service’ one successful career.”

What has changed, then? In the 1980s it was a stark choice for women—have a family or a career. Now women may compete in the career stakes and try to have a family life, but some serious choices still have to be made, and it certainly helps to have someone (male or female) playing the traditional domestic support role.

Some of the interviewees in the “be tough” group also seemed to imply that women who had chosen to balance their lives differently had made less worthy choices—using loaded terms like “mommy.” For example,

So you still have people who have grown up in homes where the mother did not work outside the home, and we still have a lot of people who would prefer to be at home and find it very easy to be at home.

The “ease” of being a “mommy” is here contrasted with the ambition to succeed via hard work in the career arena.

### **Step Back, Don't Play the Game**

I think at first I didn't [make a choice between career and life] because I just didn't realize what was involved and [5 second pause] but I think it happened by default because I've done this my whole life. It is my job and I just got on with it and then you realize what wasn't fitting into the pot, and that the job was falling behind and that's how it happened really. Then I just realized that people who were successful were putting an awful

lot more time into it than I was willing to do, and then much later I made up my mind that I wasn't going to stress out about it anymore.

This quotation illustrates how one participant gradually (almost "by default") realized that she wasn't going to play the game. Notice how she positions herself as doing a job rather than aligning herself with the career model. However, much like the "be tough" group, she attributes success to putting in "an awful lot of time" and later "being very competitive." Once again the rules of the game appear to be quite clear, the question being whether one wishes to make the requisite sacrifices in order to play or not:

It seems like most of what you are rewarded for has to be done in your personal time. . . . That was a sacrifice I wasn't willing to make.

A related theme that emerged was that those who were very career focused (men or women) wanted their colleagues to take on more teaching and/or administration in order to free up their time to concentrate on higher-profile activities:

The people who are into being very career minded make sacrifices but I suppose it annoys me when they expect me to be doing that too. You know they are playing the career as a game and they want, expect, everyone to do that too or else get out of the way, to just do the jobs around the place while they do it. . . . [later] they have horrible expressions for it like . . . horses for courses. So they often float the idea of, well, people who aren't high flying, kind of at the top of their field or whatever, the rest of us should be looking after first arts [very large classes] or whatever.

The interviewee above sees this as problematic behaviour and would attempt to resist it, whereas some (as in the quotation below) end up "taking up the slack" almost unconsciously:

You volunteer to a certain extent and I remember, when I came here first because I was on a temporary contract and then I was sort of on probation, I was doing a lot of volunteering . . . and I'm trying to figure out how I started doing that; I'm not quite sure.

And finally, some see this volunteerism as a tithe or price to be paid for not competing in the big leagues: "I don't do much research so I make my contribution by . . ."

I think there is a difference between the amount of admin people do, but I think it is also reflected, maybe, that some people might be more research active and then don't do as much as what I call the donkey work really.

### **CONNECTION BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT**

So what has changed, what remains the same, and what bears repeating after 25 years? It would appear that the rules/criteria for promotion (publications,

travel, and research) are the same as they always were—these were set by men to reflect their experiences. There is no doubt that all the faculty we interviewed were well aware of the criteria for progression. So while the rules really haven’t changed, they have been made much more explicit. Not surprisingly, then, “choice” and “sacrifice” emerged as issues among our interviewees. Back in the 1980s in Ireland, the choice between family and career was more likely to have been either/or—whereas now more women want to have both/and, so they rail against a system that has always been either/or. Or they feel that they have to sacrifice family/life to play the game, and they have to be “tough as nails” to play with the boys.

If we look at how interviewees would advise a career-minded junior colleague, we see that a focus on criteria for promotion needs to be combined with a fairly focused (selfish) approach to the individual’s existence in the organization: “to focus on research and what’s important for themselves rather than looking too much to the general good.”

Here another interviewee comments on how those focused on creating their profiles operate:

If you want to have a career and a profile and what not . . . apparently what you do is, you just have to say no a lot of the time [to requests]. Find someone else to do the . . . work. I mean, I see people who are successful and they are fairly ruthless; they have to be. It is very difficult to do it otherwise.

So they are focused on self and career, and they offload non-visible, non-profile-worthy work to others as much as possible. It used to be said that behind every great man there was a great woman—it appears that now behind every successful career there is both a supportive partner and a willing colleague to take up the slack.

## **Mentoring**

Many interviewees spoke of the need for mentoring in an academic career, but the majority felt that this was less available to women than men, for a number of reasons:

- There was a lack of senior female colleagues in the discipline and/or department.
- Senior men seemed to feel embarrassed to associate with, or unable to relate to, junior female colleagues. For example: “Now, like, you know the idea of going for a cup of coffee with any of them [male colleagues], they would just be embarrassed if I suggested it. . . . Whereas I remember thinking, God it would be nice to get to know each of the people, but they didn’t want to. They would find excuses and they were just embarrassed.”

- Some senior women felt that mentoring young women would indicate a “reverse bias” or would smack of creating a “girls’ club” that would not be advantageous for their own career.

For example, one senior female interviewee commented:

I’ve never seen any evidence of female leaders actually actively supporting female faculty but they may subconsciously do it but I haven’t seen it.

Interestingly, many suggested that informal mentoring/mirroring was extremely beneficial to younger men in some departments. A number of interviewees commented on the mentoring dynamic between senior men and junior male colleagues, in terms of mirroring, shadowing, and so forth:

The guys in the department, they’re more impressed with a male student who does the same thing; they see themselves in them. . . . [Later] they can imagine the young man being, going on and doing what they did much more easily than they can see the young woman.

Another commented:

Oh, yes, their little shadow [male mentoring junior male], yes, I think that’s definitely true and there will definitely be that going on and it doesn’t happen with women.

A number of common themes in relation to academic careers emerged across all the interviews, namely:

- Choices made;
- Sacrifices required;
- Visibility [what is hidden and what is “put out there”];
- Focus;
- Personal traits or what is seen as “natural” for each gender.

The language above was used in every interview to discuss the nature of academic work, its context in UCC, and whether and to what degree gender was salient in participants’ experience of work. In the preceding sections, we have attempted to give you a flavour of these issues, interwoven with extracts from the data to illustrate for you, using participants’ own voices, what the issues meant for them. We turn now to connect with the wider literature on these issues.

### **It’s Their Own Fault Really: Women’s Career Choices**

It has been argued that the glass ceiling phenomenon emanates from the values and lifestyles women choose, for example, “off-ramping” careers in order to care for children, or perhaps having definitions of success that are different from those of men and therefore not pursuing promotion as aggressively as their male counterparts. The discourse of “choice” was certainly prevalent in our

interviews. However, according to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (2010),

gender equality is achieved when women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation and decision making, and when the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are *equally valued* [our emphasis] and favoured.

This definition of gender equality raises an interesting challenge for many organizations—that is, that equality is not merely about providing equal access or an equal opportunity to compete; it is also about equally valuing different behaviours and aspirations. This point echoes Neville (1996: 2), who addressed the manner in which the phenomenon of female absence at professorial levels is framed:

the idea [is] that if only women could be more assertive, more forthcoming, sing their praises more loudly, then things would begin to come right. . . . But some might object that if a total personality makeover is necessary, then the price is simply too high.

There are two issues to be dealt with here, one relating to adaptive preferences and the other to the question of whose values and choices are embedded and respected within institutional practices and whose are not. Turning first to the issue of preference,

deprived groups often develop adaptive preferences: they lower their demands and sights, proscribed by the narrow experiences shaped by the mechanisms of disadvantage. In a gender context, the argument might be that women become “stuck” at middle management levels because of organizational constraints and practices that discriminate against women. (Cornelius & Skinner, 2008: 143)

Thus, it could be argued that women do not choose to privilege family over work in a value-free environment but rather in the expectation that advancement to senior levels is beyond their reach due to discriminatory organizational practices. Or as one of our interviewees put it,

I think in our heads we see it as probably greater likelihood that they [men] will get promoted anyway, whether [or not] you just say there’s no point and back off.

Therefore women’s lack of progression is not simply due to their individual preferences or choices but can be seen to stem from *adaptive* preferences shaped in the context of expectations of both work and home life. Looking forward to the next 25 years, there is clearly a need for advocacy on gender issues but there is also the difficulty that many of the successful women we interviewed had adapted to or accepted the dominant male logic—the meritocracy myth—and were unwilling to value different value systems. Thus, many of those (both male

and female) who have achieved promotion appear uninterested in a different value system—they perceive themselves to have succeeded via sacrifice and merit and believe that others should have to endure the same rites of passage. It is the issue of institutional practices that we turn to next.

## INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

It has been widely argued that barriers to equality are mostly rooted in the structure and culture of the universities (Acker, 1980; Forster, 2001). Those who dominate the organizational hierarchy bring their personal interests into the organization. Since the higher organizational ranks in academia are mostly filled by males, their practices and attitudes determine the culture of academia (O'Connor, 1999, 2008). As a result, gendered practices are rife in academia, and notions of neutrality are misguided. Since women are a minority in the culture of academia (Bagilhole, 1993b), they represent the “other” (Acker, 1980). Their token status results in invisibility, powerlessness, and lack of opportunity (Acker, 1980). These patterns affect women’s perceptions of themselves and affect their experience of their careers (Bagilhole, 1994). Certain organizational practices play a part in maintaining women’s minority status in academia. We have divided them into (a) recruitment and promotion practices, and (b) academic organizational culture and its incompatibility with motherhood.

### Recruitment and Promotion Practices

Apparently neutral criteria for recruitment and promotion can act as exclusionary mechanisms (Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Davies & Holloway, 1995; Gray, 1994; Walsh, 1995). These criteria are deeply embedded in the organizational culture and devalue some behaviours while attaching importance to others (Gray, 1994). Critiques of the use of the criteria include the following:

The impact of reliance on publication record as a measure of performance is highly gendered. (Bagilhole, 1993a; Forster, 2001; Gray, 1994; Guth & Wright, 2009; Wilson, 2005)

Gender stereotyping exists regarding performance criteria and appraisal. Other apparently neutral evaluation criteria, such as ability, talent, potential, skill, performance, and legitimacy can also conceal value judgments, as men’s ability and talents are seen as different from and often superior to women’s. (O’Connor, 2008; Thomas, 1996; Wilson, 2005)

A biasing impact of informal networks exists in academia. (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; CUWAG, 1988; Guth & Wright, 2009)

A gender imbalance exists on interview and promotion boards. (CUWAG, 1988; Guth & Wright, 2009; O’Connor, 1999)

Our findings echo many of these studies in terms of which criteria are deemed important for promotion (such as an international research profile) and which are devalued (teaching, pastoral care, and "good citizenship"); how men and women are differentially judged in relation to the "same" criteria; and finally how many women feel isolated from social and professional networks in a male-dominated environment.

### **Academic Organizational Culture and Its Incompatibility with Motherhood**

Another way in which organizational culture discriminates against women academics is the incompatibility of an academic career with having children (Byrne & Keher, 1995; CUWAG, 1988). For instance, many women academics report that it is inappropriate to admit that caring roles sometimes interfere with professional academic duties (Byrne & Keher, 1995; ILO, 2007). Bagilhole (1993a) further describes the difficulty of combining academia with caring duties by claiming that academia is not accepting of married females with children, while it sees marriage and children as a norm for males. The statistical evidence supports this. Numerically, women academics are less likely than their male counterparts to be married and/or have children (O'Connor, 1999). Men tend to have domestic back-up to perform the caring duties for them, while those women who do make it to the top of the academy are frequently childless (Bagilhole, 2002). In our sample, those women who had progressed had atypical domestic arrangements. There are related hurdles around taking maternity leave (Byrne & Keher, 1995). Our findings highlight that it still requires two people "to service one successful career," that there is ongoing "guilt" for women in taking maternity leave, and that women face choices in terms of the number and timing of children they have and the prioritising of child care or work.

## **DISCUSSION**

This article highlights the fact that some messages have been forgotten and bear repeating, given the painfully slow extent of change accomplished in 25 years. While there may be growing numbers of women at lower rungs of the academic ladder, very few are making it up to the dizzying heights of professorial rank. Our research highlights that despite continued "striking imbalances" (to repeat a phrase from the 1987 HEA report) in gender representation at senior academic levels, the issue of gender (in)equality in 2010 has largely become invisible. It is "off the agenda" both for senior decision makers in the university and for many junior female faculty. Longer-tenured faculty feel that an explicit focus on gender is seen as less legitimate now than it was in the 1980s. Younger faculty distance themselves from gender discrimination as an issue, and yet they do speak of differences in the experience of work and outcomes on gender

grounds. We would suggest two factors in this disassociation: (1) the “I’m not a feminist but . . .” effect, that is, openly labelling something as gender discrimination is perhaps seen by younger women as outdated and attracting an unwanted status of victimhood; and (2) the prevalence of the merit discourse—that it is possible for anyone to succeed based on merit and hard work. We saw this in our data as the “be tough” and play the game discourse, which avoids any questions about the legitimacy of the rules, whose rules we get to play by, or the values inherent in them.

While our findings of repeated, though more subtle, forms of discrimination are dispiriting, there are also possibilities for change arising from our research. We would like now to briefly discuss some potential avenues for change. First, following Roos (2008), we would argue that “paying attention to outcomes matters.” Many of our younger interviewees were shocked when they learned of the current low levels of female representation at senior levels of academia. There is perhaps a whole new generation of faculty for whom raising awareness of unequal outcomes will be the first step in mobilising pressure for change and bringing gender back onto the agenda. A younger generation that has no memory of the civil rights language of the 1960s, 1970s, and indeed 1980s in Ireland may need to reformulate a language to capture their experience of “otherness.” Of course, it’s not just about individual awareness; this is a systemic and societal issue.

Second, from an institutional perspective, we need to start paying attention to outcomes—that is, to systematic quantitative monitoring of, and more importantly accountability for, the continuing inequity of outcomes. Based on our data we are aware that many in academia will continue to dismiss unequal outcomes as an individual rather than an institutional concern. Our data suggest this is based on a combination of the merit and choice narratives, that is, either that women simply don’t meet the standards for promotion (merit) or that they make the choice not to compete. However, our interviewees highlighted many day-to-day practices around evaluation where they felt men clearly valued other men and their achievements more than comparable (or better) female performances. The notion of merit is thus clearly an “elastic” concept (Roos, 2008) that needs to be carefully analysed from a gender perspective by the institution at all points but particularly in recruitment and in selection for promotion.

Third, we would argue that the institution needs to broaden its interpretation of the equality agenda, beyond a 1980s focus on access and consistent application of the same standard to all, to ask itself in what ways the organization supports alternative valuing of what it means to be an academic beyond the hegemonic, traditional masculine norms. The gender equality agenda appears to have a very narrow remit in 2010—as one participant said, “They [senior decision makers] think it’s done” because access has been addressed—women get into employment, and in increasing numbers they occupy the lower rungs of the academic career ladder. There are, of course, legal frameworks (for unfair discrimination,



provision of maternity leave, and so forth), so as one interviewee put it, “What more can be done for them [women]?” Having granted access to employment and adhered to employment law, UCC is “an equal opportunities” employer, so why should the matter be addressed any further?—in 1987 terms we come back to “The need for women to get things done themselves.” The understanding of equality as valuing difference is largely ignored, and anyone who opts for something that falls outside the (male) norm is portrayed as making a personal choice, nothing to do with the institution.

There have been, of course, other changes in the past 25 years in the university system that impact on the experience of careers—for both men and women. Participants spoke about the organization being more “greedy” or “voracious” now, that is, that workloads are intensifying through, for example, increasing administrative workloads, quality control processes, various teaching and research audits, performance reviews, and single measures of research outputs (number and rankings of peer-reviewed journal articles). There is a sense that work is intensifying for all and thus puts even greater pressure on the work-family/life interface. This leads us to wonder what patterns may emerge in the next 25 years. One possibility is that, in a career that already demands personal sacrifice in exchange for career success, intensifying workloads will see even fewer women striving for promotion. Another (more hopeful) possibility is that if younger men choose in increasing numbers to be more active and involved parents, then there may be a rethinking of the legitimacy of the “rules” of the game. For the moment, though, our research would suggest that many of the issues today are the same as those identified in 1985 but that they have become less visible/explicit at both the individual and the organizational level. Not only does the lady still vanish, but now it appears that the question of why she vanishes has also disappeared.

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