

Mind the Ladder

Exploring the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in higher education in Ireland

Introduction

Despite advances of the feminist movement, and wider structural legislative interventions, women remain under-represented at senior levels in academia and continue to experience both direct and indirect forms of discrimination throughout their careers (O'Connor, 2014).

The problem that my research sought to address, using a critical feminist approach, is that there is no qualitative empirical data that looks at whether any change or movement towards gender equality has emerged as a result of the national Gender Action Plan 2018–2020. Key themes emerged and were analysed using Fraser's theory of recognition, representation, and redistribution and McNay's theory of agency.

Research methodology and findings

Using an interpretivist and phenomenological approach, this qualitative research engaged 20 women in semi-structured interviews. The table below provides a profile of the interviewees.



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Interviewee	Years of Service	Type of Role	HEI
1	20	Head of department	IoT
2	21	Professor	University
3	17	Head of function	College
4	20	Professor	University
5	19	Head of function	University
6	9	Senior Head of Function	College
7	3	Senior head of function	College
8	15	Head of function	University
9	17	Head of department	IoT
10	15	Professor	University
11	35	President	IoT
12	13	Head of function	University
13	26	Vice president	IoT
14	9	Head of function	IoT
15	5	Senior head of function	University
16	18	Vice president	University
17	34	Vice president	IoT
18	27	Professor	University
19	22	Vice dean	University
20	20	Director	IoT

Table: Profile of participants. [HEI = higher-education institute; IoT = institute of technology]

Thematic analysis was used to determine the core themes that emerged in the interviews. The theoretical lens incorporated Fraser's theory of social justice and McNay's theory of agency. The findings were analysed using both theories, which led to them being divided into the challenges women experience (Figure 1) and the supportive factors that enabled the women to progress in their careers (Figure 2).

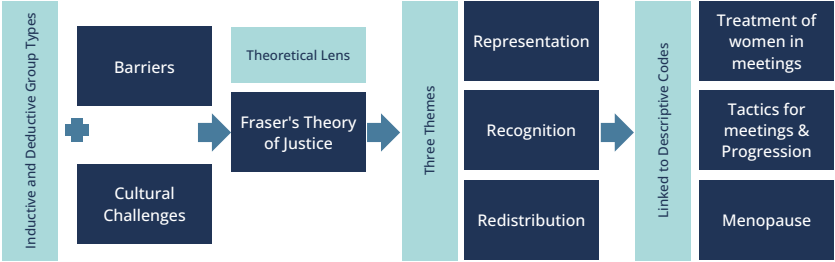


Figure 1: Thematic analysis using Fraser

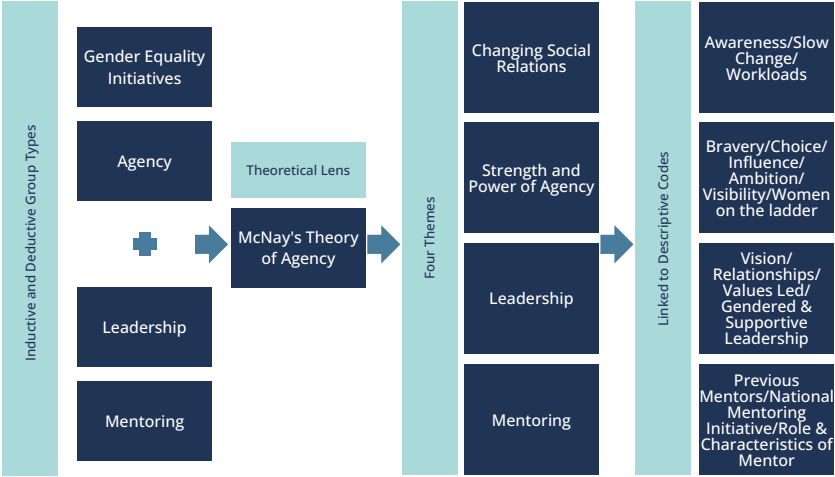


Figure 2: Thematic analysis using McNay

This led to the formation of six overall thematic areas (Figure 3).

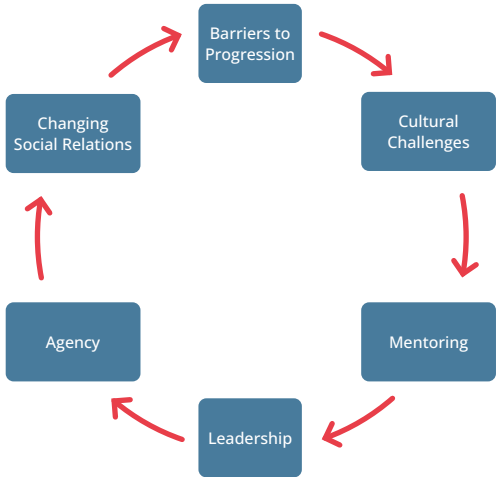


Figure 3: Themes

Discussion

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 argue that women face injustices from the patriarchal stigma associated with flexible working and leave arrangements. They experience unequal distribution of unpaid care work, and challenges that arise from menopause and social reproduction which limit their ability to have equal distribution of independence and value.

Secondly, using the representation lens, I argue that the culture of higher education is dominated by men, which creates the conditions for bullying of women; this has far-reaching consequences on women's ability to have equal respect and cultural value.

Lastly, using the recognition lens, I argue that women do not have equal political voice as social actors, as they are not being heard, they lack confidence in the higher-education environment, and they find themselves in feminised EDI (equality, diversity, inclusion) roles, which reinforces the notion that equality is a woman's problem that should be fixed by women. In the modern competitive environment of higher education, without equal voice, autonomy, and status, women simply cannot compete equally, as they do not have parity of participation.

Adopting a strengths-based approach, I will now unpack the supportive factors that enabled the women in this research to overcome these challenges in order to progress in their careers.

Women used their sense of agency to navigate changes in gender relations between men and women in higher education. Because experience is essential to an account of agency, women in senior leadership roles in higher education are more focused on collective leadership, and they have articulately shared their collective experiences of developing their individual and collective sense of power, agency, and decision-making in order to advance themselves through their careers.

Though existing literature suggests that women require mentoring, as they are in need of fixing (O'Connor, 2019), I argue that mentoring is a facilitative tool for the development and advancement of women. These women's characteristics of agency have essentially enabled them to overcome the challenges so that they could progress.

My research revealed that women continue to experience both direct and indirect discrimination throughout their careers.

Conclusion

My research set out to explore the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles in higher education in Ireland. It revealed that women continue to experience both direct and indirect discrimination throughout their careers. Despite this, the women in this research managed to overcome these challenges and advance themselves into senior roles.

This research contributes to knowledge, as I have argued that effective leadership of modern and highly complex higher-education institutes requires a shift away from patriarchy and towards empathy, relationship-building, and collective approaches to leadership.

Though the Athena SWAN Award has been depicted as a ‘silver bullet’ for addressing gender equality in Irish higher-education institutes, the only real change it has led to is a raising of awareness of what gender inequality is. Instead, the contribution that Athena SWAN has made to women’s experiences is an increase in their workload, a feminisation of their roles, and a tokenistic approach to valuing gender equality.

Though the number of women occupying senior roles has increased in Ireland since 2015, it is evident that the structural and cultural barriers have not automatically changed alongside this. Other feminist scholars have rightly criticised gender-equality interventions for shying away from challenging assumptions, beliefs, and biases about organisational practices, and for emphasising outcomes that focus more on measuring quotas than on 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 that is present in the responses of individuals to changing social relations. In my research, I have used a more strengths-based approach to ultimately illuminate individuals’ strengths – their agency, resiliency, and leadership styles – in order to inform future policies and practices to support women in higher education in Ireland into the future.

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