

**‘Resistance amongst faculty women in Academia’** *Higher Education in Europe*, XXV, 2: (2000) 213-219 by **Pat O’Connor**

**Introduction**

This article describes various types of resistance within academic organisations. It starts from a recognition that gender is embedded in organisations (Acker, 1990 and 1998) and that once we accept ‘that staff bring their personal interests into organisations and that these shape the way they discharge their functions, we must also accept that gendered perceptions, practices and attitudes will be present too’ (Halford, 1992:172). It assumes, drawing on Connell’s work, (1995a:82) that although only a minority of men actively subordinate women (hegemonic masculinity) the majority benefit from the patriarchal dividend ‘in terms of honour, prestige or the right to command. [They] men also gain a material dividend.’ This is facilitated by the fact that hegemonic masculinity is used as ‘an organising principle’ in such structures (Cheng, 1996:xiv). Resistance is ‘understood in terms of consciousness or action, whether structurally or subjectively determined, either collectively or individually engaged’ a definition which encompasses, but is not restricted to, the kinds of resistance which are typically associated with industrial labour conflicts (Gottfried, 1994:109).

Ireland (in contrast to the UK) has seen less recent dramatic change in academic structures although such changes in the UK do not seem to have substantially altered the gendered nature of the faculty profile (Davies and Holloway, 1995; Morley, 1999; Hearn, 1999). Ruane and Sutherland (1999) using data derived from the Higher Education Authority, which included two primary teacher training colleges, found that women constituted 28% of the faculty and just over 5% of those at Professorial level. The latter is virtually identical to the situation before the Marriage Bar was lifted in 1973 (the latter obliged women to withdraw from paid employment on marriage in a variety of occupations and created context where there was social pressure to do so in a variety of other areas). In the UK women constitute 7-8% of those at professorial status (Hearn, 1999). US women constitute 16% of those with full professorial status (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 1996, September:24) but again only 8% of those in the Eight Ivy League and the ‘Big Ten’ Universities. Even in Finland, which would be widely seen as ‘the promised land’ (Husu, 1999) only 18% of those at professorial level are women. Such patterns

cannot be explained by a country's level of economic development: in fact Turkey (at 20%) has the highest proportion of women in such positions in Europe -possibly reflecting the elite nature of university education there. Neither is it affected by the proportion of women in the labour force or their educational levels. Thus Irish women constitute just under two thirds of those in professional occupations; they are out-performing boys educationally in State examinations and constitute roughly half of all undergraduate and post-graduate students in higher education(O'Connor, 1998a; Ruane and Sutherland, 1999).

### **Methodology**

It is important to stress the methodological limitations of this article. It draws particularly on participant observation of the position of faculty women in three Irish academic organisations in which I was employed at various times over the past 30 years (i.e. in the early 1970s; the 1980s; and the 1990s respectively): initially at research assistant level and more latterly at professorial level. Up to the early 1990s my interests had studiously, and unconsciously, excluded power. Personal and professional experiences in the 1990s led me to reflect on these issues at the level of 'discursive consciousness' (Haugaard, 1997). More latterly I have been seen as an academic whose activities have a certain legitimacy in view of the externally imposed requirements in the equal opportunities area (Universities Act, 1998). Raising issues publicly about any organisation is widely seen as problematic, and involves questions of institutional loyalty. Ireland is a very small country (3.7 million people, of whom only 1.3 million are in paid employment); with a total of seven universities, and fourteen higher education institutes and a handful of other semi-state research institutes; with a total of 18 women at Professorial level in the Higher Education sector Smyth, 1996; Ruane and Sutherland, 1999). In this context the specific characteristics of these organisations will not be described nor the differences between them referred to. This puts demands on the readers trust. I can only echo Sennett's (1998) hope that this deviation from normal methodological practice is seen for what it is: a device which enables ideas and observations to be presented in a delicate situation.

### **Types of resistance**

Analytically separate kinds of resistance will be described in the following sections and are speculatively located on a continuum from the least organisationally transformative to the most.

#### *Individual distancing*

This is an individual approach which involves social, emotional and/or physical withdrawal from the wider organisational structure and a focusing of energies on that limited arena where the maximum level of control can be exerted (viz. the lecture theatre or one's own desk). Women's withdrawal from the wider organisational context was simultaneously an act of individual resistance and was used as evidence that they had little commitment to the wider organisation and so were not promotable.

*Creating or maintaining a 'separate' world .....*

Within a structure which is hierarchically and numerically male dominated, women who do not wish to see themselves as victims may resist by collectively creating their own 'separate' world. Such worlds are typically characterised by a chronic shortage of resources. Their very marginality means that it is difficult to achieve the kind of visibility outside them which is important as regards promotion. Such worlds are likely to provoke little negative reaction when the areas involved are seen as trivial. Where they are seen as subversive, invisibility is not an option: 'slagging', bullying, isolation, the undermining of professional identity and stymieing of task achievements being used. Attempts to sustain a non-stigmatised identity and a collective world view in this situation are only possible through frequent retreats to a bunker.

*Attempting to reconcile work and family*

At one level this can be achieved by academic women not marrying or having children. National data is not available. However Limited Maternity Leave has only been in existence in Ireland since 1981 and (unpaid) Parental Leave since 1998. Lewis (1997:21) noted that family friendly employment policies do 'not challenge traditional work structures'. Even where such possibilities exist there may be a felt lack of a 'sense of entitlement' (Lewis, 1997) Byrne and Dillon (1996) noting that faculty women did not take advantage of their full statutory rights in relation to maternity leave.

*Tackling 'the enemy within....?'*

Intriguingly, although women were severely under-represented at decision making level in these academic organisations, the majority did not 'see' it. Educational and occupational systems relentlessly encourage this illusion: one which is very re-assuring for those who benefit from the patriarchal dividend but are 'bashful about domination' and like to feel that the privileges they enjoy are given to them 'by nature or tradition or by women themselves rather than by the active social subordination of women going on here and now' (Connell, 1995b:215). In this context

references to women and women's interests may be perceived as 'sexist' and effectively as attempts to demean. A widespread lack of confidence and organisational naiveté was common amongst faculty women. Low levels of self esteem have been shown to appear very early in Irish women and to exist even when class background and ability are controlled for. This is not surprising in a society where, with the exception of the largely symbolic position of President, the face of authority is male; women's work is seen as less valuable than men's; women are paid less; and where there is a belief that men's power and authority is 'natural' and 'appropriate'

*Naming aspects of organisational culture which are not 'woman friendly'*

Organisational culture is the concept which is typically used to refer to ideas about 'women's place' and to what has been called the complicated fabric of myths and values that legitimise their position at the lower levels of the hierarchy and portray managerial jobs as primarily masculine. A variety of work has adverted to its existence and importance in 'chilling' women out (Deem, 1999; Husu, 1999). Publicly naming such a culture in a variety of internal fora (at Departmental, Faculty, Management Co-ordinating Group; Promotion Committee; Governing Body and Union meetings) is seen as a form of resistance. In some cases doing this was seen as indicative of an inability to accept authority, with the consequent demonization of those raising such issues. This undermined their attractiveness as collaborators: their status as not being 'team players' was reinforced and their structural vulnerability increased. Counter-resistance involved challenging the accuracy of the figures; claiming that the trends will change 'naturally' in the future and dismissing them as feminist and divisive.

*Revealing organisational procedures which are not 'woman friendly'*

Subtle limitations to the degree to which procedures were 'woman friendly' persisted. Thus for example a requirement to ensure a gender balance on the interview board was sometimes met by including only one woman- and one who was at a lower professional level than her male counterparts. Frequently high profile work was not allocated to women, making it difficult for them to achieve visibility, to 'show form', to be seen as an obvious candidate for promotion. Many men at the middle ranks of these organisations had ties to male colleagues rooted in their common identity as men, in patterns of sociability and past indebtedness(although there were exceptions of course (Hearn, 1999:135). The limit of such men's support for women frequently consisted in not actively opposing any proposal that might benefit women. Even where positions of managerial authority were rotated, this sometimes occurred amongst a small number of men who utilised existing structures to allocate resources to each other and generally

advanced each others' careers; the most administratively arduous of these posts being given to a man at quite a low level, whose own chances of promotion were increased by the ties of indebtedness he was then able to create.

Subtle discrimination may be reflected in the allocation of senior posts to particular gendered areas; in the framing of advertisements; in the importance attached to vague criteria at critical access points; in loose marking schemas; in general assessments of a candidate's 'style' as well as in ideas that men are more 'natural' management material or that they 'need' promotion more. The recent Employment Equality Act (1998) permits but does not require positive action, and it remains to be seen if it will have any effect.

#### *Exposing aspects of gendered career structures*

Halford et al (1997) noted that in the organisations they studied it was very unlikely for men, other than at the very start of their careers, to be in junior positions, while these latter positions were filled by women who stayed there for most of their careers. Similar sorts of patterns were evident amongst faculty in the academy. In addition in many cases predominantly female areas of employment had heavier teaching loads than predominantly male areas; a pattern which militated against women within an increasingly research conscious academy. The narrowness of the 'channel' from which senior academics were recruited further militated against the existence of women at senior level.

#### *Creating/Mobilising allies*

Within the academy, a hierarchically and numerically male dominated structure, it is difficult for women to create and maintain either cross-sex friendships with men, which are seen as most useful in career advancement, or same sex relationships, which are important in identity validation (Kilduff and Mehra, 1996). Strong ties between women were informally ridiculed in some departments, while in others such ties were seen as subversive. However electronic networking between women is becoming important as regards the transmission of information (e.g. MIT 1999) and the creation of a feeling of collective strength and identity amongst what is a very scattered and fragmented community.

Men at senior level had more potential than those at middle management as allies. In part this reflected the fact that they were more accountable to wider institutional forces, sensitive to the perceived status of their organisation and to its performance on a variety of externally defined indicators. Such support was facilitated by their 'buying into' a 'female' agenda through

participation in gendered projects to raise the profile of their area. In this way they became stakeholders in the wider gender project: exemplifying Foucault's observation (1980) that 'resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.' Their receptivity at a personal level to such initiatives seemed to be related to their own experience of discrimination; and their willingness to identify across gender (a willingness which it has been suggested was related to their ideas about their own sexuality: Maile, 1999). Their involvement meant that resistance was indirectly legitimated.

### *Targeting key structures*

If women recognise that they are unlikely to be either sacked or promoted, their co-operation with structures which dis-empower them became problematic and they took steps to become increasingly represented in union structures, on key committees and representational bodies. A decision to introduce quotas on certain key representational structures in one organisation created a context where women were more willing to put themselves forward, so that the imposition of quotas became unnecessary. In some cases the sheer paucity of women, especially at senior level, and the requirement that senior staff be involved in key committees, made the support of pro-feminist men critical.

### *Whistleblowing*

Rothschild and Miethe (1994: 254) defined whistleblowing as 'the disclosure of illegal, unethical or harmful practices in the workplace to parties who might take action' (i.e. to those further up or outside the hierarchy). They noted that typically whistleblowers were highly competent employees, although the typical response was to depict them as troublemakers, 'whingers' or crazy people (if they could neither be got rid of nor intimidated into silence). The personal and the financial cost of attempting to raise gender related issues through whistleblowing is usually considerable. In this context the public action of eight faculty women in University College Dublin in publicly highlighting the position of women in 1998 was remarkable. The recent initiative by the Employment Equality Agency (now Office of the Director of Equality Investigations) in independently taking a case on behalf of all women faculty within that University offers possibilities. Indeed a number of the women involved in the initial whistleblowing have since been promoted.

### *Industrial action*

It is suggested that this is the most potentially transformative type of resistance. However, in hierarchically and numerically male institutions, it is extremely difficult to get the union to negotiate on measures which are seen as even predominantly in favour of women. Quite simply the membership will not support them. Furthermore the perceived timidity of women whose 'frontier of control' (Gottfried, 1994) is a personal and professional commitment to the students does not facilitate this. Individual male representatives (particularly those who had some personal experience of discrimination) were frequently personally supportive but there were very clear limits to that support.

### **Conclusions**

The extent of the change which can be attributed to resistance is difficult to assess. In one or more of the organisations referred to, equal opportunities policies were formulated; structures created to deal with equality issues; directives issued as regards the composition of interview boards and the use of search procedures; a women's academic network was formed; gender awareness workshops were undertaken by senior management and a commitment was given that line management would identify time specific targets as regards redressing gender balance and ways of dealing with an organisational culture which was not 'woman friendly'. These changes may have occurred anyway. Change in the proportion of women at senior level in these organisations has been minimal.

Resistance does seem to be useful in generating an ongoing awareness of the situation amongst both women and men. Such awareness is not, of course, enough since it may simply increase women's frustration and the intensity of the backlash. The most obvious counter strategies are the colonisation of the stigmatisation of any initiative in favour of women; the demonization of prominent women; the establishment of organisational 'roadblocks' and the rendering of hard-won procedures irrelevant by the introduction of new ones containing implicit positive discrimination in favour of men. The process is painfully slow and extremely time consuming (Price and Priest, 1996). However the abandonment of the academy to hegemonic masculinity in the Third Millennium is not an attractive option.

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