

INTRODUCTION

I offer these comments from my perspective as a medieval historian of gender and sexuality, who is reaching the tail end of the early career stage. I was appointed last year to a permanent lectureship at Cardiff University, but over the past five years, I have held several post-doctoral fellowships and temporary research posts, and have taught both at Russell Group and post-1992 universities, so I feel that I speak from a wide range of experience here.

Despite the efforts of many institutions to develop and improve gender policies, a number of systemic problems remain within academia and the History profession, that centre around the representation and advancement of female academics at various stages of their careers. The influence of gender on academic progression ranges from hiring to promotions, and from workload issues to research activity. Considered separately, these practices can appear subtle and minor, but experienced cumulatively they have far-reaching consequences for men and women in the profession. A recent survey of the gender ratio of academics in the UK showed that while fifty percent are female, only twenty percent are professors, an imbalance that is also reflected in a sizeable pay gap between male and female professors. A similar gender breakdown is evident at the level of senior management, not only in History but elsewhere in academia. A number of initiatives have been launched in recent years to improve the position of women in the profession. The British Council, for instance, launched its ‘Manifesto for Change’ only last year, which hopes to make the number of women in senior academic positions a marker for determining a university’s global ranking. The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities produced a similar gender manifesto in June this year, outlining best practices for universities as employers and colleagues as employees. The relationship between women, gender, and academia changes over the course of the academic life-cycle, with different types of discrimination becoming more prevalent at certain stages. As the report notes, a number of female historians experience a period in

which their career slows in its early to mid-years, which makes understanding gender in the early career stage crucial, not only for supporting younger colleagues, but also for the progression of female academics in general. The report also highlights a number of key areas for gender discrimination - such as recruitment, workload, promotion, and maternity leave - that have particular implications at the early career stage. Gender bias in these areas is shown to constrain career development in a cumulative way, while also creating patterns that can become entrenched. In an increasingly competitive job market, these barriers also intersect with a long hours work culture that is often ingrained at the level of the profession. Early career policies are in place at some institutions, in order to ensure that new lecturers are given time to prepare courses and publish, but these are often nominal, and can easily fall into abeyance under the pressure of teaching and administration.

Gender bias in the workplace

In the next few minutes, I want to highlight several key areas in which gender bias can influence the early career experience, through linguistic, behavioural, and cultural practices. A classic example of this is in the conduct of departmental meetings, and the privileging of senior, male voices. Mary Beard described this recently as the failed intervention, and this might also be accompanied by interruptions or colleagues talking over their co-workers. This is not to imply that only men are guilty of this practice – it is simply more synonymous with seniority, power and confidence, attributes that are found more often among male colleagues. The experience of gendered power relations such as these can be compounded in the case of early career academics, both male and female, with their junior status impeding successful contributions to meetings. A number of female colleagues at UK institutions have commented that these kinds of apparently minor issues do make a difference to the confidence of women in expressing themselves in meetings which, in turn, influences perceptions of their competence and assertiveness.

November 2014

Ingrained discrimination can also be seen in the allocation of particular duties, whereby female colleagues may be assigned more onerous administrative tasks than their male co-workers. There are examples at some institutions of roles, such as admissions and senior tutor, being routinely given to early career female lecturers. In fact, thirty eight percent of women responding to the survey perceived gender discrimination in the division of major administrative roles. A similar imbalance is evident in the allocation of many pastoral and student-facing positions, with almost a third of female respondents detecting gender discrimination here. Pastoral and out-reach roles often prove to be both complex and time-consuming, but also reinforce traditional gender stereotypes of female expertise in the workplace. Such a division of administrative and pastoral roles reflects the ingrained practice, in some institutions, of giving female colleagues ‘organisational house-keeping’, work that cumulatively infringes on research time. The corollary of this is the allocation of more technical or strategic posts (such as chair of research or exams officer) to male staff, with the implications that these roles carry. This gender bias is particularly damaging for women at a point when early career colleagues dedicate more time to module development, consolidating research and publications, and in many cases, starting a family.

Recruitment

One of the key areas in which gender equality can be promoted further is through recruitment. A number of institutions have nominal gender policies at the level of short-listing, but problems continue to plague their implementation in practice. Thirty percent of respondents to the survey, for instance, detected gender bias or discrimination in recruitment and selection - suggesting that college or school policies on gender equality in short-listing are not always adopted in departments.

One colleague at a UK university recounted her experiences of acting as the ‘token woman’ on interview panels, despite college policy that stipulated an even gender balance on the committee. This tokenism can also encourage male colleagues to assume that female

colleagues would only shortlist other women, a perception which undermines their contributions to short-listing meetings. The prevalence of discriminatory practices such as these provides a strong case for training all staff on the nature of implicit gender bias, and how to avoid it. There is also an argument here for gender-blind short-listing, with the applicant's name and gender with-held initially, or for shortlists that are gender equal in composition where possible.

Family Life and Parental leave

Many respondents to the survey noted the recurrent problem of heavy workloads that can only be completed with long additional hours at evenings and weekends. There is an argument to be made here for more reflective work-load models, but many of us will appreciate that this kind of work culture is not only incompatible with a normal work-life balance, but with many key aspects of family life. Aside from workload issues, the timing of research seminars and conferences is a recurrent problem in the profession, particularly for parents with small children and those with caring responsibilities. The long hours work culture, along with difficulties in achieving promotion, may explain the small proportion of female colleagues in part-time contracts, as well as those who leave the profession during the early to mid-career stage, for teaching, the civil service, and other careers.

Family-friendly policies in departments can provide invaluable support to employees during the years of early parenting and care-giving. These are particularly crucial to support female academics further, since maternity leave remains common practice, despite its different effects on the careers of academic mothers as opposed to academic fathers. Yet family-oriented policies such as flexible contracts, a normalised 9 to 5 working day and workload, as well as mobile crèches for conferences, would also foster a culture in which parental, as opposed to maternity, leave may become more common and accepted.

This kind of cultural shift is needed to offer more choice to younger female academics, some of whom spend periods of time in temporary and part-time contracts during the early years of parenthood.

In addition, there is often a culture of misunderstanding around maternity leave. While the legal complexities of parental leave are usually understood well among administrators in Human Resources and at college level, their implications can be misconstrued within departments, among colleagues and administrators. A number of young historians, male and female, cite instances where maternity leave is conflated with research leave. In an extreme case, one young historian was contacted by her department to set an exam paper within twenty four hours of giving birth. While she reminded the colleague and secretary that she was on maternity leave, she was informed that other colleagues on research leave are setting exam papers.

Female colleagues at a number of institutions noted that the long hours of work in academia often extended to regular social gatherings, with decisions sometimes made informally outside of working hours, in the pub or bar, in ways that exclude women **and** men with caring responsibilities, as well as those outside certain social groups. This is not to suggest that social situations should be policed, but that decision-making should be based on broad consultation with colleagues, and not rooted in practices that inadvertently exclude others on the basis of gender, or caring roles.

Promotions Process

Gender discrimination can also be detected more obviously in cases of promotion decisions. The survey conducted by the RHS revealed that thirty eight percent of women believe that gender bias shapes this process in some way. A number of research reports have revealed a problem with the representation of women at senior levels, among professorial and senior management. One Russell group history department, for instance, counts only one woman among its thirteen professors. Yet the barriers to promotion can arise much earlier. So, for

Gender in the History Profession: the Early Career Perspective – Bronach Kane

November 2014



example, recent self-assessment for the Athena Swan award in the Biomedicine department at Cardiff University revealed a clear roadblock for women between lecturer and senior lecturer status.

In many institutions, the requirements for promotion from lecturer to senior lecturer may be rather more difficult to meet. While the experience of securing research leave might be clear, and colleagues may be supportive during maternity leave, promotions may depend on administrative experience as much as rate of publication. In one institution, the requirements for promotion to senior lecturer included the completion of a weighty departmental role. One early career historian thus remained a lecturer there for over ten years, in part because her employment was interspersed with two periods of maternity leave, and between these she was not appointed to any major administrative duties.

In some institutions, the standards for promotion can only be met through long hours that are not compatible with family life, or a healthy work-life balance. One colleague recounted her experiences of applying for promotion after several years of senior administration at lecturer level. During this time she worked four days a week to accommodate a young family, but was deemed not to have met the standards for promotion. While she carried out the role during her contracted hours, along with her other duties, promotion to senior lecturer at her institution depended on innovation that could only be achieved through extensive report-writing and long hours outside of work.

Differences in the rate and speed of promotion are not solely related to the ways in which institutions deal with maternity leave and parenting. An initiative was launched several years ago across Cardiff University to tackle gender inequalities in this area. The university's self-assessment produced surprising results, showing that female applicants actually had a much higher success rate in gaining promotion than their male colleagues. The reason for this higher rate, however, was the longer time-frame over which women applied for promotion, with many waiting much longer before submitting applications. The assessment group then

targeted departments with an exceptionally low rate of women in senior roles, and gave presentations to junior female academics clarifying the promotions process. The impact of this initiative is not yet known, but other universities are now conducting similar audits of senior staff. While it is tempting to attribute the delay in promotion to a generalised lack of confidence among younger female colleagues, there are clearly other contributing factors related to the experience of gender during the early and mid-career stages.

Conclusion

In general, gender policies for History and academia more broadly appear to lack uniformity, both nationally, and at an institutional and departmental level. The presence of an Athena Swan award, for institutions and departments, should of course be welcomed as a positive first step towards the redress of gender imbalances. There are, however, limitations to the efficacy of these schemes at a very basic level. An institution can receive an Athena Swan award merely for completing evaluations and inquiring into the current state of gender difference in their institutions. The application process for the Athena Swan Bronze Award, for instance, requests that institutions quote ‘demonstrate particular challenges and plan activities for the future; use quant-tit-tate-tive and qual-lit-tate-tive assessment to identify challenges and opportunities; and have a plan that builds on this assessment, and lessons from any activities already in place’. As one colleague noted, an institution can secure an Athena Swan award at this level simply by showing an awareness of gender issues in their organisation – they do not necessarily need to address them.

More sustained and uniform equality and diversity programmes could address some of the disparities between departments in the awareness of gender policies. This kind of training could be made compulsory not only for all new appointments, but also updated at regular intervals. Workshops focusing directly on gender and professional development, including promotion, could encourage women in early- and mid-career to apply for promotion sooner and with a higher success rate. These sessions would also consolidate awareness of these

Gender in the History Profession: the Early Career Perspective – Bronach Kane

November 2014



issues among male colleagues. The mentoring process is absolutely key here as we have the power to promote younger female academics, and to build formal mentoring networks. In addition, departments, schools and colleges could be encouraged to conduct self-assessments or audits, examining the gender ratio for a wide range of roles, workloads, and processes, including recruitment and promotions.

There is also a need for increased flexibility in dealing with gender issues in academia. A universal system based on meritocratic values underpins many equal opportunity policies in the UK and Europe, and these do need to be supported and upheld to minimise discrimination of various kinds. Yet when these policies are universally applied, they can restrict equal opportunities for women at an early career stage. This is not to argue for positive discrimination of any kind, but for more creative ways of dealing with gendered patterns of behaviour in some workplaces. In February this year, for instance, a jointly-authored letter from a number of Cambridge academics to the *Times Higher* urged institutions to consider a broader definition of success within the academic career path. The piece argued that much of the current criteria for success in our profession benefits men more than women, and urged a wider range of assessment in promotion on these grounds – including pastoral roles, outreach work, and administration.

There is a danger here of accommodating some of the consequences of gender bias, in a way that isn't necessarily beneficial. And yet one can't help but think of the broader lessons for the profession in general. A major redefinition of gender in the History profession would encourage a broader range of roles for male colleagues too, allowing both men and women to focus on a number of worthwhile areas. This expansion would inadvertently redefine perceptions of these key tasks, since research shows that male involvement in many areas of work shapes perceptions of its value – here, the breaking down of gender bias could help us move away from grant capture, and number of REF-able books and articles, as the only measures of excellence.