

“Naming the Parts”: a case-study of a gender equality initiative with academic women¹

Aifric O Gráda, Caitríona Ní Laoire, Carol Linehan, Geraldine Boylan and Linda Connolly

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to current debates about the effectiveness of different types of gender equality interventions in the academic context. We present an argument for the need to move beyond an individual-structural dichotomy in how such interventions are perceived. The paper draws on an action-research case-study, the *Through the Glass Ceiling* project, to challenge the idea that ‘individual’/single-actor interventions serve only to reinforce underlying inequalities by attempting to ‘fix the women’. We suggest that actions that support women in their careers have the potential to achieve a degree of transformation at individual, cultural and structural levels when such actions are designed with an understanding of how individuals embody the gendered and gendering social structures and values that are constantly being produced and reproduced within society and academia. The case-study highlights the benefits of supporting individuals as gendered actors in gendering institutions and of facilitating the development of critical gender awareness, suggesting that such interventions are most effective when undertaken as part of an integrated institutional equality agenda.

Keywords: Gender, academic careers, action research, equality, change in organizations

Introduction

Despite decades of equality legislation and awareness in Western contexts, women continue to experience different career outcomes relative to their male peers in the academic and research sectors. This is reflected in a decreasing proportion of women as one progresses up the academic career ladder (see for example, Bagilhole, 1993, 2000; Bain and Cummings, 2000; Kloot, 2004; Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000; Probert, 2005; West and Lyon, 1995; Winchester et al, 2006). Differences in career outcomes have been conceptualized in a variety of ways with the use of metaphors such as ‘glass ceiling’, ‘thresholds’, ‘hurdles’ (see Toren and Moore, 1998), ‘leaking pipelines’ (see European Commission, 2009) and,

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more recently, 'firewalls' (Bendl and Schmidt, 2010). Nonetheless it is an issue that remains a challenge in many Western countries and one that has generated considerable attention at European level in recent decades, reflected in a number of reports and projects (see for example, Cacace, 2009/PRAGES; ETAN 2000; Expert Group on Structural Change, 2011; genSET, 2010; Holzinger and Schmidmayer/GENDERA, 2010; Lipinski/GESIS, 2009; Rees/Helsinki Group, 2002).

Recent data produced at EU level reveal the persistence of gender inequalities in academic careers. Women represent only 44 per cent of grade C academic staff, 37 per cent of grade B academic staff and 20 per cent of grade A academic staff in the EU-27 (where grade A is the highest possible academic grade and grade C is the entry grade for PhD graduates (European Commission, 2013). In 2010, 15.5 per cent of institutions in the higher education sector in the EU were headed by women, and just 10 per cent of universities had a female rector (European Commission, 2013). There is continuing evidence of a 'motherhood penalty' (Correll, Benard and Paik, 2007), with recent research in Spain, for example, showing that having children affects female academics much more negatively than male academics (UMC, 2011). The Irish context has been characterised by a lack of available data and, as a result, until recently, limited political attention to the issue. The action research project, 'Through the Glass Ceiling', on which our paper is based, took place in an Irish university. In 2010, the Irish Government's *Equality for Women Measure 2010-2013* was launched as a positive action initiative aimed at improving the position of women in the economy and in decision-making at all levels of Irish society in accordance with the goals of the *National Women's Strategy 2007-2016*ⁱ. The *Through the Glass Ceiling* (TTGC) project at UCC was funded through this measure, and ran from 2010 to 2012 with two main aims:

- firstly, to develop effective professional development and mentoring supports for female academic and research staff; and,
- secondly, to position those activities within a broader set of recommendations for UCC and other Irish universities to sustain the pursuit of a gender equality agenda for academic and research careers.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that, in our view, the two main project aims of providing supports for women and creating equality recommendations were not seen as separable 'individual interventions' plus 'policy recommendations' but as double loop learning in a way – one informing and shaping the other. Thus the thrust of TTGC from the outset was to reflexively develop both our interventions and ongoing agenda for change.

The Irish university context exhibits very similar gendered patterns in career outcomes to those across the EU. Qualitative accounts of women's experiences of academia in Ireland (for example, Linehan, Buckley and Koslowski, 2009) chime with in-depth accounts of such experiences across many other Western countries (Doherty and Manfredi, 2006; Duberley and Cohen, 2010; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014).

The starting point for our work was to understand contemporary explanations for the continuing patterns of gender inequality in academic careers. Some explanations for why women remain under-represented at senior levels of higher education and research have come from a quasi-essentialist perspective, which suggests that women choose not to progress, do not tend to possess the skills or attitudes suitable for progression or senior management (see O'Connor, 2010 or Timmers, Willemsen and Tijdens, 2010, for a discussion of these perspectives) or have tempered ambition and commitment particularly if there are competing family responsibilities (see for example Hakim 2000, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2008). In more recent years, however, European research initiatives and international academic literature present a far more complex understanding of how and why women get disproportionately lost in academic and research career paths: most notably, the inherent workings of academia and higher education institutions in ways that privilege the traditional values, career cycle, disciplinary status and work practices of male academics and researchers and fail to account for the tensions that continue to exist with the gendered

identities and social relations that women live and experience. (See for example, Bleijenbergh, van Engen, and Vinkenburgh, 2012; Devine, Grummell and Lynch 2011; Liff and Ward, 2001; Morley 2013; O'Connor 2010; Probert, 2005).

In addition, at the level of the institution, traditional practices have been exacerbated by what Currie, Harris and Thiele (2000) call the 'greedy institution', where changes to the academic role and increasing managerialism in universities have intensified workloads. Thus increased commitment and time requirements to fulfill the academic role combined with a lack of significant change to the gendered division of the domestic sphere (Probert, 2005) could actually result in a trajectory of greater gender inequalities in academic careers in the future.

With patterns of inequality persisting and the risk of further plateau or even retrenchment in women's progression in academia, what can be done? Initiatives to address gender inequality in the sector tend to be represented as either 'individual/essentialist' or 'structural' approaches, seen in interventions directly with women (for example, mentoring and skills development) or in policy development for greater gender balance and equality by attempts to mainstream gender awareness into aspects of the policy and practice of institutions, respectively. In this paper we briefly review debates on different types of gender equality interventions and their impacts in academia. We argue for the need to move beyond an individual-structural dichotomy in such debates and we illustrate this by drawing on a case study - the *Through the Glass Ceiling* (TTGC) project. Drawing on our case-study, we argue that actions that directly support women in their careers have the potential to achieve a degree of transformation at individual, cultural and structural levels when such actions are designed with an understanding of how individuals embody the gendered and gendering social structures and values that are constantly being produced and reproduced within society. We highlight the benefits of supporting individuals as gendered actors in gendering institutions and of facilitating the development of critical gender awareness. By this we mean encouraging an awareness of how the embodiment of gendered norms and values has rendered the inherent advantages for men and disadvantages for women into unquestioned, invisible and normalized understandings of the way things are. We argue therefore that viewing interventions that intervene directly with women (seen as single-actor in focus) as simply working to reinforce gendered structures by attempting to 'fix the women' does not acknowledge the valuable role they can play as part of integrated gender equality strategies.

Framing Gender in Academia: Interventions, Impacts and Agendas

In the academic context an individual orientation to work and career progression is common (Cummins, 2005, cited in Gaio Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). Eikhof (2012) draws attention to the manner in which knowledge work (of which academia is an example) is focused not only on individual knowledge and talent but on its promotion and branding. Thus a "tenured academic has to constantly develop, demonstrate and self-market her professional achievements" (Eikhof, 2012: 10). She mentions the particular importance of individuals promoting both their reputation and personal networks in order to succeed. It is perhaps not surprising then that in addressing issues of gender inequality in the academy many interventions focus on the single actor (instead of, or as well as, collective or structural change). However, initiatives seen as single-actor in focus, such as mentoring or professional development programmes for academic women, are commonly criticized for over-determining the role of individual women in addressing the obstacles they face in a gendered world (Devos 2008; Liff and Ward 2001). For example, Liff and Ward (2001) argue that policies that work on the basis of addressing women's problems in an individualist manner can be counter-productive in a number of ways: by portraying women as inadequate (needing special help to compete), by potentially evoking resentment

amongst male colleagues who may perceive females as being given unfair advantage and by leading to questioning of the merit of women who do succeed. As they point out:

What such equality approaches fail to do is to expose the current organization of the workplace as built around, and hence favouring, male needs and ways of working (Liff and Ward, 2001: 33).

Others argue that such approaches leave un-examined the underlying structures of inequality, or can in fact reinforce them by reproducing cultures of performativity (Devos 2008). Thus, critics of the 'single-actor' or 'individualist' approach argue for interventions at the more structural/institutional level, highlighting the gendered nature of academic institutions and cultures.

The importance of intervening at the structural level to promote meaningful change in tackling gender inequality is widely accepted. This has been reflected in measures targeted at institutional policies and practices such as, but not limited to, legislative changes, policies regarding gender representation on boards, and the use of targets or quotas for the filling of academic posts. However, some legislative or institutional interventions have had limited impact: for example equality legislation in place since the 1970s (in Ireland and other countries) has not resulted yet in equal pay, or equal representation at higher levels of organizations. Equally, a plethora of literature questions the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming policies generally in Europe since the 1990s (see, for example, Squires, 2005; Stratigaki, 2005). There is also the risk with some legislative interventions (such as mandating one woman on a board) that they leave unaddressed day-to-day gendered practices, becoming tokenistic nods to gender equality that fail to recognize and address the deep structural processes that result in unequal outcomes. For example, in Ireland and the UK many institutions have formal equality or diversity policies but as Bagilhole (2002) points out, there can be a wide gulf between the rhetoric of such policies and the reality of their implementation.

To summarize, an assessment of these initiatives identifies a number of issues: in many cases, supports provided directly to women are among the most immediate actions taken, but they are critiqued for failing to address structural change; simultaneously, the development of policies and guidelines which attempt to intervene at the organizational/structural level can become an end in itself while meaningful incorporation of the principles into practice fails to materialize.

Conceptualizing Transformation

We argue that these continuing failures may be explained by a disjuncture between the *intervention* and the *agenda* that is underpinning it: if approaches to tackling gender inequality are not themselves informed by an understanding of how gender is constructed and how it operates, in both manifest and latent ways, at all levels of society and in all social interactions, then the potential for the intervention to achieve an effective outcome will be limited. Thus, the same action - for example, a professional development programme - can have different outcomes depending on: firstly, the agenda that shaped it and, secondly, the understanding of the relationship between individual and structural-cultural issues that underpin it. This paper suggests that the emerging dichotomy between what are seen as 'individual/single-actor' and 'structural' approaches has the potential to weaken the value of interventions at both levels because it fails to recognize that structures are embodied in individuals and are produced and reproduced in the behaviour, values and expectations of individual actors within society. By failing to recognize that individuals and social structures are inextricably intertwined in the social world, and that gender is continually constructed in the dynamic processes of that entanglement, all interventions that attempt to address one side of that web in isolation from the other not only fail to understand the embeddedness of

gender but, as a consequence, can only hope to address the negative consequences of gender dynamics in very limited ways.

Drawing on others such as Adkins and Skeggs (2004) and Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002), we point to the interrelatedness of structure, agency and practice in the constitution of the academic field. Academia can be viewed as a career field comprising of sets of rules and resources, both formal and informal, which shape it. In other words, structures can comprise of informal rules, beliefs, patterns or 'routines' (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014) that shape society in ways that are not always visible or apparent. They exist at the level of formal rules and organizational procedures, but also, importantly, at the deeper level of the informal, less visible and practical – the gender subtexts (Acker 1990). They are constituted through people's practices and thus are constantly being produced, reproduced and transformed by agents engaged in practice (Acker 2006; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014).

Focusing attention on the ongoing mutual construction of actors and practices in organizations is a useful lens through which to view gender relations in work and organizations, and specifically in academia – emphasizing the virtual, the informal, the deep-rooted nature of gendered structures, which rely on assumptions, legitimizations and gendered identities (Acker, 2006). Using such a lens, constructions of 'merit', that is, the idea that progress through the academic hierarchy is a result of inherent talent and individual achievement, can be brought to the surface and explored.

As Duberley and Cohen (2010) have found, particular forms of career capital in science careers, such as social capital and cultural capital, are not gender-neutral and are experienced very differently by men and women. Research points to the gendered nature of selection processes (van den Brink, Brouns and Waslander, 2006; Moss-Racusin et al, 2012), reviewing processes (Directorate-General for Research, 2004), support systems (Bagilhole and Goode, 2001), management cultures (Devine, Grummell and Lynch 2011), leadership ideologies (Morley 2013) and networking practices (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014) in academia – all of which are central to the ways in which academic careers are structured.

This suggests that efforts to address gender inequality in academia need to acknowledge the deep-rooted, cultural and often invisible nature of gendered structuring processes, which produce gendered outcomes embodied in individuals, and become institutionalized and naturalized as patterns of 'the way things are'. Acker (2006) argues that it is necessary to focus on the often invisible, informal and everyday practices that reproduce inequalities in any attempt to introduce change. Therefore, interventions that are aimed only, for example, at the legislative and policy levels run the risk of not succeeding because they overlook the deep-rooted nature of gendered structures, a weakness that Acker (2006) sees in 'diversity training' policies.

Similarly, it could be argued that compliance-based approaches to equality, coupled with apparent transparency in career criteria at recruitment and promotion have perhaps resulted in both individuals and employers assuming gender is no longer an issue. It has become 'invisible' and thus operates more subtly and powerfully, implying individual responsibility and making the underlying issues much harder to identify and to challenge. Seemingly gender-neutral meritocracy frameworks have the potential to sustain and reproduce normalized and individualized outcomes that disadvantage women far more than men (Knights and Richards, 2003).

Meritocracy has the power to pass the responsibility for unequal outcomes back onto the individual and therefore to stigmatize the unsuccessful as incompetent or incapable - something that these

same individuals are likely to internalize, thus becoming subjects with very low levels of self-worth (Knights and Richards, 2003: 218).

What is required, then, is an approach to equality that engages actively with constraint as well as opportunity and that challenges the gendered nature of the *practices, values and assumptions* that structure academic careers. This means challenging the current normative (male) model of the ideal academic. It also means going beyond interventions that only target the rules and legislation of our institutions and instead recognizing the deep-rooted and cultural nature of the processes that structure academic careers.

Bourdieu's concept of 'doxa' is useful in understanding the deep-rooted gendered assumptions that characterize academia - those aspects of tradition and culture which are so taken-for-granted that they have become naturalized (Bourdieu, 1977). In the academic field, certain beliefs and assumptions are widely taken-for-granted although they may arbitrarily disadvantage women and other minority groups. However, agents do have the ability to critically reflect on the otherwise taken-for-granted rules of the game when there is a lack of fit between objective and subjective structures. This possibility for critical reflection means that social transformation, or at least a re-working of gender relations, is also possible (Adkins, 2004). According to Kabeer (1999: 441):

The passage from 'doxa' to discourse, a more critical consciousness, only becomes possible when competing ways of 'being and doing' become available as material and cultural possibilities, so that 'common sense' propositions of culture begin to lose their 'naturalized' character, revealing the underlying arbitrariness of the given social order.

This has important implications for interventions which attempt to challenge gender inequalities, suggesting that those that 'create the vantage point of alternatives which allows a more transformatory consciousness to come into play' are more likely to lead to empowerment' (Kabeer, 1999: 462).

Acknowledgement of the mutual constitution of structure, agency and practice, therefore, is crucial in understanding gender inequalities in academia. It follows that interventions aimed at undermining inequalities should, informed by this critical gender awareness, address the informal and invisible ways in which cultural fields such as academia are reproduced and transformed by agents, both men and women, engaged in practice (see also Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). A key element in this is the passage from doxa to discourse or a more critical consciousness, which renders the less visible dimensions of inequality more visible. As Acker (2006) argues, change interventions in organizations frequently engender opposition, precisely because they remove the invisibility of inequality regimes, but in doing so, they are more likely to succeed.

Facilitating a critical gender awareness has the potential to drive transformation in a number of ways: by encouraging greater understanding of the practices and relational positioning of actors that lead to unequal outcomes, by developing interventions with this in mind, and also for rethinking diversity management more generally in organizations. This does not mean enabling those who are 'diverse' in some way to assimilate to accepted ways of being but to truly recognize diversity in ways of being and to create a context where those diverse ways of being are equally valued and rewarded directly and indirectly over time.

Methodology

Our research is situated within the action research paradigm. Clearly our research objective was not only to describe and understand gender dynamics in academia but also to facilitate

change (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). Following Coghlan and Brannick (2001) and Doherty and Manfredi (2006) our action research involved identifying the issues, examining literature on best practice, planning interventions, implementing interventions and evaluating outcomes in a series of iterative cycles and in close collaboration with participants of TTGC and wider organizational stakeholders. Such collaboration between researchers and participants is both typical in action research and contributes to changing patterns of thinking and action with the ultimate aim of empowering participants and prompting further change in the organization (see Bryman and Bell, 2003). Thus as action researchers and as female academics we acknowledge that we are part of the field of study. Our participation in this project prompted change for us as researchers in terms of for example, gaining a deeper understanding of gender dynamics, learning vis a vis effective interventions, and generating theoretical insights into transforming gender outcomes. It also prompted change in terms of greater awareness of gender patterns at play in our own careers. We reflect on this process here. The following section outlines the context, design process, and interventions undertaken as part of TTGC, and the data we gathered throughout the project.

The *Through the Glass Ceiling* project

The *Through the Glass Ceiling* project was a positive-action project based at University College Cork (UCC) from 2010 to 2012, which aimed to enable career progression for female academics and researchersⁱⁱ. In line with well-established global trends, and reflective of the Irish national context (see O'Connor, 2010), there was clear evidence of a *glass ceiling effect* in the university (see Figure 1). As Toren and Moore (1998) point out, a glass ceiling in academia would be confirmed if only a small percentage of women, relative to men, attain the highest academic rank of full professor. One of the first activities of the TTGC project was to highlight this glass ceiling effect at the local level.

Figure 1: Women as proportion of academic grades in UCC, 2009ⁱⁱⁱ

| Academic position | Women as % of those holding posts at this grade |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Professor</i> | 12 |
| <i>Associate Professor</i> | 22 |
| <i>Senior Lecturer</i> | 29 |
| <i>College Lecturer</i> | 51 |

The potential of a gender equality agenda rather than a human capital agenda posed a challenge for the *Through the Glass Ceiling* project in relation to professional development and mentoring supports: in what ways could our programme of supports avoid the pitfall of attempting to 'fix the woman' and instead attend to the operation of gender practices and unequal gender outcomes in academic and research careers? To address this challenge, a comprehensive review of national and international best practice in mentoring and professional development programmes (see, for example, de Vries, Webb and Eveline, 2006; Gibson, 2004; Monks and Barker, 1999; eument-net, 2008; Quinlan, 1999; University of Limerick, n.d.; Spronken-Smith/University of Otago, 2006; UWE Mentoring, 2010) in the higher education and research sectors (and also in the commercial and wider public sectors) was undertaken to identify: what had been done and how? What had worked or failed and why? How could these types of supports work for a gender equality rather than human capital agenda?

It became clear to us through our action-research approach that the deeply embedded nature of gender across all social structures required a holistic and long-term approach of which mentoring and professional development supports were an important part. However, it

was also clear that the provision of generic supports by themselves would not be effective; this was not because professional development and mentoring supports were not effective, but rather that they needed to be informed by, and part of, a substantive gender equality agenda instead of being established as ends in themselves or focused on providing the skills to women that they lacked and men just seemed to 'naturally' have.

The action-research approach meant that we reflected on gender equality issues and ideas throughout the development and implementation of the project, and as a result, the project evolved in a very particular way. Conscious of the well-founded critiques of the 'fix-the-women' tendency in similar interventions, and motivated by a desire to tackle gender inequalities and to raise awareness, we developed and delivered programmes that were tailored to female academic and research staff, that sought to raise awareness of, and to challenge some of the assumptions of gender-neutral individualistic meritocracy in academia. As such, the project was underwritten by a gender equality agenda, which informed all aspects of the project's activities, seen particularly in a number of guiding principles – gender-awareness, empowerment, peer support and diversity-awareness. We delivered a Professional Development Programme and a Mentoring Programme. Firstly, participation in the Professional Development programme was managed to maximize impact by designing two separate career-stage programmes – one for women in early career and another for women in mid-to-late career – to reflect the different concerns and issues that may exist for staff at different career stages and to create safe spaces for women to share experiences. Once-off career skills courses were also made available to all female academics and researchers regardless of position/grade or discipline to maximize peer learning and network-building. Secondly, we ensured that all facilitators were experienced in working with academic and research participants and of working particularly with women and were aware of the gendered contexts of particular skills areas. This meant that the professional development training engaged directly with the gendered nature of the norms and expectations of academic careers, not simply with a view to providing women with the skills to 'play the game' but also to open up conversations about the nature of the game itself. For example, sessions on professional networking dealt with the gendered nature of expectations and norms around professional networking among academics. Strategic career planning was a particular focus of the programme, and while work-life balance was considered central to this, family and care responsibilities were included as just one of many possible elements of a non-work life rather than as a core issue, to ensure that the focus remained on career. There was conscious awareness of the need to avoid any reinforcement of the gendered notion that women could (or should) not think about career without foregrounding wider care issues and also to avoid any construction of women as necessarily having family and care responsibilities. In general, the focus was on empowering women to strategically review, assess and plan their careers and professional lives according to their own objectives and circumstances and with an understanding of how gender operates at all levels. The agenda of the project and the importance of confidentiality and mutual respect were introduced in sessions to ensure that participants felt safe and supported to discuss experiences, perspectives and challenges they faced.

The Mentoring Programme was designed to ensure a safe space for women to support other women in a mutually beneficial relationship to promote gender equality within the institution as well as in the work lives of the participants. Drawing on good practice internationally and nationally (de Vries, Webb and Eveline, 2006; eument-net, 2008; Quinlan, 1999; University of Limerick, n.d.; Spronken-Smith/University of Otago, 2006; UWE Mentoring, 2010), a very specific model of mentoring was adopted (one-to-one, female-only, senior mentor with more junior mentee, goal-oriented over 12 months) with formalized structures and policies and ongoing support. Training was provided, which, in the second phase, was provided by the Project Coordinator to contextualize the mentoring even more within the gender equality agenda of the project. The matching process elicited as much background information as possible from participants to ensure that the matches were made around experiences as

well as particular career goals. Peer mentoring circles were introduced to provide mentoring supports to women in more senior grades following an identification of the needs of such women. Again, the mentoring scheme focused on supporting women to identify and achieve their own career goals rather than imposing externally-driven imperatives on them.

Participation in the Professional Development programme was high, in part as a result of a recruitment drive, which recognized the need for targeted information and flexible scheduling among the target group. In all, 151 women in academic and research grades from across all disciplines and all levels in the university participated in one or more elements of the Career Review and Planning Programme. A Specific Skills Programme with once-off sessions focusing on particular skills such as time-management, professional network and leadership for academic women was also developed and 91 women participated in at least one of these. There was also high demand for places in the Mentoring Programme, although places were limited, and in all 40 mentoring matches were made and three peer mentoring circles were established.

The data on which this paper is based are drawn from a process of ongoing evaluation that was an integral part of the project. A wide range of data was collected including the following.

| Data Sources (Through the Glass Ceiling project) |
|---|
| Organizational policy documents and reports relevant to equality issues and staff progression |
| Observation notes of TTGC workshops, professional development and mentor training sessions |
| Focus groups with TTGC project participants as part of project evaluation |
| Evaluation questionnaires by 100 TTGC participants at, or immediately after, many of the courses, and at one year after the end of the project |
| Qualitative feedback by email from at least 20 TTGC participants (sometimes unsolicited and sometimes in response to specific requests for feedback) to the Project Coordinator |
| Video interviews conducted with 10 TTGC participants at the end of the project |
| Notes of meetings, discussions, reactions and emails from organizational stakeholders who were not direct participants in the TTGC project |

Qualitative data was collected from participants in the *Through the Glass Ceiling* project on a regular basis in a number of ways, as detailed above. Data was primarily sought on the experiences and impacts of the project activities for the participants: their experiences of the courses, the perceived impacts of the activities on future career experiences and progression and the actual impact participants felt their involvement had on how they approached their careers and the contexts in which they were working. All invitations to submit feedback or participate in interviews were foregrounded by an explanation of why the information was being collected and how it could be used. Due to the fact that the project was taking place within one institution, it was important that participants always felt comfortable to be honest and forthcoming in their contributions and, for that reason, any quotations used in this discussion only identify the participant by the career-stage or role they were involved in.

Findings

Playing the game more strategically

The feedback from participants in the project's mentoring and professional development activities was overwhelmingly positive. A key benefit identified by many participants was the provision of space, time and tools to strategically review, evaluate and plan their careers.

I feel that I am usually so busy with the everyday 'doing' of academic and clinical life, that I never take time to stop and consider my own career wishes. Indeed, this was the first time in over 25 years that I had done so! (Mid-Late Career participant)

It really just re-enforced (sic) things in me that I had forgotten about and was great to have the forum to discuss with others all aspects on careers and where we're heading (Early Career participant).

The second extract is typical of many participants who spoke about 'forgetting', or not reflecting on their careers. Taking the time and space to do this was the first important step in consciously reflecting on their positions in the academic career field. This is important for two reasons: first is the renewed focus for individual women on their individual career trajectory ('where we're heading'), but secondly and perhaps of more interest – a career track or trajectory is not created or maintained by individuals in isolation; it is co-created between participants in organizations and the particular structural arrangements with which they interact. Careers are accomplished in an academic field. Moving from an unconscious acceptance of their positions in the field to conscious reflection on this supported the ability to think and act more strategically in relation to their own careers – to play the academic game more strategically, and to encourage women to acknowledge and consider their roles as agents (albeit constrained) in developing their career trajectories:

My thought process of what impact these career choices will have on my life has definitely improved, highlighting the options I have in a positive light (Early Career participant).

While it could be argued that this enabled women to adapt to, rather than to challenge, the norms of a patriarchal system, this occurred within the context of a recognition of the need for female progression within the system alongside, and as an important part of, efforts to transform it. Importantly, however, for many participants, the space for reflection on their own careers also involved a greater awareness of the gendered nature of the institutional and socio-cultural context in which they were working:

... the project certainly has made us think and has named the parts and put it out there that, if you like, there can be inequality and there are gender issues and it's just part of the sociocultural construct of things that these must now be foregrounded and named so I find it in that sense a very powerful movement (Mentor and Mid-Late Career participant).

It is the invisible and that's why I think the glass ceiling, I mean the very title gets that notion across. Y'know what will disempower women is invisibility and tacitness. When we make things explicit and name them, then we are on the right track already (Mentor).

Naming the parts

To speak of 'naming the parts' and 'the invisible' again suggests a move from doxa to discourse, and the importance for participants to develop a language to reflect on, and to articulate, the gendered nature of their experiences to date. It may seem surprising that participants commented on the ways in which their awareness was raised in relation to the gendered nature of their work contexts. However, in the wider context of the gender-neutral

language of meritocracy that characterizes academia, perhaps this is understandable. The discourses of equal opportunities, transparency and individualization render gendered processes invisible and unspoken. Many of the participants talked about the powerful effects of naming this.

This was linked to the sharing of experiences that happened as part of the project, which highlighted the collective nature of challenges faced by female academics and researchers:

...it was very reassuring to have the opportunity to hear from professional colleagues in a safe confidential place about the commonalities of challenges that are faced in academic life by females. (Early Career participant)

Participation in Career Development Workshop for Senior Academics [sic] instilled in me an awareness that there are numerous female academics in other Colleges/Departments who are experiencing some of the same issues/obstacles as I and my female colleague in my Department have experienced/are experiencing. Listening to their experiences, and in some cases solutions to problems, was very helpful and encouraging. (Mid-Late Career participant)

Through sharing and reflecting, the structural and socio-cultural nature of issues previously viewed as being 'individual' in nature became apparent. Interestingly, as alluded to by the second quote above it could also help to generate potential solutions to obstacles faced.

In the women-only programme we were completely sharing, truly uncovering some type of issue, issues that were unconscious maybe and we were sharing them so totally that we actually realised them in that sense, so this type of women-only aspect was extremely important (Early Career participant).

The female-only nature of the spaces meant that the gendered nature of shared experiences became apparent.

... [the workshops] were thoroughly enjoyable and provided an opportunity for meeting and networking with women across the university sector whom I would not normally meet. Being in all-female workshops allowed for a form of gendered, critical reflection which I found very useful and very affirming (Mid-late Career participant).

I wasn't aware at all of this before starting. I was feeling this uneasiness in the sense that I wasn't fitting the mould very properly, y'know, it's this kind of feeling that I felt but I felt that it was more coming from me as a person and I realised that many women all around me were feeling exactly the same feeling whether they were completely different types of personalities so then I realised it wasn't a problem of me as a person but as a woman in that sense (Early Career participant).

The previously taken-for-granted began to be questioned through the process of participation in the project. Similarly, Bailyn (2003), examining the important gender equality intervention in Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the 1990s, found that it was only when women got together that individual women's stories became visible as a

systematic pattern. It is interesting that the language used by our participants to describe their experiences, that is, moving from “unconscious” ness of gendered practices to these being made “visible”, “an eye-opener” echoes the conceptual account of moving from doxa to discourse in order to achieve transformation.

Making connections

The nature of the *Through the Glass Ceiling* project meant that a safe space was created which facilitated sharing, and this was further enhanced by the gender-aware approach to professional and career-development that underpinned the content of the programmes themselves. An added dimension was that the project facilitated the development of connections between women who were in very different positions and different parts of the university.

To my mind a structured mentoring scheme such as this is a key support for ensuring gender equality within a university. The strength of the scheme was the structure, support and encouragement it gave to women at different career stages and in different sectors of the university to connect with each other (Mentee).

I made some new contacts that I would not have otherwise and now am now developing relationships positive to my career and work with these women. I also had access to more senior women in the University in an informal manner that was most valuable for building future relationships (Mid-late Career participant).

They connected, therefore, as women academics and researchers, across disciplinary and hierarchical divisions, in ways which highlighted their common challenges, and hence brought attention to the structural and systemic nature of their shared issues. In addition they began to form new networks of friendship and alliance, sometimes connecting as allies at institutional fora where they might otherwise be in marginal positions.

Moreover, we found that the project also contributed in some small way to making visible alternatives to the traditional gendered cultures of academia. One of the activities of the project was to encourage dialogue between more and less senior women through both the career development and mentoring schemes. This meant that female role-models became more visible:

... if you don't see women in senior roles, or you're not engaging with them, there might be a sense that actually it isn't for you or whatever so I think actually having close contact with people in, women in senior roles who have kinda managed to deal with the same kind of obstacles that you're struggling with gives you a sense of confidence in terms of being able to get there yourself (Mentor).

This quote highlights the value of role-models in revealing the ways in which other women struggle with obstacles and may follow non-traditional yet highly successful career paths. It suggests that in the everyday doing of academic life such ways of being and becoming successful academics and researchers are not visible. The traditional model of the successful academic or professor who has pursued a conventional career path is the dominant one (for example, Bailyn 2003), supported by discourses of individualism, to the extent that alternative models are discursively marginalized. The importance of role models of visible women who have succeeded in disciplinary areas and grades not traditionally associated with women, is recognized as important at different stages throughout the career

path in nurturing a sense of possibility about career options (ETAN, 2000; Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000).

Similarly, the project created opportunities for women in mid-to-late career and in leadership roles to gain a greater understanding of the experiences and perspectives of their junior colleagues in a kind of 'reverse mentoring' relationship that contributed to improved institutional knowledge about the particular gendered experiences of early-career female academics and researchers (see also de Vries, Webb and Eveline, 2006).

...working with my mentee gave me an insight into the kinds of challenges faced by some women in the university. I'm not saying I can solve the challenges but being aware of how these challenges present and how difficult they are to overcome is a very good first step. I really think mentors, mentees and the university as an institution will benefit from this initiative (Mentor/Mid-Late Career participant).

I know I was the mentor and that she was the mentee but I also thought that I learned so much from it, I saw it as almost a peer process in some ways and maybe actually that's a learning thing that actually even as a Head of School or in a position of seniority that you actually have to recognise that you can learn things from other people or that in the process of guiding other people you can learn things yourself (Mentor/Mid-Late Career participant).

Other research has highlighted the benefits of academic mentoring for mentors as well as mentees. De Vries (2011) points to the potential for mentors, who are often in positions of some influence within organizations, to become more gender-aware through their involvement in mentoring. For example, de Vries, Webb and Eveline (2006) observed that mentors, particularly men, found that the insights they gained from it in understanding gender issues and the experiences and positions of more junior colleagues were very valuable. These impacted on not just their individual attitudes but created a "ripple-on effect to their workplaces, and more broadly to the institution [...] gaining insights and information as to what still needs to be addressed for women, as a result of their mentoring" (de Vries, Webb and Eveline, 2006: 585). Therefore, initiatives such as mentoring schemes for female academics and researchers can have impacts that reach beyond the individual careers of the mentees and can begin to change the views and understandings of actors throughout an institution. Similarly, Morley (2013: 125) acknowledges the potential of mentoring 'as a form of redistribution of feminist knowledge and social capital'. She asks whether 'mentoring can be subverted and orientated to a feminist morphology of the university of the future?'. We echo Morley's (2013) call to rescue mentoring from hegemonic and patriarchal languages of individual achievement and performance, and to acknowledge its potential to subvert. As the project progressed, this *potential* for transformation became more apparent and we reflected on the possibilities of ripples throughout the institution, as the project participants brought their increased confidence, awareness and connectedness to their work in the institution. Since TTGC ended we have seen a momentum for further transformation through an engagement with GENOVATE^{IV} and most recently a commitment by the institution to engage with the Athena SWAN^V awards process.

Discussion

The *Through the Glass Ceiling* project was a positive-action initiative for career progression among female academics and researchers. The project evolved in the context of a recognition of the validity of common critiques of similar initiatives, which have been

criticized either for failing to address the structural context for gender inequality in academia or for failing to achieve tangible change. Through its action-research approach, *Through the Glass Ceiling* developed an agenda that recognized the deep-rooted nature of gender inequalities in academia and the role of values, beliefs, practices and human agency in reproducing and transforming gendered structures. The professional development and mentoring programmes were developed with the principles of gender-awareness, empowerment, peer support and diversity-awareness at their heart.

Ongoing project evaluation and research with participants revealed that the project had a number of positive outcomes. For many of the women, the project led them to strategically review, evaluate and plan their careers and to develop new skills, in ways that valued their own skill-sets and achievements, and that acknowledged the gendered nature of the career structures they were negotiating. It fostered awareness not just of the existing 'rules of the game' of career progression, and of how to improve their chances of succeeding, but more critically an awareness that the game and its rules were inscribed with gendered assumptions and could be questioned and critiqued. Indeed, in many ways participation in the project highlighted that the rules could be 'other' than what they currently are, and that alternatives to traditional career paths and masculinized ways of 'being an academic' were possible. The project generated potential for structural/cultural change through its role in simultaneously supporting women to progress (to positions of greater influence) within the system, while also fostering critical awareness among them of the gendered nature of the system.

A key outcome for many was a process of gender awareness-raising as the project activities brought to light the gendered nature of processes and patterns previously assumed to be neutral. 'Common-sense' assumptions about the gender order began to be challenged. An important dimension to this was the facilitation of connections between women in different disciplines and positions in the university and the beginning of informal processes of networking and alliance-building that would last beyond the end of the project. The project had the potential therefore to contribute to the empowerment of female academics and researchers in relation to their own careers and to the institutional structures in which they worked.

This can be understood in the context of the agenda that shaped the project and the conceptualization of the relationship between individual and structural-cultural issues that underpinned it. The project was influenced by our understandings of how individuals embody and (re)produce the gendered and gendering social structures and values that constitute academia. We argue that the complex inherent entanglement of the individual with the structural has to be recognized in a way that avoids their conceptual separation. Crucially, one of the most significant outcomes of that entanglement is the latency of gender within naturalized 'gender-neutral' norms, values, practices and systems, which can only be addressed through critical gender awareness to move beyond the individual biography and to recognize the gendered institutionalized patterns of career outcomes.

Interventions that are shaped by a gender equality agenda need to recognize this complex entanglement at the root of how gender operates. The *Through the Glass Ceiling* project attempted to intervene at different levels in this relationship. Firstly it supported *individual women as actors in a gendered institution*, so helping women to better navigate it. Secondly, it raised *critical awareness of the operation of gender* in women's engagements with institutional and sectoral norms, practices and outcomes (or structures). This awareness impacted not just on the women themselves but also had the potential to have ripple effects throughout the wider university. Consequently, these types of interventions can also encounter resistance within institutions; as argued by Bagilhole (2002), this can range from confusion and cynicism to overt resistance.

More broadly, another ripple effect we would like to see is a critical evaluation of the metaphors we use to frame our discussions of women and careers; glass ceilings, leaky pipelines, hurdles and so on. Such metaphors assume an essentialist view of the individual progressing in their careers until they hit a ceiling, or fall at a hurdle. Yet through their engagement in day to day gendered practices it is not only careers but also gendered selves that are being constructed and also indeed the 'structural contours of organizational life' (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014, p462). The hurdles or pipeline metaphor ignores the ongoing differential construction of the runners' genders before, during and after the race is run. Questioning these metaphors also gives us opportunities to reflect on discourses of 'choice' (most often represented as the choices women make to prioritise family over work as an explanation for their lack of progression, that is, they do not 'lean in'). The actors and the field (of academia) are being continually co-created; therefore these choices are not a-contextual but rather made in the context of experience of day to day practices. Such choices are therefore not individual (in a rationalist Cartesian sense) but constructed in the interplay between individuals and structures.

Through the Glass Ceiling did have its limitations. It did not involve working directly with the most senior managers or with male colleagues in the organization and did not attempt to directly intervene at the level of formal policies and procedures. It was also temporally bounded, with the development activities coming to an end at the end of the two-year period of funding. On its own, it was certainly not going to overcome deep-rooted gendered inequalities. However, we argue that dynamics of awareness-raising, networking and of gender-aware strategic career planning together have the potential to contribute to change in small but cumulative ways across the institution. If TTGC represents a very good first step in furthering gender equality, then what would constitute a useful next step? In common with Doherty and Manfredi (2006) we attempted to bring 'action back into the mainstream'. Our new project, GENOVATE, builds on this approach, working with our European partners, to attempt to transform organizational cultures through bottom-up and top-down stakeholder engagement.

Conclusion

This paper presents an example of an initiative that aimed to address gender inequality in career progression among female academics and researchers in one academic institution. The *Through the Glass Ceiling* project was a positive-action initiative that provided professional development training and mentoring to the target group in a way that was underpinned by a gender equality agenda and by the principles of gender-awareness, empowerment, peer support and diversity-awareness. The project developed with an understanding of the entanglement of individual agency, biographies and practices with gendered structures in the academic context. In this paper, we highlight participants' changing perceptions of their own career strategies and experiences when involved in interventions that are soaked in an awareness of the (re)production of gendered selves, practices and structures. We highlight the importance of recognizing (i) the mutual constitution of agent and structure in a given domain of practice (here academia) and (ii) the invisible and taken for granted nature of many inequalities. This stance was useful to initially inform our understanding of the production and reproduction of gender relations in the university but also to help us develop interventions in *Through the Glass Ceiling* that brought to the surface the taken-for-granted gendered assumptions about issues like career, merit and contribution in a manner conducive to transformation. The creation of a space for critical reflection as well as the facilitation of the development of networks and cross-disciplinary connections had the potential to contribute in small ways to institutional change as alternative ways of doing academia gained currency. We do not claim, however, that such initiatives on their own can transform gendered academic structures. Commitment to change at every level is needed to pursue the agenda of gender equality. We propose that an

understanding of the mutually constitutive nature of structure and agency in the reproduction of gender inequalities is crucial to success in this endeavour.

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ⁱ The National Women's Strategy 2007-2016 is a publication of the Irish Government is a strategy "for the advancement of women in Irish society for the period 2007-2016." (p. i) <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/NWS2007-2016en.pdf/Files/NWS2007-2016en.pdf>

ⁱⁱ This project was funded under the Irish government's Equality for Women Measure 2010-2013, with funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) through the Human Capital Investment Operational Programme 2007-2013 and the Department of Justice and Equality. It was hosted by the Institute for Social Sciences in the 21st Century at University College Cork and supported by the UCC Equality Committee.

ⁱⁱⁱ The UCC Equality Committee made a presentation on the UCC Equality Strategy 2008-2012 to the university's Governing Body in February 2009. At the time, the figures presented showed that women represented 9 of the 76 staff at Professor grade, 11 of the 50 staff at Associate Professor grade, 52 of the 179 staff at Senior Lecturer grade and 252 of the 502 staff at College Lecturer grade.

These figures are represented in descending order of seniority with Professor being the highest grade and College Lecturer being the entry grade for academic staff.

^{iv} GENOVATE: Transforming Organisational Culture for Gender Equality in Research and Innovation, funded by EU 7th Framework Programme 2013-2016; University of Bradford (Lead Partner), University College Cork, Lulea University of Technology, Trnava University, Ankara University, Università degli Studi di Napoli, Universidad Complutense de Madrid; www.genovate.eu

^v The UK-based Equality Challenge Unit's Athena SWAN Charter has been developed to encourage and recognise commitment to combating the underrepresentation and advancing the careers of women in STEMM research and academia. It has recently been extended to Ireland on a pilot basis.