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Gender equality mainstreaming and the Australian academy: paradoxical effects?

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Abstract
Australian Universities consistently rank highly on lists that celebrate the most gender equal higher education institutions in the world. Despite participation in institutional frameworks for gender equity accreditation, what often lies beneath the outward display of gender equality is a lived experience of inequality. Whilst there is relative gender equality amongst academics employed at universities overall, men continue to dominate appointments at the professorial or senior executive levels. At the same time, gender asymmetries make women's access to the opportunities and resources that are highly valued by the sector difficult. Women who experience intersections with care, mothering, race, sexual identity, class, and ability face additional obstacles. In this paper, three women in Australian academia attempt to disrupt the dominant masculine ideology and value system by sharing our lived experience of gender (in)equality in the academy.

1 Introduction

For the past 3 decades, Australian universities have been actively committed to gender equality through legislation [4], regulatory frameworks [43], National strategic plans [45], and institutional frameworks [38]. Over this time, we have seen gradual but steady progress to women's representation in the academy, yet much works remains to promote and improve gender equality within Australian Universities. In this paper, our objective is to show that the mainstreaming of a gender equality discourse may obscure some of the gender asymmetries that are deeply entrenched in the everyday culture and ideology of the academy. These asymmetries maintain women's underrepresentation in senior academic positions and in stable and ongoing employment, and see us at risk of sexism, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment. We draw on our own lived experiences in the academy that spans across decades, institutions, and disciplines, arguing that visibilising women's experiential knowledge must be a critical part of a mainstream gender equality discourse.

2 Gender equality discourses

Australian Universities consistently rank in the top 10 globally for gender equality. Many hold citations as Employers of Choice for Gender Equality, invest in gender equity and diversity initiatives, promote gender pay equity, and hold Athena SWAN Accreditation as evidence of a commitment to the Science in Australia Gender Equality (SAGE) initiative [29, 50]. Manifestly, Australian Universities are at the forefront of gender progress, and there is little doubt

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that a Gender Equality discourse has become mainstream [25, 33]. One might assume that we are well on our way to smashing the 'glass ceiling' [42] by breaking the barriers faced when attempting to secure senior management positions [49], pushing through the 'leaky pipeline [35] so that we no longer see the progressive loss of competent academic women [26, 51], and breaking down the 'maternal wall' [48] so that academic mothers are not subject to the insidious gendered bias initiated upon maternity [22]. Perhaps too, the interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities, known as 'inequality regimes' [1] are eroding, and this will make the 'chilly climate' in which male styles and cliques dominate [12] warmer for the purported increased numbers of women appointed to senior academic leadership roles. However, gender progressive citations, external accreditation frameworks and policy interventions have done little to meaningfully address gender discrimination in the academy [33, 37]. Instead, the mainstreaming of gender equality initiatives can obscure the deeply problematic gendered discourses and norms that lurk beneath equity value statements and allied policy commitments [7].

3 The current conditions

Current research and Australian statistics on gender equality in academia reveal a radical disconnect between the mainstreaming of a gender equality discourse and women's lived experiences of gender equality. Australian university leadership is dominated by men, with senior positions nearly three times more likely to be held by a man than a woman. Indeed, the most recent Inter-Institutional Gender Equity Report compiled and published by Universities Australia [47] shows relative gender equality among the overall academic workforce (53% male, 47% female) but a gross gender disparity in appointments to senior academic positions, with 86% more men than women appointed at professorial levels and two thirds of Australian public university chancellors and vice chancellors are male [16]. Not surprisingly, the first Inter-Institutional Gender Equity Report in 2011 [46] shows an even more striking inequity, with only 30.6% of women in the sector employed at Level D (Associate Professor), 22.4% at Level E (Professor), and 22.8% at Level E and above (Senior Executive). Over the decade, we have seen an increase in women's representation at these levels with the 2019 Report showing that 40.7% of women were employed at Level D, 30.1% at Level E, and 30.3% at Level E and above. Despite these increases, the gender disparity in seniority remains stark.

Women's absence from the upper echelons of university hierarchies has nuanced consequences for the few women who are appointed. These women can be cast into the spotlight; their appointments celebrated as living proof that inequities are dissolving. Yet these progressive narratives are disrupted by realities where academic workload policies, interpersonal networks, and institutional cultural ideologies are all shaped by the dominant discourse of masculinity [2]. The masculine 'ideal' unencumbered worker [20] and a 'lad culture' where problematic and harmful behaviours are routinely justified or excused as 'just a bit of fun' have become emblematic of neo-liberal university culture [36]. These practices reproduce an unequal playing field where men's advancement is favoured. The valorisation of masculine leadership styles is legitimised, taken-for-granted and woven into the very fabric of Australian universities.

Women's experience of gender asymmetry extends to competitive research funding with applications from men far outweighing those from women in the Australian Research Council (ARC) funding schemes [5], and women are underrepresented on the ARC and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) assessment panels [6]. Over time this disparity has had a powerful cumulative effect. Globally, as well as in Australia, a neoliberalist agenda in the academy means that Universities strive for prestige, largely through research excellence and competitive funding, whilst concurrently delivering a cost-effective education to students with reduced public funding [23, 44]. Unequal gender participation in competitive research funding is a key contributor to the existing heteronormative gendered division of labour in the academy, where men are allocated time for research production while women are more likely to be allocated time for tasks that are assigned a lesser value such as teaching, administration, and pastoral care. This begets a vicious gendered cycle that invariably impacts women's publication rates, opportunities for recognition, quantifiable outputs, and limits our academic career trajectories [15]. As Ana Aleman aptly suggests, the dominant masculinised discourses permeating the academy are responsible for the prevailing value system that limits women to their discursive 'fit' while simultaneously profiting from our discursive gender roles [2].

Women's experience also sees us as twice as likely as men to experience sexual harassment in the academy [31]. Further, women dominate the academic precariat as 'non-citizens'—excluded from policy and decision-making power [32] with the unstable and increasingly precarious employment of casual, sessional, and fixed-term contracts decreasing the opportunity of a tenured academic career. For academic women who are mothers, the experience of gender inequality

is especially profound [3, 30, 39]. Disrupted career progression, reports of daily discrimination, hostility, prejudice and exclusion are normalized and embedded within the academic landscape [18]. Lynch [27] describes academia as a 'carefree zone' with the dual role of mothering and an academic career at odds with the idealised unbroken career and unabridged commitment to work that university promotion tracks inherently demand. For women living at the intersections of social identities [11], the Australian academy typically remains silent on intersectional disadvantage on the basis of race, class, sexual identity(ies), and/or ability [40, 41]. It is clear that the discourse of Gender Equality has a long way to go to effect equitable change to the institutional culture and the micro-practices of inequality that operate within it.

4 Lived experiences of the Australian Academy

In the writing of this short piece, each of us invariably reflected on and shared our own experiences of gender inequality in the academy, enacting a relational auto-ethnography [17] by way of anecdotes [52]. This method stems from what Ellis and Rawicki [17] refers to as 'collaborative witnessing', which 'extends an autoethnographic perspective in its emphasis on writing for and with the other, listening and working together with care and compassion, and bearing witness to others as well as to oneself'. Here, we aim to bring to the surface the relevance and relationship of our personal subjectivities to the subject matter through our own anecdotes or biographical sketches. Our experiences are drawn from our employment across multiple Australian academic institutional organisations, and from acrossdisciplinary boundaries including the social sciences, business, and hospitality, marketing and sport. Reflections on our individual and collective experiences were sobering and evoked in us anger at being the subject of sexism, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and a series of gendered humiliations. Our lived experiences, or what Yoo [52] refers to as our 'authentic insider accounts' shed light on the broader issue of gender inequality in the academy, and serve to highlight the continued salience of the feminist point that 'the personal is political', where our personal experiences are shaped by our political situation and gender inequality. Indeed, any serious mainstream discourse on gender equality in the academy must be located in women's experientially based knowledges. As Budgeon [13], (p. 259) rightly argues, "In the post-truth era, feminism must continue to defend the importance of what women name as their experience and theorise what this tells us about the gendered structure of everyday life". In the section that follows we provide anecdotes that capture some of the everyday gender inequities we have each experienced as deeply embedded and woven into the everyday practices of academic life; pointing to what Lipton [25] has argued is the 'trauma' of the gender 'crisis' in the academy.

5 Emilee—gender matters

When I began my academic career almost 20 years ago, I was 24 years-old and straight out of completing a PhD on gender in the discipline of Sociology. I knew that gender mattered. During the first 10 years of my academic career I got used to gendered comments about my appearance, with quips such as, "So, you're not just a pretty face?" and "But….. you don't look like an academic", a regular feature of my everyday work-life.

As the years went on gender continued to matter. I became subject to some sexual harassments, involving much older and more senior male academics imposing on me unwanted flattery, advances, and gifts. It was all part of the ordinary.

Still more time went on and I became pregnant with my first child. Before I had the chance to announce my pregnancy in the academy I was cautioned by a female superior; "Please don't tell me you're pregnant!" My impending maternity leave was positioned as a 'holiday', or a 'break' by senior colleagues. Following my second pregnancy with twins I needed to care for 3 children aged 2 years and under. This invoked a significant period of leave; a 'career interruption' or 'career disruption' as time with children is called in the academy.

My return to work after each period of maternity leave taught me that in one way or another my gender will always matter. I was punished in academia for my maternity leave. I was subject to daily micro-aggressions from female colleagues urging me to make up for my absence and prove that I was still a worthy research collaborator. My part-time work was expected to be full-time, my research opportunities had to be singularly rebuilt from scratch, and gender equitable workplace practices continue to be an ongoing battle—but one worth fighting for.

6 Michelle—visibilising mothering

While my pregnant body drew visibility and remarks, mothering in one way or another has and continues to shape my academic career. Having secured a full-time academic appointment while finishing my PhD, I consciously deferred family plans. Despite not having children, assumptions were made by academic colleagues especially after my marriage. I was frequently asked about when I would be starting a family. These probing and uninvited questions were set against my challenged fertility and IVF losses. More senior male colleagues remarked "your husband will need you at home" and others "once you have a family you will not be so free and easy", even before having children, I saw development opportunities evaporate.

Supervisors were supportive in sentiment but few practical supports were provided when I returned from maternity leave. Despite initiatives touting family friendly policies, that was not my experience. Requests for teaching hours that would enable childcare drop off and pick up remain unmet. While teaching and still breastfeeding I had to express in the toilets, no spaces were made available and I dared not ask for further inconvenience. The challenges were confounded with my second pregnancy. In the lunchroom I overheard a colleague remark to my supervisor "how could she not know she was pregnant?" Upon hearing that gripe, the pit firmly lodged in my stomach was made worse. While I had not deliberately concealed my pregnancy, I wished I could, and the climate became chiller. Fearing my supervisors perceived an unwillingness or lack of desire to progress my academic career I found myself making statements that "two children was enough" and "my family was complete". I removed pictures of my children and their artwork from my desk space. I sought for a while to erase my mothering, but no more.

7 Sarah—gender surveillance and explanation

The path for women in academia is strewn with surveillance, judgement, and constant explanation of choices expected at both the institutional and personal level. For me this began during my intake interview to my PhD program when it was noted I was not wearing a wedding ring. I was told by a male Professor pregnancy and marriage are not advisable. As time went on, my student evaluation reports were not cleaned of unwelcome comments about my physical appearance. I was hired in a research assistant position with the qualifier that "men will talk to Sarah". At academic conferences I was advised of the hotel rooms of more senior colleagues and told that young women could secure permanent jobs by sleeping with these older men.

Becoming a mother added an extra layer of gymnastics to my day as I tried to work as though I had no children and mother like I had no job. I was judged by male colleagues for putting my children into childcare, because they "should" be with their mother. I was punished upon my return to work when a male colleague was openly hostile, refused to provide me with access to systems I needed, and I was repeatedly told to compensate for his "terrible admin skills".

I was recently promoted and the section of my application that I spent the most time re-writing was explaining the effects of my "career disruptions" (i.e., children). I spent hours striving for the right balance between clarity about its impact, without coming across as a "whinger". Does anyone really believe that having children does not negatively impact a mother's career? All the evidence is to the contrary, and yet the burden lies with us to explain it. However, motherhood has been a rewarding experience professionally by opening up a new trajectory of research and in the fire of inequity forging supportive and stimulating relationships.

8 Gender equality policy and practice: optimism and reimagining

In 2017, Australian academic Briony Lipton, published a paper in Higher Education Research and Development [25] in which she argued that the mainstreaming of gender equity in Australian universities has the paradoxical effect of rendering gender inequality invisible. Our intellectual engagement in the field of gender studies and our lived experiences in the academy compels us to agree. Outward badges celebrating a university as an "employer of choice for women" amount to a metaphorical hand washing of the work required to create gender equity within. In Australian Universities we see the kind of 'cruel optimism' described by Lauren Berlant [9] play out at the ideological and systemic level, and this ought to be disrupted. We live with this cruel optimism by attaching ourselves to the promise of gender progression and inherent gender equity initiatives, even if they make ongoing inequity invisible by making the problems seem "solved". Gender equality measures are at risk of being little more than that by which they are named: calculative rationalities expressed as representation targets, percentages, and numbers of women that do little to disrupt masculinised norms.

So, what are women of the academy to do? The responsibilities of change should not rest singularly on the shoulders of women, but we can take the lead. A first step is to take seriously Berlant's idea of a crisis lived within ordinariness [8] whereby talking about our shared 'traumas' could be a path to transform that which we have come to accept as "every-day occurrences" in the academy. That is, we must engage in revealing rather than concealing the gendered practices of inequality we experience. By naming and sharing the gendered power relations that work to undermine women in the academy, their effects can be challenged, and their taken for granted status can be undermined. This is hard work, that requires the efforts of many. It is uncomfortable work. It is the kind of emotional work that women already bear the brunt of. We acknowledge we are not the first to expose our experiences, however, we hope that we can contribute to a growing chorus of indignant voices that will be too strong to be overcome. By doing this work we align with feminist efforts to prioritise and theorise women's experientially based knowledge. We may then be in a position to affect a more equitable reimagining of the academic landscape with positive individual and institutional effects. At the same time, there are clear and actionable changes that can be implemented to address the gender asymmetries in the academy. This means 'fixing the system not the women' [24] ensuring that institutional actions address the gender biases that pervade the academic hierarchy, including merit, tenure, and promotion [28], and actively challenging the prevailing academic culture that relies on a model of a lack of caring responsibilities [14]. We must also increase the visibility of women as role models in the academy [10], take everyday action against gendered microaggressions [19] by positioning ourselves as agents of change [34], and carve out acts of solidarity [21] to take direct action against gender-neutral and seemingly depoliticised institutional agendas.

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Data availability We do not analyse or generate any datasets, because our work proceeds within a theoretical approach.

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