**A Critical Examination of the Influence of Organisation Factors on the Career Journey of Female Professors in the UK Higher Education**

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**Introduction**

The 2022 World Bank report reveals a global disparity in the labour force participation rates between men and women, with women comprising just over 50% compared to 80% of men. This global trend is further exemplified in the United Kingdom, where, according to the same report, the labour force participation rate among females stands at 58.5%, while among males, it is higher at 66.3%. These statistics underscore the persistent gender gap in workforce participation, both on a global scale and within specific national contexts such as the United Kingdom.

In terms of the UK's higher education (HE) sector, serves as a notable example, boasting an impressive workforce according to universities UK During the academic year 2021–22, UK HE institutions employed a total of 233,930 staff, excluding atypical staff.

However, a closer examination of the composition of top-tier academic roles reveals a concerning gender gap. HESA (2022) data indicates that within the UK HE system, less than 30 per cent of professors are female. Specifically, out of 23,495 professors, only 6,980 are women. This significant numerical disparity emphasises women's persistent challenges in ascending to leadership positions within academia.

The legislative landscape addressing gender equality has evolved, with notable milestones such as the Equal Pay Act of 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, and the Equality Act of 2010. These laws were designed to dismantle systemic barriers and discriminatory practices that hindered women's progress in the workplace. Additionally, initiatives like Athena Swan, introduced in 2005, aimed to address gender inequality specifically in academia, recognising and rewarding institutions that championed diversity and gender inclusivity (Westoby, et al., 2021).

Despite these efforts, gender inequality remains pervasive, as highlighted by Westoby et al. (2021) and Bhopal (2020). The persistence of this problem suggests that while legislative frameworks and initiatives have played a crucial role in advancing gender equality, there are still deep-rooted organisational challenges that need to be addressed.

Therefore, this research aims to critically examine the influence of organisation factors on the career journey of female professors in the UK HE based on Acker’s gendered organisation theory.

**Context and Background**

Factors such as unconscious biases, stereotyping, and gender-based expectations continue to shape workplace dynamics. Moreover, women often face barriers to career progression, unequal pay, and a lack of representation in their workplace (Savigny, 2014; Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Westoby et al., 2021). For instance, according to the CIPD 2023 report, 19% of professional HR managers are not willing to hire female staff as they believe women will start a family in the future. On the other hand, 50% of female staff reported they had discrimination and 42% had sexism experience in the workplace (Jackson, 2023). Therefore, it seems that discrimination, gender bias and sexism still exist in the workplace at all.

The underrepresentation of women in top positions within the HE cation is a stark manifestation of broader gender disparities in developed nations, despite women occupying various crucial roles across societies and the official commitment to achieving gender equality by these governments (Harvey & Jones, 2022; Evans Maley, 2021).

An overview of UK HE gender statistics based on Meletiadou, (2022) at the CIPD conference shows that a mere 22% of women within the academic staff, constituting 45% of the total academic staff in HE Institutions (HEIs), ascend to senior leadership positions, despite the majority of HE (HE) students (56%) and staff (54%) being women at present.

According to Acker’s theory organizations and jobs were not gender-neutral but inherently gendered through five interacting gendering processes: practices/structures, culture, interactions, identity, and organisational logic (Bailyn & Fletcher,2019).

In terms of the theory framework of this research I am applying Acker’s gendered organisation theory, research shows that there are a few research that uses all four elements of the gendering process of Acker’s gendered organisation theory in terms of academia (Benschop, and van den Brink, 2019). Numerous individuals often choose one component of Acker’s framework to showcase its practicality or use Acker's work as a basis for shaping their comprehension of gender (Nkomo and Rodriguez, 2019).

In this research, I am attempting to reveal organizational factors that influence the career journey of female professors by studying the culture and structure of universities in relation to the identities and interactions of academic members in two universities. Therefore, I will be applying four components of Acker’s gendered organisation theory (1990): culture, structure/practice, identity, and interaction. The gendered organization's theory helped to a better understanding of the manifesting of gender inequalities in different organizational designs and configurations (Benschop, and van den Brink, 2019).

**Research Methodology**

In this research, I utilise the research methodology described by Saunders et al. (2023), which is grounded in their conceptual framework referred to as the "research onion."

In this study, an interpretivism philosophy will be employed to develop new complex interpretations and conceptions of the social world settings (Tamminen and Poucher, 2020). The research approach adopted is inductive, and the chosen research strategy is a case study (Saunders et al., 2023). Specifically, this research focuses on a case study involving two universities within the UK's HE system: Cardiff Metropolitan University and Cardiff University. Despite both institutions being located in Cardiff, they vary in terms of size, staff and student numbers, research activities, and contributions to various fields.

The research methodology utilized is qualitative, employing the semi-structured interview method and documentary analysis (strategic plan), (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Purposive sampling will be employed to select participants, with an estimated sample size of 20. For data analysis, thematic analysis will be utilized (Saunders, et al., 2017).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, a notable gap exists in the existing literature concerning the impact of organisational factors on the career trajectories of female professors. Within the context of the UK HE sector, organisational factors play a significant role in shaping the professional journeys of female academics.

This research holds particular relevance within the academic community, especially considering the limited representation of women at the professorial level in the UK HE landscape. Through the execution of this study, there is an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to academic discourse and initiate a dialogue on the low presence of women in professorial roles.

By undertaking this research endeavour, we aim to not only address the current research gap but also to serve as a catalyst for future investigations. Moreover, the findings from this study can potentially lay the groundwork for subsequent researchers, guiding them to explore diverse perspectives and propose innovative solutions. The emphasis will be on developing strategic plans and fostering social and cultural awareness to actively mitigate and reduce gender inequality within the UK HE sector, particularly at the professorial level.

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