



Positions of power: closing the gender gap in academic leadership

Professor Colette Fagan talks to *International Innovation* about the challenges facing women today who choose careers in academia, and discusses the effectiveness of initiatives in place for gender parity in leadership positions

In your opinion, why are women still underrepresented in senior academic positions, and more specifically in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects?

The focus of many policy initiatives on inspiring and supporting girls and young women to study STEM subjects is an important but insufficient intervention. There is a risk that the problem is seen to be 'women' – that it is women who need to change and women who need to adapt – rather than challenging

and reforming cultural and organisational structural barriers.

Change requires ongoing commitment from university leadership teams and ensuring that this stated commitment is translated into action to review and reform those organisational procedures and processes, thus creating a level playing field for women to advance in their careers.

You are the Deputy Dean of a large Faculty and a Professor of Sociology at

the University of Manchester. As part of a relatively small number of successful academic female leaders, were there any key factors that facilitated your career path?

Yes – my parents deeply valued education. They didn't have the opportunity to go to university themselves and were determined that I would. I also had inspiring and effective mentors who encouraged me to progress from undergraduate to advanced study, and from senior academic positions to my first

Combatting gender inequalities in academia



Researchers at the **University of Manchester** are scrutinising their own environment in an effort to understand why women are underrepresented in positions of power and how gender parity can be achieved

ACROSS THE GLOBE women are underrepresented in positions of leadership, including in academic institutions. Despite initiatives to encourage more girls and women to take up science-related careers, gender disparity in leadership roles remains acute in STEM disciplines. In the UK in 2015, for example, women account for 28 per cent of professors in humanities subjects and only 19 per cent in science subjects.

Professor Colette Fagan, Deputy Dean and Associate Dean for Research in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Manchester, serves as a UK Academic Expert and Advisor for the European Commission's Network of Experts on Gender Equality. Along with Dr Nina Teasdale, a research associate at the University's Department of Sociology, Fagan has been exploring the academic gender gap from a novel point of view: the women at the top of their game.

The personal experiences of women who have succeeded in becoming STEM professors, and the similarities and differences encountered in non-STEM subjects, has been given surprisingly little attention to date. But a deeper knowledge of the factors that have contributed to or impeded their success will create a better understanding of gender disparity in academic leadership. The results of this qualitative study will serve a dual purpose, informing the next steps of the ATHENA action plan at the University of Manchester and forging new insights into gender segregation in employment more broadly.

A SHARED EXPERIENCE

Fagan concentrated her research in her own academic backyard: the University of Manchester, where the gender profile of women in leadership positions compares favourably with the average for other research-intensive universities in the UK.

The professors who spoke to Fagan have strikingly similar stories to tell about their climb up the career ladder. They considered long-term support networks, mentors and, at Manchester University at least, courses in leadership to be particularly key to their success. Obstacles to their advancement included deeply rooted issues of unconscious bias and gendered expectations about men and women – and the way these issues fed into the organisational culture and promotional framework, and often favoured men.

The majority of women described their careers as taking a more 'meandering' and 'drifting' path than their male counterparts who tended to attain promotions sooner. They reported how men in their departments seemed to consider the rules of the promotional game to be obvious, to have a wider pool of influential networks and mentors, and to be less encumbered by childcare responsibilities. Fagan's study brings to light the importance of

management role. Additionally, I have benefited from an ambitious and supportive workplace, job satisfaction and a husband who shares home responsibilities equally.

Your research study focuses on women who have succeeded in becoming professors. Have your investigations unveiled any particular challenges female leaders in STEM disciplines face?

Many spoke of the difficulties of being one of only a few women among the academics in their department. This manifested itself in being visible as both 'different' and invisible in the sense that their contribution was sometimes undervalued or ignored. They spoke of attending meetings and events where they were one of very few women, and of feeling pressure to be twice as good as their male counterparts in order to be noticed in a positive way and to be able to advance. Many had had to grapple with being the first in their department to request maternity leave and to face the challenges of balancing their careers with caring responsibilities. Meanwhile, the men in their departments usually had fewer such responsibilities to manage.

How have initiatives such as the Athena SWAN scheme made a difference to improving gender awareness in universities?

Athena SWAN was introduced in 2005 and is a practical scheme run by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) to improve women academics' STEM careers. Additional impetus to the success of this initiative was given in 2011 when the UK's Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies, announced that the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) would only shortlist medical schools for funding if a silver Athena SWAN award was held by the school. This also included funding for patient safety research centres.

Athena SWAN has had a positive impact on progress to improve women's presence in STEM positions. The Charter was expanded in 2015 to include arts, humanities, social science, business and law departments, and the ECU has also introduced a new race equality charter. Yet we still have a long way to go to ensure that such initiatives produce fundamental organisational change and real diversity in the profile of the academic and research workforce in universities and in science and engineering industries.

long-term support networks for women, in the workplace as well as at home, in the shape of supportive and well-matched mentors and line managers who were committed to removing gender bias in the workplace.

ASSUMED ARCHETYPES

Strong barriers to dismantle include gender stereotypes and assumptions of what it means to be a good leader, academic or scientist. Sadly, maternity leave is often cited by women as a reason for not advancing more quickly up the academic career ladder. In their research, Fagan's team found that professorial women who have succeeded and had children only managed to do so by support at home, allowing them to free up more time to devote to their academic work.

Academia is highly competitive and progression is ostensibly merit-based, but there are indications that promotion criteria may be biased against women. Research volume and income, more than contribution to teaching and mentoring, is often the dominant metric of promotional criteria – and the way that professional networks and peer reputation impact on citation rates is another arena which may impact negatively on women's career progression. "While academic promotion metrics are supposedly gender neutral, many

perceived them to be skewed to reward a narrow and rigid career pathway which favours men on average," says Fagan.

CONCERTED ORGANISATIONAL EFFORTS

Gender parity in STEM is some way off yet, but the problem isn't restricted to the sciences. In her study, Fagan drew comparisons with female professors in non-STEM subjects. One-third of her interviewees were professors in the humanities – and despite slightly better female professorial representation in non-STEM subjects, there were many similarities in their experiences and those of their scientific counterparts.

Fagan's studies reveal that in order to make meaningful progress, fundamental changes must occur in the organisational procedures and culture of academia – and Athena SWAN must be seen as more than a box-ticking exercise. Initiatives to promote gender equality must be monitored, evaluated and adjusted accordingly. Yet perhaps most importantly of all, men as well as women should be involved in these endeavours since fair and open merit-based career opportunities, combined with better opportunities to combine professional life with caring for children and elder relatives, will benefit everyone who wants to pursue an academic career.

Obstacles to [women's] advancement included deeply rooted issues of unconscious bias and gendered expectations favour

WOMEN IN SCIENCE: CHARACTERISING AND UNDERSTANDING THE GENDERED NATURE OF SCIENTIFIC LEADERSHIP

OBJECTIVES

To elucidate the factors that enabled women to become STEM professors and the obstacles they encountered – and to draw comparisons with the experiences of women professors in non-STEM disciplines.

KEY COLLABORATORS

Dr Nina Teasdale; Professor Karen Hassell; Dr Jane Ferguson; Dr Lis Seston, The University of Manchester, UK

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COLETTE FAGAN focuses on work and employment, with particular interests in gender relations and inequalities in the workplace and domestic life and in international comparisons of employment and living conditions in industrialised economies. She explores theoretical and empirically-informed developments in these areas of study, as well as in policy evaluation and impact assessment.

