

Mind the Ladder: An exploration into the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in higher education in Ireland.

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Abstract

Mind the Ladder: An exploration into the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in higher education in Ireland.

Lindsay Malone

Despite advances of the feminist movement, and wider structural legislative interventions, women remain under-represented at senior levels within academia and women continue to experience both direct and indirect forms of discrimination throughout their careers. The problem which this research sought to address is that there is no qualitative empirical data which looks at whether any change or movement towards gender equality has emerged as a result of the national gender action plan in higher education in Ireland. Thus, the aim of this research was to generate empirical evidence of the lived experience of women to ascertain if the current gender equality measures are affecting any tangible change for women in order to inform future policies and practices for gender equality in higher education in Ireland. The objective was to examine and understand the challenges they have encountered during their career. As these women have essentially 'made it' into the senior roles, it also examined the factors which enabled women to effectively use their agency to overcome the challenges to progress into those senior leadership roles. Employing an interpretivist phenomenological approach, this qualitative research engaged twenty women in semi-structured interviews.

Using a critical feminist approach, key themes emerged and were analysed using Fraser's theory of social justice and McNay's theory of agency. The findings revealed that though the number of women occupying senior roles has increased in Ireland since the gender equality movement in higher education began in 2015, it is evident that the structural and cultural challenges have not automatically changed with the increasing number of women. In fact, the gender equality movement in some respects has led to a feminised approach to equality, diversity and inclusion specific roles and an increased burden of work for women who are engaged in Athena SWAN initiatives across the sector. The gender equality movement in Ireland is a phrase I am using to summarise the suite of policy measures and initiatives that have been

established in Ireland since 2015. The findings also revealed that women continue to experience both direct and indirect forms of discrimination throughout their careers. Despite this, the women in this research have managed to overcome these challenges and advance themselves into senior roles.

This research has revealed the supportive factors which enabled them to do this which include their sense of individual and shared agency, their approach to leadership and the power of being mentored. The original gap that this research sought to fill which was that by simply counting how many women hold senior roles, we cannot understand if equality is being achieved. This research therefore makes a significant contribution to knowledge as it firstly provided empirical evidence of the lived experience of women to demonstrate that the current gender equality measures are affecting limited change for women. Next, other research on the topic of gender equality tends to focus on women at lower levels of the organisation, whereas this research focused on women in senior leadership roles and revealed what factors enabled them to progress into those roles. It also contributes to the on-going debate in this area across all sectors and recommends leadership development interventions that will make a difference for women in higher education in Ireland.

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Dedication

To my children Tom, Max, and Ivy. I adore you. I believe in you, and it is a privilege to be your Mammy (Mamam).

Author's Declaration

Author's declaration: Candidates must make a declaration that the thesis is their own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. Any sections of the thesis which have been published, or submitted for a higher degree elsewhere, shall be clearly identified. If the thesis is the result of joint research, a statement indicating the nature of the candidate's contribution to that research, confirmed by the supervisor(s), shall be included.

Signature *Lindsay Malone*

Publications derived from the work on Doctoral Programmes

Conference Proceedings

Malone, L. Minding the Ladder: An exploration of the lived experiences of women in higher education in Ireland, SETU Equitas HE (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education) Conference, Waterford: May 25th, 2023

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Chapter One - Introduction and Background

Introduction

Despite advances of the feminist movement, and wider structural legislative interventions, women remain under-represented at senior levels within academia and women continue to experience both direct and indirect forms of discrimination throughout their careers (Savigny, 2019). From an Irish perspective, O'Connor (2020) affirms this by focusing on the specific male dominated cultural and structural aspects of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), that perpetuate gender inequality. I will begin by introducing these cultural and structural challenges that women experience in Higher Education (HE) before outlining how the Athena SWAN (AS) Award has become a widely used tool for addressing them. As this research will be based on the experiences of women in Irish HEIs the discussion will focus on the Irish context. This is being done to present the government led gender equality initiatives which have emerged in Ireland since 2015. I will then argue that the main 'measurement of success' in achieving gender equality appears to be metrics based, where in Ireland, we literally count how many women hold leadership positions and how many HEIs have bronze awards. The stark problem which this research seeks to address is that there is no qualitative empirical data which looks at whether any 'real' change or movement towards gender equality has emerged as a result of this national government led drive to gender equality. To address this, this study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist phenomenological research approach to ascertain whether the gender equality movement in Ireland affected the lived experiences of women in leadership roles in HE. The significance of the research and its contribution to knowledge will be addressed before detailing how I applied my theoretical lens by drawing on Fraser's social justice theory and McNay's agency-based theory.

The Research Topic

This research specifically engages women. To address the research topic, I firstly want to illustrate my position in relation to how I understand the definition of women. I believe that gender is not binary, and women are not a homogenous group and claims made in this research which relate to women are not intended to homogenise women, but rather to illustrate the meanings drawn from the women who engaged in

this research. I believe that women can be understood through an intersectional lens as women have multiple identities that converge and intersectional approaches require matrix thinking, rather than single axis thinking (May, 2015). I chose to adopt a single axis thought process as the intent was not to explicitly investigate these multiple identities but rather to explore the overall experiences of women in senior leadership roles in HE. I therefore chose to adopt a more traditional feminist approach to understanding these experiences by using Fraser's theory of social justice and McNay's theory of agency.

A core focus of this research is on agency and the definition I am using for agency is rooted in sociology. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to have the power and resources to fulfil their potential. It is the ability of actors to act without being constrained by the governing social structures. Agency is an expression of autonomy against social institutions, structures, and cultural forces (Giddens, 2008). Given the multifaceted mix of structural, cultural, and institutional factors that produce challenges for women in HE, an equally composite intervention is required to understand and address them (O'Connor, 2018). First and foremost, ideologies play a powerful role in shaping the experience of women in HE as gender ideologies perpetuate the perception that femininity is linked to caring qualities whereas masculinity reflects physical strength and power. This serves to legitimise the gender-based division of labour and gender segregation which often exists in HE (Charles 2000; O'Connor 2000). More specifically, structural constraints for example exist through informal relationships which are mainly formed between males and often are linked to mentoring roles, which again are typically male based (O'Connor, 2000). These male mentoring processes can be non-formal ones which ultimately lead to the development of male allies. Further to this, there is another narrative around men mentoring women which is abundant and this narrow definition of leadership which portrays men as the heroes and women as the ones who require some kind of help is dangerous as it creates a one dimensional notion of what mentoring is and portrays women in a way which suggests that mentoring by men can help to fix women (Anderson, 2020; O'Connor, 2019).

From a cultural perspective, HE and more specifically the areas of science, engineering, and technology, are traditionally regarded as masculine domains which

can affect the gender identity of women as a result of stereotypes and segregation (Byrne, 1993). In a response to these challenges, the AS Award has become a widespread initiative which seeks to address challenges for women's career progression and leadership in the UK, Australia, the United States of America and Ireland (Advance HE, 2020, O'Connor, 2019, Savigny, 2019). Resulting from a series of prominent High Court rulings of gender discrimination in HEIs in 2016 (The Irish Times, 2018) the Irish Government commissioned the Report of the Expert Group: Higher Education Authority National Review of Gender Equality in Irish HEIs, which presented clear recommendations for HEIs to adopt in order to achieve gender equality. Recognising a lack of progress, the Gender Taskforce was established in 2017, who then formulated the Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) for the HE sector. Framed by its vision for Ireland to be the leading country in gender equality by 2026, a major component of this plan was the AS Charter for all HEIs in Ireland. Savigny (2019) informs us that in the UK despite advances of the feminist movement, and wider structural legislative interventions, women remain under-represented at senior levels within academia and women continue to experience both direct and indirect forms of discrimination throughout their careers. From an Irish perspective, O'Connor (2020) affirms this by addressing the specific male dominated cultural and structural aspects of HEIs that perpetuate gender inequality.

The Context

This research seeks to specifically address the experience of women in Irish HEI's to ascertain their lived experiences in senior leadership roles. This research is very timely as it seeks to address whether the experiences of women in senior leadership roles is improving as a result of the gender equality movement in HE in Ireland. To provide context, this movement stems from both the Expert Group Report (2016) and the Gender Equality Taskforce (2017) which both make explicit reference to the requirement of HEIs to become members of AS and achieve relevant awards. According to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2020), the AS Charter aims to effect cultural and systemic change in HEIs to support gender equality and the career progression of women and in Ireland since 2015 and it has become a key driver of gender equality across the Irish HE sector. That said, the only tool used to assess the 'progress' that has been made is the annual HEA Gender Profile Report. The

HEA began issuing this annual report in 2016 and they affirm that the reports collate gender disaggregated data from Irish HEIs that are in receipt of annual core-grant funding from the HEA. These profiles provide information on key indicators which will contribute to the assessment of gender-equality in Irish HEIs. This publication offers a baseline from which progress can be measured (HEA, 2022), and includes all grades of staff across the HEIs. The most senior role in HE is the President. Their role is to provide direction and guidance to all sectors of the HEI and, in particular, to lead and manage the performance of the HEI's Executive so as to ensure the effective and efficient management of the HEI and all its resources. As evidenced from Table 1 below, the gender profile of female presidents in HE in Ireland appears to be improving, moving from five female presidents in 2016 to eight in 2021. Similarly, Table 2 demonstrates that since 2016, there has been an increase in the percentage of HEIs that have at least a 40% balance of male and female representatives on their governing body, academic council, and senior executives. Table 3 then illustrates the gender profile of senior lecturers, which has risen from 464 females in 2016 to 566 in 2021 (HEA, 2023).

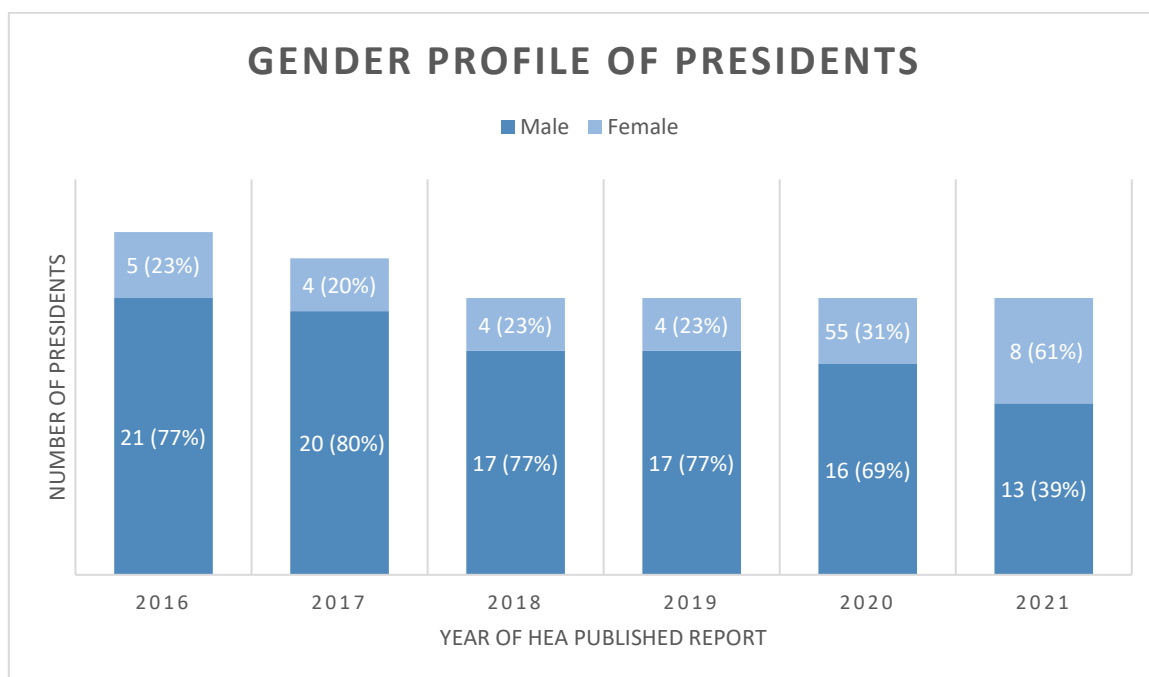


Figure 1 Gender Profile of Presidents in HEIs 2016 – 2021 (HEA, 2023)

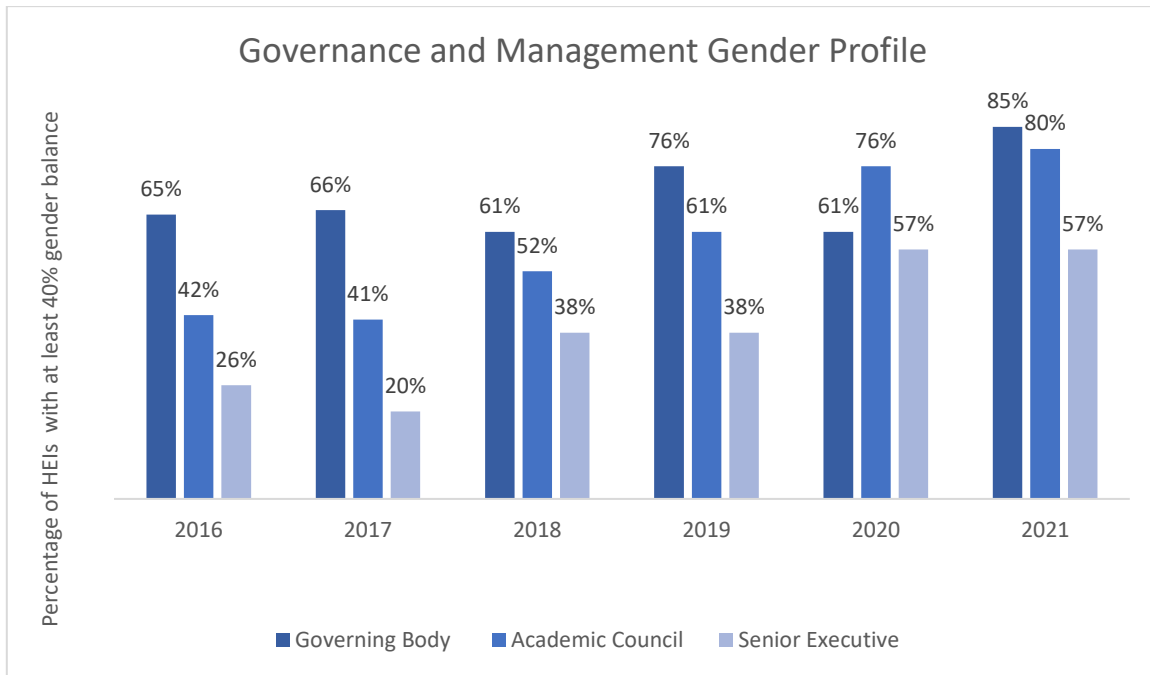


Figure 2 Gender Profile of Governance & Management Structures (HEA, 2023)

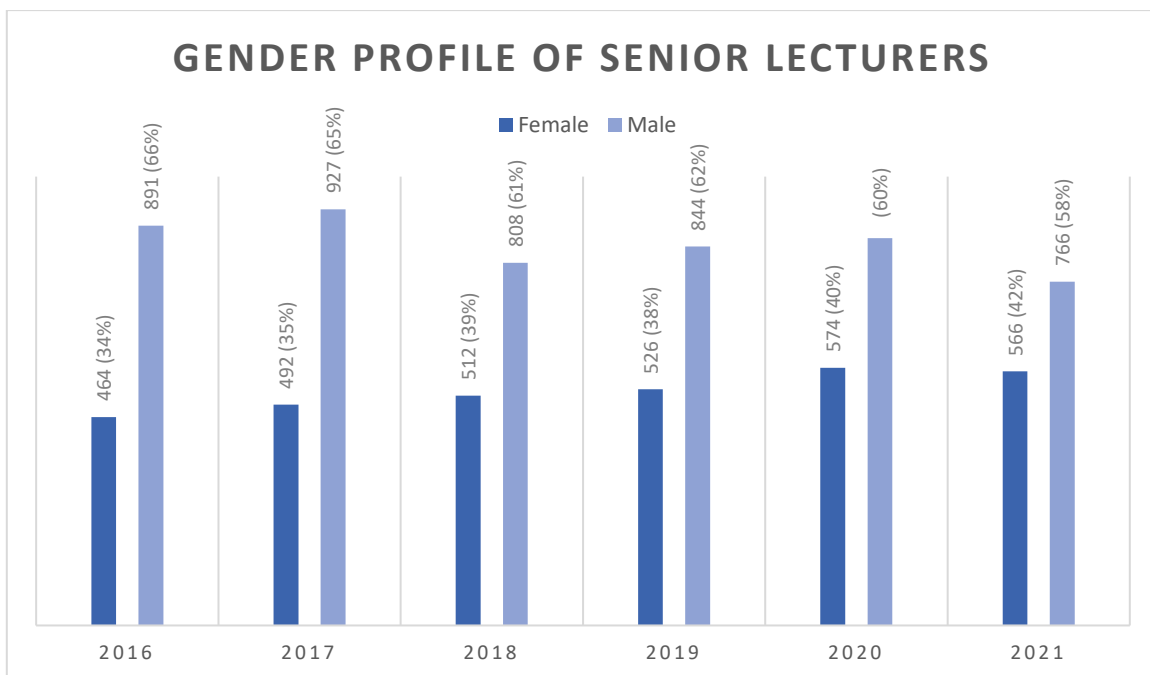


Figure 3 Gender Profile of Senior Lecturers in HEIs 2016 – 2021 (HEA, 2023).

The Problem

Having now set the Irish context for gender equality in HE in Ireland, the discussion will move to delving into addressing what problem this research seeks to address. It is evident that there was a distinct lack of females in leadership roles and in acknowledging this, the GEAP 2018-2020 inferred that different HEIs were at different points in achieving a gender balance, meaning that each would have to follow their individual path to do so. Hence, the Gender Equality Taskforce recommends that each HEI set its own targets for the proportion of staff members of each gender which it aims to have in one, three and five-year periods. It advises that those targets be included in the HEI's GEAP, submitted annually to the HEA as part of the Strategic Dialogue process. It further suggests that progress on those goals also be reported to the HEA, associating them with financial incentives and consequences. The real danger here is that the main existing measurement of success by the HEA in achieving gender equality in the HE sector is counting how many women occupy senior roles. By using this approach, it would suggest that as evidenced from Tables 1, 2 and 3 above, Ireland is moving towards gender equality based on the increase of women in senior leadership roles. That said, in Peterson's (2011) study she interviewed twenty-two female senior academic managers in Sweden, who all reported that a vital factor in supporting their transition into management was the implementation of the gender mix policy (40% quotas). Her findings revealed that the policy not only influenced appointments to positions and the composition of teams and committees at all levels in the HE system but it became a form of informal character and 'a way of thinking'. However, the respondents cautioned that academic management positions will lose prestige when women occupy over 40%, a concept defined as feminisation.

The feminisation of academic leadership positions is a process in which roles become associated with women while being simultaneously deskilled and undervalued, leading to a degrading of respect and prestige for the role (Leathwood, 2005). Using this concept, Peterson (2011) purports that caution must be applied to gender mix policies as they can result in a situation where women are not in fact empowered but instead that the role has decreased in status and power. What becomes inherent from Peterson's (2011) study is that having women in leadership positions did not

necessarily mean gender equality now existed. This is evident as the respondents reported that their appointments into their roles came at the same time as the positions declined in status, merit and prestige and became more time-consuming and harder to combine with a successful scholarly career. They described the academic leadership role as becoming less ceremonial and less collegial and far more administrative. This view is supported on a much broader level through the Eurofound's (2015) European Working Conditions Survey data which reported that women enjoy fewer of the advantages of being managers than their male counterparts: namely less influence over decision making, less opportunities to manage staff and more administrative responsibilities. Sweden has been coined the 'global gender equality leader' (Castaño et al., 2010) and yet it is now evident that it has made successful strides at creating opportunities for women to progress into leadership roles. That said, being in a leadership role does not mean that equality has been achieved and this appears to be echoed throughout Europe. The problem which this research seeks to address is that in Ireland, since 2015, our main 'measurement of success' in achieving gender equality is metrics based, where we literally count on an annual basis how many women hold senior positions and how many HEIs have bronze awards. Whilst I absolutely recognise the value that AS brings to the sector, not only as it has been an effective means of illuminating the gender inequality challenges that women in the HE sector face, it is not the silver bullet to address gender inequalities. This is supported by a review of AS in the UK in 2020 which acknowledged that it needs to evolve and change, most notably in response to legislative and cultural changes in the sector (Advance HE, 2020). From an Irish perspective, there is no qualitative empirical data which looks at whether any 'real' change or movement towards gender equality has emerged as a result of this national government led drive to gender equality.

Aim and Methods

The aim of this research is to provide empirical evidence of the lived experience of women in order to ascertain if the current measures are affecting any tangible change for women and it will inform future policies for gender equality in HE. Employing an interpretivist phenomenological approach, this qualitative research engaged twenty

women in semi-structured interviews to understand their experiences in their senior leadership roles. This research was driven by the following objectives and questions.

Objectives

The objective of this research was to explore the experiences of women in senior leadership roles in order to examine and understand the barriers they may have encountered during their career. As these women have essentially ‘made it’ into the senior roles, I also wanted to examine the protective factors that enabled that progression to happen. These objectives were informed by the following research questions:

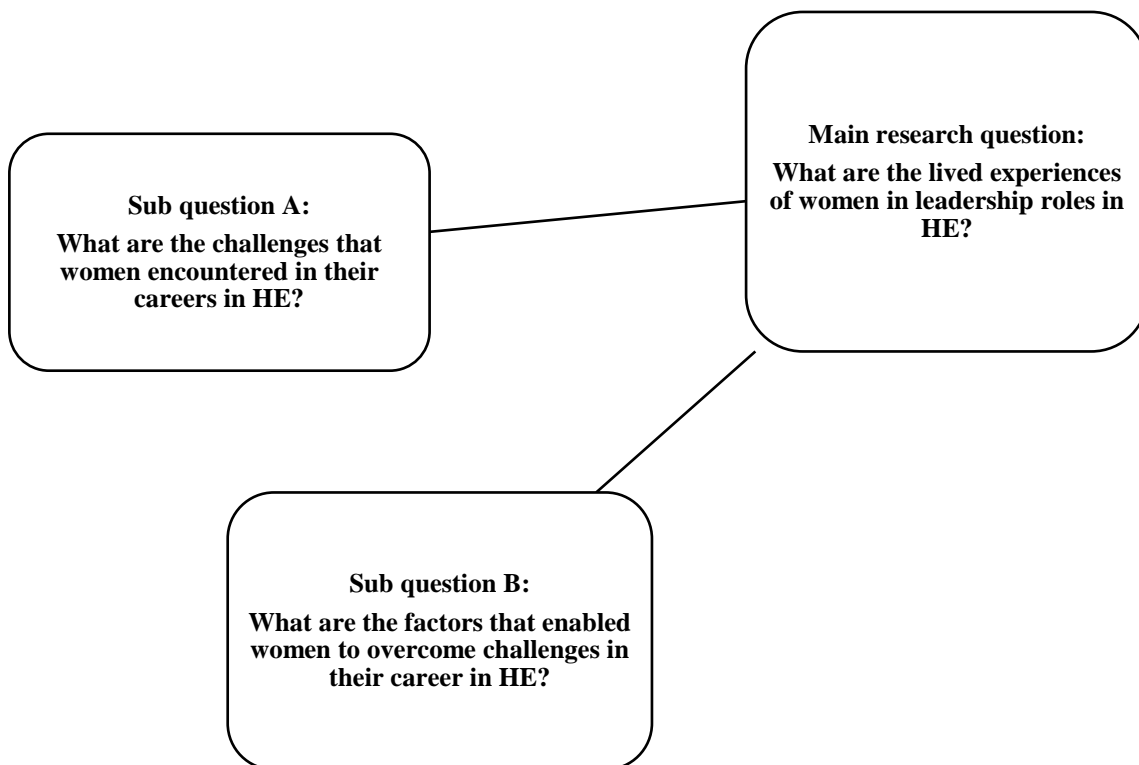


Figure 4 Main Research Question and Sub Questions

Thesis Overview

In order to address the research aim, objectives and research questions, the thesis is broken into the following areas;

Chapter Two – Setting the Context of the Changing HE Landscape

This chapter provides the context within which the research has been undertaken. It addresses the context of HE in Ireland by looking at how HE is structured. It also provides an overview of the evolving funding model for HE which follows with a discussion around what type of leadership is required in contemporary HEIs in Ireland.

Chapter Three – Situating Women in Senior Leadership

Having set the sectoral context for this research in the previous chapter, this chapter will focus on situating the female leader and the challenges they face, as leaders, in HE. This review of the literature will begin by exploring why women are underrepresented in HE. I will examine the barriers women face by addressing the gendered organisational culture at the most senior levels and by focusing on the gendered stereotypes of leaders, sexism, 'queen bee' syndrome and gender based violence as issues for women in leadership. I will then unpack the enabling factors that have supported women's advancement in HE by illuminating the role of choice, agency and ambition. Lastly, I will review the effectiveness of existing gender equality initiatives such as AS, Aurora and gender quotas.

Chapter Four – Framing the Theoretical Lens

With the Irish HE context set and having situated the female leader within it, in the next chapter I will discuss how I applied the theoretical lens for this research. I will explain why I chose a two-pronged approach which encompassed Fraser's theory of social justice and McNay's theory of agency. I will reaffirm my position that though women continue to experience challenges within their roles in HE, I will adopt a strengths-based approach to unpack and investigate how the women in this research used their own and their collective sense of agency to overcome these challenges in order to progress into senior leadership roles.

Chapter Five – The Methodological Approach

Having set out the theoretical lens which underpins my approach to this research, in this chapter I will discuss the methodological design I chose for this research. More specifically, I will begin by examining my anti-foundationalist ontological position

which underpins this research. Following that, the interpretivist phenomenological research design will be aligned to the research aim and objectives. The research questions will be identified before discussing how they were informed by the theoretical lens. From here, I will address how the data was coded and analysed for themes before giving due consideration to the ethical considerations for this research and the ethical steps which were undertaken to make it viable and reliable piece of research.

Chapter Six – Navigating the Barriers of Patriarchy

This chapter will begin by discussing how the findings from this research will be analysed through the theoretical lens which is framed around Fraser's (2003) view that equality and social justice are principally problems of parity of participation. I will argue that for participatory parity to be upheld, at least three conditions must be met which Fraser (2003) frames under redistribution, representation and recognition. I will demonstrate that in the modern competitive environment of HE, without having equal voice, autonomy and status, women simply cannot compete in an equal way as they do not have parity of participation.

Chapter Seven – Collective Leadership in the Era of Power, Agency and Decision Making

Following on from the previous discussion which focused on how women do not have parity of participation as they face injustices across redistribution, representations and recognition, this chapter will adopt a strengths-based approach to unpack the supportive factors that enabled the women in this research to overcome these challenges in order to progress in their careers. More specifically, it will present the theoretical lens which is focused on McNay's theory of agency. The final section of this chapter will analyse the characteristics of agency that these women have as a mechanism to reveal how they overcame the challenges they have encountered in their careers to date.

Chapter Eight – Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

This chapter will begin with an overview of the aim and objectives of this research to demonstrate how they have ultimately been achieved. The discussion will then focus in on the research questions to answer each of them before presenting the key

recommendations which have emerged from this research. The discussion will then conclude by reaffirming how this research makes a significant contribution to knowledge.

Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes a significant contribution to knowledge as it has focused explicitly on women in senior leadership roles where there is otherwise no other Irish research. By focusing on this under researched group, the findings are of great importance in generating new knowledge related to this specific cohort of women. This research contributes to knowledge as I demonstrate that new approaches to leadership are needed to successfully navigate HEIs through the rapid change they are undergoing. I have contributed to the existing research around the complexities women face in patriarchal HE cultures by illuminating the challenges women currently face in Irish HEIs. I have also contributed new knowledge by focusing on what supportive factors have enabled women to progress beyond the challenges and advance themselves into senior roles. I have unearthed a silent revolution amongst women who support one another to strengthen their collective voices to enhance their representation, recognition and redistribution. I have focused on the importance of agency and recognising women's agency through their ambition, resilience, and confidence in order to refute the notion that women do not progress because they lack confidence.

Summary

This chapter has set out the context for this research by presenting the gap it seeks to address. It has laid out the aim, objectives and research questions which underpinned the interpretivist phenomenological research approach which was undertaken to explore the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in HE in Ireland in order to examine if any change is occurring in their experiences as a result of the gender equality movement in Ireland.

Chapter Two - Setting the Context of the Changing HE

Landscape

Introduction

This chapter will provide the much-needed context within which the research has been undertaken. Setting the scene of the Irish HE landscape is essential to illuminate the context which women in senior leadership roles operate within. To do this, I will set out the composition of the HE sector in Ireland by placing a particular emphasis on the changing landscape of HE in Ireland and how these changes have impacted women. As this research is focused on the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in HE, it is necessary to examine what is required of leaders who are navigating their HEIs through such rapid change. I will argue that the high expectation placed on leaders in these new structures requires a re-think in terms of the traditional approach to promoting senior academics to run the HEI. I will then examine the experiences of women in Irish HEIs before examining Ireland's response to gender inequality in HE in order to illustrate the need for this empirical research.

New Composition of HE in Ireland

Ireland's HE sector has undergone quite significant change in the last number of years. To begin to frame the context of the HE in Ireland today, it is imperative to examine where the modern HEI has evolved from. This is important as the potential for the progression of women in the traditional HEIs was limited, as evidenced by the fact that Ireland was one of the few countries in Europe that had never appointed a woman as president of a university until 2020 (Cusack, 2021). To put that in context, it almost defies belief that it has taken 428 years to appoint a woman as president of one of Ireland's universities. With this in mind, in this section I will demonstrate that Ireland's evolution of HE has traditionally been very slow, which led to a binary education system. HE has existed in Ireland since the first university, Trinity College Dublin, was established in 1592. Trinity College Dublin remained the only HEI until the establishment of three more universities in the mid nineteenth Century and by the late 20th Century, Ireland had three more universities, bringing it to a total of seven. In 1997, the Universities Act was passed, one of the most significant pieces of university legislation since the State was founded. Principally, this legislative framework sets out the role, functions, and structures of a university. Each university

has responsibility for having a strategic plan in place and the HEA has an overseeing role on such plans and quality assurance procedures between the HEA and the universities. In conjunction with the seven universities, there were five colleges of the National University of Ireland which also all under this framework. From the mid twentieth Century onwards, Ireland began to develop a binary education system through the establishment of fourteen Regional Technical Colleges which were then awarded the titles of IoTs in 1998. The Institutes of Technology Act, 2006, creates a similar relationship between the IoTs and the HEA as it provides for greater institutional autonomy, improved governance, and a statutory guarantee of academic freedom for the IoTs (European Commission, 2022).

With the traditional function of HE set out, I will now illuminate how key policy developments in Ireland have led to a fundamental change in the structure of HE which has essentially ended the binary approach to HE provision. In terms of HE policy, the HEA is the statutory policy-advisory body for HE in Ireland. Their role is to provide evidence-based policy-advice to the Minister of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Government of Ireland on the development of the sector (Government of Ireland, 2022). The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) is a relatively new Department which was established in 2020 and its role is to fund and create policy for the higher and further education (FE) and research sectors. It is important to note that up until the establishment of this new department, HE and FE were separate entities with separate approaches to education provision. A dramatic change in government policy towards HE, combined with the impact of increased participation in the second-level sector, has ignited a long-term transformation process of HE in the 30-year period from the 1950s to the 1980s. Strongly influenced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), government policies shifted their focus to diversification of the system and expansion of participation to meet the economic need for a highly skilled workforce (Walsh and Loxley, 2014). The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 in the Republic of Ireland represents the latest and most assertive attempt by the Irish state to reconstruct HE in accordance with a European and international context shaped by a dominant knowledge-based economy paradigm (Walsh, 2015). The National Strategy called for a 'coherent set of higher education institutions, each of significant

strength, scale and capacity’. Focused on enhancing collaboration and institutional consolidation, it affirmed that some IoTs could apply for re-designation as TUs. The National Strategy clearly identified its aim of ‘promoting institutional mergers and ensuring advanced institutional performance’ as the ‘TUs that emerge from this process...will be essential to preserve the diversity that is one of the strengths of Irish HE’ (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2011:102). There are currently five designated TUs as listed below.

Technological University Dublin (TUD)	Munster Technological University (MTU)	Technological University of the Shannon (TUS)	Atlantic Technological University	Southeast Technological University (SETU)
Established on 1 January 2019	Established on 1 January 2021	Established on 1 October 2021.	Established on 1 April 2022.	Established on 1 May 2022
Amalgamation of Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown, and Institute of Technology, Tallaght.	Amalgamation of Cork Institute of Technology and the Institute of Technology, Tralee.	Amalgamation of Athlone Institute of Technology and Limerick Institute of Technology.	Amalgamation of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, and Letterkenny Institute of Technology	Amalgamation of Waterford Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Carlow.

Figure 5 Breakdown of Technological Universities (HEA, 2023)

According to the HEA (2022), the ‘TUs will address the social and economic needs of their region and will engage in industry-focused research. TUs will focus on science and technology programmes that are vocationally and professionally oriented’. The evolution of Ireland’s HE sector has arguably therefore had a positive effect for women as evidenced by the first woman appointed as president, Professor Kerstin Mey who was appointed president of the University of Limerick (UL) in July 2020. Following that, Munster Technological University; South East Technological University, Atlantic Technological University, Maynooth University, University College

Dublin and Trinity College Dublin all appointed presidents who are women. These appointments represent a watershed moment for women in senior leadership roles and understanding their experiences is essential in order to advance gender equality for women in HE.

Policy and Changing HE Functions

What is now evident is that Ireland has gone from a traditional binary approach to HE provision to a relatively rapid period of transformation where the traditional IoTs which were in place for more than half a Century have been replaced with a whole new structure of the TUs. Their function is to respond to regional needs through industry focused research and responsive educational provision. It is important to acknowledge these changes as they form an important part of the context that women operate within as senior leaders in HE in Ireland. Further changes ensued in 2022, when DFHERIS published its vision in their policy paper entitled 'Progressing a More Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge' which clearly articulated a vision for a unified tertiary system for knowledge and skills, composed of complementary further education and training, higher education and research and innovation sectors. This vision was cemented by the establishment of the National Tertiary Office in December 2022. One of the key functions of the new Office is to ensure that tertiary education programmes are developed by HEIs and the ETBs in order to create transitioning pathways from FE to HE which is seamless, through the development of shared curriculum, teaching collaboration, programme co-design and co-delivery within shared space and shared student experience. At this point it is evident that HE has undergone significant and, in some ways, radical reform in recent years. It has evolved from a traditional binary system whereby HEIs worked in isolation to a collection of newly developed TUs which are regionally focused and are now required to work in a co-creative way with FE to co-create programmes and pathways for learners to progress between the two sectors. This demonstrates the radical reform which is happening in Ireland as a necessary backdrop to understanding the context that women operate within as senior leaders.

The Changing Context of HE and the Impact on Women

Coinciding with these changes, as noted earlier, there has been a dramatic increase in women now appointed as presidents within HEIs which is a significant and positive development for some women in the sector. Notwithstanding how positive it is to have

more gender balance in those appointed as president in the sector, those appointed make up a tiny proportion of women in HE. And so, in this section I will argue that the rapid changes which have occurred in HEIs has had a disproportionately negative effect on some women and their outputs which can have negative consequences for their ability to advance in their careers. Over the past twenty years, major change factors such as the increasing importance of globalisation, the development of the knowledge-based economy, enhancements in information and communication technology, increased internationalization, quality, equity, and entrepreneurship have led to changes in HE across Europe. In terms of widening participation student enrolments have increased significantly from 171,821 in 2007/2008 to 246,299 in 2021/2022 in the sector (HEA, 2023). The HE sector has come under significant financial pressure in recent years due to a growth in student enrolments and through significant reductions in funding and resources made during the financial crisis. Across all HEA funded institutions, the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) estimates that funding per undergraduate student enrolled in 2019 was 50% less than in 2008. As a consequence, HEIs are increasingly reliant on self-generated income streams, including foreign student fees, investments, donations, and part time self financing student fees. The current funding model for Irish HEIs is unsustainable, with the sector facing administrative imbalances, resource pressures, growing demand and highly constrained. Against the backdrop of all of the rapid change and the requirement to have effective leadership in modern HEIs, it is understandable that the PBO (2019) refer to HE as a sector under pressure due to its precarious and unsustainable funding model, which has significant impacts on employees within the sector, which I argue have a disproportionate effect on women. In March 2010 the HE Ministers of the European Higher Education Area issued the Budapest-Venue Ministerial Declaration. This statement called for a more supportive environment for academic staff across Europe. According to Clarke et al. (2015), a healthy and thriving system of HE requires the provision of a supportive environment for the academic staff who are charged with delivering it and that the current environment is not supportive enough. They affirm that in the face of such challenges, the need to focus on the creation of supportive work environments and positive work identities is urgent, particularly in the HE context. Resulting from their mixed method study of 1,187 surveys and sixteen interviews, the themes which emerged were a lack of funding, deteriorating staff-student ratios, lack of confidence in the thrust of national

policy for the sector, deteriorating working conditions, excessive workloads, and pressure to raise funds externally. Other concerns that emerged may be less familiar but are equally deeply felt included teaching-related duties were not adequately funded, a lack of pedagogical support, lack of institutional support for research-led teaching, teaching not valued or consideration of when it comes to career progression. More specifically, in terms of how employees experienced their workplace, over a fifth of respondents (21%) rated their job satisfaction as low. Over two thirds of respondents (72%) indicated that their working conditions had deteriorated since they began their roles. The ability to exercise control and influence in the workplace was addressed and what is striking is the extent to which control of most of the activities was perceived to be concentrated within management at institutional level. In terms of the specific impacts on women, they noted that professional networks have remained highly gendered, with women experiencing greater difficulty in establishing and engaging in high-level networking. They also reported that women continue to publish less than their male colleagues and that women are more likely to have geographical constraints on their career mobility options, mainly due to family caring responsibilities. In this section I have argued that the rapid changes which have occurred in HEIs has had a disproportionately negative effect on some women and their outputs which can have negative consequences for their ability to advance in their careers

Leadership Requirements in Modern HEIs

As this research is focused on the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in HE, it is now essential to examine what is required of leaders who are navigating their HEIs through such rapid change. I will argue that the high expectation placed on leaders in these new structures requires a re-think in terms of the traditional approach to promoting senior academics to run the HEI. Clarke et al. (2015) illuminated the shared high expectations of the role of leaders within HEIs. It is my position that within the changing context of the overall HE sector in Ireland, coupled with the financial pressure of sourcing the private half of the annual budget for the HEI, the competencies that are required for effective leadership in HE are evolving. Illuminating this, Spendlove (2007) investigated the role of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Rector, or Principal of a university, and affirms that leading HEIs presents a unique challenge due to the organisational complexity of the HEIs, its multiple goals and its

traditional values. More specifically, modern leadership in HE is inextricably influenced by an 'increase in managerial control, market competition, organisational restructuring and government scrutiny. Tensions between the need to meet requirements of industry versus academic requirements will continue as long as universities face these dual challenges in a competitive global economy' (O'Boyle and Joyce, 2013:1). This ultimately means then that the nature of leadership in modern HEIs is rather ambiguous. Spendlove (2007:407) rightly asserts that the 'strength of the university system lies in the independent thought, creativity and autonomy of the people who work in them' and she affirms that appointees to senior leadership roles can have either academic or professional backgrounds, or a combination of both. In the traditional university sector, promotion to senior leadership positions has tended to be based on academic prowess, largely relating to research capability. Promotion as an academic rather than a manager, can result in senior academic leaders who may not be well suited to operational and organisational management and may simply lack the skills required (Bargh et al., 2000). Supporting this, Black (2015) suggests that the complex regulatory requirements and competitive bids for funding is a clear rationale for re-imagining how HEIs are led and managed. Refuting this, Garvin (2012) calls for the management of universities to be put back into the hands of academics in order to leverage the leadership skills of our current academic staff and to foster the leadership skills of our next generation of leaders (O'Boyle and Joyce, 2013). Spendlove's (2007:414) findings suggest that the majority of the respondents felt it was crucial to retain their identity as academics, rather than as senior leaders. Many entering HE from the business sector have significant industry experience and cutting-edge ideas but fundamentally they experienced 'difficulties when they entered academic life and culture at the strategic level without the credibility, knowledge and experience that their academic colleagues have gained through their previous roles in academe'. Drawing from the work of Bourdieu (1977) (cited in Spendlove (2007), she maintains that in HEIs, academic qualifications are to cultural capital what money is to economic capital in business. Thus, in a traditionally academic culture of HE, those who are not academics simply do not possess the symbolic capital in comparison to the academic peers who hold those credentials, which simply creates a juxtaposition of power relations. My main argument here is that the high expectation placed on leaders in these new structures requires a re-think in terms of the traditional

approach to promoting senior academics to run the HEI and instead requires an element of a business focused leader with the cultural capital of the academic.

Women's Experiences in Irish HE

I have named my position that the cause of the structural disadvantaging that women experience is as a result of the patriarchy which exists in the neo-liberal HE environment and that increasing the number of women in power positions will not automatically bring about change. I will now narrow the focus to the Irish perspective of gender equality in Irish HE to demonstrate the lack of empirical data which exists on the topic and illuminate the need for my research. O'Connor (2018) examined HE studies; leadership and leadership studies; gender studies; existing quantitative data, experimental studies and comparative qualitative studies of HEIs to determine that there are three discourses which legitimate the under-representation women in senior positions namely, excellence, fit and national relevance. She suggests that the box-ticking approach to AS, can be used to show the State and the EU that gender inequality is being tackled. However, they are very far removed from the kind of organisational transformation that needs to be embraced by senior leaders within those HEIs. In 2019, O'Connor employed a feminist institutional perspective, to provide an explanation for the slow pace of change in the gender profile of the professoriate which she determined lies in gender awareness of managerial leadership. In 2020, O'Connor's paper drew on a wide range of evidence in different institutions and countries to identify the specific aspects of the structure and culture of male-dominated higher educational organizations that perpetuate gender inequality. As a prominent researcher in the Irish context of gender equality in Ireland, O'Connor has provided key insights into this area, however, the gap that exists, is that her research has not been empirical. Her perspectives have been drawn from international research, quantitative data, and secondary research whereas this research proposes to engage in primary qualitative research with women in leadership roles to ascertain whether the gender equality movement in Ireland affected their lived experiences in senior leadership roles in HE.

Ireland's Response

In moving into the final section of this chapter, I will examine Ireland's response to gender inequality in HE in order to illustrate the need for this empirical research. Given the low rate of women in leadership roles in HE 2015, the HEA now publish

their annual gender profile report which counts how many women occupy senior roles and this measurement tool provides information on key indicators which will contribute to the assessment of gender-equality in Irish HEIs (HEA, 2022). The report also documents the AS institutional and departmental awards won and applied for by HEIs are important indicators of progress towards gender equality (HEA, 2022). The 2020 report highlighted that in 2019 in the universities only 26% of professor posts were held by women as compared to 52% women in entry level lecturer roles which indicates clearly the systemic imbalance in female representation at senior level. Further data analysis revealed that using a flexible cascade model approach (where the proportion of women to be recruited or promoted to a certain level is based on the proportion of each at the career level directly below) alone (as recommended by the HEA Expert Group) could take twenty years to achieve gender balance at senior level (i.e. minimum 40% female professors). In response to this, the HEA (2020) confirmed it is not tenable from a public policy perspective that this situation could be allowed to potentially persist for that length of time and so they proposed that targeted and proportionate positive action should be taken to accelerate the achievement of gender equality objectives. So, it was determined that new and additional gender-specific posts would be a proportionate and effective means to achieve rapid and sustainable change, and on that basis has the potential to be transformative for the HE sector in terms of securing gender equality goals through the creation of the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI). Under this initiative, forty-five such posts will be created over a period of three years the which the HEA (2020) believe will be a proportionate and effective means to achieve accelerated and sustainable change within an institution. The Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) was launched by the then Minister for Higher Education in 2019. This initiative was developed in response to analysis carried out by Ireland's Gender Equality Taskforce in 2018 which revealed that 52 per cent of lecturers in HE were female, but just 27 per cent of professors. One of the Taskforce's recommendations was the creation of new and gender-specific posts at appropriate levels that would create rapid and sustainable change in the representation of women in the senior professor grade. The scheme provides funding for 45 prestigious senior leadership posts over three years which are ringfenced specifically for women.

Another initiative which has been developed to promote leadership opportunities in HE for women is the Aurora programme. Aurora is open to women up to tenured associate professor level (or professional services equivalent) who would like to develop and explore issues relating to leadership roles which is delivered primarily through a series of day events. The programme presents an opportunity for women looking to increase self-confidence and motivation to apply for leadership roles. To measure the effectiveness of the programme, a mixed-methods five-year longitudinal study was conducted which has provided an opportunity to map change and progression in the leadership experiences and careers of professional services and academic women working in higher education in the UK and Republic of Ireland. The findings reveal increased levels of confidence amongst participants and 18.6% (compared to 7.1% of the comparison group) noted they were promoted or had a salary increment at a higher rate than the comparison group in the months and years following the programme. Though these findings are positive, it must be noted that the research team cannot be sure that the participants are typical of women working in HE in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. There are also variations in recruitment to Aurora across universities, from volunteers to highly selective processes across the HEIs (Advance HE, 2021).

The Need for this Research

The clear tensions between the need to meet the requirements of industry versus academic requirements will continue as long as HEIs face these dual challenges in a competitive global economy (O'Boyle and Joyce, 2013:1). With this duality of purpose in place for leaders, it poses a real challenge as to what the most appropriate system of leadership actually is. In the final section of this chapter, I will reaffirm that it is timely now against the backdrop of immense change in HE to investigate the lived experiences of women in leadership roles. Focusing on the development of leadership competencies across HEIs, it is clear from the existing research that leadership development interventions need to begin far earlier in the careers of those who work HEIs, so that success is built from below, rather than from above. O'Boyle and Joyce (2013) concur with this as the focus of leadership development starts with the individual and then moves to the organisational context but they caution that the shift to a distributed or shared leadership will require a mindset change in order to acknowledge and understand that leadership can be developed and that this

development needs to be deeply embedded and created out of the context and challenges faced collectively by leaders in the organisation. The Next Steps report published at the end of 2021 engaged 54,807 stakeholders from across the sector in a mixed method study to reflect in action the effect of Covid-19 on the HE sector. One of its key recommendations was to prioritise and resource leadership development for those currently in leadership roles, as well as staff and students at all levels of the institution, including a focus on Teaching & Learning leadership and change management. It also recognised the complementary ideas of leadership as individual agency and collective capacity. In addition, it recommended a further strengthening of the inclusive ethos and consultative approaches to decision-making across all roles and levels in institutions and, where necessary, moving towards more inclusive approaches to decision-making by exploring distributed leadership models (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2021). Launching the report, the Minister for DFHERIS noted that the ‘findings from this important and timely work echo the priorities of my own department, in particular our explicit focus on developing talent’. He also affirmed that ‘in my department we are determined to do all that we can to support people, staff and students, to reach their full potential. To do this, and to create value, prosperity, resilience and cohesion we need a sector which is supported and aligned across all levels, that works in partnership, that believes in dialogue which is trustworthy, open-minded and enquiry-based’ (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2021). It is therefore extremely timely and necessary to understand the experiences of leaders in HE Ireland.

Summary

To set the context for this research, I have set out the composition of HE in Ireland by placing a particular emphasis on the changing landscape of HE in Ireland. I have illuminated the changing policies which underpin the role and function of Irish HEIs before examining how this changing context has impacted women. I have argued that the high expectation placed on leaders in these new structures requires a re-think in terms of the traditional approach to promoting senior academics to run the HEI. Such a rethink would involve focusing on the development of leadership competencies across HEIs, as it is clear that leadership development interventions

need to begin far earlier in the careers of those who work HEIs, so that success is built from below, rather than from above. I have also argued that whilst it is positive to see women being appointed as presidents in Irish HEIs, the changing context has had a disproportionate impact on other women and their ability to progress in their careers. With such rapid change in the sector, with more women than ever in senior leadership roles, it is imperative to understand their experiences in order to move beyond counting how many women are in senior roles and instead draw meaning from their experiences to advance gender equality in HE in Ireland.

Chapter Three - Situating Women in Senior Leadership

Introduction

Having set out the background to the overall research topic in chapter one and having then presented a critical overview of the context of HE in Ireland in chapter two, this chapter will examine the existing literature which relates to women in senior roles in HE. This chapter has been informed by my research questions as to the challenges that women encounter in their careers in HE and also the factors that enabled them to overcome challenges in their career in HE. The challenges will be explored by showing how women remain underrepresented in HE due to the barriers they encounter in their career. Such barriers include the glass ceiling, patriarchal culture and the consequences of unpaid care work and flexible working. By reviewing the literature in this way, I will show that women remain underrepresented in HE due to the barriers they encounter in their career, particularly as they transition into senior roles. Given the changing context of HE which was examined in the previous chapter, this chapter will explore leadership in HE by exposing the issues that women encounter when they get into leadership positions. More specifically, I will examine gendered organisational culture at the most senior levels by focusing the discussion on gendered stereotypes of leaders, sexism, 'queen bee' syndrome and gender based violence as issues for women in leadership. What is evident here is that the lived experiences of women in Irish HEIs is a gap which remains. I will then unpack the enabling factors that have supported women's advancement in HE by illuminating the role of choice, agency and ambition. What is apparent again is that the lived experiences of women in Irish HEIs remains relatively unknown. Lastly, I will review

the effectiveness of existing gender equality initiatives such as AS, Aurora and gender quotas to ascertain if they lead to tangible change for women in HE.

Underrepresentation of Women

Despite advances of the feminist movement, and wider structural legislative interventions, women remain underrepresented at senior levels in academia and continue to experience both direct and indirect forms of discrimination throughout their careers (O'Connor, 2014). In particular, women remain hugely underrepresented in the senior levels of Irish HEIs despite numerous policies aimed at promoting greater gender equality. In addition to this, women in HE are also far more likely to earn less, with men accounting for the vast majority of higher paid posts in HE (O'Connor, 2014). Across the EU men make up almost 80% of heads of all HEIs (86 per cent of the heads of universities) and 76% of those at full professorial level (O'Connor and Irvine, 2020). This phenomenon is not limited to Ireland, as evidenced by Shepherd (2017) and Burkinshaw (2015). Taking only the figures from the HEA gender profile reports which demonstrate an increase in female presidents as evidenced in Chapter 1 (figure 1 and 2), the figures suggest progress is being made with regard to increasing women in leadership roles. Upon further inspection though the rate of change for senior lectures and professors is not quite so positive as evidenced below.

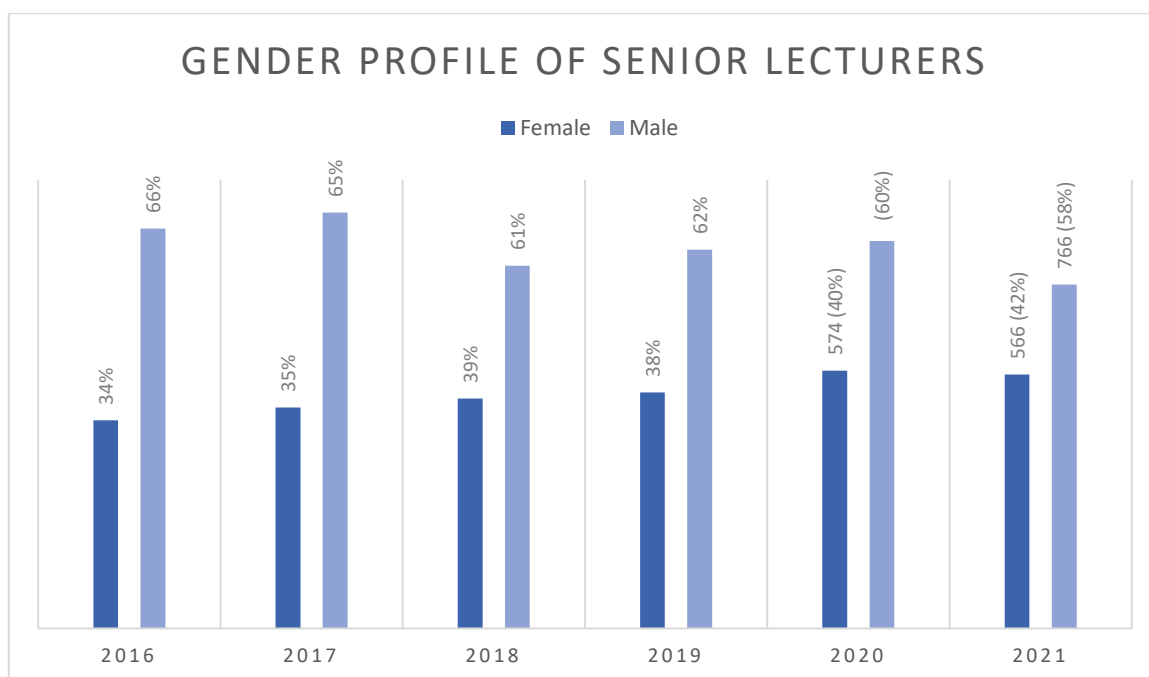


Figure 6 Gender Profile of Senior Lecturers in HEIs 2016 – 2021 (HEA, 2023).

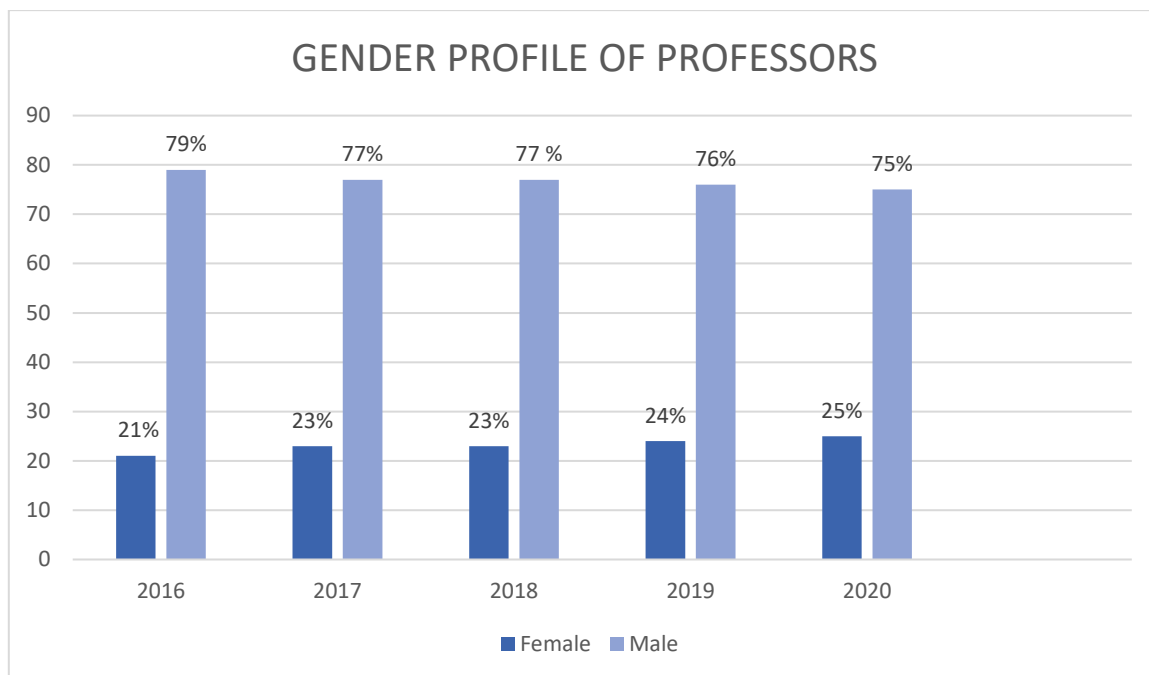


Figure 7 Gender Profile of Senior Lecturers in HEIs 2016 – 2021 (HEA, 2023).

This clearly demonstrates how slow the progress is in increasing women in senior academic roles in Ireland, irrespective of the HEA’s vision that Ireland will be the leader for gender equality in HE by 2030.

Barriers to Progression for Women in HE

Having set out how slow progress is at increasing the number of women in senior leadership roles in HE, in this section, I will examine why this is by arguing that women encounter several barriers when trying to progress through their career. I will begin by critically analysing the common explanations of why there so few women in senior leadership roles in HE. I will then examine the research which exists in regarding the barriers for women in academia by focusing on the glass ceiling, patriarchal culture, unpaid care work and flexible working.

The Glass Ceiling

As evidenced above the pace of improvement of increasing the number of women in senior academic roles is slow and there are several explanations for this. The underrepresentation of women at upper positions has been observed in countless studies (Acker, 2009; Catalyst, 2014; Choi and Park, 2014; Glass and Cook, 2016). In this section I will argue that women experience the glass ceiling effect at various points in their career which in part explains this underrepresentation. The glass

ceiling is a metaphorical barrier which prevents women (and other underrepresented groups) from advancing to senior levels in their career. Firstly, they experience the professoriate glass ceiling. Data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), (2021) shows that while a growing number of women are enrolling in university, many are opting out prior to achieving the highest levels required for a research career. For example, in most OECD countries, there are more male than female students pursuing the Master's and Doctoral degrees which is an equity and policy concern. The fact that fewer women pursue the higher-level degrees, can explain in part why few women make it to professorship and publish fewer papers, as both are linked to higher degrees (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2021). As evidenced above, the rate of progression for women in Irish HEIs to senior academic roles is glacially slow. The second glass ceiling refers to women in senior leadership roles. This is evidenced in 2020, as 15% of rectors of European University Association (EUA) member universities in 48 countries were female, compared to 85% male. This is further supported by an analysis of Times Higher Education (2024) which shows that only a quarter of the top 200 universities in the latest 2024 ranking have a female leader. Though it is clear, glass ceilings exist for women, there is a danger that by narrowing the focus only on the glass ceiling can have unintended consequences. By this I mean that if the issue of gender equality is synonymous with breaking the glass ceiling, it becomes caught up in the reproduction of the status quo which is a potential gender equality 'trap'. This trap occurs when the focus of gender equality initiatives is consumed by helping some women to reach 'the top', the unfairness of the structure is then disregarded and, therefore, reinforced (Duvvury and Ruggi, 2023: 81). This is potentially apparent in the Irish context as evidenced in Chapter 1 whereby there has been intent and focus at Government level to appoint female presidents to the new TUs (O'Connor, 2023), however, the gap in knowledge that remains is the lived experiences of these women in terms of the challenges they experienced and what factors supported their career progression.

Patriarchy

Having examined the types of glass ceilings which exist for women in HE, I will now examine the factors that lead to women experiencing the glass ceiling. In this section, I will argue that HE is a patriarchal environment, and this has a role in disadvantaging

women. Ireland is traditionally a highly patriarchal society but has been undergoing rapid change in the gender area, although such changes have only begun to impact on HE within the past 10 years (O'Connor, 2023). Patriarchy in HE refers to an ideology that elevates men to positions of leadership by recognising their importance and superiority over women, often ignoring women's abilities, qualifications, and potential. In this context, patriarchy serves to perpetuate disempowerment and disrespect of women within academic institutions (Rosa and Clavero, 2021). The impact of patriarchal HE culture has led to gendered social systems where work is 'designed by men and for men' and where patriarchy described work roles in terms of gender, has resulted in stereotyping and gender discrimination towards women (Singh and Terjesen, 2008: 54). The patriarchal culture of HE can also lead women to experience male supremacy, disempowerment, and disrespect. Further to this, patriarchy impacts on women's upward mobility and deprives them of promotions and such patriarchal environments not only impact on women's academic output but also on their intellectual and emotional wellbeing (Adams and Dlamini, 2014; Gilligan and Richards, 2018). Helgesen and Johnson (2010) are well regarded for their research into how patriarchal systems have influenced (and continue to influence) issues of access and equity in all spheres of life, particularly workplace culture. It is my argument in this section that one cause of the structural disadvantaging that women experience is as a result of the patriarchy which exists in the neo-liberal, HE environment. It is my argument that patriarchy exists in HE as positions of dominance and privilege are primarily held by men (O'Connor, 2015). In fact, part of the issue is the 'ordinariness' form that patriarchal cultural takes and what is therefore needed, is a raise of consciousness to de-normalise what should not be considered an ordinary culture (Giddens, 2008).

Unpaid Care Work and Flexible Working

Having examined the role of patriarchy in disadvantaging women in HE, I will now move on to argue that women face injustices in terms of the distribution of unpaid care work which falls heavily towards women which further hinders their ability to progress and negatively impacts their overall responsibilities and distribution of work. The notion of some women providing care to loved ones is not a new phenomenon with 45% of women engaging in this unpaid work across Ireland with time spent on care and housework combined being the third highest in the EU (Russel et al, 2019).

The report also finds that the majority (55%) of those providing daily unpaid care in Ireland are in employment. The findings from this research tally with those from the most recent Report of the Expert Group: 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2022: 43) as it noted that ‘most staff feel significantly over-worked and over stretched, and there are particular issues for those with caring responsibilities as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic’. As women spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work and domestic chores than men the outcome is that they are far more likely to work part-time, reduce working hours, or turn down promotions due to family responsibilities (Rodriguez, 2021; Russel et al, 2019). Where women seek flexible working arrangements due to being in a caring role, there are significant consequences. Firstly, there is an implicit expectation that women are expected to increase their responsibility within the family when working flexibly which can increase their work–family conflict (Hilbrecht et al. 2008). Flexible working enables the exploitation of women both at home and in the labour market (Silver 1993; Sullivan and Lewis 2001), because it enables women to carry out paid work (Chung and van der Horst 2018) without reducing their unpaid work hours or intensity. Coupled with this, women are not returning to work in the office to the same extent as men, this puts women at a disadvantage as technology and virtual working methods cannot replace spontaneous office conversations that are vital for career progression (Mann, 2021). Mann (2021) cautions that a ‘she-cession’ is possible where women who accept their employer’s offer of working mostly from home risk damaging their careers, as they are not returning to the office after COVID-19 to the same extent as men.

Leadership in HE

Having set out my argument that women experience barriers such as the glass ceiling, patriarchal culture, unpaid care work and flexible working, I will now focus the discussion towards the issues that women encounter when they get into leadership positions. I will examine gendered organisational culture at the most senior levels by focusing the discussion around gendered stereotypes of leaders, sexism, ‘queen bee’ syndrome and gender based violence as issues for women in leadership.

Organisational Culture

My opening argument in this section is that organisational structures are not gender neutral (Acker, 1990). Without recognising this, gendered assumptions which favour

men will continue to remain as they are. Longman et al. (2018:2) observed that in HE 'organisational cultures tend to be gendered, meaning that assumptions about leaders and the contributors to effective leadership are typically male-normed'. Additionally, research by Helgesen and Johnson's (2010: 58) research which was conducted over two decades in the corporate sector revealed that women were leaving their roles as there had been 'increasing recognition that the structure of work was designed to reflect the realities of an all-male workforce whose constituents had few, if any, domestic responsibilities beyond supporting their families'. Helgesen and Johnson (2010: 58) believed this reflected a 'mental mismatch between what the marketplace assumes people will value in their work and what women . . . most deeply value... because organisations still offer reward, recognise achievement, build incentive, and decide promotion using definitions of worth that reflect an all-male industrial leadership culture'. In HE, this concept of legitimating discourses which includes excellence, choice, women's 'nature' and organisational gender neutrality only explain why gender inequality is not perceived (O'Connor, 2023). Taking a feminist institutional perspective, gender is understood as an important element of social relations based on perceived (socially constructed) differences between women and men, and as a primary way of signifying and in turn naturalising relations of power and hierarchy (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). In other words, how gender is perceived and understood is socially constructed and in patriarchal settings like HE, implicit in the definition of gender is a hierarchical relationship between men and women which implicitly legitimates men's dominant hierarchical position and women's subordination (O'Connor, 2023).

Gendered Stereotypes

Having argued that organisational structures are not gender neutral and structures like HE which are rooted in patriarchy serve to perpetuate gendered inequalities for women, I will now examine how this manifests itself through gendered stereotypes. Stemming from unconscious bias, and based upon gender norms, gendered stereotypes are preconceived binary beliefs about how men and women should behave and what traits they should exude. Stereotypes which exist for women in HE are that they are not ambitious enough and lack the drive required to succeed (Drake and Svenkerud, 2023), they favour work life balance over career progression (Griffin, 2022) and they lack confidence in themselves (O'Connor, 2009). The impact of such

gender stereotyping on women is evident irrespective of the level of position women belong to in an organisation, though it is more salient in leadership positions (Koenig et al., 2011; Kang, 2012). This is evidenced where Eagly & Carli (2007) found that both male and female respondents agreed that successful leaders possess characteristics commonly associated with men, such as leadership ability, competitiveness, self-confidence, objectivity, aggressiveness, forcefulness, ambition and desire for responsibility. By contrast, women are associated with qualities related to concern for the sympathetic treatment of others such as being affectionate, helpful, friendly, kind, and sympathetic, as well as interpersonally sensitive, gentle and soft-spoken. Brescoll (2016) mentions that women in senior leadership roles may be regarded as token females and this results in them often not listened to or valued on equal terms with male colleagues. Brescoll (2016) also found that the participants in the study considered the decisions of female leaders to be driven by emotions and therefore male respondents would be less interested in hiring women in leadership positions.

The Queen Bee Syndrome

Having examined how gendered stereotypes impact on women in HE, I will now focus the discussion on the concept of women assuming “male behaviours” and why this occurs. Widespread patriarchal beliefs can operate to gender the behaviour of women and men in ways that compel women to act like men, silence harms perpetrated, and prevent women altogether from challenging hegemonic institutions and actors (Marshall, 1997; Martin, 2003), a phenomenon known as the queen bee syndrome (Tavris, 1973). This concept has evolved over time, as initially it was synonymous with a woman whose behaviours were associated with the notion of projected enmity towards others, typically younger women who may be able to compete with them professionally. In more recent times, it has become more commonly connected to areas where misogyny exists in predominantly male-oriented professions which has contributed to the need for women to compete in this manner (Hayes, 2023). This is certainly reflective of the modern HEIs where patriarchy is alive and well and competition is rife. According to O’Connor (2020), the queen bee behaviours from women to other women are the product of patriarchy in modern Irish HEIs as stereotypes which depict leaders in masculinist terms, which arguably continue to exist in HE, mean that women who aspire to or occupy such positions are

more likely to assume male behaviours which are executed through dominance over other women (O'Connor, 2020). Offering a different perspective, Derks et al. (2016) suggest that the queen bee phenomenon is itself a consequence of the gender discrimination that women experience at work. They affirm that this form of behaviour is a response to the discrimination and social identity threat that women experience in male-dominated organisations and the queen bee behaviour is not a typically feminine response at all but part of a general self-group distancing response that is also found in other marginalised groups. My main argument here is that it does appear the queen bee is a phenomenon which exists in modern HEIs, however what is lacking is the lived experience of women in HE to understand how they have experienced the queen bee effect during their own careers in HE.

Gender Based Violence in HE

Discussions of gender-based harassment and violence, from causal incidents of sexism to serious sexual assault on university campuses, have gained currency in recent times (Chambers and Smith, 2023). Gender-based harassment and violence is defined as harassment or violence which is directed at someone due to their sex or gender. Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) conducted a systematic review of the existing literature related to gender-based harassment and violence and they regard it as an epidemic throughout global HE systems and the impact for women in particular is profound. Factors which contribute to it are precarious working conditions, patriarchal culture, a normalisation of negative behaviours. They also note the findings from their research exemplify that gender harassment is the most common form of harassment in HE and sexual harassment as a more specific form of gender-based violence occurs in all disciplines in HE and is reported by all staff. They also noted that younger women (though no definition of what young is), women with insecure employment conditions and certain minorities groups were exposed to sexual harassment. Comparing these findings to the Irish context, the most recent Report of the Expert Group: 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish HEIs (2022) revealed that half of the women in the review regarded gender-based violence as an issue. The report also noted the continued under-recognition of the issue among men who the report also noted continue to dominate in leadership positions in HEIs. My argument in this section is that gender-based harassment and violence is a very real issue in HEIs which disproportionately affects women,

however, what is not known specifically from the existing research is what the lived experiences of women in senior roles in HE in Ireland has been and whether they experienced it during their careers.

Enabling Factors for Women's Advancement

Thus far in this chapter, I have set out my argument that women remain underrepresented at senior roles in HE and they continue to experience multiple barriers throughout their career. I have argued that as gendered organisational culture, gendered stereotypes, queen bee syndrome and gender-based violence are all challenges that affect women in leadership roles in HE. Notwithstanding all that women must navigate during their careers in HE, some of them make it, they make it to the most senior roles in HE and so in order to unpack what enables them to get there, I will now focus the discussion on what is currently known as to the enabling factors that support women to progress in their careers. Strategic agency is required if individuals are to prosper in the academic game (Acker, 2010), and women have sometimes been seen as deficient in this regard, lacking in the necessary confidence and skills of self-promotion. I will now argue that some women are ambitious and they do make choices about their careers, however, they do so whilst working in gendered cultures which are often patriarchal and sexist.

Ambition and Choice

As evidenced earlier, women remain underrepresented in senior roles in HE. This problem of women's underrepresentation is often considered as being about the women themselves, or rather that of their missing agency rather than an examination of their cultural environment. This missing agency may take the form of a perceived lack of self-confidence or ambition, leading women to opt out of applying for senior leadership positions (Sheridan, 2017; O'Connor, 2009). This concept of women lacking confidence is refuted by Maheshwari et al's. (2023) study of women in leadership roles in Mexico, they reported that one of the enabling factors which supported women's progression was that the women demonstrated resilience and were willing to take on challenges to move up the ladder in their professional lives, otherwise known as ambition. This aligns with Shepard's (2017) research which showed that women in the UK were no less ambitious to apply for senior leadership roles than men. In their UK study, Biggs et al. (2018) revealed that women do not lack ambition but rather women often encounter sexism which can prevent women's

advancement despite their professional ambitions and organisational provisions available to them. In Faniko et al. (2022) research, they revealed that part of their findings suggested that respondents perceived women's lack of progression was due to a lack of ambition and career motivation. Digging a bit deeper, they then explored whether the respondents had experienced or witnessed any sexist behaviours for example incidences of observing differential treatment towards male and female academics (favouring males) and the majority responded they had. This reflects a cultural lack of recognition to the organisational culture to explain the differential career success of women rather than any actual lack of ambition on the part of the women. My main argument here is that the perception remains that women lack confidence which affects their ability to progress in their careers, whereas I have argued in this section that my position is that the reality is that women experience gendered culture and sexism which negatively affects the career progression of some.

Choice

This concept of women as ambitious brings to question then what choices they may have had to make during their career and at what cost. Career choices can be viewed as the considerations of their current and future abilities and the expected which are based on perceived value and costs of future outcomes. For women there is a consideration between the outcome versus the cost. For example, where the outcome refers to the perceived positive consequences and the cost is the negative costs that are expected. The costs typically relate to high workloads which may affect life outside work that makes it less attractive to strive for this position (Drake and Svenkerud, 2023). As discussed earlier, the culture in HE is a gendered one where women experience gender stereotypes. Biased judgments of achievements, motivation, and potential can stem from generalised gender stereotypes which can serve to influence actual career choices (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). This is evidenced in Drake and Svenkerud (2023) study whereby women did report having made more difficult life choices and having received less support from the organisation for their careers. They also noted that structural factors such as gender-related factors surrounding a lack of support and inclusion, make it less attractive, to such an extent that about half of the women in their study were actually unsure that the effort was worth the cost. My main argument here is that women do make choices

in relation to their careers, however, the choices are made within gendered cultures which predominantly favour men and create conditions that favour men. What is less clear from the existing research is whether women want to live a full life and not have to sacrifice their private time to reach their professional goals. While this contrasts with the notion of doing ambition in a masculine manner (Elchardus and Smits, 2008), it remains unclear from the existing research.

Effectiveness of Gender Initiatives

Having discussed the fact that research does point to women as having ambition and the capacity to make their own choices about their careers, irrespective of continuing to face barriers and underrepresentation at senior levels. The final section of this chapter will focus on reviewing what we know about the effectiveness of gender initiatives to support women to advance in their careers. My main argument here is that whilst AS serves to promote gender equality, it also serves to increase workloads for women and fails to really address the gendered and patriarchal nature of HE cultures which limits its capacity to affect tangible change. I will also argue that the notion of women requiring mentoring is false and rather the focus should be on how women mentoring other women can serve to promote progression amongst women who want to progress. Lastly, I will argue that whilst gender quotas can assist in increasing the number of women in senior roles, it alone will not lead to gender equality and instead I caution it could run the risk of instead leading to the feminisation of roles.

Athena SWAN

In a bid to tackle this culture, AS has become seen by some as something of a 'silver bullet'. It has merits in terms of raising the consciousness around biases, facilitating conversations about gender equality, identifying areas for action and policy change and holding HEIs responsible to report on their actions (Advance HE 2020; Drew 2022). That said, my argument here is that it also serves to increase workloads for women and fails to really address the gendered and patriarchal nature of HE culture which limits its capacity to affect tangible change. When determining if it is really used to examine the culture across HEIs in the UK, Maddrell et al. (2015) reported that the advent and take-up of the AS initiative does suggest a changing spirit of times. That said, they also present evidence from their findings of workload pressures, stress

related illness, discrimination, harassment, and bullying (towards women) which suggests that HE institutional cultures still exhibit patriarchy regardless of an AS framework being in place. In fact, Bhopal's (2019) research sought to specifically examine the impact of AS on work practices and to explore good practice and how it can be improved, and the findings revealed that white middle-class women were the main beneficiaries of AS initiatives. It then seems that even when approaches such as gender mainstreaming aim to make visible the gendered nature of assumptions, processes, and outcomes the interpretation of their findings and implementation of their recommendations for change can still be perceived as too challenging by organisations, thus limiting their transformative potential (Rees, 2005). This serves to demonstrate my position that the cause of the structural disadvantaging that women experience is because of the patriarchy, by this I mean the social system in which positions of dominance and privilege are primarily held by men, which continues to exist in the neo-liberal HE environment, irrespective of AS measures to tackle it. Indeed, a review commissioned by Advance HE (2020) reported that it needs to evolve and change, most notably in response to legislative and cultural changes in the sector and it acknowledged the unnecessarily burdensome workload (Advance HE, 2020). From an Irish perspective, there is no qualitative empirical data which looks at whether any tangible change or movement towards gender equality has emerged because of this national government led drive to gender equality.

Mentoring

Moving beyond AS as a tool to support women to advance in their careers, another consideration is the role of mentoring. There is a lack of research in either Ireland or the UK regarding the impact of mentoring on women's career progression in HE, with a particular focus on women in senior roles. Most of the literature is based upon findings from studies in the USA or Australia or else the focus is on women at lower levels of the organisation. That said, what the limited research does tell us is that those who are mentored experience higher career satisfaction, increased research output and more satisfaction throughout the promotion and tenure process (Ashley et al., 2023). O'Connor posits a different view by affirming that mentoring for women can have some negative connotations as it can imply that women are in need of fixing and male mentors can in some way make them better. Perhaps what O'Connor hasn't considered is the notion of women mentoring other women. In this section I will argue

that we need to leverage the experience of women who have made it into senior leadership roles in order to affect change for other women. Homosociability means same-sex relationships that are not of a romantic or sexual nature, such as mentorship. Researchers who use the concept mainly do so to explain how men uphold men's dominance in society (Rice et al. 2019). Positioning this concept towards women, Madsen (2012) affirms that colleagues, subordinates or students of women leaders in HE are likely to gain more positive transformational experiences compared to gender-homogeneous leadership from male seniors. According to Burkinshaw (2015), women's representation in power positions is considered significant for three major reasons: firstly for social justice that advocates HEIs to be just and treat people with equality; second, for equity and parity that focus on the issue of gender pay and opportunity gap; third, for enhancing the quality of leadership that can be facilitated by diverse practices. This exemplifies the importance of having women in senior roles and the importance of giving other women an opportunity to learn from them. This active sense of responsibility to act as a role model was evidenced in Montas-Hunter (2012) and further illuminated by Maheshwari et al. (2023), where the respondents stated that their intent to become leaders was based on their desire to support the younger women as they felt that the younger women would be motivated to become leaders in the future if they saw some women already in the leadership roles. This exemplifies a mind the ladder effect where women believe they have a responsibility to help other women coming up the ladder behind them. Notwithstanding the importance that homosociability with women could offer, Mcilongo and Strydom (2021) note that mechanisms to support mentoring have not been established in the public sector, highlighting the urgency for leaders in the public sector to ensure that mentorship policies are put in place.

Gender Quotas

Having argued that women can be effective mentors for other women, I will examine the phenomenon of gender quotas using my main argument that gender quotas alone do not create gender equality. By simply increasing the number of women in senior roles will not on its own affect change as to strive towards gender equality, the conscious and unconscious, cultural and structural barriers that affect women need to be addressed. In researching the impact of the quotas Buckey et al. (2014) demonstrate that one of biggest challenges to the effective implementation of

legislative gender quotas in Ireland are informal mechanisms such as masculinised party cultures, societal gendered legacies and pre-existing informal rules surrounding incumbency. This illuminates that McNay's (2004) notion of the importance of understanding gender as a lived social notion as focusing only on the social structures and changing those will not be effective. Essentially, reaffirming my position that the focus on agency and the lived experience is essential to affect real change (Malmström, 2012). Peterson's (2011) research also supports my position that by implementing gender quotas we will have a higher proportion of women in senior leadership roles, however, that does not mean gender equality has been achieved. In her study, she revealed that for many of the women, the senior leadership roles they moved into became more feminised, which resulted in them lacking the status of the senior roles that their male colleagues occupied. What is missing is an Irish perspective as to the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles and whether they experienced any sense of their roles being feminised.

Summary

Notwithstanding the AS initiatives that are now a requirement for all HEIs, many continue to operate within a meritocratic model where the gendered nature of power is still unrecognised (Acker, 1990) and gender inequality is seen as largely irrelevant to the 'normal' business of HE. In so far as they recognise gender equality as an issue, they still focus on either 'fixing' the women (O'Connor, 2014; Burkinshaw and White, 2017) or on non-time bound gender equality initiatives that create awareness but do not change the existing organisation (Roos et al. 2020). Having examined the existing literature, it is clear that women remain underrepresented in HE due to the barriers they encounter in their career, particularly as they transition into senior roles. I have argued that one cause of the structural disadvantaging that women experience is as a result of the patriarchy which exists in the neo-liberal, HE environment. Whilst AS and other initiatives serve to promote gender equality, whether they actually bring about tangible change through challenging these patriarchal cultures remains unclear, certainly from an Irish perspective. Though the literature does examine gendered stereotypes of leaders, sexism, 'queen bee' syndrome and gender-based violence as issues for women in leadership, the lived experiences of women in Irish HEIs is a gap which remains. Having illustrated that organisational structures are not

gender neutral in HE, and whilst it does appear the queen bee is a phenomenon which exists in modern HEIs, what is lacking is the lived experience of women in HE to understand how they have experienced the queen bee effect during their own careers in HE. Having examined the notion of agency through ambition and choice, the lived experiences of women in Irish HEIs remains relatively unknown. Similarly, whilst gender quotas increase the number of women, the literature suggests it can lead to the feminisation of roles which women progress into, which is unclear from an Irish perspective. It is therefore evident that there is a need to examine the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in Ireland to determine what challenges women encountered in their careers in HE and what factors enabled them to overcome challenges in their careers in order to contribute to the existing literature in the area of gender equality in HE.

Chapter Four - Framing the Theoretical Lens

Introduction

Having examined the existing literature and determined the gaps which exist, this chapter will give an account of the development of the theoretical lens which I used for this research. More specifically, I will justify why the theoretical lens was applied by using elements of Fraser's theory of social justice and McNay's theory of agency. As evidenced in the previous chapter, it is evident that women experience a plethora of challenges throughout their careers. Fraser's theory was used to examine these challenges which women continue to encounter in their roles in HE. Fraser's tripartite theory of social justice is a framework which is commonly used for analysing justice-related problems in Europe. As also evidenced in the previous chapter, women can experience supportive factors which act as enablers in their career progression, and so McNay's theory was used to analyse the factors which enabled women to overcome these challenges to progress to senior leadership roles. I used this theory to demonstrate that women are active in their own development and career progression. I focused on the women's individual and collective sense of agency to showcase their abilities, knowledge, and capacities rather than deficits or things that are lacking. Ultimately, I developed a two-pronged approach to my theoretical lens to examine the lived experience of women in senior leadership roles so that I could argue that women continue to experience challenges and despite this, their agency has enabled them to overcome the challenges in order to progress in their careers.

Rationale for the Theoretical Lens

The theoretical lens which has been developed for this research has a two-pronged approach (Figure 10) which is underpinned by one fundamental theoretical position, which is that I am approaching this research from a feminist perspective. By this I mean in its most basic form I am of the position that women experience life differently than men. In particular, I used the critical feminist theory to examine the power relationships between men and women in HE. This was framed around a critical view of social organisations (in this case HE) that privileges some at the expense of others (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007), as evidenced in the previous chapter. Using that as the basis for the argument in this research, the first lens to demonstrate that was Fraser's

theory of social justice. This was used to explore and unpack how women experience challenges which are specific to women in how they are perceived and subsequently treated in HE. From the existing literature which was examined in the previous chapter, it is abundantly clear that women in HE experience many challenges (O'Connor, 2009; O'Connor, 2015; O'Connor, 2021), this lens will create an opportunity to focus in on those challenges in order to illuminate them from an Irish perspective. The second lens adopts McNay's theory of agency which illustrates that even though women experience these challenges, they also have a sense of agency which I believe needs to be unpacked and understood. Essentially, the women in this study have made it through the challenges and barriers to progress into their senior roles, so I am interested to explore the role of agency in their journeys. Using this lens, I will examine what the supportive factors were in enabling women to effectively use their agency to overcome the challenges to progress into those senior leadership roles. Taking this approach is intended to illuminate the strength of women, both as individuals and as a collective to draw meaning and learning from the mechanisms they have developed and adopted in order to succeed in a patriarchal system like HE. The diagram below illustrates my approach to using both McNay and Fraser's theories to explore and explain the lived experiences of women leaders. Using Fraser alone would provide a satisfactory framework to understand them, however, it would not unpack the factors which enabled them to overcome the challenges, which is what McNay's lens offers. Therefore, the theoretical lens, as depicted below, is an interconnected one which is used to examine both the challenges and the supportive factors that women experienced. The overlapping in the diagram represents the way in which the theories connect with one another as in order to understand the factors which enabled them to overcome the challenges it is necessary to firstly understand the challenges that they encountered.

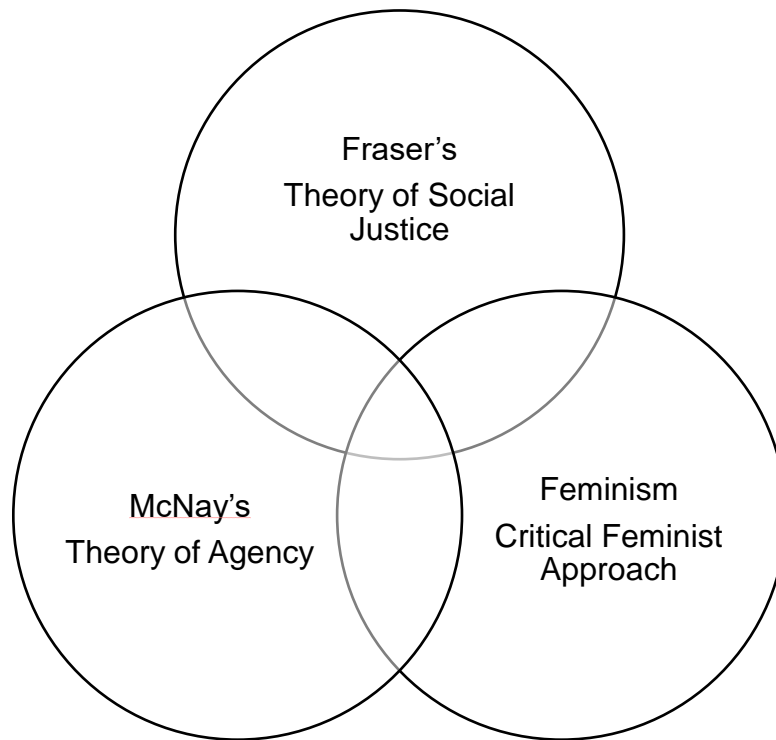


Figure 8 Visual Representation of the Theoretical Lens

Nancy Fraser's Theory of Social Justice

Fraser's theory of social justice is positioned around her belief that social justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in life. To overcome injustices requires the dismantling of institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as partners in the social interaction. Participation parity refers to a situation where inequalities are eliminated to enable all people to participate equally. For parity of participation to exist, conditions must be met across the three axes of Fraser's theory which she describes as redistribution, recognition, and representation. Essentially, my interpretation of Fraser's theory is that it means that to ensure that the institutionalised obstacles are addressed, we should consider them using these three axes as shown in Figure 11. Regarding redistribution, Fraser (2003) describes this axis as the allocation of material resources must be such as to ensure participants' independence and voice. This condition precludes economic structures that institutionalise deprivation, exploitation, and gross disparities in labour and leisure time, which prevent some people from participating as full partners in social interaction. Next, using the recognition axis, Fraser (2003) notes that parity of participation exists when the political constitution of society must be such as to accord roughly equal political voice

to all social actors. This condition rules out electoral decision rules and structures that systematically deprive some people of their fair chance to influence decisions that affect them. For the representation axis, she infers that the social status order must express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. This condition precludes institutionalised patterns of cultural value that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them, thus denying them the status of full partners in social interaction.

Redistribution	Recognition	Representation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Condition: The allocation of material resources must ensure independence. • Economic structures do not deprive or exploit people from participating. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Condition: The political constitution of society must afford equal political voice to all social actors • Decision and structures do not prevent people having a fair chance to participate and influence decisions that affect them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Condition: The social status order must afford equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. • Institutionalised patterns of cultural value do not devalue some categories of people and the qualities associated with them which negatively affects their status as full partners in social interaction.

Figure 9 Overview of Fraser's Parity of Participation Axes

To further demonstrate how the theoretical lens will be used, I first acknowledged Fraser's assertion that addressing inequalities requires a multi-dimensional approach. For this reason, I included a focus on social constructivism as understanding people's realities 'is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty, 1998:42). As AS seeks to address cultural barriers for women in HE, I believe it is essential that the research focused on constructivism as this theory affirms that understanding emerges through the individuals' interaction with the environment during their

experience. I used Fraser's three-dimensional categorisation of recognition (cultural), redistribution (economic) and representation (political) to frame my research around their experience in those categories and incorporate social constructivism to understand the role culture plays in their experience of these challenges.

Using Fraser's theory of justice, I believe that equality and social justice are principally problems of parity of participation. Fraser (2003) claims that the key issue for promoting justice is that it permits all members of the community to interact with one another as peers. For participatory parity to be upheld, at least three conditions must be met which she frames under redistribution, representation and recognition. Beginning with redistribution, I used this lens to examine the injustices women face in terms of the patriarchal stigma which is associated with flexible working and leave arrangements. I also used it to examine the distribution of unpaid care work which falls heavily towards women which hinders their ability to progress and negatively impacts their overall distribution of work and responsibilities for women. Using Fraser's (2003) notion of representation which infers that the social status order must express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. This condition precludes institutionalised patterns of cultural value that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them, thus denying them the status of full partners in social interaction. Using this lens, I explored whether patriarchy continues to be dominant in HE which can create a complex and challenging male dominated culture for women in leadership roles and by simply increasing how many women hold leadership roles will not lead to equality as gender quotas do not change culture. Using this lens, I also examined the effects of working within a male dominated cultural system for women. Turning to the recognition lens, parity of participation exists when the political constitution of society must be such as to accord roughly equal political voice to all social actors. This condition rules out electoral decision rules and structures that systematically deprive some people of their fair chance to influence decisions that affect them (Fraser, 2010). Using the lens of recognition, I examined whether women have parity of participation in relation to equal political voice as social actors in their own right. I also used this lens to look at their confidence in themselves and also in their environment. By using these three elements of Fraser's theory, I essentially wanted to investigate whether women in senior leadership roles in HE experience

participatory parity. As I discuss in chapters six, it is apparent that women do not experience parity of participation as they experience injustices across all three of Fraser's axis.

Lois McNay's Theory of Agency

The second theory I used for the theoretical lens was McNay's theory of agency. Her theory of agency and gender identity is framed against the backdrop of changing relations between men and women in contemporary societies. My interpretation of McNay's theory of agency is that it offers a different view of gender identity which move away from the negative sociological scrutiny of existing inequalities and political struggles which women face. Instead, her theory offers a lens to examine lived experience as it can reveal dimensions to oppression that are not necessarily visible from the external vantage point of the theorist. More specifically, the ways in which vulnerable groups respond to their circumstances make an invaluable contribution to the development of models of transformative social practice. This approach resonated with me as it recognises the power and importance of exploring the lived experience of women to understand how to use their experience to affect future positive change. McNay argues that recent thought on the formation of the modern subject offers a one-sided or negative account of agency, which underplays the creative dimension present in the responses of individuals to changing social relations. An understanding of this creative element is central to a theory of autonomous agency, and to an explanation of the ways in which women and men negotiate gender relations.

Acknowledging that women continue to encounter challenges whilst working in HE, I chose McNay's theory of agency to form the second element of my theoretical lens to move the narrative towards the supportive factors which enabled their success. I used this theory to argue that by developing concepts, in this case the concept of agency, cultural relations in daily life can be made more visible. This enables the issue of identity to become more connected to social structures. Much of the contemporary work on agency tends to offer a partial account of it, as it predominantly focuses on the negative paradigm. By this, I mean the subject is often understood in passive terms and is viewed more as an effect of discursive structures. This is

evidenced in much of the existing literature as the focus is on the structures that oppress people and their inability to progress (O'Connor, 2019; Adams and Dlamini, 2024; Duvvury and Ruggi, 2023) rather than on the individuals' capabilities. This one-sided account of women's experiences suggests they are victims of circumstance, which on one hand they are. That said, by only viewing their experiences like that means the other side is overlooked, which is their ability to overcome the challenges, to challenge the oppression and ultimately to succeed. McNay however offers this view of agency whereby the subject is more active, and the focus is more towards self-interpretation. Essentially, the negative paradigm provides a nuanced account of gender identity, which portrays a negative model of action focused on the displacement of constraining social norms. Whereas a fuller account of agency acknowledges that agency must include an account of the creative dimensions of action where actors actively appropriate conflicting socio-cultural values to institute new collective forms of identity (McNay, 1999). Having used Fraser's theory to examine the challenges that women continue to experience in HE, I chose to use McNay to uncover how women actively dealt with these challenges to progress. To do this, I use McNay's fuller sense of agency which focuses on the subject, in this case the women, as active actors with the power to influence their own sense of identity and their shared sense of collective identities.

McNay (2004) argues the importance of understanding gender as a lived social relation in mediating between understanding gender as a structural location which prevails in both materialist and cultural thought. In the materialist view, gender is seen as a structural location within or intersecting with capitalist class relations, in a way that resembles early feminist debates over the relationship between class and patriarchy (Gottfried, 1998). McNay argues that realistically, since people are never actually explicitly gathered in classes, the determining pressure exerted by a mode of production in the formation of classes cannot be easily expressed without reference to something like a common experience or a lived experience of the struggles inherent in relations of exploitation. In the latter, gender is regarded primarily as a location within symbolic structures. For McNay (2004), gender as a position within an abstract structure where forces only reveal themselves in the lived reality of social relations. In other words, it is through developing mediating concepts, in this case agency, that the determining force of economic and cultural relations

upon daily life can be made visible and, in this way, the issue of identity can be connected to that of social structure. My argument therefore is that the idea of experience is essential to an account of agency but that it must be understood in relational terms as essentially what material and cultural theorists fail to recognise is that that structural forces only reveal themselves in the lived reality of social relations (McNay, 2004). For this reason, McNay's theory was used to develop the theoretical lens for this research which in turn informed the development of the research aim which is to provide empirical evidence of the lived experience of women in order to ascertain if the current measures are affecting any tangible change for women and it will inform future policies for gender equality in HE. As I discuss in chapter seven, the current measures are affecting little change for women and in some instances, they are increasing workloads for women. Instead, as I argue in that chapter, women are affecting positive change for themselves, both as individuals and as a collective.

The inherent argument in this research is that we need to do more than have a balance of women in leadership roles as gender quotas alone do not address gender equality. Beyond parity, it is important that there are not only more women leaders in educational administration in HE but also that those women in leadership roles are supported within a context that enables them to thrive. It is therefore imperative to develop an awareness of what is working and contributing to the effectiveness of these women who are in senior leadership roles. I interviewed these female leaders to ascertain their self-perceptions as to what makes them effective in their senior leadership practice and what supportive factors enabled them to progress in their careers. The study considers what contributes to a leader's effectiveness, as reported in their own words. As evidenced in chapter eight, I have taken the findings and used them to make recommendations as to how we can learn from the women in this research to support women across HE more effectively so that we can reduce the challenges they experience whilst providing more appropriate supports to them.

Significance of this Theoretical Approach

Having examined the literature in the previous chapter, it is evident that women do experience life differently than men. It is clear that women who work in HE face additional challenges and must navigate those challenges in order to progress in their

career. It is also evident from the literature that there are supportive factors that act as enablers for some women to overcome these challenges and that there is a growing body of research which suggests that women may benefit from other women as mentors. I determined that Fraser and McNay were critical to this research as to focus only on the challenges women experience would offer a one-sided account of their overall experiences and would fail to examine the 'how', the factors that enabled them to overcome the challenges. For this reason, to have only used Fraser would have only looked at some of their experiences and so it was vital to include the focus on their agency using McNay as a means to unpack the supportive factors that enabled them to overcome the barriers. This will enable me to contribute to knowledge as the vast majority of the existing literature is focused on the challenges that women encounter. There is far less emphasis on the role that agency plays in the advancement of women. So by combining both Fraser and McNay as the theoretical underpinning for this research means that I will contribute to knowledge as I have taken a novel approach to the development of the theoretical lens which offers less of a one dimensional approach to understanding women's experiences.

Summary

This chapter has focused on the development of the theoretical lens. The notion that women continue to experience challenges in HE in Ireland is not a new phenomenon as it is well researched (O'Connor, 2009; O'Connor, 2015; O'Connor, 2021). That said, to examine the lived experiences of women in HE in Ireland, due consideration must be given to exploring what these challenges are and how they effected women in the workplace. The focus of my research was to then move the narrative from the challenges to the supportive factors which enabled the women to progress, irrespective of the challenges. To achieve this, I adopted McNay's lens to examine their sense of individual and collective agency. This led then to the inclusion of a strengths-based approach, as the emphasis was to examine their abilities, knowledge, and capacities rather than their deficits, so that we could learn from the women in this research as to how best we can support women moving forward so that they can overcome challenges and progress in their careers. Essentially, where Fraser (2005) acknowledges that she considers injustice first and reflecting through the struggles others have faced enables us then to fight and strive toward what justice might be. She affirms that the notion of justice is difficult to determine in the abstract.

This resonates with me as it offers a theoretical model to examine the challenges women in this research have faced to contribute to this ongoing gender identity discourse, from an Irish perspective. For me, McNay then offers something less subjective and more experiential in some ways as her lens enables me to consider not just what the challenges have been for women in this research but the ways in which they have responded to their circumstances which can then have an invaluable contribution to the development of models of transformative social practice moving forward.

Chapter Five - Methodology

Introduction

Having situated the female leader in the context of the changing landscape of HE, this chapter will discuss the methodological design I chose for this research. More specifically, I will begin by examining the anti-foundationalist ontological position which underpins this research. Following that, the phenomenological research design will be aligned to the research aim and objectives. The research questions will be identified before discussing how they were informed by the theoretical lens. I will then give an overview of the purposeful approach to sampling before addressing in detail the qualitative data generation method which was selected. From here, I will address how the data was coded and analysed for themes before giving due consideration to the ethical considerations for this research and the ethical steps which were undertaken to make it a viable and reliable piece of research.

Research Design

Aims and Methods

The stark gap which this research seeks to address is that there is no qualitative empirical data which looks at whether any change or movement towards gender equality has emerged as a result of the national government led drive to gender equality in Ireland. This aim of this research is to provide empirical evidence of the lived experience of women in order to ascertain if the current measures are affecting any tangible change for women and it will inform future policies for gender equality in HE. Employing an interpretivist phenomenological approach, this qualitative research engaged twenty women in semi-structured interviews in order to understand their experiences in their senior leadership roles. This research is driven by the following objectives and questions.

Objectives

The objective of this research was to explore the experiences of women in senior leadership roles in order to examine and understand the barriers they may have encountered during their career and also the factors that enabled them to overcome them. As these women have essentially 'made it' into the senior roles, I also wanted

to examine the protective factors that enabled that progression to happen. These objectives were informed by the following research question and subsequent sub-questions.

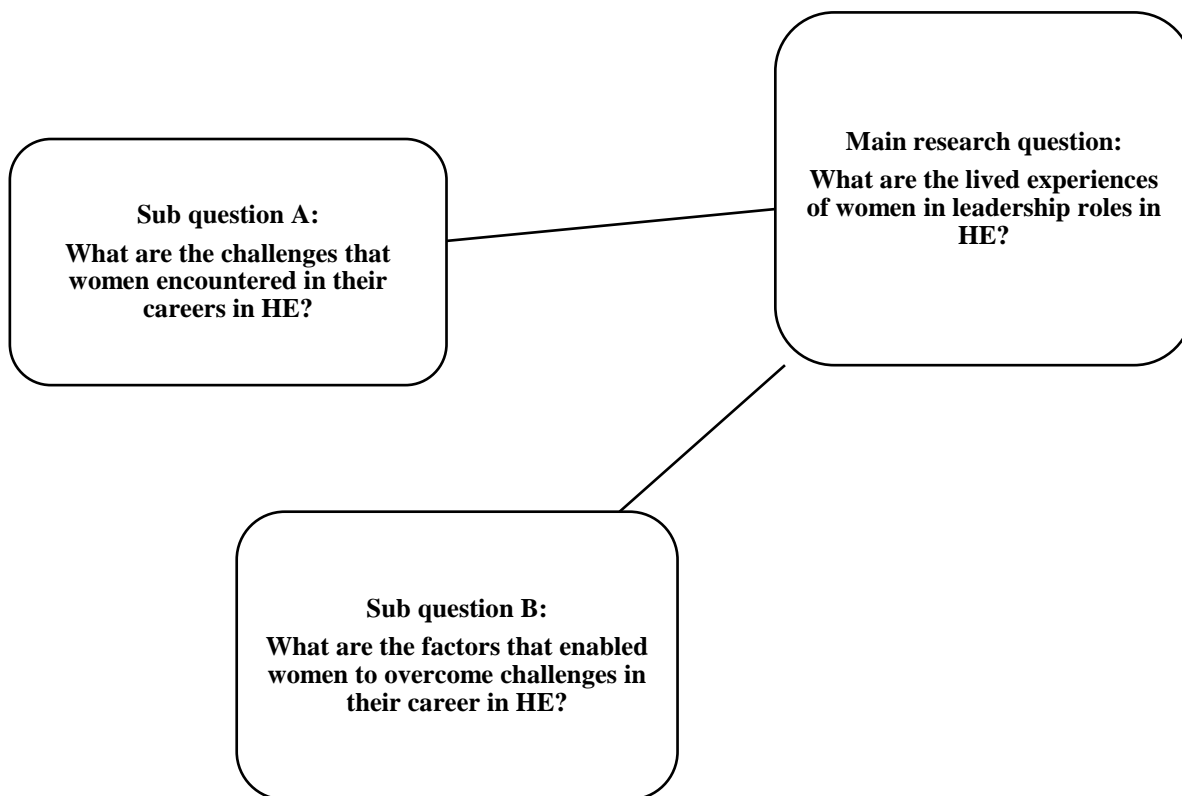


Figure 10 Research Questions

Since 2015, several initiatives have been implemented in Ireland, as presented in the first two chapters, which have focused on the promotion of gender equality in HE. It is therefore crucial to explore and understand the lived experiences of women in HE in Ireland to ascertain if any tangible change is happening for them in their roles in HE. This informed the primary research question as outlined above. Having set the context for HE in Ireland and having examined the challenges which women face in HE in chapter three, the first sub-question is focused on exploring what challenges women continue to experience in their careers. This is important as currently there is no empirical and qualitative data which examines this from an Irish perspective. Having explored the new research which is emerging in terms of the role of mentoring and the conflicting research regarding choice and ambition, it was imperative to examine what the supportive factors are which enabled the women in this research

to overcome the barriers they encountered, so that learnings could be taken from those experiences. This informed the second sub-question.

Ontological Design

Grounded in the assumption that there is no fundamental belief or principle which is the basic foundation of inquiry and knowledge but rather knowledge is transient, existing only until some new knowledge is created to replace it (Edwards, 1967), I adopted an anti-foundationalist approach to this research. I employed a non-positivist qualitative approach as I believe that social reality is viewed and interpreted by the individual themselves according to the ideological positions they possess. I am using this approach as currently the data which exists in relation to the 'effectiveness' of the gender equality movement in Ireland is based on quantitative metrics and essentially counting how many females occupy how many senior roles, whereas my approach is to seek meaning and understanding of how women experience the roles themselves. Qualitative research takes an interpretivist, approach to its subject matter as it attempts to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of meaning that people bring to them (Scauso, 2020). Building on this qualitative approach, I employed an interpretivist approach as this approach is based on the key assumption that social reality is shaped by people's experiences and their social contexts and is built upon the principle of subjective interpretations of those experiences of the participants. This is important to this research as I wanted to draw meaning and understanding from the responses I received from the participants. This means that as an interpretivist researcher, I was concerned with a rather immersive understanding of actions and meanings of the participants such as their beliefs and decisions around how they experience redistribution, recognition, and representation (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This understanding will contribute to knowledge as it will generate an understanding of the participants gender relations and the power dynamics behind them which is a key criterion for understanding individuals' access to and distribution of resources, the ability to make decisions and the way women are affected by political processes and social development (GSDRC, 2020). It is significant as it will identify any persistent constraints and obstacles to women's equality to enhance productivity and improve longer-term development outcomes for women.

Phenomenological Research Design

Stemming from this anti-foundationalist position, after careful consideration, I chose a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology seeks to study the lived experiences and the way things are perceived and appear to the consciousness (Tuffour, 2017). This approach was the most suited to this research as I wanted to understand a phenomenon's universal nature by exploring the views of those who have experienced it. Considered a variation of interpretivist research, it was used so that I could engage in gathering deep information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews and then representing it from the perspective of the research participants. The overall approach to the data collection methods will be examined later in this chapter.

From an epistemological perspective, this approach was adopted so that I could develop subjective knowledge of the personal experiences of the women in this sample group and then interpret those experiences in order to achieve the aim and objectives and address the research questions posed (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). This research was designed from the non-positivist paradigm using a phenomenological approach to its design so that I could develop knowledge and understanding of how women experience being in senior leadership positions in HE in Ireland. This phenomenological approach is particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of these women from their own perspectives, and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions within HE. Adding an interpretive dimension to phenomenological research, enables me to use this research as the basis for practical theory, which allows it to inform, support or challenge policy and action in relation to gender equality in HE in Ireland in the discussion section. The key argument from this research is that we cannot simply count how many women are in leadership positions to determine whether gender equality measures are working, instead, we need to understand their experiences of transitioning into and then being in those roles.

Research Approach

The research design was informed by the aim, objectives, and research questions. My argument from the outset of this research is that to understand what broader

impacts (if any) the gender equality initiatives are having on women, we need to understand their experience and not just count how many of them are in senior leadership roles (Peterson, 2011; Bown, 1999). In order to develop this understanding of their experience, a qualitative approach was chosen as it enabled me to investigate the experience of women in HE from an open-ended perspective. This meant that participants had an opportunity to share their feelings and experiences in a more in-depth and meaningful way in order to ascertain if the current measures are affecting any tangible change for women whilst also seeking to inform future policies for gender equality in HE. Engaging in qualitative research enabled me to be more focused on understanding the trends and meanings of natural actions and it was more flexible and iterative to explore the experiences of women in leadership roles. This enabled me to examine and understand the barriers they may have encountered during their career. I sought to interpret meaning from non-numerical data in my investigation of local knowledge and understanding of women's experiences, meanings and relationships within HE, with a particular focus on how they overcame any barriers and also what factors supported and hindered the development of their own sense of agency. Essentially, by opting to use a qualitative approach to this research, I could adopt a form of social action that focused on the way women interpreted and made sense of their experiences in HE to understand the social reality of women who have progressed to senior leadership roles (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Qualitative research enabled me to carry out research which was exploratory so that I could seek to understand whether any 'real' change or movement towards gender equality has emerged because of this national government led drive to gender equality. This allowed me to understand the social world in which we as women live, and why things are the way they are for women in HE (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). It also enabled me to unpack the supportive factors that enabled women to progress in their careers and the role their own agency played in this progression.

Positionality

To position myself within this research, my own positionality must be stated and explored. Firstly, to locate myself in the subject, my interest in this area has arisen from my own position as a woman in a leadership role in HE. I moved into the sector

in a full-time capacity in 2017 which is a year into the gender equality movement and so I was fascinated to hear the experiences of women who were in leadership positions prior to the movement and the experiences of those who positioned in during the movement. As my own experience was largely positive, I had spoken with colleagues who had very different experiences to my own. This sparked an initial interest in exploring what had led us to have such fundamentally different experiences working in the same organisation. I then considered what the reality of working in senior leadership roles was for other women, outside of our own HEI. I was aware that whilst my own experience was positive, this may not be reflective of all women's experiences in similar roles in HE. I also had to acknowledge that I was only in the sector for a brief amount of time and that perhaps I was coming into the sector at a different time with a different culture to colleagues who may have worked in the sector for decades. Based on this, I felt that I was not particularly wedded to a position that all other women must not have had a positive experience. Having read about the High Court rulings (The Irish Times, 2018) in 2015, I was acutely aware of some challenges other women in the sector had faced and so my position was one of genuine curiosity as to what the lived experiences of other women in senior leadership roles had been.

Next, I will locate myself in relation to the participants. Adopting a reflexive approach was important to me as I believe it is important as a researcher to acknowledge and disclose myself in this piece of work so that I can aim to understand my influence on the work and in the research process. I am coming from an anti-foundationalist ontological position whereby I believe that the world is not independent from our knowledge, but rather it is socially constructed by social actors. By this I mean, I believe that we are not simply products of the world we live in, but rather, we draw on our own theories to categorise, explain and narrate our own lived experiences. For this reason, engaging women in semi-structures interviews to enable them to share their experiences was essential as I believe that by understanding their experiences, we can use that learning to affect positive change moving forward. As a researcher, I am an early career stage researcher, so I viewed myself as somewhat inexperienced in the field of carrying out in-depth research. I was conscious at the beginning of the process that when inviting women to take part in the research, I would inevitably meet women who were far more experienced than I was at carrying

out research, which turned out to be correct. I refer to what this felt like in more depth later in this chapter. I was also aware of my age, as a woman in her early thirties, interviewing women who were twice my age, with decades more experience was somewhat daunting but not insurmountable. It was manageable because my position was one of genuine curiosity and one which I approached with absolute respect for the women who came forward to take part. This respect comes from my position that women are capable and resilient. That said, because I do not see women as victims, it was important not to overlook or brush past the real challenges they encountered, as this was a vital component of many of their experiences. So, I needed to remain aware of this and attentive to their story and not only seek out their agency but acknowledge their hurt.

In locating myself in relation to the research context and process, this was an ongoing piece of work. It has been a reflexive and reflective journey throughout the process over the last five years. I have reflected in action and on action on a continuous basis to ensure that I have engaged in considerable soul searching. This was essential to try to reduce bias during the process. That said, as an anti-foundationalist who believes that we construct our own reality, I do not think it is possible to be un-biased in research but rather aware of my own position and how to constantly reflect on that and what impact it may have on how I interpreted the experiences the women shared with me. A key component in that process has been regular engagement with my supervisor and having the time to reflect, discuss and be challenged in areas. Examples of this include the idea of layering, where I analysed a set of findings, I received feedback, I then reanalysed, I received feedback, I reflected, and I added more layers to the analysis. For this reason, it has been an iterative process of discovery of both me as a researcher and the research findings. As my supervisor said on many occasions, it is like painting a wall, and I think it is only at the end does that truly make sense when you reflect over the processes of layering the data. I also kept a journal of notes, observations, thoughts, questions that I continually used to reframe my thinking and my approach to the work. As it is an in-depth piece of work there were also times where I paused for actual reflection. The notion of stepping away from the work to then return with fresh eyes, to revisit areas, to re-listen to sections of the interviews. Over the course of this journey, I have come to the realisation that my positionality is somewhat fluid. By that I mean, I went into the

process with a curiosity to know more about the experiences of women in senior leadership roles in HE and what I found were twenty women who invited me into their private world to share those experiences with me. Over the course of the five years, I have had two more children myself and my sense of awareness of how that impacted me, and my career was heightened from the first to the second pregnancy. The second pregnancy was after I had conducted the interviews and it felt like my own sense of awareness was heightened in terms of how I felt telling my employer I was pregnant; would it preclude me from progression, how would that announcement be received, who would replace me. It felt as though by being part of their stories, their experiences had caused me to pause on reflect on my own life at certain points. This to me, was an unexpected outcome as I did not expect that others' experiences would cause me to reflect on my own, but it did, nonetheless. This illuminated the very real, in-depth, and transformative effect this process has had on me as a mother, as a woman and as a researcher.

Sampling

I engaged in purposeful sampling as this involved identifying and selecting groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). I acknowledged earlier that I believe gender is not binary. I chose to invite women in senior leadership roles in HE to take part in this research as the focus of the HEA gender profile reports is on women (and men only), so I too chose to focus on women. As affirmed earlier, my intent was not to explore the intersectional identities that women have but rather their experiences of being in senior leadership roles in HE. I initially intended to engage twelve women in leadership roles in HE in Ireland. The majority of Irish HEI's have an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Office and so my starting point was that I approached those offices by email and asked them to distribute my information letter which invited participants to take part in my research in early May 2021 (Appendix 1). As the government led gender equality policies have not focused on any one discipline and have purposively remained broad, it was my intention was to not focus on any one discipline. The invitation was sent to seven Universities, four Colleges, two TUs and eight IoTs and that yielded twenty-four women expressing an interest to take part in this research by the end of May 2021. I then followed up with a doodle

poll for them to select their preferred interview times. I set the available timeslots between 7am to 9pm, in acknowledgement that some of the women may also be balancing caring responsibilities and I wanted to give them flexibility in selecting times that worked best for them. In total, of the twenty-four that expressed an interest, twenty confirmed their availability and subsequently twenty women were interviewed in July 2021. Given the lack of females in senior leadership roles at the time of inviting participants to interview, due regard has been given to the protection of the anonymity of the participants who took part. This was upheld by redacting any mention of specific HEIs in the interview transcripts as the name of specific HEIs is not relevant to the research question. That said, participants represented one TU, two Colleges, seven IoTs and four Universities. In order to define what a leadership role is, I used the HEA Gender Profile Report which categorizes management in HEIs in Ireland into Professional, Management and Support Core and Non-Core Funded Staff roles. This sample is then broken down as follows:

Identifier	Length of Service	Type of Role	HEI
PAR1	20 years	Head of Department	IoT
PAR2	21 years	Professor	University
PAR3	17 years	Head of Function	College
PAR4	20 years	Professor	University
PAR5	19 years	Head of Function	University
PAR6	9 years	Senior Head of Function	College
PAR7	3 years	Senior Head of Function	College
PAR8	15 years	Head of Function	University
PAR9	17 years	Head of Department	IoT
PAR10	15 years	Professor	University
PAR11	35 years	Vice President/President	IoT
PAR12	13 years	Head of Function	University
PAR13	26 years	Vice President/President	IoT
PAR14	9 years	Head of Function	IoT
PAR15	5 years	Senior Head of Function	University
PAR16	18 years	Vice President/President	University
PAR17	34 years	Vice President/President	IoT
PAR18	27 years	Professor	University
PAR19	22 years	Vice Dean	University
PAR20	20 years	Director	IoT

Figure 11 Profile of Participants

As evident from the table above, the samples represent a mixture of colleges, IoTs and Universities, so the research is not only reflective of one type of HEI. The breakdown of roles ranges from Head of Functions (non-academic functional areas) to the senior executive roles of Vice Presidents and President. Each of the participants was labelled as PAR, short for participant and then a subsequent number. I chose to do this rather than use pseudonyms, as the greatest risk with using pseudonyms is that I might inadvertently use their actual name at some stage rather than their pseudonym. For me, this risk was too high. Having spent time interviewing and talking with these women, then listening to their recordings repeatedly, I felt I developed a connection with them and when I thought of them, I thought of them by name. So, using pseudonyms felt less real for me and also posed too great a risk of using their correct name.

Data Generation

Data Generation Methods

Turning now to the data generation methods, I engaged in qualitative, semi-structured interviews with the samples on a one-to-one basis using Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams was determined to be the safest way to conduct the interviews as it was during the COVID-19 global pandemic. A pilot, which will be addressed in more detail below, was conducted with two female colleagues to ensure questions were clear and fit for purpose. Each participant gave informed consent for the interview to be recorded on Microsoft Teams. The recorded interviews were then stored safely in Microsoft Stream which was password protected and can only be accessed by me. I then subscribed to Otter as a transcription service. I uploaded the transcriptions to Otter and then went through each transcription to ensure that it had captured the interviews adequately during the months August to November 2021. Once the responses were transcribed, I familiarised myself with each of the interviews and then categorised each of the samples, as presented above. I used NVivo then to engage in the thematic analyses where responses were grouped into themes which I then interpreted to extract meaning and analysis against the literature (Bernard, 2002).

Interview Preparation

In preparation for conducting the interviews, the first step was to ensure that I developed the interview questions in line with the aim which was to gather evidence of the lived experience of women in order to ascertain if the current measures are affecting any tangible change for women and it will inform future policies for gender equality in HE. The objective of this research was to explore the experiences of women in leadership roles to examine and understand the barriers they may have encountered during their career. As these women have essentially 'made it' into the senior roles, I also wanted to examine the factors that enabled that progression to happen and what role their own agency played in their progression. Another consideration was the theoretical lens and my position that experience is essential to an account of agency but that it must be understood in relational terms as essentially what material and cultural theorists fail to recognise is that that structural forces only reveal themselves in the lived reality of social relations McNay (2004).

Interviewing Up with Women

I wanted to approach the interviews from a reflexive position to ensure that I questioned any assumptions I may have had regarding the process of interviewing women. I had two considerations here. The first being the concept of a woman interviewing women and the dynamic that this can create. As I purposely took a strengths-based approach, my own ontological position was to champion women, to unpack what empowered them and to use that information to affect positive change for other women. I found that I could balance being a pro-women advocate with the requirement to not be overly familiar with the women to run the risk of distorting the data. I managed to do this by remaining very clear on what my theoretical lens was and focusing the use of my questioning around that lens. This echoes the work of Oakley (1993) who experienced interviewing women as an iterative process of creating a faithful and alternative feminist scholarship by delving in-depth into the interview process as a woman with other women.

The other reflexive consideration is that typically, feminist research can focus on women who are victims, which can render the women as researchers having more power than the interviewees. This, however, was not the case in my research as in

many respects I was interviewing up (Burkinshaw, 2015) where many of the interviewees were in higher ranked positions than I was in. As noted in the positionality section, I was interviewing women who were in most cases older than me, more experienced at research than me and in more senior posts than me. This meant that I was quite nervous during the first two interviews, as it was somewhat daunting. I then reflected after those interviews, I made some notes and I reaffirmed to myself how important this research was and instead of being nervous, focus less on me and more on the women. I had to manage feelings of inexperience, and this was a key reason for recording the interviews as it is difficult to be nervous and fully engaged. This did improve as the interviews went on and I was able to engage fully with the women. For the first few interviews, where I was more nervous, I could reflect on those interviews through my notes and the recordings. During the interview process, I was not focused on the women in this research as one homogenous group, but rather, the focus was on their sense of agency and how they 'made it' into their senior leadership roles within HE in Ireland. This is somewhat like Burkinshaw's (2015) research which investigated success, the lived experiences of successful women who were Vice Chancellors in HE in the UK. I am contributing directly to knowledge by taking this approach because much of the existing research is focused on women in lower-level positions and the focus is predominantly on the challenges they experience rather than the enabling factors that led to their success (O'Connor, 2019; O'Connor, 2020; O'Connor, 2010; Leathwood, 2015; Acker, 1990).

Interview Questions

The interview questions were developed with the purpose of generating valid and reliable data to answer the research questions. I divided the questions into categories that I wanted to explore with the participants. The categories were drawn from the literature which was examined in the literature review and are outlined below. As the interviews were semi-structured, it enabled me to ask additional questions during the interview to delve deeper into aspects that the participants were discussing.

Category	Questions
Type of role and motivation to take part	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long have you been in HE and why did you decide to pursue a career in HE? 2. Can you describe the role you are currently working in? 3. Why did you choose to take part in this study?
Female leadership	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Part of the self-nomination process to this research, was to identify as being in a leadership role, how would you define a leadership role in HE? 2. How long have you been working in a leadership role in Higher Education? 3. Were you always in a leadership position or did you progress into one? 4. Factors that led you into a leadership role?
Challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have you experienced challenges as a female leader in HE? 2. What factors supported your ability to overcome the challenges?
Gender equality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What would Gender Equality in Higher Education look like to you? 2. Do you think it exists and to what extent? 3. Are you aware of any changes in Higher Education since 2015 in relation to Gender Equality? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Can you explain how you understand them? 4. Have you experienced any changes in your role as a result of the gender equality movement in Higher Education since 2015?

Figure 12 List of Interview Questions

The Pilot

In order to ensure the questions were clear, I ran two pilot interviews with two female colleagues. Both pilots were conducted using Microsoft Teams to ensure I could also test the software during the interview. From a practical perspective, both interviews recorded correctly on Microsoft Teams and were then saved to Microsoft Stream. On

the first interview, the flow went well and there was no delay or lag in the connection. Both cameras were switched on, so it felt quite comfortable and natural as the discussion flowed. For the second interview however, there were some minor technical issues with bandwidth where there was a slight delay or freezing in parts of the interview. This did disrupt the flow in places. I reflected on this afterward and there were other devices in use at the same time when I was conducting the pilot. So, to ensure that I could mitigate against IT issues on my own device, I did a speed check and turned off all other devices prior to the actual interviews.

From a more reflexive perspective, both interviews had a particular sense of comfortability as both participants were colleagues of mine, so we had pre-existing positive relationships in place. This led to quite open discussion on both their parts, particularly around challenges that they had encountered. As this was an interview situation, I felt I had to hold myself back on responding to their comments in a more conversational way as I understood the culture they were speaking about. This informed my decision to not invite participants from my own workplace to take part in my actual study as I wanted to remain as objective as possible as the researcher and mitigate against interviewing those, I had close relationships with. I also felt a sense of excitement having completed the pilots as the discussions were very rich in detail and this gave me a certain confidence about proceeding on to conduct the actual research with external participants. That said, I was cognisant of social desirability in their responses and the level of trust which already existed between us. On reflection then, as I would not have trust in place with the actual participants in my study, reconfirming their anonymity would be upheld was a particularly important point I took from the pilot interviews. Both interviewees gave positive feedback in relation to the questions asked and felt they were open enough to allow for discussion. Neither recommended any changes to the questions.

The Interview Process

For the interviews I used a semi-structured approach. I had a list of questions prepared and then during the interviews, I introduced other unplanned questions to enable the conversation to flow. I did not send the questions in advance to participants as I was mindful of social desirability and so I did not want participants to feel they had to prepare the right answer, as instead I was looking to hear their

experiences. This meant I could delve deeper into certain areas or topics of interests, such as personal examples of micro-aggressions or the specific role and impacts of mentors etc. In terms of creating an open and relaxed atmosphere, I welcomed all the participants at the beginning of the interviews, prior to the recording starting, which meant I could explain the information letter verbally and answer any questions or concerns that the participants had. It also created an opportunity to build up some rapport with the participants and strike a connection with them so that the interview was relaxed and conversational rather than too formal and restrictive. At the end of the interviews, the participants were given the opportunity to make further comments, make clarifications, ask any questions, or reconfirm any points. Once the recording stopped, I had general conversations with the participants where they expressed the importance of the research and asked for copies of the findings once the dissertation was submitted. This supportive and positive reinforcement of the importance of the topic demonstrates the women's willingness to be part of and contribute to the wider gender equality initiatives within the HE sector. In terms of timing, the longest interview was 1 hour and 19 minutes and the shortest one was 53 minutes, with the average being 1 hour 7 minutes. Though I approached all of the interviews in the same way, the actual duration of them was more dependent on the level of dialogue and how much information the participants wanted to share. Some were quite succinct in their answers and others gave multiple examples in some of their answers.

From a more reflexive perspective, I kept a journal open during the interviews so I could make some notes throughout of important things that struck me. Particular topics raised quite mixed responses. One example was when participants were asked about the changes in HE since 2015 in relation to Gender Equality, the SALI posts garnered very mixed responses. On one hand, some participants felt they were needed to evoke change in terms of equality and for others they were angered by the concept and rejected it completely. It was fascinating as two women held very similar roles and would both have been involved in SALI applications and yet one was vehemently against the concept and the other absolutely advocated for its merits. I experienced very different emotions when listening to and speaking with the women in the study. In places, I was saddened by their experiences of bullying in the workplace. Their own emotions could be heard in how they vividly described certain

examples of it and the impact it had on them personally. In other places I was in awe of the women as regardless of the challenges they had encountered, as a collective, they had succeeded in attaining the roles they had sought out. For some the transition to leadership roles was relatively quick but for the majority it was slower and took sacrifice, self-belief, and absolute determination. All the women epitomised what Fraser coined 'dangerous women' as they spoke openly, candidly and vividly about their experiences and for all twenty of them it included reflections of overcoming very real challenges in the workplace that they faced simply being women.

As the theoretical lens was partially framed around McNay's work, I was also curious to see what factors enabled them to overcome the challenges they experienced. I could really empathise with their responses around having positive mentors in their careers as I too have been fortunate to have had some excellent mentors in mine. I had one in particular who had a profound impact on me, on my development, on my career progression and my educational journey. All twenty of them spoke of having at least one mentor who played a pivotal role in their own positive career development. This struck me as very important as I know from experience how important that mentor was for me, and I couldn't have predicted that all twenty women would share that experience with me. That said, many of them cited being lucky to have had such mentors as they could acknowledge colleagues who had not been so fortunate. This idea of lucky was very interesting as again it was met with mixed opinions and is further explored in detail in the discussion chapter.

Data Analysis

Approach to Data Analysis

The overall approach I used to data coding and analysis was based upon Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process. This entailed six steps which are represented in figure 13. I chose this approach as Braun and Clarke (2006) view analysis as an interactive process in which the researcher is an active participant in constructing meaning, rather than simply identifying it. This aligns with my ontological position that knowledge is continuously created and does not just happen. By this I mean, I believe themes do not just emerge from the data, but rather, the researcher is active in constructing the meaning from the data.

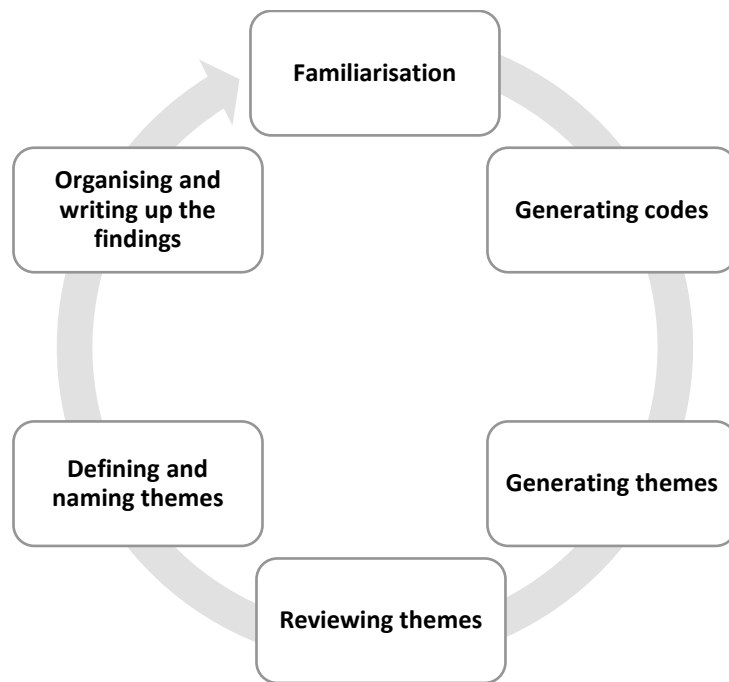


Figure 13 Visual Representation of Approach to Data Analysis

Familiarising

I used Microsoft Teams to record the interviews which were then uploaded to Microsoft Stream. I then used Otter to transcribe the interviews. Once they were all transcribed, I read and re-read the transcripts and replayed the interviews back, so that I could check for errors and fix them and also so that I could familiarise myself with the interviews. This meant that I read through and revisited the data in its entirety several times during this stage so that I developed a thorough grasp of all the data.

Generating Initial Codes

After familiarising myself with the data, the next step was coding notable features of the data in a methodical way. This meant highlighting portions of the text and applying codes to them that describe the nature of their content as exemplified in Figure 14. In the example interview snippets, portions have been highlighted and coded. The codes describe the idea or perception described in the text.

Interview snippet	Codes
<p>It can be difficult because sometimes you need to raise your hands and push forth, and I don't think that's easy, I certainly don't find that easy to do in a male dominated environment, and when there are a lot of opinionated, educated intelligent male people, it can be it can be difficult to do as a woman.</p>	<p>Patriarchal environment</p>
<p>You've got a situation where the President stands and screams at you. I mean I've been in meetings where he literally had banged tables and screamed and roared and would go red in the face and shout and pointed at people, and you're a junior lecturer, where do you go, that's what the President does. There's nowhere to go</p>	<p>Bullying behaviour</p> <p>Treatment at meetings</p>
<p>For me, I got a mentor for the first time in my career in 2016, when I looked for one, and so I approached somebody privately, and the university wasn't running the system still isn't from what I can see. And, and that mentor was and still is my mentor, and, but, like, so it's not a traditional mentor relationship in the sense that normally they finish after a year, and, and that was a huge help to me and in my career.</p>	<p>importance of a mentor</p> <p>Agency – choice</p>

Figure 14 Example of Coding Technique

Generating Themes

Once I created the codes, I then needed to examine them, identify patterns within them, and begin generating themes. Themes are more encompassing than codes as it involves combining multiple codes into a single theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using hierarchical coding I used broad themes such as 'challenges', encompassing a broad range of challenges which I then dug down into more specific ones like 'Barriers'. As I then curated the codes and I discarded some on the basis that they are too broad or not directly relevant. I also choose to redefine some of the codes as themes and integrate other codes into them. Below is a snapshot of the coding into initial themes (Figure, 15)

Sub-Question:	Initial Broad Themes	Codes
Challenges	Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working Hours Workload Unpaid care work Treatment of women in meetings Menopause
	Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patriarchal Micro Aggressions and Inequalities Bullying

Sub-Question:	Initial Broad Themes	Codes
Supportive Factors	Gender Equality Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aurora SALI Gender Quotas Awareness Interviews Slow Change
	Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attitude Confidence Resilience Choice Tactics for meetings Queen-bee Gendered leadership Vision Relationships Values Led Supportive Mentors Characteristics of a Mentor National Mentoring Initiative

Figure 15 Example of Generating Themes

Reviewing Themes

The next stage involved checking that the themes I had generated accurately and relevantly represented the data they are based on. Once again, this involved a thorough, back-and-forth approach that included review, assessment, comparison, and inquiry which were informed by my desire to make sure that nothing was overlooked, the themes were definitively supported by the data and examining whether there was any room for improvements (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Defining and Naming the Themes

With the final list of themes in place, the next step was to name and define them. In defining them, I wanted to define the meaning of each theme and, importantly, how it allowed me to make sense of the data. Essentially, once I had the themes defined, I needed to apply a concise and straightforward name to each one (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In order to do this, I used my theoretical lens to define the themes using Fraser's redistribution, representation and recognition to define the themes that represented the challenges. I then used McNay's notion of agency by defining it as evident through changing social relations, leadership, mentorship and the strength and power that agency takes. I have presented a snapshot of this below in Figure 16 and 17.

	Initial Broad Themes	Initial Codes	Theoretical Lens Definition	Thematic Description
Sub-Question: Challenges	Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working Hours Workload Unpaid care work Menopause 	Redistribution	Assumptions Regarding Flexible Working and Leave Arrangements Consequences of Flexible Working and Leave Arrangements Social Reproduction Unpaid Care Work Menopause
	Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patriarchal Micro Aggressions and Inequalities Bullying 	Representation	Male Dominated Culture Bullying The Queen Bee Effects of Bullying
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Treatment of women in meetings 	Recognition	Being Unheard Lack of Confidence in the Environment

	Initial Broad Themes	Initial Codes	Theoretical Lens Definition	Thematic Description
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SALI • Gender Quotas • Slow Change 		<p>Competitive Nature of HE</p> <p>Lack of Tangible Change to Culture</p> <p>Feminisation of EDI Roles</p>

Figure 16 Snapshot of Thematic Description of Challenges

Sub-Question:	Initial Broad Themes	Initial Codes	Theoretical Lens	Thematic Description
Supportive Factors	Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitude • Confidence • Resilience • Choice • Tactics • Queen-bee • Awareness • Interviews • Slow Change • Aurora 	Changing Social Relations	<p>Individualised Agency</p> <p>Dangerous Women</p> <p>The Tools for Change</p>
Supportive Factors		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gendered leadership • Vision • Relationships • Values Led • Supportive 	Leadership	<p>Feminised Leadership</p> <p>Collective Leadership</p> <p>Leadership as Visionary</p>
Supportive Factors		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors • Characteristics of a Mentor • National Mentoring Initiative 	Mentorship	<p>Choosing Relational Mentoring</p> <p>Unified Mentoring Initiative</p>

Sub-Question:	Initial Broad Themes	Initial Codes	Theoretical Lens	Thematic Description
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Queen-bee 		
Supportive Factors		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitude • Confidence • Resilience • Choice 	The Strength and Power of Agency	Agency as Ambition Agency as Attitude Agency as Choice Agency as Resiliency

Figure 17 Snapshot of Thematic Description of Supportive Factors

Having now outlined the steps I took in carrying out thematic analysis, I have demonstrated that thematic analysis offers a flexible and recursive way to approach qualitative data that has enabled me to yield valuable insights about women's opinions, views, and lived experiences. This process of thematic analysis is based in the initial descriptive phenomenological approach, which stems from the original data to the identification of meanings, organising these into patterns and writing the results of themes related to the research aim and the actual context. The patterns in the data that are important and of particular relevance were coded into themes and these themes were then utilised to address the research and make explicit arguments about the issue of gender equality. It is imperative that it is conducted in a rigorous and methodical manner to yield meaningful and useful results, which I did (Nowell, et al, 2017).

For transparency, I have outlined and justified my approach to coding to demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematising, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible. In order to further establish trustworthiness in qualitative research, one consideration is credibility which can be operationalised through the process of member checking to test the findings with the participants. This was built into the semi-structured interview process, where I regularly paraphrased back the main points from specific areas to ensure that I was interpreting their responses accurately. This enabled participants to correct me if I had misunderstood and in other instances to reconfirm the point they were making. Next, I considered dependability, and noted that to achieve dependability, I had to ensure that the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Nowell, et al., 2017). The process of analysis for this research project was framed around thematic analysis. I used Nvivo as the tool to

manage the analysis. In very practical terms, the tool provided me with a simple structure for creating codes and themes and gave me a safe place to document this. More traditional and manual qualitative data analysis can be demanding and depending on the volume of transcripts to be analysed, there is a risk that sources can be read and understood in less detail because of the copy-cut-paste burden posed by the traditional manual analysis system. With twenty transcripts to manage, NVivo relieved me of the burden associated with manual coding. I was able to link a paragraph from one participant to another paragraph in either the same or another source and retrieve it easily. Also, articles can be difficult to manage and in manual coding the loss of even a single paper could cause serious damage to the project. In NVivo, all the sources are kept together in one project. Although files are located in different places within the same project, the links that are created makes retrieval simple while in manual coding a researcher can spend long period of time searching for the missing papers or files rendering the process ineffective and inefficient. I could also reshape and reorganise coding and thematic structure quickly by deleting, copying, moving and combining nodes without affecting the sources within a few clicks. Aside from the convenience of using NVivo, it also helps to improve accuracy of qualitative studies. For example, when I wanted to find out how many women had mentors, using NVivo meant I could search for this information in a matter of seconds and the results were also accurate and reliable.

Confirmability and Credibility

In terms of reliability, if someone wanted to understand what I did during the analysis process of this research, it could be almost impossible if I had used manual analysis as the materials are best understood by the researcher herself and are usually difficult to sort. However, by using NVivo, one could easily browse through my project and understand how the analysis of the data was done. Essentially, thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights and enabled me to take a well-structured approach to handling data, helping to produce a clear and organised final report through the analysis chapter (King, 2004). Confirmability is concerned with establishing that my interpretations and findings were clearly derived from the data, requiring that I demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached. To demonstrate this, the voice of participants is

used directly in the discussion chapters to ensure the raw data is evident which then follows with a critical analysis of that data under the six themes using the theoretical lens line by line coding and analysis within the discussion. Confirmability is essentially then established when credibility and dependability are all achieved (Nowell et al, 2017). In terms of validity in qualitative research, it is the credibility of the results that reflect the real world of the participants. To assess the validity, I used respondent validation, where the results are tested with the participants to see if they agree. This was carried out throughout the interviews where I reflected back the answers and also at the end where I summarised their experiences and asked them to validate the accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical Approval

As with any research, ethical considerations are paramount to ensure participants are respected and safe during the research process. The first step regarding ethical consideration for this research was the application for ethical approval which was submitted in late 2020 and approval was gained in February 2021.

Information Letter

With ethical approval in place, my next consideration was the overall ethical considerations for this research which included the importance of informed consent, which was achieved through the information letter (to inform) and the consent form (for consent). Informed consent is one of the founding principles of research ethics which is intended to ensure that participants can enter research freely or voluntarily with full information about what it means for them to take part, and that they give consent before they enter the research. The information letter is available in Appendix 1.

Informed Consent

As the interviews were conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions, all communication with the participants was carried out online. The information letter was entered into a Google Form and embedded into an email which invited

participants to engage in the study. I then emailed this to the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Offices requesting that they shared it with women in senior leadership roles in their HEI. For those who opted to take part, they clicked on the link to the Google Form where they could view the information letter. Contained within the Google Form, under the letter were a series of statements that the participants could choose to respond with yes or no (Appendix 2) to ensure they had read the letter and were giving their consent to take part and for their interview to be recorded. At the bottom then, having given their consent, they could enter their name, role, and email address into the Google Form. Once I received that response, I then re-sent the information letter to participants, and I included a Doodle Poll and invited them to select the timeslot that best suited them for their interview. As mentioned previously, to afford participants with flexibility, I gave them the option to choose their timeslots between 7am to 9pm. Once the Doodle Poll response was received, I sent an invitation email to each participant with their link to their own private Microsoft Teams meeting.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

To ensure anonymity were upheld in this research, I ensured that no identifiable information was be used in any of my work to identify the participants of the study, for example, their name, place of work etc. Even though all twenty women volunteered to take part, quite a few of them clarified that their anonymity would be upheld. This is perhaps telling of the partial fear some of the women have in repercussions that could occur if their identities were known, given the toxic environments some of them described they worked in. In terms of confidentiality, participants were informed through the information letter and again prior to the interview process commencing that the findings from the research would be used for research purposes only. This would include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles. I advised that I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences, practitioner conferences or inform policymakers about the study. I also advised that when writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and experiences they shared with me and that I would only use anonymised quotes so that although I will use their exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect their anonymity in any publications.

Data Storage

To ensure that the data was stored safely and securely, I undertook a number of steps whilst familiarising myself with and adhering to the Lancaster University ethical standards set out in the University's Code of Practice and in accordance with research ethics guidelines specified by the research councils (RCUK). Firstly, I used Microsoft Teams to record the interviews which were then uploaded to Microsoft Stream. The only person with a login to these accounts was me. I then subscribed to Otter and again this was password protected and I had that password. Once the transcriptions were retrieved from Otter, they were saved to my personal external hard drive which only I had password protected access to. Once the transcriptions were then uploaded to NVivo, I was the only one with the password for that also. As a further precaution, I also kept the raw data saved separately from the personal information (names and email addresses). In accordance with university guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the methodological design of this research. The research is framed on an anti-foundationalist perspective. Adopting a phenomenological research design, I engaged twenty women in semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences of being in senior leadership roles in order to examine and understand the barriers they may have encountered during their career and what factors enabled them to successfully overcome those challenges. Due consideration was given to uphold an ethical approach to this research to ensure that the women involved felt respected and that their contributions were valued throughout the process. Throughout this section, I have also included a reflective approach to include my own reflections of the methodological design and follow through of this research.

Chapter Six - Navigating the Barriers of Patriarchy

Introduction

This chapter seeks to demonstrate the lived experiences of women by examining the first sub-question as to what challenges women encounter in their careers. To do this, I will begin by discussing how the findings from this research will be analysed through the theoretical lens which is framed around Fraser's (2003) view that equality and social justice are principally problems of parity of participation. I will argue that for participatory parity to be upheld, at least three conditions must be met which Fraser (2003) frames under redistribution, representation, and recognition. Firstly, using the redistribution lens, I will argue that women face injustices in terms of the patriarchal stigma which is associated with flexible working and leave arrangements. They also experience an unequal distribution of unpaid care work and challenges which arise from menopause and social reproduction which limit their ability to have equal distribution of independence and value. Secondly, using the representation lens, I will argue that the culture of HE is dominated by men which creates the conditions for bullying of women which has far reaching consequences on their ability to have equal respect and cultural value. Lastly, I will use the recognition lens to argue that women do not have equal political voice as social actors as they are not being heard, they lack confidence in the HE environment and they have found themselves in feminised EDI roles which reinforces the notion that equality is a woman's problem that should be fixed by women. I will then demonstrate that in the modern competitive environment of HE, without having equal voice, autonomy and status, women simply cannot compete in an equal way as they do not have parity of participation. The main takeaways from this chapter are that women experience injustices across all three of Fraser's axes which negatively effects their ability to have parity of participation.

Theoretical Lens

The theoretical lens for this chapter is framed around Fraser's (2003) view that equality and social justice are principally problems of parity of participation. Fraser (2003) claims that the key issue for promoting justice is that it permits all members of the community to interact with one another as peers. For participatory parity to be

upheld, at least three conditions must be met which she frames under redistribution, representation, and recognition. This view forms the basis of the lens which I will use to argue that the women who engaged in this research do not have parity of participation as injustices exist across all three axes. I will illuminate these injustices across the three conditions that Fraser uses. Beginning with redistribution, I will argue that women face injustices in terms of the patriarchal stigma which is associated with flexible working and leave arrangements. This stigma affects can not only their ability to progress but also how they are perceived by colleagues. Fraser (2003) notes that social arrangements that could enable people of every gender to combine social reproductive activities with safe, interesting, and well-remunerated work is necessary for parity of participation. I will argue that this combined approach to social reproduction does not exist for women in HE, but rather by virtue of being female and choosing to have a family, it can act as a barrier to their ability to progress in their careers. I will also argue that the distribution of unpaid care work falls heavily towards women which further hinders their ability to progress and negatively impacts their overall distribution of work and responsibilities for women. Lastly, I will argue using this lens that women suffer with the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of menopause whilst continuing to work with no acknowledgement of this and no policy to support them. This affects their access to parity of participation as they must contend with the very real consequences of the menopause which can negatively affect them in the workplace.

In the second section I will use Fraser's (2003) notion of representation which infers that the social status order must express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. This condition precludes institutionalised patterns of cultural value that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them, thus denying them the status of full partners in social interaction. Using this lens, I will argue that patriarchy continues to be dominant in HE which creates a complex and challenging male dominated culture for women in leadership roles and by simply increasing how many women hold leadership roles will not lead to equality as gender quotas alone do not change culture. The effects of working within a male dominated cultural system can have far reaching effects for women as the realities experienced by women in this research are that their status is not equal to that of their male colleagues which results

in inequity of voice or for others it has escalated to being the victim of workplace bullying. I will then argue that the social status order as described by women in this research does not express equal respect for all participants which demonstrates that women do not have equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. Within a male dominated environment, bringing more women in at senior levels is not affecting tangible change as they do not have an equal sense of status.

In the final section of this chapter, I will examine the findings using Fraser's (2003) third axis of recognition. Using this lens, parity of participation exists when the political constitution of society must be such as to accord roughly equal political voice to all social actors. This condition rules out electoral decision rules and structures that systematically deprive some people of their fair chance to influence decisions that affect them (Fraser, 2010). Using the lens of recognition, I will argue that women do not have parity of participation as they do not have equal political voice as social actors in their own right as they are often unheard. I argue that women do not lack confidence in themselves, given the opportunity, they would be successful, and they can do their job well. Rather, it is a lack of confidence in the environment to see their talent and recognise their contributions. I will then argue that the market driving competitive nature of HE is negatively affecting women as they do not have parity of participation to compete with their male colleagues. I will argue that the AS initiative has had a lack of any meaningful change in the overall culture of HE and instead it has created additional work for women which negatively impacts their ability to have parity of participation. For women to have the conditions met for Fraser's recognition axis, they must have equality of political voice and a fair chance to influence decisions. In this section, I argue that these conditions do not exist for women in HE as the gender equality movement in HE has led to a feminisation of leadership roles which are related to EDI.

Redistribution

Fraser (2003) describes the redistribution axis as the allocation of material resources must be such as to ensure participants' independence and voice. This condition precludes economic structures that institutionalise deprivation, exploitation, and gross disparities in labour and leisure time, which prevent some people from

participating as full partners in social interaction. This section will use this lens to form my argument that women who engaged in this research do not experience parity of participation as they as they experience significant disparities in their labour, leisure time and health related matters.

Assumptions Regarding Flexible Working and Leave Arrangements

In this section, I argue that patriarchal systems have influenced (and continue to influence) issues of access and equity within the workplace culture of how flexible working is depicted. In using the term flexible working I am referring to flexibility over where, when and the hours people work, which can be interchanged with work-life balance practices. There is an inherent link between flexible working and women which implicitly infers that all women require flexible working for caregiving reasons. This has multiple impacts for women. On one level, it assumes that caregiving is the main reason why women seek flexible working. This is an assumption, as not all women seek flexible working for family reasons. As evidenced by PAR13 who sought flexible working to manage stress and her work-life-balance or PAR2 who sought a career break due to a bereavement. It is further evidenced in the literature review, I questioned whether Stone, Helgesen and Johnson (2010) were assuming that all women value flexibility for family reasons, which inadvertently implies that women seek flexible working for caregiving reasons. The reality is that flexible working isn't only linked to caregiving as evidenced by the 80% of men surveyed by Timewise (2017), who said they would prefer more control over their working hours and would want more flexibility in their work with 90% of employees dislike the strict nine-to-five day. This indicates that flexible working is not only sought for family caregiving reasons. This is further supported by Adamson et al. (2023) who investigated why senior executives seek flexible working arrangements. They argue that to understand what drives senior executives to flexible working arrangements, we need to move beyond the linear view of it as something that people *do* and instead consider it as being more linked to the construction of one's gendered subjectivity, that is *who* they are. They infer that flexible working needs to be considered as a social discourse which governs individuals in constructing their own subjectivity. Offering a fresh perspective, they view flexible working arrangements as being part of one's subjectivity, a sense of who they are. This new perspective sits well within more own

theoretical lens, as the emphasis shifts more to who are the women who seek flexible working rather than continually focusing on the assumption that they all seek it to fulfil caring responsibilities. This implies a sense of agency amongst women as it suggests that women may seek flexible working arrangements as active social agents who are 'capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices' (Anderson et al. 2023:32).

The assumption that it is only sought by women for caregiving reasons has an impact on them as this patriarchal view renders the notion of flexible working as a women's issue which is inextricably linked to being in a caring role. This linear view of it means that in many instances, the women inferred that there are no flexible working policies in place for all staff in their HEIs. In fact, the issue was exasperated when PAR15 noted that 'flexible hours, like, you know, we don't have a coherent flexible working policy. It's only for like grades the two lowest grades'. This inadvertently further reinforces the implicit message that flexible working and caregiving is a women's issue given that the larger proportion of workers in what PAR15 refers to as the 'grades' (the professional services staff), which as evidenced in the literature review, are predominantly female. This simply enforces the subliminal message that flexible working is a women's issue rather than an option for all staff to avail of. This is further exemplified when PAR13 notes that when she sought flexible working arrangements during her career, on one occasion she was asked if she had children (which she did not). This demonstrates the inherent misconception that all women who seek flexible working do so for caregiving reasons, which is inaccurate and a linear depiction of women and why they seek flexible working arrangements. Anderson and Kelliher's (2009) study into flexible working arrangements shows that flexible working has an impact on employee engagement through a positive relationship with organisational commitment, job satisfaction and employee discretionary behaviour. They confirmed that allowing employees a degree of choice over when, where, and how much work they do has benefits for the organisation and the individual. That said, they recognised that for these gains to be realised, understanding and support is needed for the implementation of a flexible working policy. Dilmaghani (2021) conducted a large-scale study of flexible working in Canada and their findings were similar to Anderson and Kelliher (2009), however they revealed that 'rather unexpectedly' that the positive association of flexible working with work-life balance was stronger for

those without dependent children than those with dependent children. Simply put, the findings from this research suggest that not all women seek flexible working for caregiving reasons.

Consequences of Flexible Working and Leave Arrangements

This notion of flexible working and leave arrangements being a women's issue has many other consequences for women which limit their ability to have parity of participation. Moving from the previous section which examined how assumptions are made that all women seek flexible working and leave arrangements for caregiving. In this section, I will move the discussion now towards the women who do opt to take leave and flexible working for caregiving reasons, and I will examine what the consequences are for them. Referring back to Anderson et al. (2023), they argue that the pervasive postfeminist discourse in Western societies has culminated in unrealistic expectations for women that having both a good career and a family are necessary for progressive femininity (Gill, 2017). This view simply places pressure on women to be the 'ideal worker' (requiring dedication to work) and the 'ideal mother' (being dedicated to children) which renders senior executive females experiencing significant identity tensions. This is evidenced by PAR14 who recalls that earlier in her career she

felt so torn, I wanted to be a good mother but I also wanted to continue to advance my career. I knew going on maternity leave that I would be disadvantaging myself, and yet I wanted to have it all. I wanted to progress, develop, achieve my goals and naively believed I could. Well, it wasn't naïve, as I made it, I am here, in the role I dreamt of, but at a cost. At a cost of guilt and sacrifice.

This exemplifies the tensions that Anderson et al. (2023) describes as well as the discursive ideal of appearing as a balanced working mother. It also illuminates the notion that being the balanced working mother is quite nuanced and difficult to attain. It further reflects the importance of gender roles in shaping experiences of flexible working and leave arrangements and as women try to maintain a perceived balance between work and motherhood, the subjective nature of a good working mother is constantly at stake, which can result in the feelings of acute guilt and angst that

PAR14 refers to.

When further reviewing the literature, Stone and Ackerly Hernandez (2013) asserted that workplaces that were conducive to the creation and maintenance of flexibility stigma were a contributing factor in women's decisions to in relation to their careers. This is most definitely apparent from this research as several participants spoke about the stigma they felt at various points in their career when they sought more flexible working or leave arrangements. This stigma is apparent for PAR2 who notes 'well you know when I took a couple of years out to care for my children and though I don't regret taking it, it has had a really significant (negative) impact on my career trajectory'. For PAR3, who opted to take parental leave rather than a career break when her children were younger, she recalls how 'one of my colleagues thought it was hilarious to kind of mention how I was part time all the time when I was taking entitlement to parental leave'. Turning to leave arrangements, PAR18 recalls that

I remember going on maternity leave, I suppose this is interesting. I remember going on maternity leave and a male colleague who was junior to me, replacing me, you know, and coming back thinking will I get back on that committee and I did, but you know there were moments where I was very conscious that I was removed for six months, and you know those types of setbacks can that cause difficulties for women.

This signifies the reality of the stigma for women as through her own reflection, her maternity leave was seen as a setback in her career trajectory. Akram and Pflaeger Young (2020) report that there is a distinct absence of formal policies for dealing with women returning to work after maternity and parental leave. This absence combined with their own anxieties around feeling behind upon their return, compound the stigma and complexities that women experience when taking this leave. PAR7 goes on to state that this stigma or as she calls it 'discrimination' regarding maternity leave, begins at interview stage whereby she asserts that

it should be who is that best person, but I think unfortunately, we don't see that because there's so much bias when we're interviewing people, there's so much bias when we're recruiting, and you know if you have somebody young, they see

them when they're newly married. For some people, their minds are thinking she's gonna go on maternity leave, you know she's young, she's newly married me, so not worth the risk.

This further exemplifies that flexible working and leave arrangements are deemed to be a women's issue which has many consequences for women which limit their ability to have parity of participation.

Social Reproduction

Having argued that flexible working should not be considered solely as a direct consequence of having caring responsibilities, for some women it is linked to having families and so it is pertinent to consider social reproduction and its impact for women. Referring to Fraser, she notes that social arrangements that could enable people of every gender to combine social reproductive activities with safe, interesting, and well-remunerated work are necessary for parity of participation. I argue now that this combined approach to social reproduction does not exist for women in HE, but rather by virtue of being female and choosing to have a family, it can act as a barrier to their ability to progress in their careers. This is evidenced by PAR15 who recalls how

a colleague of mine who told her boss she was pregnant. She said she could see the disappointment in their eyes, like I am down someone now for the next year, and if I was having a baby, right now actually, I think I'd be really, like, be worried, like I think I'd be very apprehensive. I would be concerned and anxious about that conversation, because of how I would look about taking time out of work.

PAR18 reaffirms this view when she notes that

having families and that there really needs to be support as a lot more initiatives to ensure that females will take time off to have children I did myself and was very happy to do it...but I suppose the repercussions of that is that you're going to be behind, and then just so that you go into this with your eyes open, and if you really can't deal with it, find another way somehow have a family,

PAR17 further illuminates the challenges to career progression that women encounter when choosing to have a family when she affirms that

I suppose another thing that you're very conscious of, particularly in research, posts are usually temporary. So, they're usually posted like two, three years, the duration of a project. So therefore, having a baby in the middle of it is something that you'd have to think very long and hard about a decision that you have to make. So that was a challenge, you know, I had one child that I wanted to have another child so that they are growing up together, but then I was making a decision to do that while I was in a postdoc position that was temporary. So, I mean temporary postdoc positions which I understand the nature of the funding because they're often externally funded for a period of time, but it is a challenge for anyone having a family, that was a real challenge.

PAR17 alludes to the precarious nature of some posts in HE which is affirmed by the most recent Report of the Expert Group: 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEA, 2022:45) which confirmed that 'there is considerable concern amongst stakeholders about a two-tier system of permanent, promotable vs. precarious, exploited HE staff, a situation that disproportionately affects, and damages the careers and lives of primarily women'. PAR10 expands further on the challenges which affect women when she states that 'we already face difficulties around that (maternity leave), I've already faced negative comments related to maternity leave and things like that, you know, things that would happen because I'm a woman'. She goes on to state that

we can see what it's like because I think it is more of a burden, especially when the kids are very small, and you're breastfeeding. That's certainly made life extremely difficult, at all levels, in terms of just, just literally working in the office' or 'traveling to conferences I spent two years going to conferences and I went while I was breastfeeding, just so I wouldn't miss out (PAR10).

These findings support the existing research which affirms the challenges of combining academia and motherhood, with evidence suggesting that women with children face a 'motherhood penalty' and experience difficulties in managing work-family conflicts (Akram and Pflaeger Young, 2020; Huopalainen and Satama, 2018).

Unpaid Care Work

Having examined the challenges associated with social reproduction for women, I will now argue that women also balance more unpaid caring roles and responsibilities which affects their parity of participation. It is important to note a point of clarification before continuing here. In the earlier section, my argument is that it is an assumption that all women seek flexible working and leave arrangements for caregiving reasons. That said, the reality is that many women do, but the nuance here is that not all of them do. The notion of some women providing care to loved ones is not a new phenomenon with 45% of women engaging in this unpaid work across Ireland with time spent on care and housework combined being the third highest in the EU (Russel et al, 2019). The report also finds that the majority (55%) of those providing daily unpaid care in Ireland are in employment. The women in this research reflect this demographic with many engaging in caring responsibilities. For example, PAR3 states that

I just think that women have a lot more going on like particularly the mental load, the mental toll and women particularly mothers, I don't think there is an understanding in workplaces that women are carrying all this momentum to the personal life and at work, and that men don't actually have that.

This clearly supports the literature examined earlier in chapter three as it provides evidence to support the claim that flexible working enables the exploitation of women both at home and in the labour market (Silver 1993; Sullivan and Lewis 2001), because it enables women to carry out paid work (Chung and van der Horst 2018) without reducing their unpaid work hours or intensity. This is further evidenced by Family Carers Ireland (2023), the national organisation who support family carers, who affirm that 1 in 9 or 250,000 people balance a family caring role with paid employment. Family Carers Ireland advocate on behalf of working carers and emphasise the need for recognition, support and compassion for this cohort in the workplace. The findings from this research go on to echo the findings from Maddrell et al's (2019) study regarding the notion of the stone floor effect (which means being stuck, held down, in entry-level work with the accompanying obstacles and hurdles that serve to hinder pace and progress) that choosing to have a family can have on career progression opportunities for women. This aligns with the key findings from

the Trinity College Dublin (TCD) survey which was published by their Equality Office in 2017 which confirmed that 'Female respondents (26%) are more likely than male respondents (2%) to fulfil this primary caring role and will therefore be disproportionately impacted by measures in relation to family leave, part-time work etc' and 'female respondents (24%) are more likely to work part-time than male respondents (10%)' for caring reasons with 45% reporting that working part time had 'negative impact on their career development' (TCD, 2017). PAR3 concludes that

you know, the domestic chores for women, we know that it makes it harder, you sacrifice some of your career time to facilitate your partner or your children or your domestic demands or your maybe your parents aren't well and you know that does fall on women, and you see women falling away in the pipeline.

PAR7 further emphasises this when she states that 'what's not recognised is parenthood is a full-time job. So, if you want another 40-hour week job and now turning your working link into 110 hours'. This supports the literature in chapter three as there is an implicit expectation that women are expected to increase their responsibility within the family when working flexibly which can increase their work-family conflict (Hilbrecht et al. 2008). The impact of fulfilling these caring roles can hinder women's ability to progress as PAR8 notes 'I have a small, small kids, as I was thinking that I just really can't do a manager role'. That said, she concludes by summarising the complexities involved in being a working female parent.

It's getting to know the leaders around you and putting yourself up there and as they're with those people, it's attending, you know, different bits and pieces that you know are volunteering for, for I suppose you know, different things and activities that are going on within the organization. That's where you get your visibility, to do that, and I mean, you have to do that little bit more, in order to get that. Maybe that's why sometimes it's a barrier for women, because some women can't do that because they have family, they have caring responsibilities they have other things to do, and they can take that extra time but I think you have to make the time in order to progress.

This suggests that whilst also balancing their paid roles, with their unpaid care roles, there is also a need in some instances to do even more in terms of volunteering just

to increase their visibility. The findings from this research tally with those from the most recent Report of the Expert Group: 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2022: 43) as it noted that 'most staff feel significantly over-worked and over stretched, and there are particular issues for those with caring responsibilities as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic'. Given that women must balance more unpaid caring roles and responsibilities, along with their full-time roles and then volunteering for additional roles, the impact is that it negatively affects their parity of participation.

Menopause

The final area which will be examined using the redistribution lens is the effect menopause can have for some women in the workplace. The interviews were carried out at a time when there was a lot of publicity on the effects of menopause on women which is evident from the women interviewed as PAR12 notes

I really get the sense that there's a sea change if only I suppose within the last month or six weeks that women were talking about the menopause and the impact of that on them' and further echoed by PAR 15 who noted 'what struck me the last couple of weeks is just your there's been a kind of national more national narrative around and you're supporting women going through menopause.

PAR15 goes on to note the effects that menopause can have for women in the workplace when she notes that

I think a massive percentage of our workforce is going to be retiring in the next 10 years, I'm unsure what the exact number is but it's really large. Okay, so basically, we have a massive portion of our workforce who are currently menopausal. Okay, and there's no policies, there is none, this should be standard across HEIs, a public sector menopause policy, I don't know what to call it, maybe a fertility policy, which could be male or female, but like yeah there's no awareness about that if a woman is, you know, could potentially be going through a really tough time, and that's the reason why you know she is forgetting things, and that she's, you know, a little bit discombobulated, and that there is your self-

compassion, you don't know what's going on her life. It's not a case that you know you need to be self-reporting these things are more about having that awareness. Actually, it's very likely that on a day-to-day basis you're dealing with women who are going through very very tough times and we just need to have due consideration of that.

To coincide with these findings, Advance HE published guidance for AS participants on how to support HE staff through the menopause and as all Irish HEIs are either award holders or have committed to working toward AS awards, this guidance relates to the Irish sector. It refers to tailored policies, rest periods, flexible working arrangements and occupational health provision, yet it is clear from the findings here, that perhaps it is too early to see any impact from these guidelines. Further emphasising the need for supports, speaking of her direct experience of menopause, PAR17 says that

a lot of us women are in leadership positions at my kind of my age of life. Another challenge facing us is menopause and things like that, and that is something that has been a struggle, and, you know, we're starting to have conversations about it in our own institute there was a workshop thing about menopause, you know that got us thinking about it although women like us at that time of their life, but it's another challenge that men don't have to face, but there are times when I've had to stand up to, you know, give a talk or something in the middle of like hot flushes and all those kind of things, and brain fog and everything, which is really a challenge. Now I don't even know how you address that sort of thing, when you starting to think about it. There don't seem to be any guidance in the workplace, around menopause in Ireland that I can see, there are some of the UK that we're having a look at it at the minute but it's another area that I'm saying it's a challenge for people who are not in leadership roles but certainly if you're in a job where you're having to put yourself out there a lot, and deal with these things. It's, it's difficult.

The main argument from this section is that women suffer with the physical, emotional and psychological effects of menopause whilst continuing to work with no acknowledgement of this and no policy to support them. This affects their access to

parity of participation as they have to contend with the very real consequences of the menopause which can affect them in the workplace.

In this section I have used Fraser's redistributive lens to argue that the findings from this research demonstrate that women do not have the conditions required for parity of participation. They face injustices in terms of the stigma which is associated with flexible working and leave arrangements. This stigma affects not only their ability to progress but also how they are perceived by colleagues. I have also argued that the distribution of unpaid care work falls heavily towards women which also hinders their ability to progress and negatively impacts their overall distribution of work and responsibility causing women to work more just to create some visibility. Lastly, I have argued that women experience the menopause which creates emotional, physical and psychological symptoms which women must manage within workplaces that do not acknowledge or support these challenges.

Representation

In this section I will use Fraser's notion of representation which infers that the social status order must express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. This condition precludes institutionalised patterns of cultural value that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them, thus denying them the status of full partners in social interaction. Using this lens, I will argue that women do not have parity of participation as they do not have the same status as men as they operate within a very male dominated environment. I will illustrate that women's status is affected through their poor treatment in the workplace which for some culminated in being overtly bullied. I will also argue that HE is now a competitive environment with an imbalance at the top table which makes competing a greater challenge for women.

Male Dominated Culture

Patriarchy continues to be dominant in HE which creates a complex and challenging male dominated culture for women in leadership roles and by simply increasing how many women hold leadership roles will not lead to equality as gender quotas alone do not change culture (O'Connor, 2020). Arguably by having more women, there is

potential to change culture. That said, there are more women now as evidenced in the literature review and yet the findings from this research clearly illuminate the challenges which continue to exist for women in HE. One such challenge is the complexity women face in operating within such a male dominated environment. This is clear across the interviews as illuminated by PAR14 who describes the culture in HE as 'the default norm (which) is kind of clinical rigorous objective quantified kind of macho masculine norm I would say and we've worked with those people throughout our careers, often times endured them'. PAR15 affirms that the culture is imbedded as 'at the end of the day, you know, the senior management's tables are predominantly male' (PAR15). The findings here support my earlier argument in chapter three that organisational structures are not gender neutral (Acker, 1990). The findings also illuminate Longman et al's (2018:2) observations that in HE 'organizational cultures tend to be gendered, meaning that assumptions about leaders and the contributors to effective leadership are typically male-normed'. The notion of gender inequality is far from a new concept, in fact, O'Connor (2020) emphasises that is exacerbated and perpetuated through a focus on gendered informal day-to-day interaction, which she terms micropolitical practices. These practices manifest as actions, relations and perceptions which reflect the operation of informal power, and which are seen to impact on academic recruitment or progression, particularly for women. This is evidenced by PAR3 who describes the 'invisible barriers which women encounter everyday'. She goes on to describe the

culture in HE as an iceberg so above the waterline is discrimination, harassment, and assault, below the waterline, all the little moments that make you feel like you don't belong, and that's what I call the invisible. So I would see my job is trying to help people to see the invisible things so that could be cultural, for example, and you can call them micro aggressions and micro inequalities, being ignored, your contribution ignored at meetings, and your competence being questioned your work being over monitored, and a lot of the questions that are inappropriate to put up from a race ethnicity point of view are really really from or having stigma on taking family leave that type of thing. So, they're all cultural things that are there that often, you know, we don't think about too much but over and over again the telling you, you're not really supposed to be here, you know type thing.

This exemplifies my argument from chapter three that the way gender is perceived and understood is socially constructed and in patriarchal settings like HE, implicit in the definition of gender is a hierarchical relationship between men and women which implicitly legitimates men's dominant hierarchical position and women's subordination (O'Connor, 2023). What is interesting here is that PAR3 refers to her role as 'trying to help people to see the invisible things', this suggests that the responsibility of change rests with women rather than men. As evidenced from the literature, findings from Peterson's (2011) revealed that the gender mix policy became a way of thinking, which arguably aligns to PAR3's position. Peterson's (2011) goes on to caution that gender mix policies can result in a situation where women are not in fact empowered but instead that the role has decreased in status and power and that by simply having women in leadership positions did not necessarily mean gender equality now existed. This focus on increasing women in certain posts, can implicitly suggest a 'fix the women' approach rather than a focus on addressing the structural and cultural reasons inhibiting women's opportunities to progress or in some cases just be equal when at the table. My main argument here is that women are operating within male dominated environments and by simply increasing how many women hold leadership roles is not leading to equality as gender quotas, on their own, do not change culture.

Bullying

The effects of these male dominated cultural attitudes depicts gender inequality as natural and inevitable, which can have far reaching effects for women. One such affect for the women in this research was their shared experience of overt bullying in the workplace. As evidenced by PAR 15,

I have definitely faced. Oh my god like I'd hate to use the bullying word, but he was properly bullying me, and I would have never complained about it but definitely I would have been kind of targeted in a way by some people, and probably because I'm a younger female came in at a high grade, and there would have been probably a lot of contempt and resentment from people who probably have been in the university for a very long time and see someone coming in, you know, in her mid-30s and a senior management level, with no direct experience

in this sector like you know and I totally appreciate that but that's difficult for some people, and, and definitely there will be a kind of ageism around younger managers, even more so when you're female.

Reflecting on what has been said here, the first point of note is the reluctance to use the word bullying. Simply put, this represents a fear to speak out against what isn't just in the workplace, and this is reflective of women operating in an environment where they do not have the same status as their male colleagues. This is evidenced by the Report on the National Survey of Staff Experiences of Bullying in Irish Higher Education Institutions which was launched by the Minister of DFHERIS in August 2022 which surveyed a total of 3,835 HEI staff (11.5% of employees working in the HEIs that were invited to participate in this study) aged between 18 and 65+ (Mazzone et al, 2022). It is also important to note that of the total respondents, 65.1% were female and 31.7% were male. This signifies the importance of this topic for women in HE and arguably demonstrates a desire to speak out. The report found that 28.4% of women surveyed experienced negative acts in the workplace, compared with 19% of males in HE. In addition, 35% of women experienced being ignored or facing a hostile reaction compared with 30% of men. Moving back to PAR15's fear to speak out, this is supported also by this report which revealed that 39.8% of women felt tense or nervous in the workplace, compared with 28.5% of men. Unpacking this further, not only did PAR15 experience bullying as a result of being a woman, but it was an intersectional approach to bullying as she felt it was also resulting from ageism. This is a similar experience to PAR11 who explained that

my most recent role, I would have seen, I would have felt quite undermined, bullied you might say, by a colleague who, on the surface of it would have been very supportive of women, and encouraging women into roles, but as soon as a woman got a role, but he thought that he should have gotten. Not only did I see sour grapes, but I saw active undermining for five, six years, so it made it very difficult so much so it was a key factor in me applying for a leadership role elsewhere outside of the organization, but it was quite a toxic experience to have been on the receiving end of it, just for being a female who was younger than him.

The literature suggests that this male aggression towards women in the workplace is often motivated by a desire to dis-empower and control, and that overruling decisions in public is a potentially powerful strategy to display dominance (Diehl, 2022; Choo and Ping 2021; Chambers and Smith, 2023). For this reason, Simpson and Cohen (2004), suggest that results from their study indicate that bullying cannot be divorced from gender and that such behaviour needs to be seen in a gendered context. This is evidenced in the most recent Report of the Expert Group: 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2022:34) which noted that 'in the online consultation conducted [with 2,025 full responses] as part of this review, half of the respondents who identified as women saw gender-based violence as an issue compared to only 35% of those who identified as men'. This is further evidenced by Maddrell et al (2015) who reported that existing HE institutional cultures exhibit 'cultural sexism' which led to discrimination, harassment and bullying of women. It also aligns with Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) who stated that gender-based harassment and violence and they regard it as an epidemic throughout global HE systems and the impact for women in particular is profound. The realities experienced by women in this research are that their status is not equal to that of their male colleagues as evidenced by the fact that they work in male dominated environments where they are bullied, undermined and ignored. This demonstrates again that women experience more challenges in their navigation of the workplace due to an unequal status which results in a lack of parity of participation for women.

The Queen-Bee

The gendered nature of HE has been explored within the literature review earlier and the notion of the queen bee was examined to illustrate that this phenomenon suggests that women may feel compelled to act like men (Marshall, 1997). Findings from this research suggest that women can act as the bully to other women. PAR20 affirms that 'I find women very challenging to work for'. Interestingly, PAR1 notes that 'I've never worked for a woman. Okay, I've never worked for a woman, but I have hired women'. She affirms that 'well, actually some of the remarks that have been made to me by other women have been, have had maybe far more impact'. The impact can be negative as evidenced by PAR14 who notes that

there are some other women managers who are very institutionalized in the system. They've been there a long time, and myself and a couple of others, we would feel that our expertise of external women, or as women who have kind of, you know, don't always fit kind of that default norm, and that we're maybe our expertise has not been taken seriously or we're not I'm not so convinced that the executive is hearing all of the voices and all of their advisors around the table if that makes sense, and if they are listening to women, it's often there, you know, these women who've been there a long time or who will kind of play the game you know if that makes sense, they become also male like.

For PAR7, they recall that a female 'person who was my line manager suddenly realised that I was going to be on par, and it didn't suit at all. I was kind of had a bit of a foot, put on my head'. For PAR5, she infers that 'I felt a particularly just some of the older women who just seemed very resentful towards younger women coming in'. This clearly exemplifies the traditional notion of the queen bee syndrome as it is synonymous with a woman whose behaviours were associated with the notion of projected enmity towards others, typically younger women who may be able to compete with them professionally (Hayes, 2023). My argument here is that these behaviours from women to other women are still the product of patriarchy as stereotypes which depict leaders in masculinist terms, which arguably continue to exist in HE, mean that women who aspire to or occupy such positions are more likely to assume male behaviours which are executed through dominance over other women (O'Connor, 2020). Perhaps the women felt they had to act in this way in order to get into leadership positions given 'good' leadership is still often associated with masculinity. This exposure to males, in male dominated or patriarchal settings exemplify the masculine traits towards leadership. This aligns to Hayes (2023) work where she suggests that queen bee behaviours have become more commonly connected to areas where misogyny exists in predominantly male-oriented professions which has contributed to the need for women to compete in this manner (Hayes, 2023).

Effects of Bullying

Having evidenced that women can be subjected to bullying in HE, this section will examine how the effects of workplace bullying can have far reaching effects for men

and women. For women, this is evidenced in this research when PAR18 recalls that a 'colleague has threatened my existence' which caused her 'a lot of stress and anxiety'. She reflects on the difficulties she experienced having to cope with the stress of being bullied and still try to perform in her role. This is evidenced in the Report on the National Survey of Staff Experiences of Bullying in Irish Higher Education Institutions which revealed that 30% of women felt that bullying had a negative affected on their health and wellbeing compared with 24.5% of males (Mazzone et al, 2022). Again, this demonstrates that findings from this research suggest that a significant proportion of women did not have parity of participation if they must navigate the effects of workplace bullying on top of trying to do their actual job. Other effects were noted by PAR17 who recalls that 'certainly I have seen a bit of bullying, and it is difficult to call out, particularly if it's a senior colleague'. This is echoed and further illuminated by PAR19- who describes how difficult it is to navigate when

you've got a situation where the President stands and screams at you. I mean I've been in meetings where he literally had banged tables and screamed and roared and would go red in the face and shout and pointed at people, and you're a junior lecturer, where do you go, that's what the President does. There's nowhere to go.

She goes on to recall numerous occasions where this kind of behaviour was apparent and recalls

what really struck me was how many people were willing to throw in and deal with abusive behaviour, and be abusive, because they knew they could get away with it, it became an acceptable behaviour, and it was because it was the lead from the top.

Summarising this normalised behaviour, she concluded that 'very senior management members were there, and nobody said anything'. The effects are that 'I'd say we're pretty traumatized institution is my sense ... it's like working with people who have PTSD' (PAR19). Again, this is evidenced in the Report on the National Survey of Staff Experiences of Bullying in Irish Higher Education Institutions as 74.6%

of women compared with 62.2% of men experienced bullying in the workplace overall several months (Mazzone et al, 2022). It should be noted that these figures represent an unacceptable impact on men as well as women. Utilising Fraser's lens of representation, the social status order as described by women here do not express equal respect for all participants which demonstrates that women do not have equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. Within a male dominated environment, findings from this research illustrate that bringing more women in at senior levels is not affecting tangible change as they do not have an equal sense of status. This was illustrated earlier by illuminating the point that women's status is inherently affected through their poor treatment in the workplace which for some culminated in being overtly bullied.

Recognition

In the final section of this chapter, I will examine the findings using Fraser's third axis of recognition. Using this lens, parity of participation exists when the political constitution of society must be such as to accord roughly equal political voice to all social actors. This condition rules out electoral decision rules and structures that systematically deprive some people of their fair chance to influence decisions that affect them (Fraser, 2010).

Being Unheard

Using the lens of recognition, I will now argue that women do not have parity of participation as they do not have equal political voice as social actors. This is illuminated by PAR3 who recalls that 'sometimes there could be situations where you get talked down in a meeting by males, even when it's your meeting. Yeah, that happens regularly'. This notion of being unheard is an experience that many of the women shared in this research as evidenced further by PAR12 who affirms that

we also have challenges for women then in terms of their own confidence around how to negotiate or how to manage through difficult and challenging situations where they may feel that because of their gender, that they're not given an equal voice, or they're not being heard.

The findings here support Starnski and Son Hing (2015) assertion that gender inequality in the workplace can manifest as workplace discrimination which ultimately contributes to women's lower status. The impact for women here is that they 'feel that because of my gender, I may have not, I suppose put myself forward or spoken up in particular settings and that may have disadvantaged me'. Women clearly do not experience equality of voice, which evidently means they are disadvantaged which for some impacts how they contribute at meetings which in turn means they do not have parity of participation. This is further evidenced by Mazzone et al's (2022) national study of staff experiences in HE which revealed that 62.8% of women experienced being ignored in the workplace.

Lack of Confidence in the Environment

Unpacking PAR12 comment more, it could be determined that she did not have the confidence to speak up because of feeling as though she had an unequal voice. This however is not the case as I argue that women do not lack confidence in themselves, given the opportunity, they would be successful, and they can do their job well. Rather, it is a lack of confidence in the environment to see their talent and recognise their contributions. This is affirmed by PAR13 who notes that

I don't think there is a problem with confidence in women's ability. There's always been excellent women scientists and researchers. Throughout history, and their contributions just been ignored. So, there's nothing wrong with women, we don't need to fix them.

This argument is supported by McKinsey's (2022) Women in the Workplace report, who in their research with 40,000 women reported that women experience belittling microaggressions, such as having their judgment questioned or being mistaken for someone more junior, which lessens the equality of the voice in the workplace. Turning to HEIs specifically, PAR9 notes that 'the vast majority of the senior academics are male, it's sometimes difficult to be heard'. This is overt inequity of voice, which she says can also be more implicit as she also recalls

I remember quite distinctly where someone sent out an invitation to kind of a formal event saying anybody who would like to attend should attend and should dust off your tuxedo and then in brackets, it said, or ball dress or whatever terminology was used and I remember thinking, there we are in brackets. That to me that kind of epitomizes the actual, like you're there, you're not forgotten but you're still not there, you're still not on the same platform, you're still not level, it is as if you're, you're kind of a footnote in some regards, particularly in how men see and perceive you and then in this example openly treat you.

She concludes by stating that

it can be difficult because sometimes you need to raise your hands and push forth, and I don't think that's easy, I certainly don't find that easy to do in a male dominated environment, and when there are a lot of opinionated, educated intelligent male people, it can be it can be difficult to do as a woman.

Although the idea of a single dominant form of masculinity is being increasingly contested, particularly through AS initiatives, it is through these examples of both institutional and cultural practices that gender comes to uphold a social order where women remain subordinate, thus diminishing an equality of status (Acker, 1990). This is further illustrated when PAR4 notes that she has regularly heard the males 'remark oh well, that was 10 minutes of my time wasted, which I always hear about women, which I would never hear about man'. When considering if this behaviour has scope to be changed, she confirms

No, as I say there's, there's just a couple of male voices that are always going to be dissenting, but I think they're just dissenting regardless, you know, they're there and the trouble in higher education is if somebody is permanent and pensionable and has been there X number of years, we just cannot get rid of them, so things can change with them in charge.

The findings here correlate with Biggs et al. (2018) revealed that women do not lack ambition but rather women often encounter sexism which can prevent women's advancement despite their professional ambitions and organisational provisions available to them. Having argued that the women in this research did not appear to

lack confidence in themselves rather, it is a lack of confidence in the environment to see their talent and recognise their contributions, I have exemplified that they do not have equality of political voice as their contributions are not valued in the same way as that of their male peers which negatively impacts their parity of participation.

Competitive Nature of HE

As discussed in the literature review, the nature of HE has evolved towards a competitive market driven approach to education provision (O'Boyle and Joyce, 2013). I will now argue that this market driving competition is negatively affected women in this research as they did not have parity of participation to compete with their male colleagues. This is illustrated by PAR10 who affirms that 'right now, higher education feels like it's competitive, and you know, if you're looking at it from a gender research perspective, it's very much falling in that kind of masculine competitive winner takes all type of model'. For PAR8 she notes that

some of my colleagues and my friends within higher education have had a really tough time and have really tough management experiences and blockers to developments. It has become very competitive, and they just feel they don't have the opportunities to compete in the same way as men do. They do more, are recognised less and are not even listened to.

The impact of this competitive approach to work and promotion is explained by PAR16 who describes how it is

more competitive. There's a sense of don't tell anybody anything, you know, protect what you're doing very closely, maybe, historically, people have tried to steal ideas. I don't know, but it means the that the working of an institution is very siloed in higher education is siloed anyway, but it means it's even more of an isolating place.

She goes on to explain that

It doesn't feel natural to work in such an isolated way, but I have been burned

so many times, where men have taken my ideas or more senior ones have put their names on articles I wrote, so my work is actually making their record better.

This idea of working in siloed ways being unnatural is very interesting and will be explored in more detail in the next chapter in terms of unpacking the supportive factors that women have experienced in progressing in HE as one of them is working with other women to advance themselves. So, the very fact that the competitive culture is to work in silos, it challenges the fundamental approach that some women take to their work. Referring to the work of Spendlove (2007:407) who summarised that the 'strength of the university system lies in the independent thought, creativity and autonomy of the people who work in them', as evidenced throughout this chapter, the women in this research have shared their collective experiences of under-representation, under-redistribution and under-recognition. This I argue negatively affects their ability to compete with their male colleagues. Without having equal voice, autonomy and status, women simply cannot compete in a fair way as they do not have parity of participation.

Lack of Tangible Change to Culture

I will now argue that the AS initiative has affected limited change in the overall culture in HE as experienced by the women in this research and instead at times it has created additional work for women which negatively impacts their ability to have parity of participation. This lack of significant change is illuminated by PAR1 who affirms that 'I don't know that it (AS) has made a tangible difference to see the way that I actually work'. PAR10 notes that there has 'definitely not (been) enough done'. The reality which has emerged from this research is that AS has created more work in many cases for women which again reflects the ideology that equality is the responsibility of women. This supports the work of Madrell et al. (2015) who asserted that the workload pressures, stress related illness, discrimination, harassment, and bullying (towards women) which suggests that HE institutional cultures still exhibit patriarchy regardless of an AS framework being in place. It has also led to tokenistic work to reflect a rhetoric of equality rather than a reality focused on it. This is evidenced by PAR10 who states

I was asked to do a case study for our school silver application, and then my Head of College asked me to write, honestly, you know about my experiences over the last four or five years, and when he read what I wrote, he asked me, could I change it as it didn't sound positive enough and not very EDI.

This exemplifies what O'Connor (2009) spoke about in terms of AS being seen as a tick box exercise rather than a meaningful approach to cultural change. For PAR13, she notes that

it does not feel like anything has changed. I think all of those initiatives are very welcome, and there's in this particular sector, they are really really welcome. I think change will come in organizations. If people recognize that it's not just about gender equality, it's about organizational culture, but we are a long way off that.

For PAR2, she notes that 'we've made progress but we're coming from a pretty low bar, and particularly at the higher level' and quite simply 'as a sector, and you see, it's not anywhere equal yet'. PAR5 offers that 'no, nothing, nothing changed, it's like it's so, so slow, it's glacial' and for PAR4 'Athena Swan, like the amount of negativity that I've had to experience within our department, around it, nothing has changed'. What becomes apparent from these comments is that quite a number of the women in this research were engaged in leading AS initiatives and their experiences of being involved was challenging for them. PAR9 concludes that

do I feel things have changed drastically though No, I think we're doing the tokenistic things I think we're trying to do the leadership stuff, trying to fix the girls trying to say oh geez, we'll do that certainly thing now, we'll keep you happy for a little while and we'll put that on every application we have and you're rolling your eyes going Yeah, and look at how many people think the culture is and it doesn't support everybody, certainly not women.

This argument drawn from the findings of this research that the AS initiative has had a lack of any meaningful change in the overall culture in HE and instead it has created additional work for women is supported by Drew (2021). Drew (2021) reports the well documented (Caffrey et al., 2016; Maddrell et al, 2015) realities of making the AS

applications as it creates in many cases an uneven distribution of workload within Self-Assessment Teams, at institutional and unit levels. This is further exemplified in the most recent Report of the Expert Group: 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2022:34) which noted ‘there is further concern that the greater proportion of the burden of the work in terms of achieving and maintaining both institutional and departmental AS awards rests on the shoulders of women’. Such inequity could be to the detriment of the careers of young female academics as such women spending their ‘research time’ on an AS application alongside their male colleagues whose research time was spent on research, publications/conferences, all of which are career-enhancing. In fact, she reported that this overuse of (often female) more junior academic and research staff is often exacerbated by a lack of institutional resources and a lack of acknowledgement of their contributions to AS, for example, as a key criterion in the promotion process. In turn, the AS Charter must be critiqued for not achieving a higher representation of women in senior roles nor fundamental institutional and cultural change (Drew, 2021). This is further echoed by O’Connor (2009) who argues that this box-ticking approach to AS can be used to show the state and the EU that gender inequality is being tackled. However, they are very far removed from the kind of organisational transformation that needs to be embraced by senior leaders within those HEIs.

Feminisation of EDI Roles

For women to have the conditions met for Fraser’s recognition axis, they must have equality of political voice and a fair chance to influence decisions. In this section, I argue that these conditions do not exist for women in HE as the gender equality movement in HE has led to a feminisation of leadership roles which are related to EDI. At the time of inviting participants to engage in this research, I researched the EDI offices in the HEIs and of twenty-one people in leadership roles of those offices, 17 were women and 4 were men. This exemplifies that though there has been an increase in recent years of women into senior leadership roles, many of them have moved into these roles. This exemplifies the ideology that I spoke of earlier, that equality is seen as a woman’s issue for women to address. In assessing then whether women in these arguably feminised roles feel as though they have equal political

voice in order to have parity of participation, PAR14 who has a specific senior leadership role in relation to EDI, notes that 'its tokenistic, you know I will be asked to EDI approve the policy but the policy has already been written, you know I need to be involved from the start and not just come along with an EDI stamp at the end'. This demonstrates that her political voice is not equal, and her contribution is not valued but rather a rubber stamp required at the end of a process. PAR3 who also has a senior leadership role in EDI recalls 'being ignored, contribution ignored at meetings, and your competence being questioned your work being over monitored, and a lot of the questions that are inappropriate'. Again, this exemplifies a lack of political voice, even though she is in a senior role herself. It also illustrates Caffrey et al., (2016) assertion that without gender competent managerial leadership, interventions such as AS can become 'box ticking' exercises that absorb much of women's time and energy, since frequently it is women who undertake to lead the activities involved in them. It also tallies with the most recent Report of the Expert Group: 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2002:29) which noted that 'there has been considerable inconsistency in how responsibility for the Gender Equality agenda has been assigned in different institutions. In some cases, the person responsible is not a member of the executive team and therefore does not have the appropriate status or authority within the organisation'. Given that most of the EDI roles are held by women, this further exemplifies the unequal political voice afforded to women in these roles.

Summary

In summary, Fraser (2010) asserts that all three conditions of redistribution, representation and recognition are necessary for participatory parity and that none alone is sufficient. It is evident from the discussion in this chapter that despite the advances of gender equality measures in the HE sector in Ireland, challenges continue to remain for women. This chapter sought to demonstrate the lived experiences of women by examining the first sub-question as to what challenges women encounter in their careers. By adopting Fraser's (2003) view that equality and social justice are principally problems of parity of participation as the theoretical lens, I have argued that for participatory parity to be upheld, at least three conditions must be met which Fraser (2003) frames under redistribution, representation, and

recognition. Using the redistribution lens, I have argued that women face injustices in terms of the patriarchal stigma associated with flexible working and leave arrangements, an unequal distribution of unpaid care work and challenges which arise from menopause and social reproduction which limit their ability to have equal distribution of independence and value. Then, using the representation lens, I argued that the culture of HE is dominated by men which creates the conditions for bullying of women which has far reaching consequences on their ability to have equal respect and cultural value. Finally, using the recognition lens I have argued that women do not have equal political voice as social actors as they are not being heard, they lack confidence in the HE environment and they have found themselves in feminised EDI roles. What this chapter then demonstrates is that in the modern competitive environment of HE, without having equal voice, autonomy and status, women simply cannot compete in an equal way as they do not have parity of participation. The main takeaways from this chapter are that women experience injustices across all three of Fraser's axes which negatively effects their ability to have parity of participation.

Chapter Seven - Collective Leadership in an Era of Power, Agency, and Decision Making

Introduction

Following on from the previous discussion which focused on how women do not have parity of participation as they face injustices across redistribution, representations and recognition, this chapter will examine the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles by exploring the second sub-question of unpacking the supportive factors that enabled their progression. To do this, I will adopt a strengths-based approach to unpack the supportive factors that enabled the women in this research to overcome these challenges to progress in their careers. More specifically, it will present the theoretical lens which is focused on McNay's theory of agency. Using this lens, I will argue that women used their own sense of agency to navigate the changes within gender relations between men and women in HE. As experience is essential to an account of agency, I will demonstrate that women in senior leadership roles in HE are more focused on collective leadership and they have articulately shared their experiences of developing their individual and collective sense of power, agency and decision making in order to advance themselves through their own careers. Whilst existing literature suggests that women require mentoring as they are in need of fixing (O'Connor, 2009), I will argue that mentoring is a facilitative tool for the development and advancement of women. The final section of this chapter will analyse the characteristics of agency that these women have as a mechanism to reveal how they overcame the challenges they have encountered in their careers to date. The main takeaway from this chapter is that women through their experiences have personified agency through their choices, ambition, resilience, and attitude. Combined with their sense of agency, the role of women in leadership as well as mentoring have enabled women to advance themselves despite the challenges they have encountered.

Theoretical Lens

I will use McNay's theory of agency as a lens to unpack what natural and normal steps the women in this research have taken to overcome the injustices which were illuminated in the previous chapter. More specifically, McNay's (2009) theory of agency espouses an understanding of how women experience changing social

relations, which is essential to an account of agency. Given the evolving nature of HE in recent times, the relationship between women and men continues to evolve, which as evidenced in the previous chapter, this creates a multitude of challenges for women. Given that the women who took part in this research have essentially ‘made it’ into senior leadership roles, I believe it is vital to understand what factors enabled them to overcome these challenges in order to progress in their careers. To analyse what these supportive factors were, I will draw from McNay’s theory of agency. More specifically, this chapter reassesses theories of agency and gender against the backdrop of changing relations between men and women in contemporary HE. Using this lens, I will argue that recent thought on the formation of the modern subject of gender inequality offers a one-sided or negative account of agency, which underplays the creative dimension present in the responses of individuals to changing social relations. In this research, I will adopt a more strengths-based approach which focuses on individuals’ strengths in terms of their agency, resiliency, and leadership styles.

Changing Social Relations

As evidenced in the literature review, the nature of HE is changing, and the sector is in a state of flux. Coupled with that, the previous chapter examined a plethora of challenges that women continuously navigate. This section will examine how the constant challenges amidst the evolving sector have culminated in changing social relations amongst men and women. The role of AS will also be examined to determine what changes are occurring and what factors are enabling women to overcome the challenges to advance themselves and ultimately succeed.

Individualised Agency

As discussed earlier, AS is not a silver bullet to create gender equality, however, it does have merits in affecting some positive change. In this section, using McNay as the theoretical lens, I will argue that one of the positive outcomes of AS is that it has begun to highlight the different experiences that men and women have in HE. It also helps us create an understanding of how women experience these social relations which is essential to an account of agency (McNay, 2009). One of the positive impacts of the gender initiatives, in particular AS, is that it has

well, really, it's highlighted the different experiences that I think women have and have had and continue to have in Ireland, and how that needs to be changed, it is becoming better but still needs a lot of work, so having this research report out there I think will perhaps highlight some of the issues a bit more (PAR18).

Notwithstanding the challenges explored in the previous chapter, it is apparent from the findings that AS is creating opportunities for women to speak out about those negative experiences, which is changing the traditional social relation of women not being heard and not speaking out. According to McNay (2009), experience is essential to an account of agency and that sense of agency is apparent when PAR2 notes that

there's definitely still a lot of learning, but I can see change happening and it's really positive and I like to think that I'm part of a change, you know, having a strong presence at these meetings and being valued has opened the door for others and allowed me to open them up for me.

By understanding the experience of women, we empower their sense of agency and here, PAR2 demonstrates her own sense of agency as the positive changes she refers to are not simply happening but rather she gives an account of her capacity for individualized choice and action by being a strong presence for other women and valuing them. This reflects McNay's notion of the creative and active dimension present in the responses of individuals who are changing social relations.

Dangerous Women

Acknowledging the individualised sense of agency which was demonstrated by the women who engaged in this research, a sense of collective agency is also apparent. Referring to Fraser (2017), she illuminates the concept of 'dangerous women' which she depicts as a 'woman, and not just an individual woman, but a social movement of women, who insist that their fellow citizens face the fact of injustice, not turn away from it. Look it in the eye and do something about it' (Fraser, 2017). In this section I will argue that the findings from this research certainly personify the concept of dangerous women as against the backdrop of the challenges described in the

previous chapter, the women who took part did so with the intention of acknowledging they 'have a real responsibility to, I suppose share my journey for want of a better word, and so that I can support and affect change for other female colleagues going forward' (PAR2). This is echoed by PAR16 who affirms that

'being a female in a leadership role, there's a lot of invisible things that you have to navigate everyday and I think the more we have people looking at this and researching it, the better will understand it so that we can improve it for other people, for other women coming down the tracks...ultimately, we need to be the drivers of change'.

For Fraser (2017), dangerous women seek to overcome injustice and yet remain sensitive to the complicated relations that exist for women every day and to me 'dangerousness', in the good sense of dangerous, is a way of thinking and a form of political practice or social movement activism. This is illustrated by PAR2 who affirms 'there's a visible, tangible shift towards calling it out (injustice), and recognising it is a much more comfortable experience to talk about now' (PAR2). This is further reflected by the women in this research as so aptly summed up by PAR14 who states that 'ultimately, as female leaders in modern HE, we are activists, we are advocating for ourselves and championing change for others coming up the ranks. We are in the driving seat, and we are now driving toward changing the narrative'. This marries well to the concept of Aurora (women's leadership programme) which is based around the premise of women working together, championing one another, and providing peer to peer support. The women in this research advocated for the usefulness of Aurora, however, it did become apparent that not all the women had equal access to avail of it. This supports Borkin (2021) assertion that access to Aurora is a 'highly selective process' across the HEIs. What is apparent from this research is that in the midst of working in a highly competitive environment, where women face additional challenges as explored in the last chapter, they have also taken on a role as activists to affect positive change for themselves and others. For me, the women in this research personify the concept of dangerous women as against the backdrop of the challenges described in the previous chapter, they continue to drive change through activism and using their collective sense of agency and voice.

The Tools for Change

When reviewing the literature earlier, I noted that the HEA (2020) affirmed ‘targeted and proportionate positive action should be taken to accelerate the achievement of gender equality objectives’. So, it was determined that new and additional ‘gender-specific posts would be a proportionate and effective means to achieve rapid and sustainable change, and on that basis has the potential to be transformative for the HE sector in terms of securing gender equality goals’ through the creation of the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI). In this section I will argue that such initiatives may enable women to progress more quickly into senior roles, but these initiatives are not the silver bullet as they fail to tackle the patriarchal culture of HE. On the face of it, ringfenced senior roles for women sound ‘positive’ but it must be recognised that it is ‘challenging to get a post on the basis that it’s based on gender’ (PAR1). Echoed by PAR10, recruitment should

be done on the basis of merit and there should be absolutely no sense that you got the job because you’re a woman. We already face difficulties around that I’ve already faced comments related to maternity leave and things like that, you know, things that would happen anyway because I’m a woman, and I think that those positions do generate animosity.

Reflecting Peterson (2011) notion that gender quotas do not lead to equality as they fail to address patriarchal culture, PAR18 illustrates this when she affirms that

it isn’t just the numbers, it isn’t that we’ve suddenly got, you know, the magic minimum 40% of, of either gender on groups or at professor that we could have the numbers completely fixed and still have a culture where we’re discriminating against certain people, either intentionally or unintentionally, so that culture change has to happen.

This clearly exemplifies the position that women from this research do not want to move into senior roles simply because they are women as again their sense of agency comes to the fore here, as they believe they should move into senior roles because they deserve them on merit not based on gender quotas. This is further evidenced by PAR8 who asserts that

people should be getting their role on merit. I do think, you know, merit is really important for me as a woman, I don't want to have a job that I'm not considered to be the best for as I don't want to be considered that I'm being placed into, because I'm a female, I want to have the job because I'm good enough. So you know, so for me, that is really important.

Interestingly, in the most recent Report of the Expert Group: 2nd HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2022: 43) noted that 'there is a need to consider the contextual/sectoral relevance of the implementation of positive action initiatives such as SALI'. Perhaps this view reflects the findings from this research in that creating senior posts for women based on gender alone is not an effective mechanism to affect positive change. In this section I have argued that such initiatives may enable women to progress more quickly into senior roles, but they are not tackling the patriarchal culture of HE and are seen to disregard the agency of women as the most suitable candidates irrespective of their gender.

Leadership

Having examined the changing social relations between men and women and what factors have enabled women to overcome constant challenges, this section will examine the role of leadership. More specifically, it will examine how women adopt a more feminised approach to leadership which enables them to move beyond leadership as a hierarchical position and towards one that is focused on collective leadership and a values led sense of empowerment. The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate that the way women lead and the type of leadership they exude is a supportive factor in their experiences of success in their careers.

Feminised Leadership

In this section, I will argue that by focusing on women's strengths, a feminised approach to leadership is not only valued but is required for successful leadership in contemporary HE. Given that all of the women in this study hold senior leadership roles, the way they view their roles as leaders is worthy of examination. Interestingly,

though we have seen in the previous chapter how women reported experiencing other women adopting masculine qualities in their approach to leadership in the patriarchal culture of HE, when asked about how they define and exude leadership, their responses become more feminised (Sumra, 2019). In the first instance, empathy as a style of leadership emerged as a theme, as

I think a form of leadership that is more about empathy is you know, meeting people at their level that is about inclusivity that is kind of honestly feminized but it is often feminized in lots of ways, but nonetheless, I think is really important... myself and particularly maybe three or four other women managers, we would try to implement that kinder, more emphatic gentler inclusive form of leadership in opposition to what is the default masculine norm (PAR14).

As evidenced in the earlier review of the literature, Clarke et al (2015) affirm that the sustainability of effective leadership in HEIs in the face of modern challenges requires a 'need to focus on the creation of supportive work environments and positive work identities is urgent, particularly in the HE context'. This is supported overwhelmingly from the findings here as PAR6 notes that 'historically, there was a difference in our leadership styles in women' and

there is a difference in how females lead...I think women are probably more focused on relationships ... They're like, if I want to get someone to do something, I can build a relationship with them, then I can, I can develop it. I don't think men think like that.

Echoing this sentiment, PAR13 notes that leadership is

hugely about relationship building... leadership to me is somebody who may occasionally inspire the troops, but we'll certainly understand what's going on with everybody in the organization, that doesn't mean they absorb everybody's personal feelings, but you need to have a sense of what's going on in an organization and if you're a leader and you're so far removed from that, that you do not, then I think it's a really dangerous place to be.

For PAR9, she echoes this when she affirms that the 'critical thing (in leadership) is there in relationships. Like, you need to know your people, and then you need to know their skills and have some heart, they might be sensitive. Sometimes the detachment causes problems'. That said, as Spendlove (2007) acknowledged, modern leadership in HE is inextricably influenced by an increase in managerial control, market competition and organisational restructuring, which is affirmed by PAR3, who suggests that HE is a 'corporate style environment' where

the aggression maybe or the killer instinct or the you know, this kind of thing and I'm not sure that it's embraced the kind of the fullness of what having both men and women and what that could actually give the institution at all levels in all job types, if we were just open to what women bring as leaders.

This evokes the consideration of leadership and the role of gender in leadership. Much has been written regarding the relationship between gender and leadership from an array of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, management, and women's studies which have sought to understand the challenges that women may face in attaining, leading, or succeeding in leadership roles. Despite this, more attention has generally been paid to the role of gender rather than the nature of leadership. Shen and Joseph's (2021) research indicates that gender differences in leader effectiveness tend to be null, however women female leaders appear to have an advantage over male leaders when it comes to leadership behaviours, engaging in more effective overall leadership behaviours. The findings in this section correlate to Burkinshaw's (2015) concept that women's representation in power positions is considered significant in how other women aspire to be leaders. In this section, I have argued that women offer a different type of leadership, one focused on empathy and relationship building and by focusing on women's strengths, a feminized approach to leadership is not only valued but is required for successful leadership in contemporary HE.

Collective Leadership

Having acknowledged that women offer different approaches to leadership than men and given that HE has become a more individualised and competitive environment where women continue to face challenges, the findings from this research suggest

that there is a shift toward collective leadership in HE as a means to succeed and affect positive change. This involves moving beyond the role of the individual leader and towards the role of leadership where the focus shifts to distributed and shared leadership, particularly in the duality of purpose that HEIs appear to be operating within. This is certainly illuminated in the findings of this research, as overwhelmingly, the women interviewed spoke of the metaphorical shepherd, as evidenced by PAR16 who affirmed that

there is also a kind of sense like in a leadership role that you're almost being more like a shepherd, where you're leading from behind, so you're empowering people to kind of have the vision and give them the tools and the capability, but you're almost, enabling their success.

Echoed by PAR7 who notes leadership 'is supporting somebody else and bringing them along...we need to enable people to get there'. PAR11 defines it as 'but then there's the strong sense of persuading people to follow a particular path, you know, I kind of have notes here around what's leadership about you know it's about sense making'. PAR2 notes that

as a leader, it's not just about being the one who succeeds, but it's also about championing the vision within it's also about bringing everybody with you, so you need to wear multiple hats for it to be successful..(and)... whilst you might be the one you know the leader, one of the, you know, leading out on top, that it is about collaborating with others that will be really important.

PAR3 also concurs that leadership is 'trying to get a task done with people trying to collaborate with them trying to bring them along'. PAR9 notes that 'effective leadership in HE is, it's about bringing people along with you'. This sense of shepherding and bringing people along reflects Bolden et al (2015) presentation of a way forward which bridges the gap which Spendlove (2017) revealed around the issues of cultural capital as instead the focus is not on the capital of the individual but rather the shared capital of all the actors involved (Lumby, 2003; Gosling et al. (2009). As compared to traditional leadership, in which one person makes key decisions, in collective leadership, the group empowers others to tackle particular problems and

implement solutions. By making leadership less hierarchical, a collective leadership structure should give women and other frequently marginalized stakeholders a greater voice in leadership decision-making. O'Boyle and Joyce (2013) concur with this as the focus of leadership development starts with the individual and then moves to the organisational context but they caution that the shift to a collective leadership will require a mindset change in order to acknowledge and understand that leadership can be developed and that this development needs to be deeply embedded and created out of the context and challenges faced collectively by leaders in the organisation. This approach to the collective is further supported by the findings as the women spoke of the positive impact that Aurora has had on their ability to engage in collective leadership with their peers. This is illuminated by PAR 20 who notes 'it was very liberating' and it 'gave me a chance to find my voice...to bolster myself'. For PAR3, she recalls that it was 'a really positive network for women. We could support one another, lead one another and champion each other'. Offering a criticism of how it is not widely available to all women though, the women shared in their view that for it to be more effective and meaningful, it should be opened up to all women in the organisation. The concept of Aurora and the fact the women in this study found it so useful aligns with Burkinshaw's (2015) assertion that women's representation in power positions is considered significant particularly for social justice that advocates HEIs to be just and treat people with equality and for equity and parity that focus on the issue of gender opportunity gap. The premise of Aurora is about women being empowered to affect positive change for themselves as advocates in the sector which is clearly evident in the findings here. In this section, I have argued that there is a shift toward collective leadership by women in HE as a means to affect positive change which focuses on the strengths and agency of women as a collective rather than as individuals.

Leadership as Visionary

As discussed in the literature review, HE is in a state of flux as the sector is somewhat mission adrift where HEIs are half public entities and half private companies. In this section I will argue that effective leadership within this evolving sector requires clear values led vision. This is depicted by PAR11, who notes the role

of the leader involves 'creating direction, engaging colleagues in the direction and then mobilizing achievement through our values'. For PAR16, it is about

lots of different things, and in some respects it's helping to have the strategic vision, and enthusiasm to bring people along with you when you're trying to instigate a change, a vision, a set of values, a plan and you don't have to be the highest person in the organization, you could have identified the change and be bringing along colleagues at any level, once you share that vision.

Elements of the collective leadership and shepherding come through here through the combined description of bringing people along through the values led vision. For PAR2, effective leadership is 'about having a vision, it's about having commitment... as a leader, it's not just about being the one who succeeds, but it's also about championing the vision within'. Echoing this, PAR3 notes that 'the point of leadership, a good one, is that there is a vision'. PAR9 concludes that

what I really mean is you make the journey so much lighter by building a group of people around you that will respect you, support you, will challenge you as well, but all to the one common goal and having that common purpose, having that bigger purpose, basically having the vision and working together to achieve it.

According to O'Connor (2018), the need for effective and inspirational leaders who can provide a clear, compelling vision for a better future is increasingly important in light of the challenges currently facing institutions of higher education globally. In fact, the ability to articulate a compelling vision is regarded as a central tenet of transformational, visionary, and charismatic leadership theories (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Baum, Locke, & Kirkpatrick, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 2009; Northouse, 2013; Shipman, Byrne, & Mumford, 2010). O'Connor (2018) revealed from her study that women tend to be visionary leaders naturally and this approach tends to differ from the typical leadership styles of their male colleagues and therefore is not always recognized or valued in the patriarchal culture of HE. Thus, she contends that both current leaders and those designing programmes to prepare future leaders should be intentional about acknowledging that various envisioning styles that women offer as they can be extremely effective. This aligns with the literature in chapter three

whereby Madsen (2012) affirms that colleagues, subordinates or students of women leaders in HE are likely to gain more positive transformational experiences compared to gender-homogeneous leadership from male seniors, as women lead with a different vision and purpose. In this section I have argued that effective leadership within this evolving sector requires clear values led vision. As supported by the literature, to move beyond the linear view of the leader and their traits requires a broader focus on leadership and on the process of engaging teams to work towards a clearly defined mission and vision. In a patriarchal neo-liberal HE system, a more feminized and value led approach may well be what's needed to navigate the sector successfully through its state of flux.

Mentorship

The next section of this discussion pivots around the fundamental role that mentoring has had in the lives and careers of the women in this research. All twenty participants reported having had mentors during their lives and careers and they were unanimous in their view that these relationships had played a fundamental role in their ability to drive their careers forward in the direction they wanted to go in. The argument in this section is that the findings from this research indicate that mentoring is not a concept of 'fixing the women' (O'Connor, 2014; 2020) but rather it is a developmental and relationship-based tool to develop confidence, networks, and agency.

Choosing Relational Mentoring

In this section I will argue that the effectiveness of mentoring is based upon relational mentoring where mentees choose their own mentor. The importance of the relationship with the mentor was a key theme from this research as evidenced by PAR6

I think part of mentoring, you've got to form a bond of an openness or relationship or an understanding of sorts, and maybe that's it's that, you know your guard a little bit in order to let the person in on both sides of the table, and you build up that level of trust.

Echoing the need for trust, PAR1 notes that

I don't think that people should be assigned a mentor, before they enter the job. I think that if people come into the job, and then you have a university, they should give them let's say a six month period to get to the colleagues, and then they should be asked, who they feel would be an effective mentor for them, because it has to be a personal relationship at whether you get on, you know, it's really, that's critical.

The common thread which emerged from the interviews was around the need for the mentoring relationship to be open and for the mentee to have the lead role in choosing the mentor. Again, evidence of the women's sense of agency is apparent here as they articulate their desire to be active actors in the selection of a mentor. The participants were predominantly unanimous in their view that mentors should not be assigned to them, but rather they should be available to them, should they wish to seek them out. This aligns to the existing literature which suggest that the effectiveness of mentoring can often lie in the mentees choosing mentors who have characteristics they are interested in and want to learn from (Palmer and Jones, 2019). When the discussions moved toward unpacking what characteristics the women sought out in their mentors, it often surrounded someone who they 'could pick up the phone to and have a chat' (PAR10), 'seek advice from' (PAR10) and for others it was the welcome need for 'encouragement or a bit of praise, that was timely enough to just keep you going' (PAR11). For others, it was more of the extrinsic factors which appealed to them as the mentor could ensure 'you got exposure' (PAR16), could act as a 'positive influence' (PAR17) and as PAR2 illuminates, the mentor could personify

really strong, capable women, you know, are not apologetic for it, they work very hard to eliminate that, but that would be an instinct in me that I've sort of fought against whereas they just, maybe they're the same and they hide it better, but you know so confident no questions about why they wouldn't be there, and that's really really inspiring you know, you can't be what you can't see and all that.

The findings here contribute to the existing knowledge regarding mentoring as it fills the gap regarding the impact of mentoring on women's career progression in HE, with a particular focus on women in senior roles as all of the women were unanimous

that mentoring played a pivotal role in their career development. The findings here refute the literature which focuses on women requiring fixing and mentoring as the tool to do it (O'Connor, 2020), as the women themselves sought out the mentors, it was an active process of aligning themselves to those they could learn from. Again, the sense of agency amongst the women in this research shines through here as again they are actively seeking out role models to take charge of their own development. For some, the learning was for personal growth and development, whereas for others it was more focused on progression.

Unified Mentoring Initiative

In this section I will argue that the mentoring that is desired for women in HE should be a streamlined and consistent mentee led approach for the sector. As mentioned earlier, the women all had mentors, they all cited benefits in having them but upon further exploration, it became apparent that how they accessed a mentor was very mixed. For PAR19, their agency was apparent as they articulated that

for me, I got a mentor for the first time in my career in 2016, when I looked for one, and so I approached somebody privately, and the university wasn't running the system still isn't from what I can see, and, and that mentor was and still is my mentor, and, but, like, so it's not a traditional mentor relationship in the sense that normally they finish after a year, and, and that was a huge help to me and in my career.

This illuminates the realities that mentoring is not universally available in the HE sector. For PAR14, she recalls that 'I suppose, some of us got lucky and particular people came into our lives at certain time which made a huge difference'. She goes on to suggest that to move beyond luck, we need 'well I think it (mentoring) is hugely important, and I suppose I you know, and I think so kind of a structured mentoring system at sector level or nationally is key'. PAR9 notes that a national approach to mentoring would 'protect women and ensure we all had a chance to be lucky and to be mentored'. PAR6 echoed this and affirmed 'I think so I definitely think people should have mentors. I think we should have them at a very early in my career stage'. Again, the shared experiences of the women in this research combine to demonstrate a sense of agency and activism as they collectively champion the concept of a

national approach to mentoring for the sector. PAR3 further affirms this when she states that

mentoring actually would be the key to change some of that kind of behaviour in the individual, you know, give a bit more kind of courage, a little bit more still might just have people I suppose along the way as they're as they're trying to forge their path, and I think that's something that's probably missing is career development, because that's certainly not, there's no real conversation around career development or advancing yourself and how to do it. Mentoring could be the gateway to making that happen for all women rather than some.

PAR2 affirms this concept of mentoring as the catalyst for women to advance in their careers as

mentoring I think it's hugely positive... I think around the promotion piece, but there's definitely a need for mentoring whatever it could look like with the broader mentoring scheme, yes, there probably should be an institutional wide recognition of its significance and the need for it, nationally... I'd say the majority of people benefit from mentoring, presuming that you have enough good mentors.

and she concludes the success of it lies within the 'the freedom to choose to buy into AS or to choose to buy into the national framework for mentoring, we need to have a role in making a choice ourselves'. Again, the sense of agency is evident here as the power to choose lies with them women themselves, again refuting the notion that mentoring is a mechanism to 'fix women'. PAR2 shares her insights that having been successfully mentored earlier in her career, she is now a mentor as she affirms that

I currently mentor seven junior colleagues across the university, and I really enjoy working with them and providing I suppose an insight into the challenges that I have faced over the last 21 years...there are particular challenges that women face. I'm a mother of x children. I have a chronic illness since I was x, you know there are lots of things standing in my way, but, nonetheless, she persisted, and got there so you know, I have a lot of experience with lots of issues, and so yeah so very anxious to use opportunities to support junior colleagues.

My main argument in this section is that the mentoring should be made available for women in HE and that it should be a streamlined and consistent mentee led approach for the sector. This argument surrounds the women's agency and power to choose a mentor for themselves.

Women as Mentors

Having demonstrated that women want a national mentoring initiative that is available to all women in HE, I will now examine who they want the mentors to be. From the previous section, it is clear that the women echoed their support for a national mentoring approach which would engage women in the co-creation of it to ensure it is 'not just a programme made in isolation but one that is created for women, by women to champion other women' (PAR9). This was further supported by PAR17 who affirmed that

women lead differently than men and for me mentoring is a form of leadership. So, we need to look at women as leaders and also women as mentors. There has been so much focus on moving women into leadership roles but what is missing is the how...how do we move them in there and do so effectively. I believe the missing focus is on the importance of mentoring. Of women mentoring other women to progress, to succeed and to thrive.

This is further emphasised by PAR12 who notes that

I had a male mentor, who was great, but I wonder how much I might have learned from a female one. I think that many women have had male mentors because there simply weren't females in senior management to be our mentors, so it had to be the men. Times are now changing, and I believe women as mentors will be so powerful for younger women.

This active sense of responsibility to act as a role model was evidenced in Montas-Hunter (2012) and further illuminated by Maheshwari et al. (2023), where the respondents stated that their intent to become leaders was based on their desire to support the younger women as they felt that the younger women would be motivated

to become leaders in the future if they saw some women already in the leadership roles.

The Strength and Power of Agency

Having examined the role mentoring has had and could continue to have into the future for women in HE, this section will focus more on the individual characteristics of the women which demonstrate their agency. Contrary to existing literature that suggests women lack ambition and confidence (O'Connor, 2019), I will argue that women are incredibly ambitious, resilient and self-empowered which are key factors in their ability to overcome the challenges of working in a patriarchal HE sector and ultimately succeed.

Agency as Ambition

Agency is visible right across all of the interviews in terms of how each of the women spoke about the factors which enabled them to progress into senior leadership roles. In this section I will argue that one of the principal characteristics of agency that enabled their progress was their own autonomy and ambition. This is evidenced by PAR20 who recalls 'I wanted to do certain things because I could see how it had influence on career paths' and by PAR18 who notes 'really, you have to be very aware of everything going on, wherever you're working, and really be proactive, look for the opportunities and take them'. For PAR14, agency was ambition in her self-description of being an activist 'so I suppose, we are activists, and we kind of discussed this amongst ourselves you know three or four of us were actively trying to pursue progression and career paths and so we made it happen'. This inherent sense of ambition was clearly a factor in their progression as evidenced by PAR11 'you have to you have to be really ambitious to do as well as you can in the role you're currently in to move to the next one' and PAR2 'is about bravery, ambition, commitment, and collaboration'. She continues 'you need guidance, support and opportunities...you know, to get out there and, and then I mean, life, you need absolute ambition'. Echoed by PAR4 'I would say is that I always had ambition, I was always ambitious, and to actually move up the ladder you had to move into those kinds of roles in industry'. PAR6 notes progression is rooted in 'ambition or the drive and strive to do it' and she perhaps sees what was earlier identified as a barrier as a

driver when she notes 'so I have two kids and I, if I didn't have as much ambition and drive or career focus, then I probably would have dropped down to a three or four day week, but I didn't'. here, PAR6 demonstrates McNay's point that by focusing on agency, we moved beyond the barriers that oppress women and instead we see the factors that enabled them to progress. This is further echoed by Bowden (2009), who infers that there is a desire and a call for women's agency, for a capacity for self-determination and autonomy according to which women can be effective against their own oppression. PAR8 reflects that her 'colleagues would say I am ambitious' and PAR7 sums up ambition as the ability to 'not stand there, open it (the door) and go in'. This represents very opposing views to that of O'Connor's (2014) work where HE was located within a wider neo-liberal context involving the state and the market, with a specific focus on higher policy and on the elite group of senior managers in universities. Having surveyed 34 senior leaders in universities, she found the majority believed women were the source of this 'problem' and the focus must be on 'fixing the women' rather than the system. In fact, these leaders reported believing that women lacked career ambition, they were poor at marketing themselves, they lacked political skills to advance themselves. She said the officials believed they were not responsible for changing their organisations for the better. Noting that O'Connor's publication was 2014, a year before the gender equality movement began in Ireland, one could assume that the gender actions plan resulting from AS has led to this change in attitude. The findings above, however, suggest that this has only risen awareness of gender biases rather than affected any tangible change in culture or behaviours. Irrespective of the patriarchal structures that continue in HE, I have argued that one of the principal characteristics of agency that enabled women in this research to progress was their own autonomy and ambition.

Agency as Attitude

In examining the participants' attitude to change, progression and opportunity in this research, I will now argue that their attitude was a key enabler to their success as evident by PAR1 who notes 'I don't mind change I don't mind a bit of disruption, I don't mind taking on something new, I'm quite happy to do it... I don't fear change really'. In terms of progression, 'I don't see for me any barrier on the basis of my gender, that would stop me progressing' (PAR1). This is fascinating as research by

Martin and Phillips (2017) espouse that this is called gender-blindness, a strategy used by women to downplay gender differences which enables them to neutralise the gap between men and women's confidence. In fact, they went on to suggest that this strategy enables women to more strongly identify with their own sense of agency more strongly in male dominated contexts. PAR11 recalls 'I suppose I did apply for it, it wasn't, I mean, I certainly didn't fall into it'. She continues

I suppose I'm a very positive, optimistic person anyway, I get stuck in. I face the unpleasant things, but that doesn't mean that I deal with them easily like I know there's issues you have to go through, but I always have this belief that it can be good at the grind in the end you know that we'll get through it, and it will be fine, you make it happen

and she concludes 'I am myself, I moved out of my own comfort zone'. Turning to PAR13, she confirms that 'I deserve them (opportunities) I've worked really really hard in my career, absolutely, but it is a rich experience, and I really value it, and I never take it for granted'. PAR2 confirms that 'I could have done less, be less ambitious, but I wouldn't have made professor and that's what I wanted. That was the goal, and I did whatever it took' and 'I believe in many ways we were sort of the masters of our own destiny that there are opportunities out there for everybody, you just need to take them'. Thus, it is clear that women have a certain 'can do' attitude which is an enabling factor in their ability to move forward and overcome the challenges they frequently encounter.

Agency as Choice

This prevailing sense of the can-do attitude then led to the discussion around choices. For PAR18, agency is apparent through the choices that women make, the idea of choice, again instilling a sense of individual power in making those choices. She affirms

all women in the fact that they have choices, and they have to make the choice they want and then go do that but to also realize if they make choices that get you where you want to be that you just have to accept it, but it should be our decision fully

she continues 'my point is you make your choices, and you live with them and you somehow get around them. But family is an issue you have to make choices'. As discussed earlier, the culture in HE is a gendered one where women experience gender stereotypes. These stereotypes can take the form of biased judgments of achievements, motivation, and potential which can serve to influence actual career choices (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). This is evidenced in Drake and Svenkerud (2023) study whereby women did report having made more difficult life choices and having received less support from the organisation for their careers. They also noted that structural factors such as gender-related factors surrounding a lack of support and inclusion, make it less attractive, to such an extent that about half of the women in their study were unsure that the effort was worth the cost. Elements of this are present in this research as PAR4 acknowledges that 'I had to make difficult choices to succeed. I missed time with my children when they were small. I sacrificed. Was it worth it, sometimes I am not sure'.

For PAR2, choice is again apparent

it was so important to me to succeed in my career, but that was all fine. Those terms are fine by me. So, once we might call it a challenge and one, I think I might never surmount, I don't. So strange. I don't necessarily see it as a huge obstacle, but rather a choice that I made to get her and advance myself.

It is worth referring to Coate et al (2015) at this point, as they suggest that the academic career is quite an individualistic one which creates a perception that the career advancement is the personal responsibility of the individual, which appears to reflect the findings here. Their view reflects a pressure for the individual resulting from their downplay of the structural inequalities they face and that in turn, those who do not progress are missing some form of agency. Shepard (2017) takes this and suggests that this lack of agency results from a lack of confidence or ambition. Notwithstanding the very real challenges women face, my argument refutes this, as women in this research clearly articulated the barriers they have encountered in their careers in HE and instead it has been their confidence, attitude, determination and

sense of personal agency which have become the enabling factors that empowered them to choose to overcome those barriers.

Agency as Resiliency

Some of the participants believe luck had a role in their progression to senior leadership roles as evident by PAR10 'I was very lucky. I think I'm lucky to be where I am'. PAR12 concurs that 'I'm very lucky in the role that I am in that I set the agenda and decide what we need to do, obviously I do that in the context of looking across the higher education sector at home and abroad I look to see what's coming down the line, but yes I am lucky'. PAR13 echoes this 'I was lucky because maybe I got to work with one or two great people along the way so they could inspire you and motivate you'. PAR14 agrees that 'I suppose some of us got lucky and particular people came into our lives at certain points in time and maybe we were confident enough maybe others don't get that, and you know for lots of reasons, so I am a lucky one'. In this section I will argue that luck was not the determining factor in the women's abilities to progress, but rather it was their own resilience. Whilst the women in this research display a high degree of self-confidence, it should be borne in mind that they are part of a select group who have already succeeded in gaining their senior leadership roles. As White et al. (2011) observe, it takes courage and resilience for a woman to apply for a leadership post in a male dominated managerial academic culture, and that resilience is clearly apparent in this research as PAR 14 goes on to perhaps clarify her position on luck

I think that that reliance on the word lucky is, sometimes it can be modesty, you know any leader anywhere kind of sees you know half with hard work and half with luck but as my sister would say you work hard to be lucky, you know to put your stuff in a situation where you can realize opportunities when they can, but I also think for women. We're so used to being on the backfoot. We're used to the barriers that being underestimated we're, you know, it's kind of like, as you grow up, that the expectation, you know, if you're playing sports or something that the boys are gonna be better, stronger, faster, more accurate already. So, when you transfer that into a workplace, you take the knocks and you keep going.

Demonstrating how the sense of collective agency and confidence peak again, PAR8 offers a further clarification on the point of luck,

it isn't luck, it has to be you. I mean if it isn't you, well then you're not, you're not being true or authentic to yourself, you know, you have to make those calls because if you're not making those calls you have to do what's right for you and you have to be able to stand up against us, because if you're going to, you know, be a role model for another woman, there's no luck in that.

PAR2 offers that

it has been very positive, very supportive, and has, has added what I have found is that in carving out with what's passionate, what I'm passionate about and where I believe I can make a difference that there is no one way to be successful, but its hard work and not luck.

She continues

I feel that my experience is that if you play to your strengths, and you use the opportunities you get to affect change in the way that you can, in other words, be true to yourself and what you want to do and enjoy what you do, it really makes that those challenges much more survivable.

PAR20 suggests, 'its not luck, its resilience, but upon reflecting I said look you know the struggles that I had the discrimination that I had to put up with actually made me stronger'. She concludes

there have been times I have not been treated fairly and that's why I left positions. I would have said I won't say where but I would have had experiences, you know, working in faculty, particularly working on research projects, and you have the senior PI (principal investigator) who does fuck all, and then name goes on the top, take credit for your work. You know, things like that, or being kind of say at the last minute being asked to teach courses without preparation and given no support. And then in terms of say for when you go for interviews that you carried like big loads of work very, very hard to be very good colleague, but that would

have counted for nothing, and those experience have made me, I've grounded me to make sure that I never do that, that's not luck, its life.

This sense of resilience is fuelled by a sense of entitlement to real choices and objectives, to be able to act against their subordination and, perhaps most importantly, to have a sense that they can be themselves or be true to themselves. This is the desire that underpins Wollstonecraft's call for the rights of women as it reflects the desire to drive women's consciousness-raising activities, the proliferation of mantras for (women's) self-empowerment and the demonstration that women are in control of their decisions irrespective of the challenges that continue to surround them (Boden, 2009).

Summary

Following on from the previous discussion which focused on how women do not have parity of participation as they face injustices across redistribution, representations and recognition, this chapter examined the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles by exploring the second sub-question of unpacking the supportive factors than enabled their progression. Using McNay's theory of agency as the theoretical lens, I argued that women used their own sense of agency to navigate the changes within gender relations between men and women in HE. I argued that women in senior leadership roles in HE are focused on collective leadership and they have articulately shared their experiences of developing their individual and collective sense of power, agency and decision making in order to advance themselves through their own careers. Whilst existing literature suggests that women require mentoring as they are in need of fixing (O'Connor, 2009), I refuted this by arguing that mentoring is a facilitative tool for the development and advancement of women. Lastly I argued that women exemplified their sense of agency through reflecting on their experiences of using their ambition, choices and resilience to advance themselves in their careers. The main takeaway from this chapter is that women through their experiences have personified agency through their choices, ambition, resilience, and attitude. Combined with their sense of agency, the role of women in leadership as well as mentoring have enabled women to advance themselves despite the challenges they have encountered. I have argued that recent thought on the formation of the modern subject offers a one-sided or negative account of agency, which underplays the

creative dimension present in the responses of individuals to changing social relations. Instead, I have used a strengths-based approach to focus on individuals' strengths to understand what factors enabled the women in this research to effectively overcome the challenges they experienced in order to progress into senior leadership roles. In the next chapter I will argue what learning should be taken from the strength and agency of these women so that we can begin to affect change on a cultural level across HE.

Chapter Eight - Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

Introduction

This chapter will begin with an overview of the aim and objectives of this research to demonstrate how they have ultimately been achieved. More specifically, the aim of this research which was to provide empirical evidence of the lived experience of women in senior leadership roles in HE in Ireland to ascertain if the current measures are affecting any tangible change for women. From listening to the experiences of women in this research, I will argue that the change for women in this research has been limited. This research was driven by the following objective which was to explore the experiences of women in leadership roles to examine and understand the barriers they may have encountered during their career. As these women have essentially 'made it' into the senior roles, I also wanted to examine the supportive factors that enabled that progression to happen. These supportive factors will be illuminated to inform future policies for gender equality in HE. The discussion will then focus in on the research questions to answer each of them before presenting the key recommendations which have emerged from this research. The discussion will then conclude by reaffirming how this research makes a significant contribution to knowledge.

Reviewing the Aim and Objectives

It is evident that HE in Ireland has had a distinct lack of females in leadership roles and in acknowledging this, the GEAP 2018-2020 inferred that different institutions were at different points in achieving a gender balance, meaning that each would have to follow their individual path to do so. Hence, the Gender Equality Taskforce recommends that each HEI set its own targets for the proportion of staff members of each gender which it aims to have in one, three and five-year periods. It advises that those targets be included in the HEI's GEAP, submitted annually to the HEA as part of the Strategic Dialogue process. It further suggests that progress on those goals also be reported to the HEA, associating them with financial incentives and consequences. The problem which this research sought therefor to address is that in Ireland, since 2015, our only 'measurement of success' in achieving gender equality

is metrics based, where we literally count how many women hold senior positions and how many HEIs have bronze awards. There is no qualitative empirical data which looks at whether any tangible change or movement towards gender equality has emerged because of this national government led drive to gender equality. To address this, the aim of this research was to provide empirical evidence of the lived experience of women in senior leadership roles in HE in Ireland to ascertain if the current measures are affecting any tangible change for women and it will inform future policies for gender equality in HE. This research was driven by the following objective which was to explore the experiences of women in leadership roles to examine and understand the barriers they may have encountered during their career. As these women have essentially ‘made it’ into the senior roles, I also wanted to examine the supportive factors that enabled that progression to happen. These objectives were informed by the following research questions;

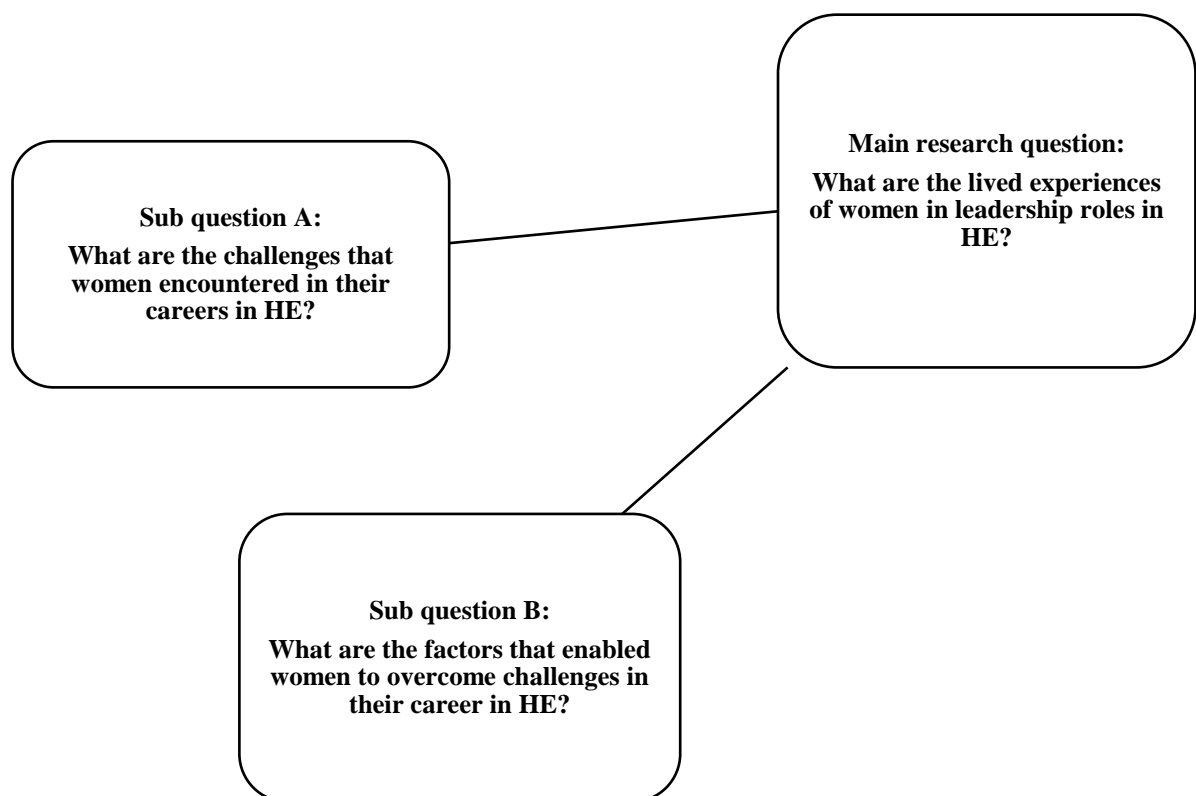


Figure 18 Research Questions

Revisiting the Literature Gaps

Informed by the above research questions, in chapter one I set out the background to the overall research topic. I then proceeded to chapter two where I presented a critical overview of the context of HE in Ireland and the rapidly changing landscape that women in senior leadership roles are operating within. Having set out the contextual backdrop, I moved on to examine the existing literature in chapter three. In doing this review, a number of gaps were presented which I will now revisit. Firstly, referring back to the glass ceiling which refers to women in senior leadership roles, the gap which I identified is that there was no empirical qualitative research conducted with women in Ireland to ascertain if they had experienced the glass ceiling. Throughout all twenty interviews, though there was no explicit reference to the glass ceiling, I acknowledge that the glass ceiling is a theoretical concept that many people do not necessarily speak in these terms. From the findings and discussion, it is evident that some women did experience elements of the glass ceiling whereby it is evident that women did experience inequalities across their opportunities to participate with parity across Fraser's three axes. The next gap in the literature was whether the issue of the 'ordinariness' form that patriarchal cultural takes and whether the gender equality movement in Ireland has raised the consciousness to de-normalise what should not be considered an ordinary culture. The sad reality from the findings is that patriarchy is alive and well in Ireland as evidenced by the experience of the women in this research and it is still part and parcel of the culture of HE. Though the literature examines the queen bee syndrome, there is a mixed notion of it as a rationale for compelling women to act like men to silence harms perpetrated (Marshall, 1997; Martin, 2003) or whether it is an outcome of an environment where misogyny exists in predominantly male-oriented professions which has contributed to the need for women to compete in this manner (Hayes, 2023). This research contributes to this area as the findings revealed that some women (not all) do assume the queen bee behaviour but mainly as a method to compete in an overtly competitive and patriarchal environment. In terms of gender-based violence, the findings correlate with the literature that women do continue to experience this in their careers, even as senior leaders. The notion of ambition is a contested one where some believe women lack confidence (O'Connor, 2019) and others believe women are just as confident as men but work in sexist environments

(Shepard, 2017). The findings suggest that the latter is reflective of the experiences of women in this research as they exuded absolute confidence in themselves but rather what they lacked confidence in was their work environment. Further to this, what is less clear from the existing research is whether women want to live a full life and not have to sacrifice their private time to reach their professional goals. The women reflected on choice and sacrifice and for some the cost of those choices and whether it was worth it remains unclear. What is clear is the confirmation that women still believe there are choices and sacrifices needed, particularly for those who have children, if they want to succeed. The final gap was the effectiveness of the gender equality initiatives in Ireland and whether they are affecting any tangible change. The findings revealed that AS increases awareness of unconscious biases but it serves to increase workloads rather than tackling the patriarchal and gendered structures and cultures which continue to exist in HE.

Addressing the Research Questions

Challenges

In addressing the first question as to the challenges that women experience in HE in Ireland, the main argument is that the dominant culture across HE continues to be deeply rooted in patriarchy. This means that the relations and perceptions which affect women in HE reflect the operation of informal power and which negatively impact on academic recruitment or progression, particularly for women. As evident from this research, this manifests itself as bullying and disempowerment which some women have managed to survive and navigate through by assuming queen bee type personas in a bid to become leaders themselves or indeed for others they have opted to champion and support other women either in their career endeavours or in their everyday activities as they collectively provide support to one another in a silent revolution of group empowerment.

In addressing whether the gender equality movement in Ireland affected the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in HE and unpacking how women understand 'success' in achieving gender equality, it is of no surprise that the impact

of these initiatives arose as a theme which can be subdivided into positive and negative impacts. On one hand, it has certainly raised the consciousness of gender inequalities within the sector, and it has raised the expectation to move towards equality. This is primarily evident through the rollout of unconscious bias training, interview board selection training, gender quotas and AS action plans. That said, it became evident from the findings that popularity of initiatives like unconscious bias, particularly so in HE, has created a false impression that it is a silver bullet' to achieve gender equity, but that its effectiveness is likely to be limited unless accompanied by sustained interventions to address discrimination. This research also revealed that the less favourable impacts of AS begin with a lack of tangible change in the overall culture in HE where the findings suggest the rate of tangible change is glacially slow, is tokenistic and the burden of work for engagement in AS initiatives falls far more to women than men across the sector. This causes stress and further inequality which is only exacerbated by a lack of institutional resources and a lack of acknowledgement of their contributions to AS.

Supportive Factors

In addressing the final sub-question as to what factors enabled women to progress to senior leadership roles in HE, the role of agency becomes very clear. Bearing in mind that the theoretical lens employed in this research is that of McNay's theory of agency, so these findings are of great interest in terms of how agency plays out in the stories of the women interviewed. The women not only displayed a sense of individualised agency in their ability to overcome the challenges they faced but also a sense of collective agency. Personifying Fraser's concept of 'dangerous women', they have begun to collectively speak out to affect change for the future generations of women who are trying to climb up the ladder. When examining the perceptions of initiatives like the SALI, the women were clear that they do not want to move into senior roles simply because they are women as again their sense of agency comes to the fore here, as they believe they should move into senior roles because they deserve them on merit not based on gender quotas. In terms of the supportive factors that enabled them to progress in their careers, all twenty of the women reflected on the pivotal role that mentors had. The common thread which emerged from the interviews was around the need for the mentoring relationship to be open and for the

mentee to have the lead role in choosing the mentor. Again, evidence of the women's sense of agency is apparent here as they articulate their desire to be active actors in the selection of a mentor. In terms of the individual characteristics of the women which demonstrate their agency, they all displayed ambition, positive and determined attitudes, and a clear sense of making choices about how to progress their careers. The women in this research clearly articulated the barriers they have encountered in their careers in HE and affirmed that it has been their confidence, attitude, determination, and sense of personal agency which have become the enabling factors that empowered them to choose to overcome those barriers.

Lived Experiences

In addressing the main research question as to whether the gender equality movement in Ireland has affected the lived experiences of women in leadership roles in HE, it is clear it has, but the change is slow and somewhat minimal as described by the women in this research. The change is evidenced through the introduction of gender equality initiatives such as AS and Aurora, which have certainly led to women speaking up more about the challenges they face. That said, for parity of participation, all three conditions of redistribution, representation and recognition are necessary as none alone is sufficient. It is evident from this research that despite the advances of gender equality measures in the HE sector in Ireland, challenges continue to remain for women. Using Fraser's three axis as the theoretical lens to analyse these challenges, it is clear that women do not experience the conditions required to have parity of participation. This results in additional workload (both paid and unpaid), anxiety, reduced status and negative consequences for women which sums up their experiences of in senior leadership roles as women. I have used a strengths-based approach to focus on individuals' strengths to understand what factors enabled the women in this research to effectively overcome the challenges they experienced in order to progress into senior leadership roles. This has resulted in findings that demonstrate that it was not AS that led to their professional development and career advancement but rather it was their own sense of collective leadership coupled with their individual and collective sense of power, agency and decision making.

Contribution to Knowledge

This research contributes to knowledge as it builds on the understanding of gendered issues in HE as it has focused explicitly on women in senior leadership roles where there is otherwise no other Irish qualitative research. By focusing on this under researched group, the findings are original and of great importance in generating new knowledge related to this specific cohort of women. Given the focus in Ireland on increasing the number of women in senior leadership roles, this research makes a value contribution to knowledge as it provides insights into the challenges they continue to face. It provides evidence that by focusing only on increasing the number of women in senior leadership roles will not lead to gender equality within the sector. It supports the existing literature that suggests that to achieve gender equality, we must tackle the organisational and cultural structures and barriers that prevent women having parity of participation in HE. I have demonstrated that new approaches to leadership are needed to successfully navigate HEIs through the rapid change they are undergoing. I have contributed to the existing research around the complexities women face in patriarchal HE cultures by illuminating the challenges women currently face in Irish HEIs. This research also contributes to our understanding of the issues related to women's leadership in HE more generally through my approach to combining Fraser and McNay to focus on the women's lived experiences to challenge previous literature and to reveal new ideas. The new ideas which this research revealed is that women do not lack confidence or ambition, quite the opposite. I also demonstrate that women want to be mentored and to be mentors which absolutely refutes the notion that mentoring implies a fixing of the women (O'Connor, 2019). I have unearthed a silent revolution amongst women who support one another to strengthen their collective voices to enhance their representation, recognition and redistribution. This research offers a new Irish perspective to the current literature which exists here as by combining Fraser and McNay, I have moved the focus from only looking at the challenges which they continue to experience to focusing on the importance of viewing and understanding women as active participants in their own lives and careers. By only focusing on the challenges, it serves to run the risk of perpetuating a notion of women as victims, as inactive and as products of their patriarchal environments. This research offers a different way of looking at women in senior leadership roles as being active, resilience, ambitious and

capable. It personifies Fraser's concept of dangerous women and reveals an intent across women in senior leadership roles to mind the ladder in order to support other women coming up it. It contributes to knowledge as it focuses on the importance of agency and recognising women's agency through their ambition, resilience, and confidence to refute the notion that women do not progress because they lack confidence.

Limitations

As with any research, this one has limitations. Given that this research focused on women, I could have looked at women using an intersectional lens. I believe that gender is not binary, and women are not a homogenous group and claims made in this research which relate to women are not intended to homogenise women, but rather to illustrate the meanings drawn from the women who engaged in this research. I believe that women can be understood through an intersectional lens as women have multiple identities that converge and intersectional approaches require matrix thinking, rather than single axis thinking (May, 2015). I chose to adopt a single axis thought process as the intent was not to explicitly investigate these multiple identities but rather to explore the overall experiences of women in senior leadership roles in HE. I therefore chose to adopt a more traditional feminist approach to understanding these experiences by using Fraser's theory of social justice and McNay's theory of agency. I aligned to the definition of women as set out by the HEA's annual profile report. Given that this research adopts an interpretivist approach, it lacks a positivist focus. As this research took a qualitative research approach, it is subjective, and this can be viewed as a limitation. Notwithstanding that, I believe that a qualitative approach was the most suitable in order to seek to answer the research questions posed and to engage with the participants in an interpretivist process. The interviews were conducted online which meant I did not have the opportunity to meet the participants in person. Conducting the interviews online also limited the ability to read body language and cues which was an unfortunate limitation which arose from conducting the interviews during COVID-19 lockdowns. A further challenge when writing the discussion chapters was ensuring that I acknowledged nuances in order to avoid making overly generalised statements about all women as I am conscious that the findings reflect the experiences of the

women in this research and I cannot say that they reflect the experiences of every woman in HE in Ireland.

Recommendations

In this section I will make recommendations which have arisen from this research. The recommendations will firstly be framed around Fraser's (2003) axis of redistribution, representation and recognition. I will then provide further recommendations around how to learn from the agency of the women in this research in order to make changes to how women are supported in HE so that the focus is on their development from a strengths-based approach.

Redistribution

It is clear from this research that women experience economic structures that institutionalise deprivation, exploitation, and gross disparities in their labour and leisure time, which prevent them from participating as full partners in the workplace. To address this, given that findings from this research suggest that not all HEIs have flexible working option available to all staff, I recommend clear policies and procedures for all HEIs which relate to all types of leave and flexible working which does not preclude any staff. Building on the recommendations from Adamson et al. (2023), high quality training should be offered to line managers on leading and managing flexible working which focus on managerial uncertainty and how to manage a new hybrid workforce. I also recommend that HEI's develop a consistent approach to imbedding structures which support all staff when returning from all types of leave. These policies should be reviewed on an ongoing basis and in consultation with staff. Where staff have taken any form of leave, I recommend that allowances are fairly and transparently applied regarding their research output so that they are no longer disadvantaged. Regarding women's health and social reproduction, I recommend an awareness campaign across HE regarding menopause and the development and implementation of a menopause policy and set of procedures to support women across the HE sector. I recommend the implementation of the Family Carers Ireland (2023) Caring Employers Programme across the HE sector as it aims to support organisations in recognising employees who have caring roles, conducting

research with the organisation to identify the challenges these staff face and then they support the organisation to implement initiatives to support them.

Representation

It is evident from this research that the social status order within HE does not express equal respect for all participants. Rather, women face institutionalised patterns of cultural norms that systematically depreciate them, and the qualities associated with them, thus denying them the status of full partners in the workplace. To address this, I recommend that further research is conducted with women across all levels of HE to continue to highlight these inequalities. I recommend that senior leadership teams are trained to recognise and respond to cultural inequalities across HE. I recommend that senior leaders engage in ongoing continuous professional development in the area of equality, diversity and inclusion to ensure they are aware of the evolving challenges which affect staff in their organisation and that they are suitably equipped to deal with those challenges effectively, fairly and transparently. Coupled with this, I recommend bystander training be made available for all staff in HE in order to identify and respond effectively to violent behaviour in the workplace. I recommend clear anti-bullying policies and procedures for all staff in HE which are distributed effectively so staff know how to report bullying behaviour.

Recognition

It is apparent from this research that the political constitution of HE does not accord equal political voice to all social actors. In fact, electoral decision rules and structures that systematically deprive women mean that they do not experience a fair chance to influence decisions that affect them. To address this, I recommend that all senior leaders and middle management engage in training around respect in the workplace, valuing the contribution of others and effective facilitation of meetings. I also recommend a upstander training and an awareness campaign so that instances of disrespect can be called out in order to change cultural norms. I also recommend an awareness campaign regarding micro-aggression in the workplace to raise more awareness and bring unconscious attitudes and behaviours more to the conscious to affect tangible change. Given the competitive nature of HE, I recommend the actual implementation of performance management for all staff in HE, so that work is

formally recognised and valued, and staff receive due recognition for a job well done. I also recommend that the HEA include the titles of senior roles within the annual gender profile report, so that the feminisation of certain roles can be made more visible in order to raise consciousness towards it in a further bid to tackle it. Finally, under the area of recognition, I recommend that the distribution of work within AS be more effectively managed to ensure that men and women play a more equal role in terms of their contribution to advance gender equality in HE.

I will now provide further recommendations around how to learn from the agency of the women in this research in order to make changes to how women are supported in HE so that the focus is on their development from a strengths-based approach.

Leadership Development

Given the feminised nature of some of the senior roles which have emerged in HE, I recommend that the HEA include a breakdown of the titles of senior roles in their annual gender profile report, so that the feminisation of roles is more actively reported on in a bid to make it more transparent. Given that the findings from this research suggest that women lead differently than men, I recommend more training around leadership styles and approaches for all senior leaders in HE, so that there is more awareness of the different forms of leadership in a bid to move beyond leadership as a form of patriarchal power in HE. The idea of collective leadership was explored, and it is evident that moving towards collective leadership will require a mindset change in the to acknowledge and understand that leadership can be developed, and that this development needs to be deeply embedded and created out of the context and challenges faced collectively by leaders in the organisation. Again, I recommend here more training in relation to collective leadership and the formation of communities of practice across the organisation to imbed this approach. The discussion and the findings have revealed that women are in support of initiatives like Aurora. That said, it became clear that access to it was not the same across HEIs. I recommend that Aurora become more mainstreamed across HE so that women can access it across all levels of the organisation. A value led approach to leadership which is based on having a strong vision was deemed a necessary approach to leadership for HEIs in contemporary times. That said, as evidenced in the literature

review, senior leaders in HE may not all be coming from leadership backgrounds and so again training is required to ensure that senior managers are clear on what values led leadership is and how to engage staff across the organisation in working towards a shared vision.

Mentoring

Throughout the interviews, the discussions pivoted around the fundamental role that mentoring has had in the lives and careers of the women in this research. All twenty participants reported having had mentors during their lives and careers and they were unanimous in their view that these relationships have played a fundamental role in their ability to drive their careers forward in the direction they wanted to go in. From the discussion chapter it is also evident that access to mentoring opportunities was quite fragmented across the sector. To address this, I recommend that the mentoring opportunities available to women in HE should be a streamlined and consistent mentee led approach for the sector. More specifically, the women echoed their support for a national mentoring approach which would engage women in the co-creation of it to ensure it is not just a programme made in isolation but one that is created for women, by women to champion other women.

Further Research

As evidenced in the discussion, most gender equality work in Irish HEIs is still championed and undertaken by women, and this needs to change if we are to create real and sustainable gender equality in our HEIs. More work is needed to move beyond understanding and acceptance of the structural nature of gender inequality in order to effect real, sustainable change. I recommend that HEIs must report on the workload distribution of AS initiatives to create more transparency in relation to the additional burden which falls to women. I also recommend that further research is conducted with women in HE to continue to examine their lived experiences over the coming years as Ireland continues to evolve within its gender equality movement. I also recommend that national conferences are hosted which focus specifically on the lived experiences of women in HE to continue to listen to what women have to say and for the sector to learn from those experiences to ultimately make HE a more attractive and just place for women to work into the future.

Concluding Remarks

This research set out to explore the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in HE in Ireland. In doing so, it has revealed that women continue to experience both direct and indirect forms of discrimination throughout their careers. Despite this, the women in this research have managed to overcome these challenges and advance themselves into senior roles. This research has made a significant contribution to knowledge as it has focused explicitly on women in senior leadership roles where there is otherwise no other Irish research. By focusing on this otherwise under researched group, the findings are of great importance in generating new knowledge related to this specific cohort of women. This research contributes to knowledge as I have clearly argued that effective leadership of modern and highly complex HEIs requires a shift away from patriarchy and towards empathy, relationship building and collective approaches to leadership. I have contributed to the existing research around the complexities women face in patriarchal HE cultures by illuminating the challenges women currently face in Irish HEIs. Though the AS Award has been depicted as the silver bullet for addressing gender equality in Irish HEIs, I have shown that the only tangible change it has led to is a raising of the conscious as to what gender inequality is. Instead, the contribution AS has made to the experiences of women is an increase in their workload, a feminisation of their roles and a tokenistic approach to valuing gender equality. Further to this, in adopting a strengths-based focus, I have contributed new knowledge by focusing on what supportive factors have enabled women to progress beyond the challenges and advance themselves into senior roles. I have unearthed a silent revolution amongst women who support one another to strengthen their collective voices to enhance their representation, recognition, and redistribution. I have focused on the importance of agency and recognising women's agency through their ambition, resilience, and confidence to refute the notion that women do not progress because they lack confidence. This research argues the opposite. That women are confident, capable and have navigated additional challenges to that of their male colleagues and have been resilient enough to succeed. I have also demonstrated that a vital component of how women in HE can be supported into the future will require the creation of conditions for women to progress in HE which must involve the co-creation of a

mentoring initiative to ensure that women have a more equitable opportunity to engage in and benefit from mentoring.

Though the number of women occupying senior roles has increased in Ireland since the gender equality movement began in 2015, it is evident that the structural and cultural barriers have not automatically changed with the increasing number of women. The original gap that this research sought to fill which was that by simply counting how many women hold senior roles, we cannot understand if equality is being achieved. This research therefore makes a significant overall contribution to knowledge as it has provided empirical evidence of the lived experience of women to demonstrate that the current gender equality measures are affecting small elements of change for women. Though measures such as AS have created more awareness of injustices for women, the reality is that they continue to persist for women in Irish HEIs. In conclusion, other feminist scholars have rightly criticised gender equality interventions for shying away from really challenging assumptions, beliefs, and biases about organisational practices, and for emphasising outcomes that focus more on measuring quotas rather than addressing structural barriers. That said, recent thought on the formation of the modern subject of gender inequality offers a one-sided or negative account of agency, which underplays the creative dimension present in the responses of individuals to changing social relations. In this research, I have used an agency focused approach to ultimately illuminate the individuals' strengths in terms of their agency, resiliency and leadership styles in order to inform future policies and practices in order to support women in HE in Ireland into the future.

List of Acronyms

AS	Athena SWAN
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
ETB	Education and Training Board
FE	Further Education
GEAP	Gender Equality Action Plan
HDI	Human Development Index
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IoT	Institute of Technology
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
PBO	Parliamentary Budget Office
QQI	Quality Qualifications Ireland
SALI	Senior Academic Leadership Initiative
TU	Technological University
WHO	World Health Organisation

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Information Letter



Participant Information Letter

‘An exploration of the lived experiences of women in leadership roles in Higher Education in Ireland’.

Lindsay Malone
Lancaster University
Department of Educational Research
l.malone@lancaster.ac.uk

Dear Colleague,

I am a PhD student from the Doctoral Programme in Education and Social Justice in Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about the lived experiences of women in leadership roles in Higher Education in Ireland.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

Aim

- The aim of this study is to explore the lived experience of women in leadership positions in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland in order to ascertain if any change has occurred as a result of the Gender Equality Movement in Higher Education in Ireland since 2015.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are to carry out semi-structured interviews in order to;

- Understand how women experience culture and whether they feel fairly represented
- Understand how women experience economic distributions and whether they feel they are fair and just
- Understand how women experience political matters and how these impacts on their roles
- Understand what women consider 'success' looks like in achieving gender equality and whether any change has occurred since 2015 regarding gender equality
- Influence future policy and practice through presenting the findings and publishing articles

Why have I been invited?

I am inviting you to take part in this research as you are a woman in a leadership role in Higher Education in Ireland and I would welcome your participation in this research so that we could explore your valuable insights and experiences of being a female leader. With this in mind, I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you accept the invitation to engage in this research, the process will involve a semi-structured interview which will be scheduled at a time convenient to you and will take around an hour and no longer than 90 minutes. The purpose of the interview is to discuss your experiences of being a woman in a leadership role in Higher Education. As the interview will be semi-structured, I will provide you with a broad outline of the questions in advance.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

The intended benefit of you taking part is that you will play an integral role in providing empirical data which I intend to use to influence future policy makers in the area of gender equality in the Irish Higher Education sector by presenting the findings in policy briefings, through conferences and by publishing in journals. By sharing your experiences with me, I will complete a dissertation which I then hope to publish in order to provide valuable insight into what the lived experiences of women in Irish Higher Education Institutions are in order to provide evidence to inform future policy formation in this area.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time up to 2 weeks after your interview. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any experiences or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any disadvantages to taking part. The only commitment is the time you will give which will be no longer than 90 minutes.

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study and my supervisor will have access to the ideas you share with me. The only other person who will have access to what you contributed is a professional transcriber who will listen to the recordings and produce a written record of what you have said. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles or the media. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences, practitioner conferences or inform policymakers about the study.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and experiences you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g., from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in any publications.

How my data will be stored?

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected hard-drive. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with university guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What about my data protection?

In order to comply with data protection requirements, I have included this privacy notice for your attention, as a student of Lancaster university, I am working within this policy.

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me at L.malone@lancaster.ac.uk.

My supervisor's details are Professor Carolyn Jackson C.jackson2@lancaster.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Head of Department Professor Paul Ashwin paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed and approved by Lancaster University.
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Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix 2 - Consent Form

Participant Consent Form



Project Title: 'An exploration of the lived experiences of women in leadership roles in Higher Education in Ireland'.

Name of Researcher: Lindsay Malone

Name of Supervisor: Professor Carolyn Jackson

Email: L.malone@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information letter for the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before the interview or up to 2 weeks after the interview, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks of the interview being conducted my data will be removed.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I understand that the Semi Structured Interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. I consent to information and quotations from my interview being used in reports, conferences, publications, briefings, articles and training events.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I confirm that in order to comply with data protection requirements, the Researcher has included a privacy notice for my attention. For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I agree to take part in the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Signature of Researcher _____ Date _____

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Appendix 3 - Semi-Structured Interview Questions



Semi-Structured Interview Questions

‘An exploration of the lived experiences of women in leadership roles in Higher Education in Ireland’.

Lindsay Malone
Lancaster University
Department of Education and Social Justice
l.malone@lancaster.ac.uk

Category	Questions
Type of role and motivation to take part	<p>4. How long have you been in HE and why did you decide to pursue a career in HE?</p> <p>5. Can you describe the role you are currently working in?</p> <p>6. Why did you choose to take part in this study?</p>
Female leadership	<p>5. Part of the self-nomination process to this research, was to identify as being in a leadership role, how would you define a leadership role in HE?</p> <p>6. How long have you been working in a leadership role in Higher Education?</p>

Category	Questions
	<p data-bbox="612 304 1334 394">7. Were you always in a leadership position or did you progress into one?</p> <p data-bbox="612 468 1267 501">8. Factors that led you into a leadership role?</p>
Challenges	<p data-bbox="612 636 1318 725">3. Have you experienced challenges as a female leader in HE?</p> <p data-bbox="612 799 1342 889">4. What factors supported your ability to overcome the challenges?</p>
Gender equality	<p data-bbox="612 967 1358 1057">5. What would Gender Equality in Higher Education look like to you?</p> <p data-bbox="612 1131 1246 1164">6. Do you think it exists and to what extent?</p> <p data-bbox="612 1238 1385 1328">7. Are you aware of any changes in Higher Education since 2015 in relation to Gender Equality?</p> <p data-bbox="708 1402 1385 1435">a. Can you explain how you understand them?</p> <p data-bbox="612 1509 1385 1659">8. Have you experienced any changes in your role as a result of the gender equality movement in Higher Education since 2015?</p>