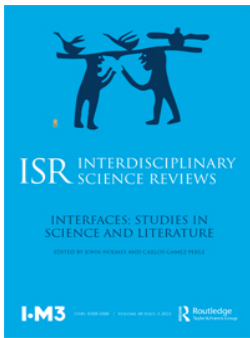


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Is gendered power irrelevant in higher educational institutions? Understanding the persistence of gender inequality

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ABSTRACT

For the past 30 years, many researchers have highlighted the gendering of higher educational institutions. However, many organizations in the broadly defined Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) area in the EU have varying degrees of interest, or academic staff available, in the gender equality area with many being largely unaware of this literature. This article draws provocatively on existing concepts to 'make sense' of the persistence of gender inequality. Such concepts include gendered organizational power, which is frequently taken-for-granted and is reflected at structural and cultural levels. The concept of legitimating discourses (including excellence, choice, women's 'nature' and organizational gender neutrality) helps to explain why gender inequality is not perceived. Other manifestations of institutional resistance to gender inequality provide insights into why it is not tackled effectively. The article recognizes that gendered change does occur and uses the metaphor of bonsai-ing to highlight attempts to limit the impact of such changes. Finally, it identifies some key issues that need to be tackled.

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Introduction

For the past 30 years, many sociologists and educationalists - and particularly scholars of gender and gender and education have done research on the gendering of higher educational institutions (HEIs) and its implications for women. However, many organizations in the broadly defined Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) area in the European Union have varying degrees of interest, or academic staff available, in the gender equality area in the European Union (EU). Yet, funding programmes in the EU and elsewhere increasingly require them to address gender inequality and gender bias in research and innovation and to develop a Gender Equality

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Plan (GEP). In applying for such funding, some include sociologists, educationalists, or gender experts as part of their team, or (more frequently) on Advisory Boards. In addition, often prior to applying for that funding, they invite gender experts as speakers since many of the researchers in core STEM disciplines are largely unaware of the literature in the gender equality area. They 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 higher education. 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).

In this article, I use concepts drawn from the existing literature to provocatively challenge such perceptions in an innovative way. I supplement these with case study material from Ireland where I have done research on gender inequality in higher education for over 25 years. Ireland was traditionally a highly patriarchal society, but has been undergoing rapid change in the gender area, although such changes have only begun to impact on higher education within the past 10 years. This then is the context for this overview which reflects my academic experiences, my research in the area and my reading of the international literature. It is not intended as a detailed review of literature, but, drawing on that literature, it aims to provocatively identify and discuss existing concepts which can help to 'make sense' of gendered power in higher educational institutions and their implications as regards the persistence of gender inequality in them.

Key concepts

Gender, gendered processes and gendered organizational power are key concepts. Legitimizing discourse, as a concept, is helpful in explaining why gendered power is not perceived. Other manifestations of institutional resistance and the bonsai-ing of change are also helpful in understanding why that change is slow and/or has limited impact.

Gender and gendered processes

Gender is still frequently thought of as referring to the characteristics or physical attributes assumed to attach to sexed bodies, although it is increasingly recognized that this is an unhelpful and simplistic view. Here gender is seen as a 'situated social practice actualized through social interaction and rooted in the doing and saying of organisational actors' (Van den Brink and Benschop 2012a, 73). Implicit in this definition is a performative focus on gender as something that is 'done' in social interaction, with taken-for-granted ways of 'doing and saying' underpinned by gendered stereotypes about appropriate ways of behaving (Martin 2003, 2006).

In a feminist institutional perspective, gender is seen as a 'constitutive element of social relations based on perceived (socially constructed and culturally variable) differences between women and men, and as a primary way of signifying (and naturalising) relations of power and hierarchy' (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010, 58). This definition re-echoes the focus on the social and cultural construction of gender and

the embedding of gender in social relations, but it adds an additional element: the idea that implicit in the very definition of gender is a hierarchical relationship between men and women. Thus, the very construction of gender implicitly legitimates men's dominant hierarchical position and women's subordination.

This hierarchical relationship between men and women is maintained through relationships between men. As suggested by Hartmann (1981, 14), these relationships, 'although hierarchical, establish or create interdependence among men that enable them to dominate women'. Underpinning this is the idea that men's relationships with each other are important to men, despite these hierarchical differences. This opens-up the possibility of understanding the kind of 'pack-mentality' that has been identified as important in perpetuating gender inequality, as well as many men's acute sensitivity to other men's evaluation of their behaviour and attitudes. Homosociability (i.e. the tendency to favour those who are like oneself: Grummell, Lynch, and Devine 2009; Van den Brink 2015) and sponsorship (i.e. reflected in creating opportunities, visibility and advocacy for the protégé: O'Connor et al. 2019a; Parsons and O'Connor 2023) have also been recognized as important ways through which male bonding is expressed and male dominance of organizational power structures maintained.

These aspects of men's behaviour have attracted less popular attention than their negative behaviour towards women, highlighted by the #MeToo movement. This has sometimes been referred to as hostile sexism (Barreto and Doyle 2023), reflected, for example, in gender-based violence and harassment (Bondestam and Lundqvist 2020; Naezer, van den Brink, and Benschop 2019; O'Connor et al. 2021). It includes microaggressions and behaviours that devalue women including disparagement, invisibility, marginalization, scientific sabotage, sexual harassment, and rape.

It is important to ask why women might collude with their own oppression. They may do so because of the fear generated by gender-based violence and harassment which is particularly likely to be directed at women who challenge traditional ideologies (such as highly educated women in male dominated areas). However, there may be other sources. Radke et al. (2018) found that women who see the world as hierarchical and their own subordinate position in it as legitimate are more likely to endorse a world view that legitimates men's obligation to protect women. This has been referred to as benevolent sexism (Barreto and Doyle 2023). It suggests that men should protect women, while simultaneously restricting women's access to resources to protect themselves, in a context where gendered stereotypes persist, and where women's primary role is 'reflecting men at twice their natural size' (Cline and Spender 1987). Paternalism can be attractive to women although it is associated with women being perceived as less competent and getting 'praise but little concrete recognition for their work, such as career enhancing opportunities, promotions, or salary raises' (Barreto and Doyle 2023, 104). Women may also of course assimilate the male dominant ethos which legitimates inequality and distance themselves from other women: the 'Queen Bee' phenomenon (Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers 2016).

Fox, Whittington, and Linkova (2017, 701) suggest that 'science is deeply intertwined with processes of status building, power, and organisational change'. Compared with other disciplines that study the nature, extent and impact of power structures, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM: with notable exceptions such as in MIT 1999) have historically struggled to recognize and respond to social, cultural and organizational sources of discrimination and privilege (Nielsen 2016). They have

required tailored interventions (such as MIT 2020), identifying systemic discrimination against women in order to understand the causes and consequences of gender inequality (Casad et al. 2021). In multidisciplinary higher education settings, STEM's higher research funding and lower teaching loads (even in Iceland: Steintporsdóttir et al. 2019) mean that women in those disciplines have more to gain by identifying as scientists than as women (Nash and Moore 2019; Rhoton 2011), with implications as regards identifying and challenging gender inequality.

In summary, the construction of gender implies a hierarchical element and this has consequences for relational gendered processes within and between men and women.

Gendered organizational power

Acker (1990, 146) challenged the idea of organizations as gender neutral: suggesting that 'advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine'. Thus, implicit in the concept of gendered organizational power is the idea that the structure and culture of organizations reflects an unequal gender regime or order. Acker (2006, 43) defined organizational regimes as 'loosely inter-related practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain gender inequalities', with such inequality regimes involving 'systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources and outcomes' (Acker 2009, 202). She saw these as reflected in the gendered division of labour, power and resources in organizations; in the symbols, evaluations and images that explain and reinforce those gendered allocations; in the informal interactions within and between men and women which enact dominance and submission; in the gendered components of an individual's identity and in the wider processes creating and reinforcing other gendered structures outside the organization. Thus, gender inequality is maintained through the formal and informal organizational structure.

Lawrence's (2008, 174) concept of systemic power in organizations is helpful in understanding the routine exercise of formal power in these contexts. It is defined as 'an automatic form of regulation that enforces compliance, without involving episodes of actions'. It focuses on the taken-for-granted 'normal' ways of controlling behaviour, allocating resources and making decisions: ways that are not typically seen as reflecting the enactment of power but which do enforce compliance. The concept of stealth power (O'Connor et al. 2019b) makes explicit the idea that this power 'operates covertly and panoptically' (Webb 2008). It is reflected in the existence of organizational rules and in taken-for-granted understandings about formal and informal relationships between those in the organization and their differential legitimate access to resources. It is also reflected in the use of such organizational resources to shape reality, to set agendas, to obscure options and even to create opaque decision-making structures which simply rubber stamp decisions made elsewhere. Such resources are also used to offer inducements/sanctions – including the possibility of increasing/reducing direct access to power through membership of the 'in-group' which legitimates normalized enactments of power (O'Connor et al. 2019b).

Connell (2002, 2005) specifically suggested that an unequal gender order perpetuated a patriarchal dividend, i.e. with financial resources, status, support and other benefits

given to men because they are men (and particularly to those who uphold the gender order). These benefits accrue to individual men and, whether they want them or not, they still benefit from them. Thus, the gender order operates through a hidden interplay of formal and informal norms with gendered implications. It is reflected at an individual level in feelings of entitlement or self-denial/self-effacement – but these individual phenomena are ultimately created by gendered structures and cultures.

Indicators of gendered organizational power can lie at the structural or cultural level. At the structural level they include those reflecting vertical segregation, e.g. the gender profile of senior management, and particularly rectors/presidents and academic professors; gendered career paths – including the existence of gendered career cul-de-sacs ('mommy-tracks'); gendered workload allocation (often based on stereotypes about the appropriateness of, for example, allocating pastoral care and academic housekeeping to women, and high profile, high prestige activities to men); gendered recruitment and promotional criteria and procedures (including 'closed' hiring and/or narrow criteria designed to suit only one preferred candidate); the allocation of posts to gendered disciplines (e.g. engineering versus midwifery) and gendered words in ads (strong leader versus team player) (Nielsen 2016; O'Connor 2020a; Peterson 2018; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012a, 2012b). At an even more fundamental level, valorized practices such as the total dependence of a large number of junior precarious faculty on senior permanent faculty, create possibilities for gender-based violence and harassment arising from gendered power inequalities (O'Connor et al. 2021; OECD 2021). The enactment of such gendered power in specific contexts (Ni Laoire et al. 2021) can also include the use of criteria and procedures which look objectively gender neutral but which in fact are not (e.g. the prioritization of research over teaching in western HEIs; the favouring of local candidates (inbreeding) in a context where these are most likely to be men; the adjustment of criteria on the day of interview to favour male candidates; and other local indicators of procedural subversion: Montes and O'Connor 2019; O'Connor 2020c; O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016; Vázquez-Cupeiro and Elston 2006). Indicators of gendered horizontal segregation include the higher availability of senior posts in predominantly male areas; higher access to national research funding in these areas and the perception of them as of greater national strategic importance; the higher valuation of research outputs in these areas; the use of research metrics that favour them as well as the lower staff student ratios in such areas and hence greater possibilities as regards individual advancement in them (Steinþórsdóttir et al. 2019).

Gendered indicators at the cultural level include gendered stereotypes (of scientists; leaders, professors: MIT 2020; Schein et al. 1996); a favouring of male over female CVs – both experimental and actual in recruitment/promotion processes and in evaluations for research funding (Ahlqvist et al. 2013; Correll 2017; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012; O'Connor 2020a; Sheltzer and Smith 2014; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012a, 2012b; Wenneras and Wold 1997). Thus, CVs with male names are preferred, with women often assessed against a higher standard than men; their accomplishments scrutinized more; more 'doubt raisers' being identified about their achievements and a 'double bind' existing for women, but not for men (i.e. those women who are seen as competent are not seen as likeable and vice versa). Other indicators include gendered informal patterns such as gendered encouragement to apply for promotion and the gendered availability of 'inner track' information, advocacy or sponsorship as well as

gendered practices/day-to day interactions (also called micropolitical practices: Morley 1999; O'Connor et al. 2020) which favour men and/or devalue women.

There is no agreement on whether 'the pervasive gendering of bureaucratic organisations' is inevitable (Ferguson 1984) or historically contingent (Connell 1994). However, there is a good deal of agreement that the enactment of gendered power is reflected at a structural and cultural level with systemic power stealthily exercised and favouring the perpetuation of male dominated masculinist structures and practices.

Legitimizing discourses

The concept of legitimating discourses is useful in helping us to understand why the manifestations of gendered organizational power are not perceived as such. Legitimizing discourses are social constructions which provide 'normative justifications for existing policies and practice, through which they are seen as appropriate, reasonable, and fair and are consequently more readily accepted' (Tyler 2005, 211). They thus obscure gendered power (O'Connor and White 2021a). They include discourses about excellence, choice, 'women's nature' and organizational gender neutrality.

Excellence is frequently used as a legitimating discourse to 'explain' the under-representation of women in senior positions – the suggestion being that access to such positions is entirely meritocratic and that women lack the confidence, academic excellence, political 'nous', leadership or networks to facilitate their access. At first glance, it appears totally reasonable: women are not in these senior positions because they are not excellent enough. However further examination suggests that in organizations the structures, procedures and criteria are designed by men, underpinned by gendered constructions of leadership and assumptions about the unsuitability of women for these positions (Fitzgerald 2018, 2020; Morley 2014); the gendering of academic careers and the devaluation of women and of areas of predominantly female employment are reflected in their perceived strategic importance, resourcing, working conditions, access to research funding and promotional posts (O'Connor 2020a; Steinþórsdóttir et al. 2019); and in day-to-day interactions which facilitate and encourage men and marginalize and undermine women through various forms of gender based violence and harassment (Naezer, van den Brink, and Benschop 2019; O'Connor et al. 2021).

Variation (both across and within nations as well as over time) in the proportion of women in senior academic and/or presidential/rector positions has implicitly undermined such assumptions (O'Connor and White 2021b). In Ireland the proportion of women at full professorial level in the pre-2019 seven universities increased from 19% in 2013–2015 to 30% in 2021 (HEA 2016b, 2022), compared with an EU average of 26% (EC 2021). Persistent variation between universities, even in a small country such as Ireland (population: 5m), further undermines assumptions about excellence. Thus, for example in 2013 the proportion of women at full professorial level was identical (at 14%) in Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and the University of Galway (U of G), but by 2021, the proportion in TCD had increased to 33%, while in the U of G the proportion was only 19%. There is no evidence suggesting that excellence increased to a greater degree in TCD over that period than in U of G. Indeed, the proportion of all academic women who are professors in U of G has remained low (4% as compared with 8 per cent in TCD: HEA 2022): with women's 'chance' of a professorship there being 1:24 as

compared with 1:11 in TCD (calculation derived from HEA 2022; see O'Connor 2020b). That these patterns reflect gendered power is implicitly suggested by the fact that men's 'chance' of a professorship is higher in U of G than in TCD (1:5 versus 1:7) and has remained the same in U of G, while falling from 1:5 to 1:7 in TCD over that period (HEA 2016b, 2022).

Evidence problematizing the excellence discourse has begun to appear in the past 10 years in the Netherlands, Denmark, the UK, Ireland, etc. (Ferretti et al. 2018; Nielsen 2016; O'Connor and Barnard 2021; O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012a, 2012b). Thus, for example it has been shown that in Aarhus in Denmark as well as in the Netherlands, professorial chairs were frequently not publicly advertised, with an applicant being identified by acclamation as 'excellent'. In the UK, it was shown that in policy documents, definitions of research excellence were tautological and vague. Indeed, Ferretti et al. (2018, 738) conclude that the research excellence indicator developed by the European Commission is a 'multi-dimensional, complex, and value-laden concept whose quantification is likely to end in controversy'.

Another legitimating discourse that has been widely used is that of individual choice: i.e. that paid work, or career advancement is not a priority for women. At first glance again this appears to have validity; some women may not want paid work and/or may not be interested in moving up, and this may be related to child care and other kinds of caring activities. However, on further examination this legitimating discourse appears to include several assumptions. Firstly, it assumes that men do not/should not have such choices. Most men want to be good fathers, husbands and sons, so how is it then, if choices are being valued, that in most societies it is socially unacceptable for them to choose not to engage in paid work. Secondly, a focus on choice ignores the fact that such choices are situationally defined. Thus, for example, in Ireland, married women's 'choice' to engage in paid work was limited by the Marriage Bar up to 1973, which prohibited married women from continuing in paid work in the civil service, second level teaching, etc. (O'Connor 1998). Furthermore, outside such areas it was socially unacceptable for them to do so (i.e. it reflected badly on their husbands' ability to financially support them). Thirdly, implicit in the focus on women's choice is the assumption that a reliable, life-long financial supporter exists. In an era when divorce and separation are common experiences, this is a problematic assumption, with very high proportions of single mothers being in poverty. Fourthly, for many women choice as regards participation in paid employment does not arise: they cannot afford not to engage in paid employment even if their partner/husband is also in paid employment.

The ongoing allocation in most western societies of most of the unpaid work involving housework and child care to women can of course limit women's availability for specific kinds of paid work in an individual couple, particularly if a gender pay gap exists so that the reduction/withdrawal of the woman from paid work is a more financially viable solution for that couple. But this reflects social arrangements and wider cultural constructions of masculinity in terms of financial control and breadwinning. As Linkova, Atay, and Zulu (2021, 72) note: the discourse of choice reflects 'neoliberal discourses of individualised responsibility' and the 'ways in which they are used to create a particular form of feminine subjectivity. These discourses obscure structural gender inequalities

and shift the responsibility for women's disadvantaged position and under-representation in leadership onto women academics'.

Frequently underpinning the focus on choice is a focus on biological essentialism, i.e. a discourse about women's 'nature'. This discourse has been re-asserted in eastern Europe and remains important in many countries in Africa as well as India (Gallant and Agarwala 2021; Linkova, Atay, and Zulu 2021). Comparing patterns across time and/or place again reveals the socially constructed nature of these legitimating discourses and raises questions about whose interests are served by endorsing them. In Ireland in the 1960s it was assumed that girls 'naturally' did not have the ability to do honours mathematics in the final state examination (Cullen 1987) – a perception that has been challenged by their subsequent performance, although parents and teachers continue to underestimate girls' objectively assessed maths' achievements and to overestimate boys' ones (McCoy, Byrne, and O'Connor 2022). Such patterns are not peculiar to Ireland. Maths is a gender marked subject in most western societies (OECD 2015), with girls' maths abilities being widely underestimated (Copur-Gencturk et al. 2020). Similarly assumptions about the 'naturalness' of the absence of women presidents/rectors in Irish public universities for 429 years were implicitly challenged when, over less than a three-year period, seven of these 12 universities endorsed women as presidents/rectors (O'Connor and Irvine 2023).

At an organizational level, a legitimating discourse involving organizational gender neutrality is frequently used, i.e. the assumption being that organizations are staffed by 'degendered automatons' (Halford 1992, 172). Such views are occasionally made explicit by academic leaders (Sumers 2005; see also Nielsen 2016; Van den Brink 2015). More usually, however, in so far as there is a focus on gender inequality, ideas about organizational gender neutrality are reflected in assumptions that it is necessary to 'fix the women' – an implicit deficit model. The assumption is that if women were more confident; had better time management or political skills; made different life choices, had different priorities – (implicitly) if they were more like men, there would be no problem (Burkinshaw and White 2017; O'Connor 2014). Assumptions about gender neutrality are also implicit in the tendency to see gender-based violence and harassment as the actions of difficult individuals rather than as systemic issues reflecting gendered power imbalances within organizations (O'Connor et al. 2021; Phipps 2020; Wilson and Thompson 2001). Such assumptions exonerate those in positions of organizational power from taking any action to end gender inequality. Assumptions about gender neutrality also come into sharp relief on specific embodiment issues such as the availability of facilities for breast feeding or the scheduling of early morning or late evening meetings, without regard to their implications for those – predominantly women – who have caring responsibilities. Specific arrangements may be put in place for these situations but these often have career implications for those who avail of them (Maxwell, Connolly, and Ni Laoire 2019; Morgan et al. 2021).

Assumptions about organizational gender neutrality are ultimately reflected in the failure to recognize that the structure and culture, career paths, day-to-interactions and micropolitical practices are masculinist and reflect the invisibility and normalization of male bodies and male privileging (Collinson and Hearn 1994) and perpetuate what is effectively a male dominated masculinist structure (O'Connor et al. 2020; Peterson and Jordansson 2017).

These legitimating discourses in HEIs are underpinned by wider societal discourses involving ideas about merit, choice, 'nature' and gender-neutrality. The fact that these discourses may contradict each other is ignored (e.g. ideas about women's 'nature' may sit uneasily with assumptions about organizational gender neutrality). These discourses serve the interests of those in power and legitimate the status quo. However, they are frequently internalized at an individual level and reflected both in the stereotypes underlying formal interaction, decision making and allocation of resources and in the informal 'strategies and tactics used by individuals and groups ... to further their interests' (Van den Brink 2010, 25).

Legitimizing discourses inhibit the identification of gender equality by legitimating it and obviating any focus on an individual HEI as implicated in creating or maintaining it. They can be seen as a form of institutional resistance since they prevent gender equality being seen. However, there are also other forms of institutional resistance to gender inequality.

Other forms of institutional resistance to gender inequality

Institutional resistance to gender inequality has been defined as 'patterns of organizational behaviour that decision makers or people in power positions employ to deny, reject, and refuse to implement, repress, or even dismantle, gender equality change proposals and initiatives' (Agócs 1997, 918) actively or passively. This concept is important because it helps us to understand why HEIs so often fail to take effective action even when gender inequality is identified.

Mapping gender inequality is a key element in tackling it. Those who are most likely to reject evidence and/or to resist change are those who are privileged – whether in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, etc. Thus, for example, men were less likely than women to see gender inequality as existing in Irish HEIs and less likely to see it as extremely important (HEA 2016a). Not surprisingly then, these men were less likely than their female counterparts to be in favour of strategies to deal with it (such as targets (21% vs 44%); positive discrimination (20% vs 37%) or temporary quotas (20% vs 43%)). Frequently the response of senior academics to such data is to challenge the methodology or to suggest that the phenomenon applies to other times or other HEIs (Van den Brink 2015) – with men in STEM being particularly unlikely to accept evidence of gender bias in STEM (Hanley et al. 2015).

In the EU and the US there are numerous projects on gender equality, diversity, mainstreaming, etc. – with reports, articles and other publications indicating some degree of success – albeit that this is often simply at the level of creating gender awareness. Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) have become ubiquitous with the requirement by the EU that they be included in all Horizon Europe research funding applications (Augusto et al. 2018). Frequently, however, these GEPs include multiple actions with little attempt at prioritization and little appetite for implementing time-bound measures to promote substantive change (Roos et al. 2020) such as soft quotas as reflected in the cascade model, where the proportion of women to be promoted reflects the proportion at the level below that. Thus, GEPs may involve a great deal of 'busyness' which does not challenge power (Hodgins, O'Connor, and Buckley 2022).

Furthermore, even where the importance of gender equality initiatives is recognized, there may be a lack of acceptance by senior management of their responsibility to do

anything about it. This may be reflected in a lack of resourcing of the area (in terms of money, time and/or personnel) and/or a lack of specificity in the objectives to be achieved. Roos et al. (2020) suggested that in the absence of time-bound specificity, the perpetuation of gender inequality is effectively legitimated. In that situation those in management can highlight their awareness of the issue. They may explain the persistence of gender inequality by referring to early socialization or societal structures, without any commitment to tackling it within the organization – thus effectively legitimating the perpetuation of the problem: ‘seemingly emancipatory discourses can be highly problematic and may unintentionally contribute to the persistence of gender inequality in academia’ (Roos et al. 2020, 491). In that context it was striking that the first Expert Report on gender equality in Irish higher education institutions (HEA 2016a) identified 66 time-specific recommendations, in stark contrast to their virtual absence in the second report (HEA 2023).

Key sites for the manifestation of institutional resistance are those involving access to positional power and/or to resources such as money, time or space. In these areas, there may be foot dragging, reflected in long delayed processes around attempts to change procedures around recruitment, promotion or gender budgeting. At an organizational culture level, institutional resistance may involve undermining those who have broken ‘moulds’ and/or reinforcing stereotypical assumptions (for example, as regards the appropriateness of women’s silence at departmental or faculty meetings).

As recognized by Agócs (1997) there may also be attempts to disempower structures that have been effective; or to dilute, undermine or even abandon effective procedures. Thus, for example, Science Foundation Ireland’s Starting Investigator Research Grant (SIRG) Program incentivized HEIs to nominate excellent female candidates by allowing them to increase the number of candidates that could be submitted for research funding from each institution, from the original six to 12, provided no more than six of these were men. This increased the proportion of women applicants (from 23% in 2013 to 47% in 2015) and their success rates (from 27% in 2013 to 50% in 2015). However, this highly effective programme has been suspended for several years.

In HEIs institutional resistance is often subtle. It has many sources, not least because change disrupts the benefits accruing to those under the existing status quo.

The metaphorical bonsai-ing of gendered change

Specific functions in many HEIs are at least ostensibly working to create change. There are anecdotal examples of individual men in positions of power who have challenged the ‘pack’ mentality and have supported women – often at the cost of their own career and even their identity as men. There are examples of women who have acted as change agents or tempered radicals (Meyerson and Scully 1995; O’Connor 2019).

Gendered change does, of course, occur. For example, the gender profile of high status, powerful positions has changed in some countries. In Sweden and New Zealand roughly half of those in presidential/rector positions are now women (O’Connor and White 2021a). In the Irish context there has been a dramatic change with the number of women presidents/rectors rising from zero to seven out of the 12 universities over a less than three-year period (2020–2023). In that context the metaphor of bonsai-ing such gendered change is potentially useful. This concept derives from an original

Chinese, and later Japanese art whereby genetically normal trees are artificially reduced in size so that they become realistic miniatures. It is a metaphor for limiting what could be seen as the disruptive impact of gendered change: a subtle reflection of institutional resistance.

Thus, in the changing patterns of gender under-representation in senior positions, an attempt may be made to admit only those who are seen to be ‘of good behaviour’ (Tiernan and O’Connor 2020), i.e. those who are unlikely to challenge the existing patriarchal structures, from whom limited challenges may be acceptable. In Ireland, the potential impact of the change in the gender profile of presidents/rectors is likely to be reduced by two factors. First six of these seven female presidents/rectors come from STEM disciplines in a context where these disciplines reflect the state’s priorities and where their knowledge paradigm tends to involve a decontextualized gender-neutral construction of knowledge (Nielsen 2016). Thus, those from such backgrounds may be seen as less likely to advocate for a gender equality agenda in the transformation of HEIs. Furthermore, since very few women are at professorial levels in STEM (EC 2021), such patterns raise questions about the sustainability of this gendered pattern. Secondly, four of the seven women at presidential/rector level have had no formative higher educational experiences in Irish universities (O’Connor and Irvine 2023). If this reflects their ‘global excellence’, it is difficult to make sense of the fact that none of the five current male presidents are in a similar situation. Furthermore, since sponsorship and homosociability are key mechanisms in reproducing male dominance, these dissimilarities between the profiles of female presidents/rectors and the women they lead raise questions about the reproduction of female occupancy of these positions.

Change can also be to some extent illusory. Thus, in Irish HEIs the proportion of women at full professorial level has steadily increased over the past 10 years – being now above the EU level (30% as compared with an EU average of 26%). However, when we look more closely, although roughly 12% of all academic staff are at full professorial level (in the pre-2019 seven universities on which data is available), academic men were much more likely to be in these positions than their female counterparts. The gender gap had reduced over time, i.e. 6% of the women and just under 16.6% of the men were at full professor level in 2013–2015 compared with 7.6% of the women and 14.9% of the men in 2021 (HEA 2016b, 2022). It seems possible that the improvement in women’s ‘chances’ reflects the increased availability of professorial positions (Woods 2022). In any case, those HEIs which consistently had the highest proportions of all women at professorial level are those which now have female presidents. Overall, however, academic men in Irish universities are still twice as likely as women to be in professorial positions. These trends are not peculiar to Ireland. In New Zealand, drawing on a comprehensive data set, Brower and James (2020) found that a man’s odds of being at professor or associate professor level were more than double a woman’s odds among those with a similar research score, age, field and university. And the odds were even higher when attention was focused only at full professorial level.

In Irish HEIs academic men’s ‘chances’ have varied very little over time (from 1:5–1:7; O’Connor and Irvine 2023). They have also varied little between HEIs, in contrast to women’s ‘chances’. Even in 2021, women’s ‘chances’ varied between 1:10 and 1:24

(HEA 2022). Men's access to professorial positions are remarkably resistant to change: indicating another possible aspect of the bonsai-ing of women's chances in the absence of increases in such positions.

Summary and conclusions

This article is not intended to provide a systematic review of literature, but to provocatively identify and discuss concepts which can help to 'make sense' of the persistence of gender inequality in HEIs. These include gendered organizational power; legitimating discourses (which obscure the existence of gender inequality) as well as other manifestations of institutional resistance (including the bonsai-ing of such gendered change as occurs).

A key element in delivering gender equality is recognizing that gendered organizational power is a reality. Change requires a recognition of its multi-faceted and multi-level existence at a structural and cultural level and of the way in which its enactment has become embedded in masculinist male dominated structures, procedures, career paths and culture. Thus, rather than 'adding on' structures or procedures dealing with gender equality, an examination of existing structures, culture, procedures and practices needs to occur. In addition, the identification of time-bound actions by those in named positions is important, particularly the implementation of the cascade model, as well as the identification of targets and quotas in key areas involving access to resources (i.e. money or positions). The inclusion of gender experts as observers on recruitment and promotional panels (Ahlqvist et al. 2013) with the authority to halt competitions can also be helpful.

Cultural change needs to be led from the top by presidents/rectors, with gender competence being a key criterion in their appointment and in the appointment of all line managers (O'Connor 2020b). A learning culture at management level needs to be fostered – recognizing that errors and inadequacies will occur, but that mistakes can be admitted and inappropriate behaviour called out. Led from the top, informal processes and practices that perpetuate gender inequality, both those that favour men and those that devalue and marginalize women need to be tackled. It is essential that both hostile sexism, reflected in gender-based violence and harassment, and benevolent sexism, reflected in paternalism, gender stereotyping and women's marginalization from power 'for their own good' are challenged. In the meantime, behaviours that are not seen as paternalistic when men are the beneficiaries may need to be provided for women (e.g. senior men encouraging women to go for promotion and providing them with sponsorship). Because of the persisting impact of homosociability, it may be necessary to link such behaviours to evaluations of managerial performance in order to ensure that they happen. The success of the most prestigious highly ranked HEIs in any country in adopting a gender equality agenda is obviously key since it is likely to be emulated.

Challenging the legitimating discourses that obscure and legitimate gender inequality is crucial. Everyone within HEIs, particularly those in permanent positions, can play a part in this – whether individually or collectively. This may involve challenging their own attitudes; naming gendered structural or cultural aspects; exposing gendered career structures; identifying allies; targeting key structures; engaging in provocative misbehaviour; mobilizing support internally or externally; whistle blowing or industrial action (O'Connor 2000). Organizational change is facilitated if it is actively supported

by policies and resourcing at a national level including the promotion of gender equality as a key purpose of higher education and as a national priority; and the linking of state funding to key indicators of gendered change, with time specific targets being identified. Leveraging the state's ability to tackle institutional resistance in HEIs is also crucially important, particularly, the devaluation of, and hence the under-resourcing of areas where women academic staff are more likely to be found; as well as supporting men who are willing to call out other men's behaviour. Requirements at EU level in terms of research funding applications (including those related to the content of the research and the existence of GEPs) have been helpful in increasing awareness of gender inequality. However, this is not sufficient to end gender inequality in HEIs. Ingenuity is required at national and EU level to 'encourage' HEIs to do this (e.g. in the research area, one example of this might be restricting the number of research applications that can be submitted if they are all led by men, but allowing HEIs to submit a larger number of applications if at least half are led by women). Nevertheless, the bonsai-ing of gendered change is a salutary reminder of the possible limits of gendered change in HEIs.

This article uses existing concepts in a provocative and novel articulation of the challenges that exist in attempting to create gender equality in HEIs.

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