

Academic women and the challenges they face; their stories then and now

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses research undertaken by British Federation of Women Graduates (BFWG), on the challenges faced by women working in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England and Wales. A purposive sampling technique was used across a wide range of disciplines, in their local universities, by a nationwide group of BFWG trained interviewers. A semi-structured interview schedule was employed to prompt responses from the women who were from a wide range of university types, allowing them to tell their stories. Content and theme analysis was used to pinpoint the similarities and differences between challenges faced by academic women formerly and those now at the peak of their careers with those encountered now by younger women, starting out, or mid-career in HEIs. Results demonstrate that the challenges these women face have changed over the years, but are still causing difficulty now in the advancement of women working in higher education and that there are more similarities now in the challenges faced by both sexes, than previously occurred. It also shows that employers of these women need to reconsider their attitudes to the staff they employ, both male and female.

Keywords: Higher Education, Academic women, Women's careers in HEIs, Women's progress and status

Introduction

Over recent decades questions have been asked about the problems confronting females employed in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Concerns have been raised about discrimination rooted in gender, in areas such as promotion, (Seo et al., 2017) salary rates, (Brynin, 2017) and the publication of papers (Spencer and Smith, 2019). This paper presents research undertaken by the British Federation of Women Graduates (BFWG) to discover if the challenges of being a female working in an academic role in an HEI, have changed over the last decades. Academic women at different stages of career were approached, including retired female academics, to relate their stories and the challenges faced in moving forward in their careers.

It should bother everyone that, in the 21st century, despite the fact that 45% of all academic staff are women, 78% of professors are men. Women make up only 22% of the professoriate in the UK and only 4% of Russell Group Universities have a woman VC (2012-13 HESA data), which has prompted Dr Paula Burkinshaw to ask, "why are there so few women VCs?" (University of Southampton (2019: no page)).

In 2017 the European Commission (EU) issued information on the progress towards gender equality, reporting that the UK had made no progress on this issue in the last ten years (EU, 2017; Boffey, 2017). Figures showed that the UK trails countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and France, sitting on a level with Slovakia and the Czech Republic, on areas including income and treatment in the work-

place. Women across the EU were earning on average twenty per cent less than men, (though there are great disparities between countries). In addition, women undertake two thirds of household chores and at give at least an hour a day to childcare, or supporting the elderly; only one third of men do likewise. This EU report is supported by detailed information from the Fawcett Society (2018) looking specifically at gender equality, in their *Sex Discrimination Law Review Report*. Despite earlier legislation the gender pay gap is still entrenched in UK society, caused by the lack of pay rate transparency. BBC NEWS (Gulbourg, 2019) reported a large gender pay gap in British universities. The largest gap between women and men being at Harper Adams University, a specialist university in the areas of agriculture and veterinary sciences, at 33.7%. The Royal Veterinary College, part of London University came a close second, with Durham showing the widest gap in the Russell Group of universities. Every one of the 228 HEIs reported a gap in favour of men. The article also reported large gender gaps in bonuses paid to male and female staff. Much of this gap is down to the lack of women in higher level jobs in HEIs and that lower paid and part-time jobs are taken mostly by women. However, the gap, though it has reduced of late is alarming. Acton et al. (2019) found significant differences in starting salaries of early career researchers related to gender and a lack of support and mentoring. Additionally, pregnancy and maternity leave can result in many women being made redundant during this time, with little redress against the actions of employers. Paternity leave, which was supposed to bring more equality in the care of babies up to a year has not, in the eyes of the Fawcett Report (2018), been very successful and flexible working is often not available, despite provisions being made in law. It is women who take leave and as a result, can fall behind in their career progression. In addition, women the report states, face harassment in the workplace, something that has received massive publicity of late. ‘TUC and the *Everyday Sexism Project* research finds that 52% of women have experienced it in some form, and that 80% did not report it to their employer’ (Fawcett Society, 2018; 8).

Casualization is making life difficult for many HEI staff, male and female. In recent years, according to a study carried out by University and College Union (UCU) there has been a great expansion of the use of temporary or short-term contracts, often paid on an hourly basis. UCU (2019) claim that almost half of UK teaching staff are on ‘insecure’ contracts. If the staff decide to abandon their aims to be employed in HEIs, due to the insecure conditions and low pay, many Doctoral students are waiting to offer their services, as the competition for employment is huge. However, flexible working, including working from home is increasing in popularity, especially from women with children. The demand is there, but many employers do not address this need in initial interviews and some employees are reluctant to ask if it is possible (Timewise, 2017).

Women also lose out when research efforts are considered. Certainly, HEIs with the status of their research efforts in mind, appear to concentrate more on the achievements of the few, rather than have an inclusive policy towards research. This could of course be blamed on the Research Excellence Framework (REF), as success in that competitive world is important for an HEI’s standing. Baker (2019) reported, in press, the exponential rise in teaching only contracts in HEIs as the REF approaches. Little consideration is given it appears to staff wishes or aspirations, to join the research community. However, anti-female bias has also to be considered, a male name on a journal paper is more likely to result in publication than a female name. Studies of citations show that women are far less likely than men to be cited by male colleagues, even from journals where women are the main contributors; all these phenomena demonstrating prejudice against females by some men. The study’s findings were that implicit biases can influence judgment of academic work and this can affect women’s career progress (Dion et al. 2018; Pells, 2018).

Gove (2018) cites the poor support and mentoring of women in HEIs, as a reason why women are not climbing the career ladder and that more men should offer to help. However, women may be better at supporting younger women, who are struggling with the tasks of career building and starting a family. Women are blamed for not being sufficiently 'go getting', that is, reluctant to put themselves forward for promotion or notice. In some cases, women are accused of failing to clearly state their achievements to HEI leadership; that is, it is women that cause the inequality problem, as they do not tell the world about their abilities and successes, whereas men do. Also, a study (Parkman, 2016) discovered that a high proportion of women academics, from all types of HEIs and disciplines and positions, were afraid of being exposed as 'imposters'. That is, as Gove (2019) reported in press, performing a role that they were not entitled to, or good enough for and therefore could be exposed at any moment.

Kelly (2018) points to the fact that little is done in HEIs to support women who are still the main carers of children and organisers of family life, whereas many men are supported by wives at home and concentrate on their careers more easily. All this supports the existing gender biases that are so prevalent in the HEI sector. BFWG Colloquium (2011) *Female Leadership in Higher Education; Breaking the Barriers Real or Imagined?* raised the question of role models for women in HEIs as they were severely lacking. The meeting also considered the problems of poor leadership training courses which, in many cases, were centred on business-like models. The seminar also discussed the need for good mentoring and providing networking opportunities for women.

Prejudice and discrimination take many forms; some gender related, some prompted by racial bias and also class bias. An anonymous author (in press) wrote a telling description of her struggles to gain any kind of permanent job, despite publications and a considerable number of successful posts of a temporary measure in research. She blames this on her working-class origins and feels she is looked down on by her fellow academics and of course, in addition she is female. Her description of living on a salary too low to really maintain any kind of decent lifestyle, is disturbing to read. The difficulties of being from the working class and an academic have been noted by bodies such as The Association of Working-class Academics (AWCA), which aims to establish a collective voice for working class academics, thereby helping career progression and the fight against discrimination. AWCA is supported in this by the Hampton Institute, a working class think tank (WCSA, no date; Vitale and Hurst, 2016). Certainly, more interest has been displayed in the cases of racial discrimination, where a University and College Employers Association (Hopkins and Salvestrini, 2018) report showed that salaries of black and other ethnic minority academics are thousands of pounds less than those of their white counterparts. Black females being paid on average, 11.9% less than their white peers. These racial differences were noted in a BBC report, gained via Freedom of Information requests to twenty-four universities in the Russell Group, which showed that out of all ethnic groups, black women earned the lowest average salaries (Croxford, 2018). Indeed, the effects of discrimination from more than one source has also attracted attention in HEIs, some taking into consideration how gender and other discriminatory factors work together to adversely affect careers. This was introduced as a principle in the Athena SWAN Charter in its 2015 extension.

There does appear to be a difference between disciplines with some, such as the sciences, maths and engineering dominated by men, with other subject areas more balanced or, with females outnumbering men. The Royal Society of Chemistry (2018 on their website) state that

Talented women, interested in an academic career, are leaving the sector before reaching their full potential. Many excellent female scientists who stay in academia are not progressing to senior grades in the same proportion as their male peers. There does appear there-

fore to be a gender problem existing in sciences evidenced by a lack of senior roles being filled by women, stories of harassment and bullying, women of real talent are not progressing in careers in HEIs as are men.

Sciences and health disciplines suffer more than some others from discrimination, and this appears to be an international problem. Stem research was featured in a meeting in Toronto, where the situation in the area was described as a human rights, rather than a women's/gender issue (Duran, 2019). At the same time in the UK The Lancet medical journal, featured a whole edition on the way women are overlooked and undervalued in health research (Healthworld, 2019). The Times Higher (Mayo, 2019) reported on a study by Saunders, (Eaton et al. 2019) in Nevada, on the way a name affects the possibility of employment. It appears that males were more highly rated by physics academics, seen as competent and reliable, with whites and Asians being more highly rated than black and Latin applicants, for jobs in universities. Biology professors, however, did not show bias against women, but did prefer Asian to black candidates. The authors of the study considered that physics departments were dominated by male cultures. Women the report author suggests, face a double bias of race and gender when applying for physics posts.

One possible solution is positive discrimination, in order to attack the gulf between women in high positions in academia compared to men. The government of the Irish Republic, where only one quarter of university professors are female, proposed in 2018 establishing 'female only professorships' and fining universities that did not keep targets for gender equality. This was aimed at reducing the imbalance of males to females holding professorial status in the country and that gender-blind assessment of research proposals, resulted in far more female researchers represented across all disciplines. Certainly, women appear to make fewer applications for professorial status and grant applications. Unsurprisingly, protests have been made against the idea of ring-fencing some professorial roles for women, with accusations of the possible lowering of standards (O'Connor, 2018). However, as Clark and Coe (2019) ask; how is it that HEIs are still resisting the drive for gender equality? *Advance HE* in 2019, published a report summarising evidence as to what works in helping women advance in their careers (Media FHE, 2019). A variety of interventions were explored, including the initiatives Aurora and Athena Swan, which appear to have some positive results. A summary of possible interventions is included, encompassing areas such as mentoring, offering flexible work times and respect for family life, plus programmes to support women. However, apart from a mention of using search firms to advertise top jobs in HEIs, little is included about the need to change cultures, including those held by men at the top of most universities.

Methodology

A semi-structured interview technique was used in this ethnographic research, to ascertain the experiences of academic women in HEIs and their feelings about those occurrences. A set of open-ended questions was used to ascertain the experiences of the interviewees and their perceptions of the practices they faced in their careers. These questions were based on the reports and concerns of researchers noted above. Women from different age groups (20s to retired), different disciplines, university types and levels in the university hierarchies, were approached personally by members of BFWG and via social media and asked if they would agree to an interview. The respondents were, Vice Chancellors (VC) Deans (D) and Chairs (C), Heads of Departments (HDept.), Senior Managers (SM), Readers (R), Principal Lecturers (PL), Senior Lecturers (SL) Lecturers (L), those seeking work (SW) or having a teaching role whilst doing a PhD and those in temporary positions after their PhD (Post Doc.). (EC)

denotes early academic career and (MC) mid-career. Respondents were from England, Wales and one from Scotland. BFWG members are graduates and many are experienced researchers in their own right. The interviewers were guided and trained via paper instructions and group and personal emails as requested. The interviews were undertaken by individuals, or pairs of interviewers. Responses were noted in writing with the use of any recorded evidence, the use of which had been agreed with the interviewee and deleted after the final results of the interview were recorded on the provided form. Care was taken to ensure that responses were confidential, and no names of people, universities or individual respondents were kept. Interviews were carried out using Skype, phone, or face to face. Interview results were returned to the author for collation. Subsequently, the results of the questions were examined for emerging themes, commonalities and differences in the responses linked to age, level of employment, discipline and type of HEI. By far the majority of respondents were from a white ethnic background but included some from Europe and countries such as Australia and South Africa, whilst those of other ethnic groups, black African and black English and Asian were a small minority. This, echoing the problems of the employment of ethnic minority women detailed above. The stories of the women were examined for the similarities and differences of challenges faced in their careers and where there was a consensus of ideas presented. The findings from older and younger women were also compared, to look for agreement or dissent in their views on women in academic life. These findings were used to compile the main themes emerging from the interviews, in-order to produce a narrative of the experiences and feelings of the interviewees about their careers in HEIs.

Results

The respondents came from a wide variety of HEIs including, Russell Group (RG) Research intensive, Redbrick (RB) well established older HEIs, Post 92 HEIs (92) and New universities, (NU) established from 2000 onwards and included church based (CB) and private teaching only HEIs (P). Disciplines ranged from Arts to Veterinary Sciences and included engineers, psychologists and those teaching in disciplines such as business entrepreneurship and health sciences. The emerging themes noted in this research are detailed below. The sample size is small in comparison to the numbers of women employed in academic roles, teaching, research and senior management in HEIs, as the total number of interviews carried out was sixty-one. However, the main points that emerged and are included below, were expressed by a large majority of respondents and there were some strong correlations between concerns raised by women at all stages of career; those in Post Doc. appointments or even earlier, to those who had retired. Where the younger and older women's views differed strongly this is noted in the results. Where one or two people expressed similar concerns, they are noted as minor points, if they have some have significance to the overall findings; for example, age discrimination, experienced by some of the younger respondents.

Type of HEI and its effect on individual responses

It was noticeable that there was no apparent correlation between the type of university in which the respondent was employed and their feelings about how women's careers were developed and supported. University types appeared to have had little effect on their responses or demonstrate particular characteristics of attitudes towards women faculty members; individual university cultures did, however, as did specific disciplines. The quotations in the following sections are taken directly from the written recorded responses from women interviewed. Pauses and 'ums', 'ers' etc. have been removed to produce their thoughts in an uninterrupted stream.

Satisfaction with their employment and role achieved

This was generally moderate to high, although many offered caveats as to how things could have been improved. Some noted attitudes in the HEIs to women, others blamed themselves. 'Although I finished my career at a senior management level I should have pushed more for Professorship; I had the publications, had made a lot of money for the university, been involved with European grants and worked abroad for the university and other bodies in Europe etc. but no one encouraged me to go for it, the environment was not encouraging for women. I regret that' (HDept. Education 92 Retired). 'Would have liked to make Dean, I was a Deputy but no real encouragement' (HDept.92 Sociology Retired). 'Wish I had started earlier, would like to make Professor but not sure I have the energy now to do it' (PL MC NU Law 50s). All these women had children and were from different subject disciplines. 'Like where I work (L, EC P International Relations 30s), but think the standard of student ability has dropped considerably in the last few years, with little ability to critically analyse. I think that just doing teaching would bore me after a while. I prefer research'.

Several, at various stages in careers pointed to the centralisation and the power of the management and administration in HEIs. Academics, these respondents believed are not valued, their opinions are not taken into consideration. Some retired or near the top of the academic structure said they did not want management roles such as Head of Schools/Departments, Deans and VCs, as this would take away the research possibilities. Some commented on the division between teaching only and research only posts, though in some HEIs teaching only post holders were clearly expected to publish if they wished to be promoted.

Early Career respondents; virtually every respondent in this group pointed to the difficulty of finding a position and the massive competition for permanent jobs. 'I applied for 45 Post Doc positions before I got this one' (Post Doc RG Physics 20s). The difficult situation surrounding maternity leave for those in Post Doc. position, making it more or less impossible to have a family was raised by many of these women; all bar one in their thirties. Some were working on differently funded and timed projects and the pay is very poor, 'not enough to live on', 'I can only do this because my husband works in the City and earns a very high salary'. 'Satisfied with work, but not the precarious nature of work, semester only contracts, hourly paid cannot live on the pay and cannot plan for the future. The pay does not equal work done' (L MC Joint Unis Group Business 50s). The work/life balance and the impossible workload, was mentioned by almost all of the respondents. This included massive administration loads and having to learn new computer programmes to record data, which formerly had been undertaken by admin staff, many of whom had been removed to save money. 'The workload is impossible – should mention it to my line manager, but he has just imposed a load of marking on me for a module I've never taught and have no knowledge of. People are leaving because of workloads and friendships and relationships are suffering as a result. And the pay is not good either' (L 92 Film Animation 50s). These problems were adding enormous pressures onto academic staff and were mentioned by many middle, late career and retired women. Interestingly here, several mentioned the pressure on women to take on mundane, time consuming roles, which did nothing to improve their promotion prospects. Men they suggested refused to do them, or did them badly, saying time pressures were to blame and had them removed from their work programmes. 'The work-life balance is poor, the amount of work is unsustainable, most people (but not me) work ridiculous hours and this is increasing if anything - totally different from 20-30years ago' (R RG, Engineering 40s). Some women were stronger in their expressions of anger at what they considered exploitation by their employer. 'I am very angry I was never awarded Senior Lecturer level. There was total discrimination against women, gender discrimination was rife. I was the first woman in the subject area' (SL RG, Engineering Retired). Some older women complained about the lack of encouragement and that they had to move HEIs or work overseas to progress, citing a lack of support or interest in their betterment. 'Was

told (by a man) I would never get promotion in that university (RG). and not to bother to try. I had to change jobs to a different uni. There, it was totally different, I was supported and encouraged to apply for and achieve promotion' (SL NU Social psychology Retired).

Challenges faced in achieving their position

These were varied, but many older women mentioned blatant gender discrimination, whilst younger ones tended to use the term 'unconscious bias'. Two young women were adamant that there is now discrimination against men, as there are women only programmes for progression and organisations like Athena Swan. However, many more from all age groups cited the challenges of family life, maternity leave and childcare as being very difficult now. Taking time out, left you behind in the promotion race and, in some cases, it was seen as a waste of time by university leaders to attempt to bring you 'up to speed'. This seemed more so in areas such as sciences, psychology, health sciences and engineering, typically male dominated disciplines. However, a small number of HEIs were excellent at supporting family life, by banning early and late meetings, expecting men to take half of allowed maternity leave (thereby allowing the women to return after six months) and providing support for home working. This was an area which demonstrated the greatest differences between individual universities and disciplines. Sadly, several of the EC, or seeking full time work women, expressed worrying over ever being able to have children, as it would impede their career. This was common in veterinary sciences, sciences in general, health science and engineering. Keeping up with fast moving research was given as a possible cause, but it was creating a great deal of heart searching for some young women. 'In that position (Post Doc.) there is no entitlement to maternity leave. I did get pregnant but lost the baby, it was probably a good thing then, but very upsetting. Now I have a more permanent post, I am still worried about maternity leave and asking for part time work. The top people here are all men, though seventy five percent of the students are female now and there is no support for family life. Clinical work starts at eight thirty and finishes at six, too late for pick up from a nursery and there is no childcare provision on site, despite us being in an isolated position away from such services (L EC RG Vet. Sciences 30s). Several older women told how their careers were hampered by having to take time out to rear children and then having to restart careers at the bottom of the ladder and part-time, which delayed their progress through the ranks. 'I did not try to get promotion until the children were older and felt I could cope, so am slow in my progression, was a Deputy for ages' (Dean NU Social Sciences 40s). Many older women also expressed concerns about the pressure now on young women not to have children and the lack of support when they did. Also, the need to proceed from degree to Masters to PhD and then Post Doc. situations, without gaining any experience outside of the HEI 'hothouse'. This made many of the older women feel this new system hampered both men and women, as it prevents people getting 'real world experience in life outside of universities which are not the real world' (Prof. Dep Dean NU Quality 50s).

A small group of women from a variety of ages claimed that individuals (males and females) in their university, for whatever reason, had gone out of their way to block their progress and in some cases, had almost wrecked their careers. This, resulting in a need to move universities to gain any chance of continuing in the profession. There seemed to be no common explanations for these actions apart from individual bias. A notable group of women in science disciplines and psychology specialisms, complained bitterly about the take-over of men in the choice of research approaches. Quantitative techniques now rule the day it appears in those areas and where many women (and some men), prefer a qualitative approach. This is the women claimed, looked down on by male colleagues as 'soft' and not scientific. There were instances of women having to move universities to overcome this problem, but the quantitative tide of male dominated

research in these areas according to the interviewees. seems to be expanding not retracting.

Many older women spoke openly about sexual harassment by male colleagues, with the offered prize of research or publishing opportunities. This went in most cases unchallenged, though was well known about by other males in the departments, who in some cases did their best to protect vulnerable young women from these approaches from colleagues. Now, the complaints appear to be about innuendos, the shouting down or ignoring of women in meetings, after which, points they have made are redelivered by male colleagues and gain immediate support. On occasions, to pacify a female colleague who complains about these behaviours, remarks are made by male colleagues, about her appearance or that her 'dress is very pretty and makes them look lovely' (Ass. Prof 92 Education 60s) There were several expressions of concern about the pressures on female students from their peers, whilst the harassment from staff seems to have many consider 'gone underground'.

Interestingly, many young and older women mentioned the challenge of the 'need to be noticed' and that men were better at achieving this than women, who most respondents thought men supported each other better than women do and are better at networking. Their physical situation is also important. 'I am in a building a good distance and across a road from the main building, where all the important people are and there is not time to get there for coffee or lunch, so most of the people there have no idea who I am or what I do. It is not good for my career, but I can't do anything about it' (L EC NU Engineering 20s).

Several respondents mentioned the challenges presented by unclear promotion structures which differ between universities and run to endless pages of material on the internet. Women they believe, are too self-deprecating and consider if they do not meet every criterion, they should not apply. However, there were examples of universities that had good support for furthering one's career. Panels to whom one could put forward a draft application for promotion and receive comments and encouragement as to how to improve, were highly praised by the women who received such support.

Many, at the beginning of careers as Post Docs. raised the difficulties of doing other's research not their own and having to juggle different posts at the same time for very low pay. 'Love the work but can't get a Post Doc place full time. I am working on two different projects, very stressful and I'm in my thirties' (EC RB Science 30s). 'Took ages to get a Post Doc position and some of the interviews were awful. I think because it was for physics there was an anti-female bias and I am also an Asian' (EC RG Physics 20s). This challenge to gain a first post they all said, was the same for both sexes. One respondent presented the solution to the promotion problem as, 'work overseas as there is more respect for academics and better salaries than in this country' (SL MC RG Health 50s).

Challenges the same or more difficult now?

The majority, with only a few thinking the opposite, considered they were more difficult; particularly getting a full-time post and that men and women are having the same struggle. The few who considered the challenges to be less now, tended to be older or retired women, who pointed to the training, support and initiatives to bring women to a higher level in the profession not available to them. Also, the blatant sexist attitudes they had suffered were now less obvious; changes in the law had helped here. Things were still difficult but had changed and many believed strongly that those challenges now existed for both sexes. Working women acknowledged that now much more support and training was on offer and greater awareness of women's difficulties, but that cultures were still against the promotion and valuing of women's contributions. These they believed, were of real value to the HEIs as '(women) have a different perspective'. There were a considerable number of complaints from a wide spectrum of HEIs and disciplines about the sector 'Unis have been very slow in this regard they do not develop their staff. We

have not moved forward as much as we should as regards the challenges faced by women' (Prof NU Sociology 50s).

Support and training offered

HEIs were considered by many of the respondent as, 'not good at developing their staff like in the commercial world, it is often left to you to do' (Prof. NU Psychology 50s). Many pointed to the rise in programmes designed to help women succeed, though those courses were often not offered freely at their own university and they had to pay for programmes elsewhere. This included seeking out role models in their subject, or in a management area in which they were interested, from other HEIs. In addition, the programmes on offer such as Leadership for Women and Assertiveness training, were often based on the needs of industry/business and run by people who had little knowledge of the world of HEIs. The teaching preparation programmes were generally described by all who mentioned them as 'boring', 'dull', 'I did not finish it as it was so poor' (L P International Relations 30s).

Individual support was varied and seemed to depend on personalities and finding a good match of someone to see as a role model and not related to gender. However, many told stories of very little support 'I had to do it for myself, no-one suggested I apply for promotion or encouraged me, so I just did it for me' (Prof NU Sociology 50s). Other cases were the exact opposite, with stories of good mentoring, suggestions to put themselves forward for promotion, even before they thought they were ready, and time given for research activities. 'I had a generous time out for pursuing my own research on sabbatical it was wonderful' (Chair Oxbridge English 50s). It again appears that it is left to individuals, departments or line managers to develop staff; some take it very seriously, others do not and the variation between HEIs in this was very marked. Mentoring provision was often non-existent and certainly very variable between HEIs. Some described it as 'very good' others as 'very poor' on 'not related to specific needs'. Provision for and by men and women seemed similar, depending on the characters involved, but there was massive inequity between HEIs' attitudes to providing good support. 'I had to find a mentor from another uni. as no-one in my place did anything for me. I paid for a leadership course as nothing was offered to me here' (HDept MC 92 Education 50s). There appeared to be a difference here between younger and older women, as the latter had often had further degrees which enhanced their career prospects paid for by the HEI, whereas younger women had been expected to start with those qualifications already obtained.

The appraisal system varied massively between HEIs. In some it was taken seriously, and advice was given on how to apply for promotion, some respondents being urged to do so. In others appraisal 'didn't really happen though it is supposed to' or was of 'poor quality' and undertaken by people who though in a senior position in a school had, in some cases, little knowledge of the area in which the appraisee worked. One respondent said 'I had to explain that I could not take on any more work by showing my appraiser, my Head of Department my teaching timetable, at which he was astonished, apologised and withdrew his insistence that I should take on more work' (Prof. RB Maths 50s).

Domestic and working situations and their effect on progress

Responses here were in many cases affected by age and whether women had children. The majority of the retired women had not married or had children, so did not have that to consider when addressing work pressures, or attending conferences, though some did mention caring for older relatives. The difficulties of leaving home and attending conferences to network (which all respondents thought was so important for one's career), was raised by most respondents. Caring for children or older family members was also highlighted constantly. In addition, if attached, the difficulty in moving jobs when their partner was employed elsewhere and there were children's schools to consider, was also a

problem for many in considering career progression. It often resulted in one partner having to give up some career ambitions. The need in this situation, for a supportive partner who helped with childcare was considered essential, making it possible to cope. Many Post Docs and EC women also raised their serious concerns about the possibility of having a family in the future. Their lack of job certainty and their age, late twenties to early thirties, was a cause for concern and some were making the decision that children could be an impossible dream. 'I don't think children will be possible as in engineering you are under such pressure to be up to date with the changes. Taking a year out would be impossible (L EC NU Engineering 30s). However, there were others who were adamant that the problem was the attitude of HEIs to maternity leave was not up to date and the support for bringing absentees back up to speed was poor. There were very strong opinions expressed by women of all ages and from all HEI types and disciplines, that more should be done to persuade men to take a fair share of the caring roles, not leaving it all to the women. There were some examples of universities that were doing their utmost to help in this regard.

There were strong feelings from all age groups and HEI types about the pressures of academic work and the unrealistic expectations of their employers and its effects on their lives. 'It's not gender related Academia has not recognised the new environment and aspirations of this generation. To get a work life balance is now important. Lots (of PhD holders) now go into industry, hourly rate is better and hours more realistic' (Post Doc RB Sciences 20s). 'The environment in HE is hostile, a blame culture, always the fault of the individual here' (SW RB Science 30s). 'Feel under threat in Academia with government funding cuts and the devaluation of performing arts education in schools' (SL MC NU Drama 30s). 'Very frustrated like others with the increasing bureaucracy of the institution' (Prof.NU, Sociology 60s). 'No allowance made for the time writing and publishing takes' (SL MC NU Education 50s).

Equality across the institution

Many respondents here spoke of their real concerns about the secrecy of pay awards particularly at higher levels. Lecturer levels are on a rising scale with annual increments till the top is reached, but it is unclear where people are put at the start of their careers in HEIs. Respondents acknowledged that often women accept what they are offered when appointed, men on the whole negotiate to get a better salary. 'Equal salary still not happening as women do not negotiate starting salary as men do' (Prof NU Psychology 50s). 'Getting better but we are not equal yet. No experience of sexism, but there is an unconscious bias against women as regards promotion, salary and papers and grants etc. Cultural conditioning has something to do with this as it makes people behave in certain ways like volunteering for menial tasks, women do men don't' (Post Doc RB Psychology 30s). Male behaviour was mentioned often as being more assertive, refusing to take on extra work and being supportive of male colleagues. Women considered themselves not to be good in this area and needed more training to be assertive and confident. Some interesting comments were made about male behaviour traits 'This place is an old boys' club if you don't go to the pub and play golf you haven't a hope of fitting in – when I first started, because I could touch type it was assumed I was the new secretary' (SL MC 92 Education 50s). 'I work in engineering as the only woman and have the only phone on my desk which I have to answer - all callers assume a woman who answers is the secretary' (L EC NU Engineering 20s). Several younger women complained of discrimination due to their being 'young and inexperienced' – this despite this one respondent being the only person in her area to hold a Doctorate (L EC 92 Education 20s).

Some women now realise that they had suffer gender discrimination, whilst others seem not to notice, despite providing evidence of it. 'At my initial interview to join the maths department as the only woman, I was interviewed by seven white men, all with beards. At the time I did not even question whether this was right, but now I

do everything I can to ensure interview panels have a gender balance and possibly at least one representative from an ethnic minority, it is only right' (Prof. RB Maths 50s). 'I suffered no discrimination my treatment was always fair' This respondent follows this later with; 'When I first arrived as a woman, I was expected to make the tea' (SM NU Social Psychology 50s).

A few respondents mentioned the problem of being working class in what they considered a middle-class environment. This they said had made them feel self-conscious and not belonging to the HEI world.

Other discrimination on grounds of sexuality was not addressed by any respondent and there were few complaints of racial discrimination, but worries over Brexit and its effects on people's perceptions of European non-UK women. One white South African with English as a second language, working in an Education department felt she was 'looked on oddly as not fitting in' by colleagues. A Nigerian woman complained about the attitudes of 'Arab men towards women, very patronizing they ignore me whilst white men are fine - linked to their expectations of women in their own cultures I think' (L NU partnership Business 50s). However, only a small number of ethnic women were questioned as there is a lack of ethnic minority women employed in the sector, although one VC said she had never observed racial problems in the HEIs in which she had worked

Questions about sexual harassment brought strong responses and examples from the older women in the group, including those of suggestions of 'favours for favours' and outright proposals and physical attacks. However, this was not raised by younger respondents, but several did mention the problem for young female students and the behaviour of some male students as 'giving concern'. However, many mentioned a paternalistic, patronising culture prevalent still in it appears, quite a wide variety of HEIs, particularly those with a mostly male hierarchy.

Promotion prospects was also considered a difficult area, with respondents young and old, giving examples of what they saw as the favouring of men in promotion rounds at the expense of women. Older women admitting they accepted it at the time, younger ones now saying they complained.

However, complaints seemed to be an area where there is little support from HEI hierarchy. Human Resources were condemned as 'useless' 'of no help' 'did nothing' 'didn't want to know' by all who mentioned them. One respondent had to recourse to hiring a lawyer to fight her case and won it. However, she admitted that this was only because she could afford to do so, having a high earning husband who paid the lawyer's fees. In addition, there were hints that in some disciplines cronyism was occurring, that is unqualified people were, because of their 'standing' in the commercial world, being given honorary degrees to allow them to lecture to undergraduates who were it appears, impressed by their notoriety (SL 92 Film Studies 50s).

Athena Swan and programmes to enhance women's careers

Many older women had not experienced these efforts at all, though some thought that in their ex-universities they now existed. Opinions of those in universities were that it depended on what HEI, or even department you were in; some took this very seriously and strived to improve their gradings; others seemed unconcerned. There were complaints about the bureaucracy of the whole process, 'too much form filling' and 'some people have made a good career out of running this stuff'. Generally, however, women were in favour of anything that supported their progress. Yet again, it all appeared to depend on the culture of the HEI from the top down and some claimed there had been some negative comments from men, (although many were very supportive) about the process. Some women, also demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for how this and similar initiatives had been dealt with in their HEI or Department; 'rather a tick box approach', 'exists but it's not very active',

Should younger women be encouraged to work in HEIs?

There was great agreement over the response here. The answer was a strong 'yes' with some additional suggestions. 'You need to love your subject', 'go into it with your eyes open', 'be prepared to work 24/7', 'be ready to fight for what you want'. In addition, it was suggested by many respondents that one should 'look around' at what is on offer elsewhere, as jobs outside HEIs are 'better paid', 'less hard work' is required and there is more 'flexibility and better preparation for promotion' and 'commercial companies are better at developing their staff'. A somewhat depressing view of their employment prospects.

Other points they wished to raise

A great many respondents suggested more and better training and mentoring for women, but nearly as many mentioned the need for HEIs and the men in them, to be trained on areas such as unconscious bias. A desire for men to share the caring for children and families came over most strongly from all age groups as, if it did not happen then women will lose out on chances of advancement. There were pleas too for more flexibility in working conditions which is supported by law. Women need to 'stop apologising for their 'failures' and 'demand better and fairer treatment'. 'Position of women in academia is underpinned by their cultural conditions which are often menial and do nothing to further their career. Women do not say no when they should as men do. They volunteer for things men avoid and these tasks are often mundane and do nothing to further their careers' (Post Doc RB Psychology 30s). One interesting point was raised by a few respondents was that women in academic life tend to receive pleas for help from young female students on areas such as harassment, forced marriage, deportation, pregnancy etc. and male staff do not. There is no training given on how to respond to this and it greatly adds to the time burden on academic women. One woman suggested that until we have more women leading HEIs very little will change, and change has been far too slow up to now. Some offered good advice from experience 'shop around unis differ a lot, find one that suits you and your needs' (Retired Senior Manager). Stop women being penalized for taking career breaks to have or raise children, was raised constantly. Provide more and less expensive childcare within the HEI, to encourage good women to stay and progress (mentioned by a large group).

Conclusion

These are some of many comments and stories, told by women from a great variety of HEIs, employment levels and disciplines in Higher Education. What is clear, even from this small sample, is that there is still room for a great deal of improvement in the responses of universities and the men who mostly run them, in order to really use to best advantage half of their workforce. Progress has been made, but is far too slow and the culture of many HEIs requires improvement and positive efforts, as women's progress is still lacking. No-one in this research suggested that women should be appointed over men, if they were inadequate or incapable (something that several women pointed out does occur when some men are promoted). It is essential that more support and training is offered, childcare and flexible working is made easier to afford and obtain and that above all, those at the top of institutions should listen to their workforce. Women too need to learn to stand up and be counted, to expect and demand support and fair treatment, without asking for positive discrimination. It was clear that different institutions had very diverse approaches to supporting the advancement of women, demonstrated by individuals having to move to another HEI to progress. This however, with a partner possibly employed elsewhere and children at local schools can be almost impossible. The poor support documented in many of the interviews, ineffective, or non-existent appraisals and the lack of Human Resource Departments to react to complaints are serious problems needing to be addressed by HEI leadership.

The cultures described in some HEIs too are troubling, indicating a dismissive attitude that is determined by a few at the top of the institution who have it appears, little time to listen to their staff's concerns.

Certainly, the findings from these interviews demonstrate that challenges for women to progress in higher education are still present, but appear to have changed. To some extent the blatant sexism, harassment and lack of promotion opportunities seem to have disappeared, but sexism is still there, if somewhat disguised. However, the main concerns coming out from the findings here are those of the lack of job security, the bureaucratic, seemingly uncaring system that demands more than it is possible to give with regard to work levels and publication demands and the divide between teaching only and research positions which are imposed to suit the REF. All these it appears, seem to affect both men and women. The main concern that emerged from so many of the responses is one many considered resolved, that is the desire to have children and a career. For most people, earning normal salaries, both partners working is essential to support family life. Women who had well-earning partners apologised for being able to take action against discrimination, or take on unpaid roles, something that would be impossible for most colleagues. Sad too were the concerns of the thirty something year old Post Docs, with fertility limits in mind, having in precarious work situations to contemplate the inability to ever have both children and a successful career. Older women were also most concerned about this, as it appears that the fights over maternity leave, paternity leave, flexible working and the rights to family life they thought had been won are seriously under threat. Non-stop demands of employers are making it highly challenging to have a normal family life, with constant communication taking this away from both men and women. Strong feelings came too from the women interviewed that it is time men took their fair share of caring responsibilities.

The fight is ongoing, but with some closing of the concerns of the different sexes in the need for career progression and a decent family life. There is still a good way to go for women and men to receive equal pay, chances of promotion etc. in higher education. Certainly, the blame culture, saying it is the fault of women as they do not put themselves forward, as an argument seems tired and outdated. As one respondent said 'we need training courses for all men in HEIs to make them see what it is like to be discriminated against, put down and ignored' (Ass Prof, 92 Education 60s). There is still some way to go for real equality to be achieved and as a result the losers here are not just women, but the whole higher education sector. In particular, the disciplines including the sciences, health science and psychology, seem to be where the largest problems for women exist; possibly as they were traditionally dominated by men and little it appears has changed. However, we also need blind reviews of papers for publication to remove the seeming bias against female authors and men looking at the quality of published works, rather than ignoring those by women. Training women to work with large budgets would also positively affect the gap in male dominated research projects and this point was made by many active researchers, adding to their concerns over research funding after BREXIT. Challenges have changed it appears, but many still remain with insufficient action by employers to enable the advancement of women's careers in higher education.

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