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Pat O'Connor, "Management and Gender in Higher Education". Manchester: Manchester University Press 2014, 224 pp.

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## Book Review

**Pat O'Connor, *Management and Gender in Higher Education*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014, 224 pp.**

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Why is it that despite the increasing number of women participating in and excelling in higher education, the number of women in senior management and leadership positions remains low in most countries? Despite the fact that the gender gap in the percentage of men and women who had tertiary degree in 2010 has been closed or reversed, men still dominate in employment, in higher salaried jobs, and in management positions. According to the OECD, across the EU, women represent about 45% of the labour market, but only 30% of senior management positions. The good news is that where countries have taken proactive measures there are signs of the gap closing; but in other countries the gap remains wide.

So what is happening in Ireland? The gender split between males and females is now 50:50, unlike five years ago, when females made up 54% of all full-time undergraduates. This is partially explained by the severity of the recent economic crisis. Many males had taken up employment in construction and related fields but when the economic collapse occurred they returned to or entered college availing of many new programmes, especially in ICT. This latter point helps explain why even though there are more women taking up STEM-related studies, their overall percentage has declined.

Yet none of this explains why the employment of women in higher education institutions in Ireland is still so strongly gendered. Interestingly, differences are more severe in one part of the binary system than the other; O'Connor argues that this reflects a general pattern across Europe where the proportion of women in high-status universities is often lower than other, perceivably lower-status, HEIs [p. 25.] Accordingly, women constitute 43% of the academic staff in both kinds of institutions compared to 20% in 1993, but 65% of the non-academic staff in the universities and 59% in the institutes of technology. As one moves through professional grades, the number and percentage of women declines – as it does in most other professions. At the senior management level, the subject of O'Connor's book, the gender disparities are extreme. Women constitute only 18% of full university professors, and only 19% of senior management positions (president, vice president or dean) in the universities; there are no figures for the institutes of technology. There has never been a president of an Irish university. In contrast, there have been several women leading the institutes of technology, equivalent to 21%.

O'Connor seeks to explain these developments in terms of a wider study of management in Irish higher education. She situates the discussion within a broader framework of the growing strength of neo-liberalism, managerialism, corporatization and marketization of higher education. Together, these trends have effectively helped to redefine higher education “as serving the needs of the market, with a stress on the transmission of employment related skills and the undertaking of commercially useful research” [p. 11.] According to O'Connor, this situation helps explain and sustain a gendered higher education system. As she argues “managerialism is wedded to a masculinist agenda” to the extent it is difficult to understand how change can actually occur. This in turn explains

the relative lack of interest by the Irish state, or by higher education authorities or the institutions themselves, to bring about any substantial or meaningful change.

As evidence, the book draws upon forty interviews with a wide range of senior staff across the seven Irish universities. Using anonymised extracts from these interviews, O'Connor weaves the story of Irish higher education into a comprehensive review and analysis of change in higher education with particular focus on gender. Topics include organisational structure and decision-making, recruitment and promotion, research, and culture. There are interesting differences between how males and females perceive the environment in which they both operate; the latter are profoundly conscious of gender stereotyping and power relations while the former are blind to them. As one interviewee states: "women are conscious that men are unconsciously misogynistic but men aren't conscious of this" [p. 91;] thus to get on, women need to keep quiet and move on regardless. Consequently, it was men rather than women who raised the challenge of family responsibilities [p. 101.] While some male interviewees felt the gendered structure of senior management was problematic, others appeared oblivious to it. Men portrayed a greater sense of entitlement to senior positions than their female colleagues – which also explains why they assume a stronger and more systematic approach to their careers often tolerating no opposition.

There are difficulties bringing gender to the fore as it is often portrayed as an excuse or an argument for exceptionalism. Yet, as one of the few women holding a senior management position in Ireland over the last 20 years, I can attest to the slow pace of change over the decades, and to a gendered culture which is invisible except/until it becomes explicit. It's most obvious form is the relative and absolute absence of women from key positions, but it also defines the culture of senior management discourse. Reading O'Connor's book side-by-side with Sheryl Sandberg's book on her life in Google, *Lean-in: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* [2013] presents an interesting contrast but also with very strong similarities. There is no doubt that the latter is a book about privileged women in professional organisations; but then, in reality, that is the world of higher education. What Sandberg does, however, is give some sense of what life is like inside the organisation which is missing from O'Connor's book.

I would have liked to hear more from the interviewees rather than have their comments parcelled out throughout the book to support the experience elsewhere. Having reached the end, I don't have any deep understanding of the Irish situation as distinct from a generalised picture of gender in higher education management and/or if the issues I experienced were particular or more systemic. I think the genuine strength of O'Connor's argument is probably lost by not letting the voices of her interviewees speak out loudly. And, while I understand the research challenge of extending her study to the thirteen institutes of technology – they do constitute almost 50% of all higher education students in Ireland. The study misses the opportunity to provide a comprehensive picture of gender in Irish higher education.

There are more substantial difficulties with the overall theoretical argument which relies on relentless repetition of the over-weaning influence of neo-liberalism and managerialism. Unfortunately, this has too often become a mantra. Similarly, it's too simplistic to suggest that research policy is pre-determinedly gendered albeit the effect on partic-

ular disciplines, which are more likely to be populated by females, of policy funding decisions does have that effect.

There are fundamental gender issues which lie at the heart of (Irish) higher education but I'm not convinced that they can be sufficiently explained by reference to the above. Whether we like it or not, globalisation's biggest effect on higher education has been to transform it from a local institution into one of geo-political significance. Today, higher education institutions face enormous challenges often of survival in an increasingly more complex and policy-challenged environment. There are real leadership challenges, and retreating to some whimsical view of collegiality is not realistic. The genie won't go back into the bottle.

None of this, however, excuses any form – visible or otherwise – of discrimination. This is not to argue that if women increased their presence in national parliaments and other decision-making fora or led higher education institutions the world would be a better place. I'm not that naïve – and there are plenty of women whose social values and political views I disagree with. These comments aside, O'Connor has done Ireland a great service. I just hope that the book will provoke sufficient discussion in leadership and policy-making circles to make an actual difference.

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## References

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