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# Intersectional barriers to women's advancement in higher education institutions rewarded for their gender equity plans

Gail Crimmins <sup>a</sup>, Sarah Casey <sup>a</sup> and Maria Tsouroufli <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Business and Creative Industries, University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Education, Brunel University London, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a research project designed to understand the work experiences and career opportunities of people working in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the UK, which received formal recognition for supporting gender equity between 2015 and 2020. The findings reveal multiple intersecting barriers to women's full engagement, inclusion, support and career success in higher education, despite the implementation of organization-based gender equity plans, and institutional international recognition for advancing equity. Most axes of de/privilege that are based along lines of gender, race, ethnicity and religion are enacted as everyday sexism that resist gender equality policy. Moreover, our findings suggest that 'place' is a constitutive element of intersectional dis/advantage, not merely a context within which compounded barriers to inclusion and advancement may exist. In addition, the findings demonstrate that whilst inter-categorical intersectionality is based on the notion that all social categories (such as age, race and gender) are equally salient, the degree of importance of any category will likely depend on location or context of the phenomena being examined. Our findings therefore invite further, iterative and translocational research into the impacts of the intersections of gender, ethnicity, race and religion in spaces of higher education, particularly those with colonial legacies and presence.

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## KEYWORDS

Athena Swan; gender; intersectionality; spatio-temporal context

## Introduction/context setting

### *Gender inequity in HEI*

The inequitable distribution of women in senior roles in academia is well established, and intersecting factors such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, age and dis/ability contribute to cumulatively fewer opportunities for women to achieve senior roles and associated decision-making capacity. Indeed, across the 28 countries within the European Union, 47% of women academics hold the lowest academic grade (Level D) yet only 24% of

**CONTACT** Gail Crimmins  G.Crimmin@usc.edu.au  UniSC Sunshine Coast, 90 Sippy Downs Drive Sippy Downs, Queensland, 4556, Australia

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grade A (full professorship) positions are occupied by women (European Commission 2017). Relatedly, men make up 78% of heads of all HEIs and 86% of the heads of universities across the EU (European Commission 2019). An examination of the proportion of women in the professoriate is important because access to management positions at all levels in HEIs is predominantly restricted to those at full professorial level (O'Connor and Irvine 2020).

The proportion of women in casual and relatively low levels of academic work – in relation to those in senior and executive academic positions – provides further evidence of unequal affordances to women in contemporary universities (Crimmins 2016). The trend to furnish lower ranked and unstable/precarious academic positions with women is evident even in countries where women make up the majority of university workforce and approximately equal number of graduates with a PhD (Lindhardt and Berthelsen 2017), as international data indicates that women in academia are generally more likely than men to enter casual, fixed-period, short-term, part-time and contractual agreements. In the European Union at the country level, on average 32% of women and 9% of men academics are employed on part-time employment contracts; and 11% of women and 7% of men are employed on precarious contracts (European Commission 2017).

Moreover, intersecting factors create extra layers of structural de/privilege in academia. For instance, in the UK there are around 350 Black women professors out of a total of 18,000, meaning that Black women make up less than 2% of the professoriate in academies in the UK (Solanke 2017). That is, white academics are almost two and a half times more likely to be Professors than their Black counterparts. This corresponds with findings from the UCU that white academics are approximately three times as successful in their applications for professorship when compared with their peers from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds (Rollock 2019, 6).

Women who are mothers also fare worse than non-mothers. Employers are less likely to recruit or promote mothers compared to otherwise equivalent non-mothers; and when they do, they pay mothers significantly less than non-mothers for doing the exact same job, though fathers are paid the same as non-fathers (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007). Differences are noted indicating a greater toll on women's personal lives at the expense of an academic career compared to their male counterparts. Lindhardt and Berthelsen (2017) found that women professors who are not divorced and enjoy a family life with children are a rarity, and more often women in academia (compared to other professions) are single parents and/or unmarried. Even when academic women stay married, they have excessive domestic and caring responsibilities and achieve promotion much later than male colleagues, including their husbands/partners (Tsouroufli 2020).

Finally, the statistics presented above largely mirror the international context: 39 out of the top 200 institutions in the world (19.5 per cent) are currently led by women (Bothwell 2020), and women leaders in higher education are disproportionately more likely to lead smaller colleges or women's universities, particularly in South Asian countries (Morley and Crossouard 2016). In Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong, the top national or public universities that have entered the highest ranks of the international league tables are not led by woman presidents (Cheung 2021). Therefore, notwithstanding cultural nuance, the academic workforce appears largely stratified along gendered and racial lines.

In response to the persistent and international barriers to women's advancement, over the past two decades, many Certification and Award schemes (CAS) related to gender equality, diversity and inclusion have emerged in the higher education, research and industry sectors. According to a recent report, there are as many as 113 CAS which have been identified across Europe and beyond (Tzanakou, Clayton-Hathway, and Humbert 2021). The Athena Swan Charter 'originating in the UK, is arguably the most prominent and well-known certification system for research organisations' (Tzanakou, Clayton-Hathway, and Humbert 2021, 6). Similar gender accreditation systems are currently in development in countries of the Global South, including India.

### ***Athena Swan***

The Athena Swan Charter was established in 2005 to combat the gender inequities in higher education and research careers faced by women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM). The Charter's remit expanded in 2015 to encompass gender equality in academia and research in the fields of arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law; and in 2021 developed a 'holistically transformed Charter' (Advance 2023) which sought to address gender equality more broadly, including a commitment for applicants to consider intersectionality. Advance HE (who administers the Charter) has recently included a revised award criteria and streamlined application processes, though the previous system whereby Charter members can apply for AS award, at Bronze, Silver or Gold level, each is valid for five years (Advance 2023). As of February 2023, there were 990 active awards in the UK alone; 124 of which are institution-wide awards, and 866 are department-specific (Advance 2023).

The AS Charter has been adapted and adopted by HEIs across Australia through the SAGE initiative, piloted in 2015 across Ireland, which launched its AS initiative in 2015 (Advance HE); throughout the US, via the American Association for the Advancement of Science which launched STEM Equity Achievement (SEA) Change in 2018 (AAAS); and introduced in Canada through Dimensions EDI, launched in 2019.

Notwithstanding the increasingly significant role that AS plays in HEIs gender equity policy and practice, the intersecting challenges people working in HEIs which have been awarded an AS Charter, and the perceived impact of AS upon these work experiences, remain under researched and under theorized. Whilst some evidence indicates that AS accreditation operates as moderate feminism that benefits mainly the careers of white middle-class women in higher education in the UK (Henderson and Bhopal 2021; Tzanakou and Pearce 2019), a positive correlation between AS and the employment of a diversity of women in academia has not been established. Neither is there any substantial evidence to demonstrate a link between AS accreditation and the eradication of sexism in academia (Tsouroufli 2019). Consequently, Tsouroufli (2019) argues that independent research on the impact of AS on women's work experience and career success in higher education, informed by different theoretical and methodological perspectives (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed), is required.

In response, we sought to learn the work experience and of people who work within schools, units or organizations which received an AS award between 2015 and 2020, paying particular attention to the impact that intersecting social locations have on

participants' career histories and trajectories. Before providing detail of this study, we offer a brief overview of the concept of intersectionality.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework based on the premise that human experience is shaped by multiple simultaneous social positions (e.g. race, gender), and cannot be adequately understood by considering social positions independently. As an organizing theory intersectionality = first introduced by Kimberlee Crenshaw in 1989- considers how different inequalities intersect, compound and are mutually constitutive (Thomas et al. 2021). When employed as a methodology, intersectionality tends to focus on how multiple social categories (such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality and poverty) come together to shape life opportunity and experience.

Intersectionality, as an analytical lens, can be applied at the micro or meso level to expose macro level/systematic forces of power and privilege (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Adopting an intersectional lens allows researchers and practitioners to work with an understanding that the broader contexts of identity impact on individuals differently, at different times and in different contexts (Thomas et al. 2021). It also invites a critical approach to identifying power relationships and is aimed at challenging the status-quo by taking a holistic approach to how human individuality is impacted by multiple and intersecting axes of power and de/privilege.

As the origin of the term intersectionality was embedded in the tradition of Black feminism, the concept was initially most frequently used in the study of the relationship between race and gender within social institutions and settings (Sircar 2021). Consequently, the subsequent application of intersectional analysis across disciplines and geographical locations, has led to critique of the erasure of attention to race as an operative category (Sircar 2021). Nevertheless, many researchers and theorists identify race as 'an inherently geographical mode of power that operates differentially through space ... [where] intersectionality too becomes a geographical mode of analysis that manifests differentially across places' (Sircar 2021, 4). In accord with this perspective and Hopkins (2018) description of intersectionality as a mode of mapping, the authors of this paper conceptualize intersectionality as a lens that provides researchers a framework of contextualized nexus of factors that shape lived experience that can be identified through analysing largely qualitative data.

### **Methodology and methods**

Whilst there are various methodological classifications of intersectionality, McCall (2005) identifies that three the most common research approaches include intra-categorical, anti-categorical and inter-categorical. An intra-categorical approach explores overlapping categories of disadvantage within the same social group (McCall 2005). Yet, Walby, Armstrong, and Strid (2012) critique this approach for failing to focus on the wider societal structures and social processes which cause inequalities. Further, while anti-categorical approaches often explore the process that causes disadvantage, their preference for categorical fluidity can make practical analysis difficult (Jang and Kim 2018). Therefore, the inter-categorical approach which adopts well established and stable analytical categories

(such as race, gender and class) to examine dominant and compounded inequalities that exist across multiple social groups is used most often (Sircar 2021). Moreover, inter-categorical intersectional approach enables researchers to compare and contrast multiple social groups within the same study (Corus et al. 2016). We therefore adopted an inter-categorical intersectional methodology in the research project discussed in this paper to explore the work experience and career opportunities and progression of people working in higher education institutions across the UK, which have received an Athena Swan Charter. The methodological approach employed to collect evidence for this study was activated by the research aims and questions. Central to this was providing a foundation for the *investigation of experience* through (predominantly) qualitative research questions administered via an online survey.

## **Methods**

Academics and professional/administrative staff employed in UK schools or units within academic institutions in the UK were invited to participate in the research project. This included participants who identify as male, female, or gender non-binary, and who were employed on short term, fixed term and ongoing appointments, and at any level of academic appointment.<sup>1</sup> After obtaining ethical clearance from the University of the Sunshine Coast (Ethics number: A191199), we approached the AS coordinators of twelve UK-based academic institutions and/or academic units or schools within a UK-based academic institution, which had been awarded an AS award of varying levels including Bronze, Silver and Gold, to invite them to participate in this research project. The AS coordinators of participating academic institutions disseminated an email invitation to all staff working in eligible schools or research centres to complete an online survey, which included a research project information sheet, and a link to an online survey. Individual participants voluntarily self-selected to complete an online survey. We focused particularly on UK-based institutions because AS has been established in the UK for over a decade and has had an opportunity to mature and embed into institutional frameworks and practice. We finally sought engagement from HEIs across the UK instead of focusing only on England to capture geographically contextualized data.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Survey questions were designed to elicit demographic details and open questions were created to elicit the work experience of participants, including questions to garner how they describe their work experience and career opportunities. All quantitative data was aggregated first by institution, and secondly across all participating institutions. In addition, all qualitative data was latterly analysed using an intersectional lens.

Survey data was imported from Survey Monkey directly into SPSS. Basic descriptive analyses were calculated for all variables to provide an overall description of the data (frequency distributions and percentages). The data was further described by separating participant responses to key questions according to gender and then analysing the differences in the proportions of responses. Fisher's exact tests (with alpha level set at

.05) were used for analysis as across most key variables, there were instances when the assumption of a cell count greater than 5 could not be met in order to appropriately interpret the results of chi-square analyses (Field 2016). Due to the cross-sectional study design, and the use of convenience sampling, it was not possible to determine predictive relationships between variables using logistic regression, as not all combinations of predictor variables were represented in the sample (Field 2016).

Open text responses were treated as qualitative data, and manual thematic analysis was performed. The analytical process followed that described by Nowell et al. (2017); becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and searching, reviewing and naming themes. To provide a contextualized consideration of the practical (lived), theoretical and research implications of the findings, we intersperse quantitative findings and direct quotes from open text responses with some discussion below.

## Findings and discussion

A total of 207 respondents participated in the survey from various institutions across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales: Aston University (32), Brunel University (4), Cardiff University (3), Loughborough University (13), Oxford Brookes University (2), Queen Margaret University (1), Ulster University (56), University of East Anglia (7), University of East London (2), University of Huddersfield (1), University of Leeds (53), University of York (33). Eleven participants did not specify their institution.

Most of the respondents identified as female ( $n = 165$ ), 38 male respondents, and one individual identified as female presenting nonbinary. Most respondents were aged between 35 and 54 (62.3%), 22.5% were aged between 25 and 34, 10.6% were aged between 55 and 64, 2.5% were under 25 and 2% over 65. Most respondents identified as heterosexual (84.5%). Of the remainder of the sample, 5.8% identified as bisexual, 4.8% as homosexual and 1% as asexual. One individual identified as lesbian, one as pansexual and another as queer – homoromanticism and bisexuality. Five individuals indicated that they would prefer not to answer the question, and one individual declined to answer.

Most respondents were married/partnered (77.8%). The remainder were single (15.8%), divorced/separated (4.4%), widowed (1.0%), cohabiting/engaged (0.5%) and other (0.5%).

The majority of participants (93.0%) described their ethnicity as White (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British/Irish/European/Other). Six participants identified as Asian/Asian British, three as mixed/multiple ethnicities (including White and Black Caribbean/White and Black African/White and Asian), two as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, and two individuals as ethnicities not mentioned in the given categories.

When describing the focus of their work contract, most academic staff placed themselves in either the 40/40/20 category (37.9%) or research focused (35.8%). A teaching focus was less common (15.8%). More specific, individualized responses were also entered for this category and included various levels of management (PVC, Associate Dean, Head of Department) and all managerial-focused positions mentioned above were all held by males.

The four recurrent themes that emerged in relation to work experience and career support and trajectory, include: women experience the role of primary carer as a barrier to career success; a gendered allocation of tasks/workload and access to



promotion; a lack of engagement with, and appropriation of, female 'voice'; and the intersection of religion and gender can reinforce gendered and raced structures.

### ***Women experience the role of primary carer as a barrier to career success***

Almost half of the respondents (49.3%) indicated that they have no current caring responsibilities. A further 35.5% of respondents care for young and/or school-aged children, 6.4% percent for older relatives and 5.4% for both young school-aged children and older relatives. Some respondents (3.4%) indicated that they were responsible for the care of individuals who were not listed. Of the 63.3% who identified as the primary carer for children ( $n = 90$ ), 70% were females. Most participants (37.6%) who hold caring responsibilities ( $n = 93$ ) reported that they spend more than 40 h in a week caring for their child/ren or guardian/s, and a significantly greater proportion of females (40.5%) spent more than 40 h caring for children, compared to males (22.2%). Of the 74 participants who indicated that they were the primary care of an elder (i.e. who takes time off work to care for ill elder?), the majority were also female. Finally, in relation to carer status, more individuals *without* caring duties received promotion than did individuals who are carers (37.0% and 29.6%) respectively.

These findings align with scholarship that determines women adopt the majority of familial caring responsibilities (Mussida and Patimo 2021). Thus, to address the intersectional barrier to career success experienced by women academics with caring responsibilities, all gender equity plans developed and used as evidence of institutional support for gender equity by the HEIs in this study explicitly include flexible working opportunities, maternity/parental or family leave entitlement and accommodation of parental leave within promotion policy. Yet, notwithstanding these policy directives, the lived experience of the participants indicates that the HEIs cultures – as determined by daily inter/actions and behaviours – resist or ignore the HEIs policies, demonstrating that adopting the role of primary carer for children is experienced as a liability for women with caring responsibility, within institutions that received the AS Charter. Examples of female participant responses that reflect this include:

- 'Told not to include maternity leave on promotion form'
- 'Insufficient and unclear allowance made for maternity leave in promotions procedure, no support for childcare at conferences or when having to work outside of normal working days/hours. Explicit emphasis in promotion criteria on international collaborations/ conferences, when these are harder for carers to attend'
- 'Short deadlines e.g. for internal funding opportunities are impossible for part time staff with caring responsibilities because they essentially mean working evenings and weekends - so I miss out on these opportunities and my male child-free colleagues mop them up and reap the accolades'
- 'I was told I had to take annual leave to look after sick child - even when I had worked more than my contracted hours that week'
- 'early career researchers are defined by years since first research work and the university policy doesn't make clear how maternity leave fits'
- 'The mechanisms are still set up to advantage men - basically assuming a fulltime career with no breaks and no caring responsibilities'
- 'An attitude that as a woman with children you will be unable to carry out roles'



This data illustrates that gender equity policy or procedures designed to support women with caring responsibilities are often ignored by people in senior roles, or the policy and procedures do not reach far enough in terms of grant submission deadlines, conference support, leave entitlements and the matrices of 'academic success'.

### ***Lack of engagement with, and appropriation of, female 'voice'***

When asked whether their gender and/or sexuality had impacted on work experiences, 40.3% of participants indicated that it had, and this was greater in females (45.3%) than males (19.4%). The individual who had identified as 'female' presenting non-binary also indicated that gender and/or sexuality had impacted on their work experience and career. The most common theme to emerge in this data was that a male-dominated environment can result in women not being recognized or heard. The behaviours, as described in qualitative data presented below, reflect what Bourabain (2020) describes as patronizing mechanisms that under/de-value women's presence and work, and demonstrate that whilst women are present, they are not always included in discussions and decision-making. In this regard, women are considered as space invaders (Puwar 2004), and although no longer excluded to the private space, are still the 'Other' in public spaces.

Related comments from female participants include:

- 'There have been situations when a male co-worker has acted unprofessionally, e.g. ignoring my opinions during meetings or talking over me'
- 'I have at several times made suggestions, been ignored, only for a male colleague to make the same suggestion and it be hailed as a great idea. My work has been attributed to male colleagues on occasion. I am paid less than male colleagues doing the same job'
- 'My previous line manager would regularly include males at meetings instead of the females with the most relevant work within projects'
- 'In meetings men take your comments and they receive the positive feedback for them. My male line managers have used my work for their own promotion'
- 'I can't begin to say how many times I was ignored or shouted down in meetings, had my concerns trivialized or had my ideas ignored and then presented by someone else (male) as if it was theirs'
- 'My previous line manager regularly treated women with disrespect, calling them girls and talking over them'

The data examples show how women's work and position in academia are undervalued, and support Bourabain's (2020) position that gendered structures have not vanished, they have simply taken on a disguised form. More specifically, Crimmins et al. (2019) refer to the process of males' appropriating academics women's work, identifying that it can result in the erasure of women's names, identities and contributions, bolster male academics' careers, and is subsequently deployed as a rationale for the disproportionate representation of women in the lower levels of academia, and the glut of male academics in senior positions.

### ***Gendered allocation of tasks/workload and access to promotion***

Less than half (44.1%) of academics had received promotions while employed in their current school/organization, and an equal proportion of males and females had applied for promotion. Yet a greater proportion of males (52.2%) had received promotion than females (40.6%). In addition, of promoted academics, 42.9% had worked at their pre-promotion levels for between 1 and 3 years, and when analysing according to gender, there was a greater proportion of males in this category (50%) than females (40.5%). Of the respondents who had worked at pre-promotion levels for more than 10 years, all four were female. In the whole sample, a significantly greater proportions of males were promoted from senior lecturer (30.8%) and associate professor positions (30.8%) than females (21.1% and 2.6% respectively). It is interesting to note that within this sample of individuals who identified as asexual, homosexual, queer-homoranticism and bisexuality or those who preferred not to answer the sexual orientation item, none had been promoted. In relation to racial categories, only White and Asian individuals had received promotions.

Further, the qualitative statements made in relation to academic promotion make manifest how women's exclusion from academic tasks and opportunities that increase the chance of promotion or career advancement and are instead allocated a disproportionate number of time-consuming roles and responsibilities based around internal engagement and service. Examples include:

- 'I am given more administrative and pastoral tasks because I am female. In fact, when choosing a new first-year tutor for our department my HoS said I should do it because I was "more mumsy" than everyone else'
- 'I have been expected to carry out more administrative tasks than the opposite gender and I feel this is due to my gender'
- 'Women are assumed to want part-time work and to prefer pastoral roles - and potentially not \*need\* promotion or research roles'
- 'Women tend to be given the 'greater good' activities, putting their own needs behind those of the students/university and thus impacting their promotion rates'
- 'There is a culture of the 'old boys' network that makes it more likely that roles and responsibilities which are an easier 'sell' for promotion are given to male colleagues.'
- 'Male peers were more likely to be seen as ambitious and support given for that ambition. Conversely the same activities were seen as 'bossy' 'too assertive' in female peers, these females were more likely to be 'sold' activities that while billed as 'good for ones career' were actually activities that lacked recognition in terms of the promotions process and that took up more time than anticipated (and therefore limited the ability to be able to get involved in other matters)'
- 'Despite being in a Department that supports equality, I feel that as a female I have been burdened a particular sort of administrative task that requires a lot of time but that time is not recognized'
- 'In my school the men are regarded as genuises, permitted to take time off and to take time to write. The women are seen as workhorses.'
- 'I explicitly get asked to take on onerous admin duties to increase female representation on panels and committees, which then impacts my ability to do research, while making the department look good wrt[sic] equality'

- 'I have observed a tendency for women to be more involved in local administrative/management work, whilst the male members of the department travel more. There are pros and cons to this'.

These findings resonate with earlier research that demonstrates how women are allocated the majority of 'organisational housework' (Blackmore and Sachs 2007, 14), and administrative work that in the contemporary neoliberal university is prone to being discredited, regarded by many academics as abject, and of lower value than teaching and research (Lipton and Crimmins 2019). The internal service tasks allocated to women academics are also considered 'non-promotable' even though they take up most of women academics' time (Guarino and Borden 2017).

### ***The intersection of religion and gender can reinforce gendered and raced structures***

As identified above, 93% of participants described their ethnicity as White (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British/Irish/European/Other). Of note is that a larger proportion of individuals of mixed race, Black and Asian were found to have been employed for under 5 years (from 25.0% to 100.0%), compared to White individuals (from 12.1% to 18.4%). There is likely a correlation between the higher turnover of academics who identify as Black or Asian and the dominance of a White Eurocentric academics climate, as people are attracted to an organization with employees that they have similar attributes or values; and a perception of an unfavourable climate, including when an organization does not value their contributions, increases turnover intentions (Butter and Lowe 2017). Additionally, given that a very high percentage (93%) of respondents identified as White, it is perhaps not surprising that only 20.6% of respondents indicated that they believed that race or ethnicity had impacted on their work experience and/or career history as most White people do not recognize the 'privileging effects of racism' for the racial groups who are dominant within a society (Paradies 2006, 146). By failing to 'racialise Whiteness' (Churchill, Baltra-Ulloa, and Moore 2015, 26), White people do not recognize the de/privilege of non-Whiteness.

Where race was recognized as having an impact on participants' careers, racial congruency with students and unconscious bias were cited as factors, and (below) religion is considered a salient intersect with gender in relation to career opportunity and success:

- 'I am from a demographic very similar to that of our students on the course and it is hard not to feel that could be a factor to why I was appointed in my role' (female, Asian/Asian British).
- 'I think this is more unconscious bias. I do believe however in a previous role that I had to work twice as hard as male and White counterparts to progress, or get the recognition that I deserved' (female, Asian/Asian British).
- Whilst religion is often considered as a sub-category of ethnicity, it is identified as a distinctly separate social identity by several of the participants in this study. The specific insights participants shared in relation to how religion intersects with gender within their work context include:

### Religious factors:

- ‘As a female catholic in NI [Northern Ireland], it is not an easy process, more protestant males get promoted faster’
- ‘NI from a Nationalist/Republican background. Improvement recently but still seems weighted towards Protestant higher appointments on some campuses’
- ‘I believe academic institutions have traditionally favoured White, middle-class Catholic candidates’

These statements demonstrate the importance of capturing, in order to address, gendered and religious-based barriers to career advancement. This perspective emphasizes the necessity in separating religion from ethnicity and/or race (and other social identities) because essentializing race and/or ethnicity, and subsuming other categories obscures significant internal differences existing within racial or national groups (Douglas 2002). The data also illuminates the need for further interrogation of social groupings based upon religion, region, ethno-religious groupings and gender in order to discredit simplistic dualistic notions of racial, ethnic or national homogeneity. Our findings indicate that women located in HEIs in Northern Ireland specifically identified religion as an impediment to their career opportunities. This resonates with Witinok-Huber et al. (2021) suggestion that ‘gender systems are operationalized through local gender contracts under specific circumstances’ (556) and shape overlapping gendered and geographic relationships and power divides in the everyday lives of women and men.

In particular reference to Northern Ireland, the findings are significant because it has been noted that women are invisible in mainstream analyses of the Northern Irish conflict and legacies, and this absence has discursive and material implications for tackling women’s inequality in societies in transition from armed conflict (Rooney 2006). More specifically, religious sectarianism is not generally considered as an intersectional category or impediment in the scholarship or discourses around women’s career opportunities and experiences in HE in the UK, which is reflective of the legacy of ‘the inadequacies of a wide variety of academic work which has dealt with Northern Ireland’ (Miller 1998, 4). Yet, the qualitative statements directly reflect wider societal structures in Northern Ireland, where Catholic men remain almost twice as likely to be unemployed as Protestant men whilst Catholic women are over twice as likely to be unemployed as Protestant women (Office for National Statistics), and the participant’s identify religion as an intersectional barrier. The finding thus illustrates the importance of intersectional research that ‘helps to reference how race and/or sect, class and gender work as integrated regimes of inequality within historical processes’ (Rooney 2006, 359), particularly in spaces or places that with colonial and imperialist legacies. It also makes manifest how space or location not only reflect intersectional de/privilege but also constitutes at least one axes of power imbalance. As Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina (2018, 549) note, ‘intersectionality is not only where and when intersectionality occurs but also contributes to the configuration of intersectional dynamics themselves’.

Correspondingly, Spencer-Wood theorizes that prior to feminist post-colonial theory and adopting an intersectional lens, conceptualizations of colonization and colonialism did not sufficiently consider how patriarchy is inextricably entwined with racism and religiocentrism (2016). She further recommends a place-based application of feminist post-colonial research in spaces and places with colonized histories, in order to analyse the

'intersecting gendered, sexual, racial, class and religious dialectics of power negotiations between colonizers and colonized' (Spencer-Wood 2016, 478).

## Further discussion

As a result of persistent gender inequality in HEIs, gender equality plans that include parental leave, flexible working conditions and on occasion accommodations on promotion and grant applications for women with caring responsibilities. Yet, our findings demonstrate that these policy directives are often ignored, or not far-reaching enough to support women with caring responsibilities; fail to prevent women from being spoken over, ignored, excluded, or having their ideas and work appropriated by male colleagues; do not thwart women being allocated a disproportionate amount of service roles; or address gendered religiocentrism.

Intersectional analysis of these findings suggest that equity policy is often undermined by invisible, masculinized 'everyday' cultural practices that most benefit male academics (Blackmore 2014). Moreover, the everyday sexism described in the data reflect how flexible and multifarious sexism is, and thus how difficult it is to eradicate. Similarly, Bourabain (2020) observes that whilst sexism has transformed into more subtle ambiguous forms that are less explicit than overt forms of exclusion, its manifestations in most of the Global North have shifted from a private to a public patriarchy, which is opaque or even invisible in the public space, only observable through lived experience. It is therefore imperative that research into the lived experience of women in various social and organizational contexts is undertaken to unearth the various shapes and forms of sexism, and to develop nuanced and context-specific ways to identify and expose it. It is equally important that existing research on everyday sexism and 'intersectional disadvantage in practice' (as presented in the qualitative data above) also be operationalized to address the everyday sexism that often undermine gender equity plans and initiatives. For instance, as men are most often responsible for institutional policy development, even though they are less likely to be personally affected by the very issues the policies are developed to address (Anicha, Bilen-Green, and Green 2020), research outcomes such as presented above might be used to evaluate the efficacy of existing policy and practice directives, or to develop new policy and protocols. Furthermore, the research findings highlight that religion in some spatial contexts is a separate intersectional issue to race and ethnicity and to conflate these undermines opportunity to address religiocentrism. In addition, the specific spatio-temporal dimension of the participants comments in relation to Catholicism being experienced as detrimental to career success in Northern Ireland, highlights the benefit of 'context specific' intersectional research. This resonates with Anthias (2012) recommendation for researchers to use a translocational lens in research design and implementation. For (Jang and Kim 2018, 10) 'the concept of translocations focuses on social locations rather than groups [and] treats people as being located across multiple but interrelated social spaces of different types ... resulting in multiple and uneven social patterns of domination and subordination' (Anthias 2012). The findings also demonstrated that whilst inter-categorical intersectionality is based on the notion that all social categories (such as age, race, gender) are equally salient, the degree of importance of any category will likely depending on location or context of the phenomena being examined. It also demonstrates the benefit of feminist intersectional research in

making manifest, countering and complicating essentialist constructions of identity and compounding dis/advantage.

## Conclusion

In this paper we share the findings of a study designed to learn the work experience and career trajectories of people working in schools, departments or centres that have achieved an AS Charter Mark. Quantitative findings reveal that even in HEIs that have been awarded (and thus recognized) for supporting gender equality, a higher proportion of males were employed in a permanent/ongoing basis; were more likely to be promoted, and promoted within a shorter timeframe than females; more likely to hold a senior professorial and leadership role than women; and less likely to spend 40 h of more on caring responsibilities than women. Furthermore, Black and Asian participants were found to have been employed for under 5 years, compared to White individuals. Finally, no individuals who identified as asexual, homosexual, queer-homosexual and/or bisexual or those who preferred not to answer the sexual orientation item, or respondents who identified as Black in the sample, had received promotion in their current institution.

Four recurrent themes emerged in the qualitative data, which include: women experience the role of primary carer as a barrier to career success; a gendered allocation of tasks/workload prevent access to promotion; there is a lack of engagement with, and appropriation of, female 'voice'; and the intersection of religion and gender can reinforce gendered and racialized structures. Analysis of these findings illuminate that, despite the implementation of gender equity plans, raced and gendered power structures within HEIs are maintained through 'everyday sexism' (Savigny 2014) made manifest in daily acts of microaggressions against women, including women with caring responsibilities, and Catholic women. The findings further suggest that the geographical contexts of HEI not only reflect but appear to *constitute* intersectional experience. Finally, the outcomes demonstrate a multiplicative effect of race/religion and parental responsibility on career opportunities for women, reinforcing Bourabain's (2020) position that 'women cannot be considered a homogenous lump' (264), and Anthias (2012) recommendation to use a translocational lens to focus on social locations rather than groups in research and policy development.

The research contributes also to the ambivalent research that currently exists in relation to the efficacy of the AS Charter at addressing gender inequality in HEIs. For instance, Barnard (2017) identified that academic/research staff working in departments that had been awarded a Silver AS Charter Mark were more satisfied with their career development than staff in no award departments, and ECU (2016) note that in all departments holding awards academic/research staff rated their university's higher for the promotion of equality and diversity. Yet, Henderson and Bhopal (2021) and Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) suggest that AS accreditation mainly benefits the careers of white middle-class women in HEIs. Finally, Xiao et al. (2020) identify that whilst non-recipient Charter institutions had higher percentages of women leaders than non-Athena institutions, the AS Charter had positive effects on increasing women's representation in both managerial leaders and non-managerial academics. Our findings, though, identify that despite gender equality policy development in institutions awarded an AS Charter,

many of the policies were either resisted or could not adequately provide gender equality of experience for many of the research participants, particularly women with caring responsibilities, and women who identify as Catholic working in Northern Ireland. There was little evidence in the findings that the AS Charter had addressed 'everyday sexism' (Savigny 2014) or gendered religiocentrism.

### **Limitations and recommendations**

The research is limited because data was elicited by one survey only, and that the same survey was administered across HEIs which had been awarded an AS Award across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Some of the survey outcomes, such as the issue of religion as an intersectional barrier to career progress within Northern Ireland, and the widespread 'colour-blindness' (or lack of acknowledgement of white privilege) of participants, were not anticipated. The survey instrument did not therefore include questions designed to elicit more detailed and nuanced responses in relation to these issues. A research design with capacity to interview respondents about any key findings to emerge from an initial survey are likely to have elicited richer and fuller outcomes. We therefore recommend iterative *and* research processes that are sensitive to transnational and translocation positionalities of participants and authors/researchers. We also recommend intersectionally-focused research be undertaken in countries and spaces with colonial legacies and presents to investigate what Spencer-Wood (2016) describes as inextricable entwining between patriarchy and heterosexism with the Eurocentrism, racism, classism and religiocentrism. As there was little evidence in the findings that the AS Charter had addressed 'everyday sexism' (Savigny 2014) or gendered religiocentrism, we propose that the qualitative findings, which demonstrate 'intersectional disadvantage in practice' be used to visibilise *specific* forms of everyday sexism operating in HEIs, and be operationalized to evaluate existing gender *and place-based* equity policy and practice directives (by analysing whether existing policy or practice protocol would prevent or address the intersectional disadvantage in practice described), and to support policy development.

Finally, while we acknowledge the limitations of our study – the small sample (207 participants) and that the cross-sectional design is limited in describing trends in the population studied – the study provides direction for refining future measures by which gender equity issues may be assessed, and ultimately addressed, in higher education. For instance, the findings, which are internationally relevant, because the AS initiative is gaining increasing traction around the world (Gibney 2017), are pertinent to all participating institutions as the level of AS award received or institutional categorization did not seem to mediate the participants' experience of compounding inequities in the institutions for which they work. We therefore encourage all AS affiliated institutions to evaluate their existing gender equity plans (policy *and* practice directives) against these findings to determine any policy or practice protocol gaps and workplace training needs. We also recommend future research that includes interviews or focus groups to provide more nuanced understanding of how gender, religiocentrism and place mediate the lived experience of women working in ASC awarded HEIs. Finally, as the ASC expanded its remit in 2015 to include a wider variety of disciplines, we encourage research to investigate if and how the disciplinary field (further) mediate intersectional barriers or experience.



## Note

1. Please note, that while the survey deployed the term 'female', we acknowledge that this descriptor is limited as not all women are 'female', and that complexity exists around women as all women *are* women (cis and trans\*). Throughout the paper we use 'female' due to accuracy of reporting from the survey data wording, but 'women' more generally due to its greater inclusivity.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Gail Crimmins** is associate dean, School of Business and Creative Industries and an associate professor in Communication at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She has widely published on gender equity, gender in education, and the lived experience of women in developing gender equity strategy and cultural change management. Gail has worked alongside Sarah Casey on the 'Real Rural' projects, is an executive member (2021–) of the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association, and sits on the Board of high-ranking gender journals such as *Gender and Education*. Gail has published three books, is experienced in creating Non Traditional Research Outcomes (NTRO), as well as producing scholarly works in high ranking journals.

**Dr Sarah Casey** is a senior lecturer, Communication at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. She leads the Real Stories of Country Women, Real Rural Digital Solutions and Real Rural Women's Leadership projects. Her work and lived experience about rural life have featured in academic publications, national media, as well as internationally in the *Chicago Quarterly Review*. She is the author of two books and produces NTROs such as micro-documentaries and podcasts. Sarah is a long-term executive member of the national peak body, the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association and the co-editor of the associated journal, *Feminisms, Gender and Advocacy* (with Associate Professor Gail Crimmins). She is a member of the National Rural Women's Coalition Communication Reference Team (2021–), the key industry alliance for rural, regional and remote women in Australia.

**Maria Tsouroufli** is a Professor of Education at the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences at Brunel University, London. She previously worked as Reader in Women and Gender at the University of Wolverhampton. Maria's research is concerned with social justice with a particular focus on gender inequalities in education and professions.

## ORCID

Gail Crimmins  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7548-0139>

Sarah Casey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7433-3623>

Maria Tsouroufli  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0547-4956>

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