Gender Discrimination in Academia and the Workplace

By Aine Treanor (recent MA alumnus of NUI Galway)

“I have always believed that contemporary gender discrimination within universities is part reality and part perception, (...) but I now understand that reality is by far the greater part of the balance.”

– Charles Vest, former President of MIT.

Gender discrimination in modern-day society is rooted in a long history of women being perceived as secondary and inferior to their male counterparts. Although women have secured some progress in this area, discrimination based on gender is still apparent throughout society and its public and private institutions; preventing women from achieving their full potential in the public sphere. The facts and figures outlined below deal specifically with this point, highlighting the many manifestations of bias and gender discrimination that exist in academia and the workplace.

More work, less credit

Both men and women give more credence to something when it is said/carried out by a man than by a woman;

‘A study carried out in Sweden found that peer reviewers on post-doctoral fellowship applications repeatedly over-estimated male achievements and/or under-estimated female performances when the gender of the applicant was known.’

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Similarly, many US studies have focused on the lack of female representation in Science and have found that women are often stifled by ‘a substantial degree of bias against them’.

‘One study found that women applying for a research grant needed to be 2.5 times more productive than men in order to be considered equally competent’.

In relation to NUI Galway’s Senior Lecturer Promotion Scheme, a study by Liz Doherty and Aoife Cooke on the academic career advancement at NUI Galway found that the three promotion criteria (research, teaching and contributions, respectively) were not seen by a majority of the respondents as being given equal importance. It was felt that research was given more credence, while teaching was considered less important. Both male and female respondents felt that men fared better for their research experience while women had considerably more teaching experience and were therefore disadvantaged by the process.

The Gender pay gap
An obvious manifestation of gender discrimination in the workplace is the gender pay gap that undermines women’s work in the public and private sector. A study by the NWCI and SIPTU has found that:

‘For the bottom 10% of earners, the Gender Pay Gap in Ireland is 4% but this rises to 24.6% for the top 10% of income earners, suggesting the continued presence of a glass ceiling and indirect discrimination.’

Discrimination based on biology
A study based in the UK found that for every year a mother is absent from work, her future earnings will be reduced by 5%. Another UK based study found that 30,000 women each year are sacked simply for being pregnant and each year on average 440,000 women lose out on pay or promotion as a result of pregnancy.

The Gendered Perceptions of Caring Responsibilities
In light of the above point, the argument that women miss out on employment opportunities purely because of their caring responsibilities at home is often used as a way of excusing gender discrimination. A Spanish study on women in Science found that

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5 National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWCI) and Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU)
6 NWCI website, 2015
women with children often experience discrimination merely for being mothers and not because their job performance is actually different.

‘When comparing men and women with the same personal and professional characteristics, the same academic productivity, and both with children, we see that having children affects women much more negatively: a man with children is 4 times more likely to be promoted to Full Professor than a woman with children.’

Furthermore, in a survey of some NUI Galway faculty members (321 male, 189 female); 21% of women, and 11% of men were single, while 47% of women and 29% of men had no children.

‘This background information shows that women’s under-representation at senior levels at NUI Galway cannot be explained by their burden of caring responsibilities’.

‘The Boys Club’
Although formal discrimination in the workplace has been largely addressed in anti-discrimination legislation, informal discrimination in the form of ‘the boys club mentality’ is still very apparent in many male-dominated workplaces.

A UK based study on Gender and Prestige in Academic Work used NUI Galway as a case study. One male respondent of the survey highlighted the below phenomenon on campus:

‘I must go on the record and state explicitly that as a man I have benefited enormously from being included in informal networks which are dominated by other men […] too much happens in this university based on the 11 o’clock coffee break, the gathering of senior male colleagues who use bad language, gossip, engage in character assassination – homosocial bonding, in other words.’

Moving Forward

Despite these barriers that face women and prevent them from breaking the ‘glass ceiling’ within Academia, recent studies have found the benefits of increasing gender diversity at the ‘decision-making level’. A McKinsey study found that corporations with gender diversity at senior levels outperform those that don’t, in financial returns and organisations health. While a study from Harvard Business School proposed that women leaders ‘act more on behalf of the public good’ but admitted that more research into this area was

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needed. These findings indicate the importance not only of having women in senior positions but also the value of having men and women’s input, collectively.

Although gender discrimination is not formally tolerated as may have been the case up until thirty or forty years ago, women in employment and female faculty members in Academia have a fundamentally different experience throughout their careers than their male colleagues. If gender equality is to be achieved in this context then the formal and informal structures and practices that prevent women from reaching their full potential must be challenged. For gender equality to be realised in Academia, the workplace and throughout society, meaningful change must be led from the top tiers of our institutions, as well as Government.