A standard academic career? By Pat O’Connor (2013)

*Generation and Gender*, ed by B. Bagilhole and K. White, Palgrave Macmillan pp23-45

Abstract

I graduated with a first class honours degree at 19 years, but more than 25 years later, I was as far away as ever from my naïve early career dream of a Professorship. I had a PhD, a research track record, varied teaching experiences and demonstrated leadership abilities. I had worked in some very prestigious institutions in Ireland and the UK. But at 46 years old I was stuck. Yet, within five years, I had been appointed Professor of Sociology and Social Policy and Dean of the Faculty (the first woman in my university to be appointed at these levels). I am now working on my sixth book. This is what I learned about men, power and organisations during what has been a long and challenging career to date.

Introduction

It is very strange in some ways to think of my academic career as standard, and yet in many ways it illustrates some of the typical issues, challenges and opportunities which characterise women’s careers in male dominated organisations. There are particularities of time, location and background, characteristics which at first glance, do not appear to be transferrable to other contexts, but may actually be so. There are also organisational particularities, and of course interactional and personal ones. The critical moments in my life will be different to many others. I fully appreciate that the opportunities that opened for me, did not open for many women in the past, and especially not for women like me. I feel deeply privileged to be working in the public educational system. I still believe that education is important and that, despite the heartaches and reversals, there is no more satisfying arena for a life. Other women may perhaps be less naïve than I, and more adept at learning the lessons of life in the world of higher education. But the similarities are there. This then is my story.

Background: including time, location and family

I grew up in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1950s were yet another period of recession and emigration, and the 1960s were not much different, although there were shreds of hope, culturally and economically. Ireland was moving from a predominantly rural agricultural society to a credentialised urban one and middle class positions were opening up (Breen, 1990). However the institutional Roman Catholic Church dominated all aspects of public and
private life in what was culturally a very static society, where men controlled the public areas, and where to be ‘really’ Irish was to be male, catholic and a supporter of the (largely male) Gaelic Athletic Association. Women’s power base was in the home, and indeed since the marriage bar prohibiting married women from continuing in a variety of areas of paid employment was not removed until 1973, the home was the only arena where most women could dream of having power (O’Connor, 1998). Power, of course, was not a respectable aspiration for a woman, other than in a purely symbolic sense, and even there one was still ultimately subject to male authority. Possibly reflecting the hidden strength of women’s role in the family, there was a very strong popular devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. She exemplified the highest ideals any girl could or should aspire to: the implicit message being that girls are at best ‘handmaidens’ of those in power; serving, caring, exemplifying self-sacrifice and deference. One of two daughters, my sister, Stella (apart from one spectacular act of self-assertion) fitted the mould. I did not. But power is never total (Faith, 1994). In this patriarchal landscape, I emerged as a headstrong, opinionated young woman, ambitious to change the world and seeing no reason why I could not do so.

Unusually for the time, both my parents graduated from University College Cork in the 1930s. Both were from downwardly socially mobile, agricultural backgrounds, and as such, both were very unlikely candidates for university education. My father’s father was poor and feckless and, one of five boys, he was the only one to get a university education (his Degree in Dairy Science was funded by an aunt). Neither my mother’s two sisters nor any of her three brothers got a university education. Indeed, her mother opposed her going to university as a young ‘mature student’ on the grounds that it would ruin her eyesight. For my mother, who did an Arts degree (English and History) these were halcyon days. We were reared on Shakespearian quotations: ‘This above all to thine own self be true and it must follow as the night the day thou canst not then be false to any man’. A deeply religious woman who went to mass every day, she was profoundly anti-clerical. We were early introduced to Anne Frank’s diary and to the consequences of institutional obedience and abdication of personal responsibility, as reflected in many German’s collusion with the Holocaust. A non-conformist in her youth who had not only gone to university, changed her name by deed poll and married against her parents’ wishes, she found a narrow home centred life difficult, yet was not quite strong enough to successfully rebel against it. A lover of ideas, literature and political argument, she was a very reluctant housekeeper who, for as long as I can remember, read nine library books a week to escape into her own world.
Both my parents were from Cork, a county in the south of Ireland which is popularly seen as ‘the rebel county’ because of its ability to produce dissenters: people who in Irish terms are ‘great crack’, with a nice line in parochial arrogance and ego-mania, who believe that Cork is the centre of the universe and who dismiss any evidence that does not fit with that perception. We lived there until I was seven years old, and in truth my parents never really left it and were perpetual emigrants in their own country. The move from a small village two teacher country school to a large Dublin working class city school with classes of 50 students was difficult for me socially and personally. The one area in which I could sometimes shine was the classroom. Books were the typical prizes. I won one called *101 Great Lives*. To my considerable surprise ninety nine of these were men. Of the two women, one was Queen Elizabeth 1st and, in a nationalist household, identification with the oppressor was impossible. The other was Marie Curie. Education, I subliminally recognised was the way forward. Yet during my second level convent education in 1960s Dublin, the only teachers I had were religious or single unmarried women. Some strange processes were at work, but I had no idea what they were.

Education, its reality, was very important to my mother, and hence her top priority for my sister and I. That priority was not supported by the Dublin urban working class neighbourhood that we moved to when I was seven years old and where, in the 1960s, most children did not even go on to second level. School fees, which were essential for a convent education then, were a source of stress in our family. I still remember the brown envelope with a window in the front that arrived every August. But my mother was determined that we would get an education. My father, who had been ‘shafted’ from his managerial job in the food sector when I was a child, and whose subsequent career was in a job well below his educational level, was less impressed by the value of education. A workaholic, he believed in the value of work well done, regardless of its level or salary (‘trifles make perfection and perfection is no trifle’). His mantra of ‘It is not what you know but who you know’ was in striking contrast to my mothers’ views. Opinionated and articulate, I argued ferociously that he was wrong. It took more than thirty years before I began to realise just how right he was.
Higher Education

I finished second level education when I was 16 years old. This was a-typical and far too young, but I was unwilling to repeat the state examination (Leaving Certificate). All the jobs that might be considered by a girl of my lower middle class background were unavailable at that age (for example, civil service, primary teaching, nursing). Anticipating this, and with an entirely precocious (male?) faith in objectivity, and an equally (male?) sense of entitlement, at 15 years old I persuaded my parents to have me assessed professionally in University College Dublin (UCD). Strong literacy and numerical skills (and hopeless spatial ones) as well as a strong commitment to social justice were identified. They recommended a variety of careers including the law, primary teaching, hotel management and social science. Not really knowing what it was, but impressed by the combination of social and science, I decided that, whatever it was, this would be my career. I ignored pressure from the nuns in my second level school to consider science, not surprising perhaps, since as a girl it was not possible for me to do honours mathematics at school, and the only science subject I had done was physiology (both very common patterns at that time: Cullen, 1987).

In the 1960s, the Irish higher educational system was in Trow’s (2010) terms, an elite one, with only five per cent of the cohort attending university (Hunt Report, 2011). A very small number of local authority scholarships were available, and apart from these, attendance at university in 1967 involved the payment of fees. Recognising my anxiety and my ambition, my father promised that regardless of whether I got one or not, he would give me an (Irish) pound a week. This was a substantial sum of money, to him and to me. I got the local authority scholarship and was able to ‘lend’ him back the money. Relieved of total financial responsibility for me, he bought a second hand family car. It was a clear lesson in how educational success brings many kinds of rewards.

The head of the Department of Sociology was then an adjunct bishop in the institutional Roman Catholic Church, and the Heads of the Departments of Psychology and Ethics were priests. That seemed in no way odd to anyone at the time. Neither did the fact that 90 of the 100 students admitted to social science were women. I studied with the men. They seemed less complicated and my parents’ working class address (where I lived while at college) seemed less important to them than to the women. My greatest intellectual stimulation came from English (to my amazement, I came first in the Arts Faculty in English in first year).
(possible) desire to choose a different route to my mother’s, or a reluctance to abandon my dreams of changing the world meant that I continued with Social Science. That decision dramatically changed the course of my life.

Having entered university at 16 years of age, I graduated with a first class honours Degree in Social Science at 19 years. I was educated enough to know how little I knew. At that time, for someone with my background, there was no question of not starting paid work immediately. My choices were social work, teaching or research. An internship in a psychiatric hospital in Baltimore in the USA, as an undergraduate made me realise just how hard it was to change the world as a social worker. I felt I did not know enough to teach. So it had to be research.

An ‘outsider’ to university in terms of class, gender and age, I had survived and was on my way, with high hopes and naïve optimism.

Critical Moments: Awareness

My first job in 1970 was a three year contract job as a research assistant at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the most prestigious institute in Ireland, albeit one that was struggling to accept sociology as a ‘real’ discipline. My first direct line manager was Professor Damian Hannan, a lovely man, respectful, kind and stimulating. A born researcher, he loved his discipline, sociology, had studied in the United States, and had not a discriminatory bone in his body. Encouraged by him, although daunted by the enormity of my ambition, I enrolled for a M. Social Science Degree part-time. My topic was middle class women’s attachment to, identification with and normative obligations as regards housework and child care. This topic was to be very effectively explored by Ann Oakley in London in the 1970s.

The marriage bar was still in existence in Ireland in 1970 and there were higher pay rates for married men (a pattern depicted as ‘natural’ since they had a wife and family to support). I did not have a feminist frame of reference but was appalled by this. I began to notice gendered patterns. There were few women researchers in the ESRI at that time and none at Professorial level. Spatially, the women were concentrated on the lower floors. I began to notice how gender and hierarchical position affected interaction. My father’s ‘hail-fellow – well-met’ attitude of ‘treating the prince and the pauper just the same’ involved a disregard of
hierarchical and gender cues. It was slowly beginning to dawn on me that this was not the way things worked.

Within a year Damian Hannan, my supportive line manager (now also my Master’s thesis supervisor) left the ESRI. I was told to report directly to the new Director of the Institute, an economist by discipline and socially very conservative. He was critical of my desire to do a Masters (‘why would you want to do that? You will marry’); unsupportive of my discipline and totally hostile to my topic (‘trivial’); and unable or unwilling to deal with someone who had never grasped the essence of line management. It was an unhappy experience for both of us (certainly so for me). When my three year contract ended it was not renewed.

It was now the early 1970s and culturally Ireland was beginning to change. But there were few jobs available. I went to London where I worked on contracts in two research centres for a total of nine years: first at the Social Research Unit at Bedford and Royal Holloway College, and then at the National Institute for Social Work. During this time I finished (on a part-time basis) what was now a PhD length Masters; and then (still convinced that I did not know enough) started a PhD on a new topic. My PhD was again on women, this time on women’s very close relationships, (focussing on friends, mothers and sisters). This topic was a spin off from a research project on which I was working and which was looking at the factors protecting women from the onset of depression. It was obvious to me that women got a lot of support from mothers, sisters and fictive kin/friends but the ideology suggested that male partners were the key supports in their lives. In Irish terms this topic was as trivial as my Masters, reflecting as it did, a prioritising of women’s concerns and their lives. In the first research centre where I worked there were other young women in similar research positions (doing part-time PhDs), and one very senior male researcher. None of the young women seemed to be making much headway. Furthermore, a much older and more senior collaborator had not finished her Ph.D. We were generators of ideas, but credentials seemed to elude us, destined apparently to all sit at the feet of the Master indefinitely. I began to wonder.

I changed jobs in London. In the National Institute for Social Work, Irishness was a quaint and colourful addition to a largely British context. Although the lead researcher was male, his style was genially patronising. I was invited to join an informal circle that included iconic figures such as John Bowlby, Murray Parkes and Ian Sinclair. I found being patronised and
protected infinitely preferable to my other gendered experiences, but somehow I was unable to utilize the cultural capital I acquired, there either at the time or indeed subsequently.

The breakup of a long-term relationship and my father’s terminal illness decided me: I was coming back to Ireland. It was the early 1980s and Ireland was in recession again. There were still very few jobs. It never occurred to me to revisit my old lecturers in UCD to explore options, or to talk to my Master’s supervisor, who was now in University College Cork. I turned to family, and my sister, Stella kept an eye on the advertisements for me. Eventually a job was advertised in what was then a Regional Technical College. It was in a predominantly female area of which I had no direct experience (child care). I got the job. Within six weeks of starting work in Ireland, my father died, to be followed two years later by my mother. I was then in my early 30s.

I enjoyed teaching and the strange intimacy of the classroom. I had the opportunity to take initiatives. My colleagues were kind, sensible grounded people. The students were responsible and disproportionately from working class backgrounds. In my mid-30s, after more than fifteen years in various kinds of higher educational institutions, I was on the bottom rung of the career ladder in what was popularly seen as a ‘lower status’ institution. I insulated myself in this little gendered world and convinced myself of its importance. I ignored the fact that the area I was involved in was trivialised by management. I felt that I had at last discovered a really useful survival strategy. I finished the PhD and started to publish.

I was very surprised when an attempt was made to ‘shaft’ me and to replace me as course director at the Regional Technical College by a male colleague. The process was subtle and relentless. At this time, with three other women I was teaching a voluntary Saturday morning Women’s Studies course. A colleague there lent me a book by La Rouche (1985) called Strategies for Women at Work. I followed the advice on ‘how to deal with a no-holes-barred barracuda’. It worked. He left. I began to wake up to the reality of power. I saw an opportunity for the development of a new degree (in Social Work). It would enhance the institution and add to the greater good by educating professionals in an important area. Full of enthusiasm I gathered a team around me and we produced a credible syllabus. I saw an opportunity for external validation. It was all very exciting. My PhD and publication track record gave me and it credibility. However there was a problem. Neither my immediate line manager, nor the one above him would back me. I was very puzzled. Instead they backed a
degree put forward by a male colleague, with no PhD or publications, but with some footballing expertise. My assumptions were all called into question. I began to wonder if my father’s stress on ‘who you know’ might be correct.

In many ways I had kept to a ‘stereotypical male script’ up to this point in my career. I had believed everything Weber (1947) said about the rationality of bureaucracies. I believed in a meritocratic world where educational credentials were the key to career success. From a spectacularly promising undergraduate degree and first job, I had been very slow to make the transition to a permanent job. After 12 years on research contracts, I had managed to get a permanent job in Ireland, but at an institution that was seen as much lower in status than the Economic and Social Research Institute, where I had begun my career. The occasional men among my PhD group in London had managed to transition to permanent jobs in academia, some very prestigious indeed. Meanwhile, prioritising financial independence, I had studied part-time, and was making little progress occupationally. I had moments of gender awareness, and thought that by creating a little world where women and children were valued, that I could survive and thrive. But it was now clear that this solution was illusory.

It was time to re-evaluate the assumptions that had underpinned my life.

**Critical Moments: Transformation**

I was now in my late 30s. I had begun to notice gendered patterns of disparagement and marginalisation; and to wonder about others (including spatial segregation and hierarchical dominance). I had enjoyed being patronised and protected, although I could not seem to use the opportunities offered on this basis. I still felt little real sense of intellectual confidence and no sense of entitlement. I was a committed and effective teacher and an excellent administrator. I was beginning to build a solid publication track record, the perception of it as a way of serving the students being the catalyst for me. I had no children and no work/family issues and was a token-male in terms of my ‘care-less’ (Lynch et al, 2012) life style and priorities. Peculiarly enough for someone whose ambition at 18 was to have a Professorship at 25 years old (thinking very much within a male linear career model), at 37 years, I had no career ambitions. Partly this was because completing my (part-time) Masters and PhD theses had taken so long that they had become ends in themselves. Partly having been on short-term employment contracts (which was my situation, for twelve years), long term ambitions had
been obliterated by a focus on survival. Furthermore, my career trajectory was such that to even think of a Professorship smacked of total lunacy. But having been forced to challenge my own assumptions, at 37 years old, I decided that I was giving myself three years to publish a substantial amount of academic work, and that if I had not done so by that time, I would give up that dream. This terrified me since I had no other dreams. I started to publish with a vengeance. *Friendships Between Women*, sold extremely well in the Unities States and the UK and soon I was getting regular requests for reprints of my articles from colleagues all round the world.

A blunt friend, spelt out for me the reasons for my career difficulties. In a conventional world where women dressed in formal, or at least smart casual clothes, and wore feminine accessories, I was not acceptable. Pre-occupied with work and study, I attached no importance whatsoever to this dimension of my life. I wore what was clean, with a baggy dark blue boiler suit and a patched leather jacket being amongst my favourite outfits. Dismissing my excuse of lack of time, she suggested that I keep a pair of ear-rings in the car and put them on while driving. This required an attitude shift but I could do that. Her other comments were more difficult to absorb. She said that the predominantly female area I worked in was not taken seriously, and that, despite my PhD and publications, because I was seen to embody that area, I lacked intellectual credibility. Those in power did not identify with me, and so would not support or mentor me. I began to realise that I had a lot to learn and that I probably would not have the opportunity to do so in that setting.

I eventually got a new job in a university in a different city. This was difficult. To move from a lower prestige institution to a higher status one is difficult for anyone. But if you are a woman, over 40, whose only lecturing experience is in such an institution, and in an area that is both applied and female dominated (i.e. child care) it is even more so. I developed the ability to forget about the Dear John letters as soon as I received them. I rewarded myself for putting myself through the recurrent torture of job applications. There was a craft centre that produced beautiful wraps and, over time, I acquired quite a selection since I bought one each time that I was rejected. Unbelievably, it never occurred to me to network to increase my chances. I had drifted away from the educational and work based networks I had in Dublin and although I joined a professional association, it was clear to me that the status of my institution was low and that this affected my own status. I maintained and valued personal ties in Dublin and London, but these overwhelmingly did not translate into work related social or cultural capital. In any event I felt uncomfortable using them in these terms, coming
as I was now from a low base. I just kept applying for jobs (and buying wraps). In and out between I continued publishing steadily and built a little house. The job I was offered at the University of Limerick involved administrative responsibilities as course director for the MA in Women’s Studies. At 42 years of age, I gave up a permanent job to go on a year’s probation there. I was on my way at last.

Being course director in Women’s Studies for the next six years was by far the most difficult experience in my life, but it transformed me. Despite my skirmishes with male power I had never really understood stereotyping until that point. As a ‘token-male’ in career terms who loved to talk politics (although hated sport) I was astonished that ‘everyone knew’ who I was before I arrived. I was a ‘ball breaker’. I had always studied women, but avoided power as a topic and did not really see myself as a feminist. I found men’s easy undemanding interactional style relaxing, although women and children had been the drivers of my intellectual life. Now suddenly I was enemy number one to 49 per cent of the population and the ‘great breast’ /iconic mother figure to 51 per cent. I was not comfortable with either position.

As course director in Women’s Studies I learned just how deeply many middle aged Irish men fear and dislike everything to do with Women’s Studies. Yet I found it hard to accept the conclusion of Anthony Clare (2000: 194) a psychiatrist and family man, that all men, like himself, not only loved women but ‘We fear them, hate them, marginalise them, denigrate them and categorise them’. The Women’s Studies course was constantly under threat. Every academic grading board became a logistical nightmare as every decision or non-decision was challenged. A gregarious extrovert, I gave up going for coffee. It was too exhausting. Every conversation turned into a battle one way or another.

My male colleagues turned my interest in gender to their advantage by directing all students, with even the vaguest interest in gender, and from any discipline, to my door for advice, help, support and supervision. Never blessed with equanimity, it was not long before I began to get utterly exhausted and frustrated. Their response was even more infuriating: a bewildered look and the observation that: ‘But you are interested in gender’. There was no point going to my Head of Department. He had already told me that he ‘had a problem with the word woman. It was narrow, rigid and ideological’: a singularly unproductive place to begin a discussion.

At that time all of my Women’s Studies colleagues were part-time and so structurally unable to support me. I was a member of the union, but it never occurred to me to go to them.
Instead I pinned a sign on my door highlighting the fact that more than half of the students but only 15 per cent of the Faculty were women. I suggested that they draw these figures to the attention of the then Dean and the head of the Students’ Union before they knocked. This reduced the number of students knocking. Faculty detoured to see the sign. The then Dean ordered me to remove the sign saying that it implied that he was not supportive of women. I refused but said that I would modify it. Never having been a campaigning sort of person, I was surprised at my own action. It did not endear me to management.

Around this time a colleague, Dr Ita Richardson, asked to use the Women’s Studies network as a pilot for her PhD research. She was interested in looking at how strategic planning could occur, how issues could be identified and decisions made through a process of individual and collective brainstorming and mapping. Equal opportunities in the university emerged as one of the top ten concerns in the Women’s Studies network. It sounds ridiculous to say that I was surprised, but I was. I began to do yearly audits on the proportion of women at each academic level in the university. I addressed Governing Authority and several other fora. I used my own position as an illustrative example: 26 years after graduating with a first class honours degree, I was still at Lecturer level. This was the same level of position I got when I returned to Ireland 14 years before. There were no women at Professorial level in my university. Nationally the picture was much the same: the proportion of women at this level having changed little since the 1970s (when the marriage bar was in place, and when women made up five per cent of those at Professorial level). I had no hope that this would change in my lifetime. Given that I had spent 26 years at one point on the career ladder, it seemed very unlikely that I would ascend three steps to a Professorship before I had to retire in less than 20 years’ time.

My career seemed set to end before it really started. I had almost entirely forgotten the lessons I had begun to learn from my blunt friend in the 1980s. True, I now dressed better, wore make-up, and kept the ear-rings in the car; but the essential lessons about power in hierarchical male dominated institutions still eluded me. The visibility of my responsibility for Women’s Studies did bring some benefits. When the union organised a course in management for women, they sought me out: I was the embodiment of woman in the university. I have a distinct recollection of a short course on women in management where the man who was providing it tapped his address book and equated friendship with usefulness. My own horror and that of the other women participants was matched by his astonishment. In the meantime I survived, and at the end of every week I celebrated that
survival with a mad combination of my favourite treats: pate, ice cream with chocolate sauce and two whiskies.

My research interests were beginning to turn towards power. I had undertaken a study of the position of women in an Irish speaking semi-state organisation. Then I successfully applied to undertake a study of the barriers to women’s promotion in the Irish health service. Denis Doherty, the man who commissioned the latter study understood prejudice, transferring his experience of religious sectarianism to the gender issue. Again, I did the fieldwork myself and was very surprised indeed to hear 160 women articulating concerns that had lain submerged in my consciousness for years. They talked about a culture where men hired men who were like themselves (a process of cloning or homosociality that has been well recognised internationally: Grummell et al., 2009); they talked about the experience of being in a ‘chilly’ culture that excluded women; about being in areas that had few promotional posts and little visibility; they talked about women’s lack of confidence and political astuteness and the usefulness of the ‘structural stuff’ such as quotas ‘that gives women confidence’ (O’Connor, 1996). It was a moment of enlightenment and relief. These women were in very different careers than I was, yet their experience of male dominated organisations was very similar.

Then I had a moment of awakening. I realised that, as a permanent employee who was doing her duty, I could not easily be sacked. I was not going to be promoted, so why was I behaving myself? I suddenly realised that I did not need to please. They had no hold over me. But ironically things changed again. The profile that Women’s Studies had given me internally; the public nature of my campaigns; a higher awareness of gender nationally (because of EU pressure) and my external research activities began to bear surprising fruit. I was nominated by a man, Professor Eddie Moxon-Browne, for the annual University Research Achievement award in 1996 (my status as a ‘token-male’ was revealed in a colleagues’ comment that I ‘was the only one with balls’. I did not take that as a compliment).

Then a Chair in Sociology was announced in 1997. It was a public competition and I applied. By this time I had built up a credible research and publication record; considerable experience of teaching and a track record of leadership activities. I had also found a (male) external academic mentor. To everyone’s astonishment (not least my own) I was appointed. Paradoxically against all the odds, after six years as course director in Women’s Studies and 27 years in academia, and from a position as a Lecturer, I had finally achieved that very early
ambition. But even then a lack of a sense of entitlement persisted. I felt guilty that I had achieved a Professorship before women whom I saw as more able than I (although none of them had applied for this position). I was daunted by the shoes of a Professor. I still felt that I did not know enough.

I was the first woman to be appointed at (full) Professorial level in the University of Limerick in 1997. I was continuing to publish steadily: my fourth book, Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society was an attempt to understand the gendered changes taking place in Irish society and sold extremely well in Ireland. Meanwhile gender issues in the university remained problematic. At 47 years old, while in my probationary year at Professorial level, I learned of yet another all male interview board and tried to raise it as an issue. I was deemed to be undermining the process and was summoned to a disciplinary hearing involving three levels of line management, all of whom had signed off on the (entirely male) interview board. To underline the gravity of the situation, I was advised to bring a union representative with me. I was shocked and afraid. Despite my skirmishing, it was the first time I had ever been the subject of formal disciplinary hearings. It was difficult to get a union representative who was willing to accompany me. I knew instinctively that it had to be a man. Tom Turner, with whom I had co-authored a paper on equal opportunities, agreed to do this. The hearing proved to be very much a pro-forma exercise. I realised its purpose was simply to indicate disapproval and to generate fear.

When I look back over this stage in my life, I see the importance, and the difficulties, of Women’s Studies in universities, and the ambiguous benefit they provide for those working there. I am amazed that it took me so long to recognise gender as an issue in universities myself. Given my status as lecturer, and the almost certain likelihood of a rejection, the surprising thing was that I applied for the Professorship. This reflected a grim determination to take any opportunity, lest it be said that women did not try or were not interested in senior positions. Yet despite that grim determination, when I was successful, I still believed I was not worthy of a Professorship. I did not know enough.

**Into the Lion’s Den…..**

For as long as I can remember I have had little respect for management: my identification was always with front-line workers. Management was remote and male: ‘the suits’. I had
never been head of department, nor did I wish to be. It was impossible for Women’s Studies to survive without leadership, but I never really saw my activities there as such. The idea of being Dean never entered my head. Indeed I was not at all sure what a Dean did. Two years after becoming a Professor a colleague mentioned that she would like to be Dean when the then Dean retired. I was delighted to think that a woman might occupy this position. Since the possibility seemed remote, she applied for a sabbatical, her first in 27 years. Just before the summer, when it was too late to re-organise her plans, it was announced that the then Dean was stepping down.

It was the year 2,000. The procedure to replace the Dean in the University of Limerick then involved a mixture of nomination and appointment, with candidates being asked to write vision statements; with invitations to colleagues to comment on those who went forward as well as an interview with the then President. I had sat on several appointment and promotion boards and was not satisfied with the processes I saw there. All male appointment boards were still happening, despite the university’s policy forbidding this, and decisions were not always as free from bias as I felt they should be. After I was nominated by a woman (who nominated a block of women in the Faculty) I decided to go forward as a voice for change. There were 13 candidates; the requirement to do a vision statement reduced the field to six people. There was one other woman, and both of us had crossed the university authorities to varying degrees.

A female colleague emailed me saying that she was not going to support me, but that if I was serious I needed to ‘kiss babies’, and she attached two pages of instructions. I was astonished that someone would take the time to tell me what to do. I began to lobby and muster up support, particularly from senior male colleagues outside my own Faculty. I was still very relaxed as I was sure that there was no possibility that I would be appointed. During the interview with the President in September 2000 I suddenly realised that he identified with me, transferring his own understanding of religious sectarianism to gender. A day later I was appointed Dean for a three year period, the first woman to occupy such a position in the university. Two days later I was giving the Dean’s Conferring Address. The only aspect of the transition that I found difficult was the move to the Dean’s office on the ‘power corridor’. For six weeks I commuted between it and my own old office. This got too complicated and so I moved, bringing an old circular table with me as a tangible reminder of who I was and where I had come from.
To my very considerable surprise, I enjoyed being Dean. Suddenly many of the qualities which had been liabilities all my life became assets. In a late modern world where positional authority is no longer seen as credible (Giddens, 1991), to have an irreverent attitude to it is helpful. I was not daunted by being chair of the Faculty Management Group and of Faculty Board. I now had a tiny possibility, but still a possibility, of making changes. I was fortunate that some of these coincided with institutional developments. Thus, for example, although initially I was very much on my own in insisting on rigorous appointment processes, within a few years this was normal practice in the university. I enjoyed working with a team at Faculty level for objectives we all shared. I enjoyed being a catalyst as regards programme development and other initiatives. A collegial process still existed as regards the nomination of heads of department, so that inevitably the people who became heads were not of my choosing. I enjoyed understanding and supporting them. I relished their diversity and was pleased that the thirty people who served on the Faculty management group over the ten years of my Deanship, were diverse in terms of gender, age and nationality. The Faculty manager, Fionnuala MacMahon, had a totally different style to mine, but for ten years we worked together extremely productively and harmoniously. I found the pace of change frustratingly slow, but my impatience meant that things did happen. My tenacity too was now an asset, not a liability. As a woman, my gender was not a problem since as Dean I embodied gender and so my presence effectively changed the norm (Fletcher, 2011; Alvesson and Svengingsson, 2011).

As a Faculty Dean over the first seven years, I was one of six Deans (and the only woman). As such I was a member of an (internal) university structure called Deans’ Council, although it in fact included a wide range of heads of function as well as Deans. Because I had spent so much of my working life in largely female contexts (albeit under an ultimate male authority), and despite the fact that in many ways my life style was a male one, I was initially dismayed by a work context where women made up less than 15 per cent of the membership. I recognised the roles on offer: harridan or dutiful daughter. Neither was attractive. However I managed to carve out one that I was comfortable with: a disruptive, challenging presence that by combining humour and warmth, managed to stay just inside the bounds of acceptability. There was little real power in that context, so this strategy, which exemplified a kind of advocacy, was both effective and accepted.
During my Deanship, managerialism became an increasingly prominent part of the university processes. Hence in my last three year term the process of appointment simply involved application to and appointment by the president. This kind of process brings great risks of homosociability (‘cloning’), academic feudalism (Saunders, 2006) and ultimately a potential lack of independence. The most senior management group in the university was a nine person group, including the president, vice-presidents and (unusually) executive Deans. Two (and for a short period three) of the nine people on this group were women. Positional and gender hierarchies appeared. The power of the Vice Presidents was covert and extensive, and could ultimately undermine an executive Dean’s ability to deliver for his/her Faculty. In that context the pressure to assent to proposals coming from the Vice –Presidents in expectation of a *quid pro quo* was considerable. Deans’ advocacy on behalf of their own Faculty was depicted as biased and partial, although it was obvious that objectivity was less valued in other contexts. There were ambiguities about whether this group was simply an advisory group to the President or an actual decision making body. Taking a position opposed to the President could be seen as usefully anticipating future criticism; undermining one’s own credibility or challenging the President’s authority. I found these ambiguities difficult. There were subtle exclusionary strategies generated by men’s affiliative strategies with each other. Pre-meeting ‘bonding’ conversation, where it existed, was frequently about (male) sport; ‘side-bar’ conversations before and after the meetings were typically between the men. This conflation of ways of ‘doing men’ with ‘doing power’ irritated me in a way that I found hard to articulate at the time (when I read Yancey Martin, 2001, I understood the source of my unease). This was a gendered, extremely political arena. I was neither entirely comfortable nor adept at these games. As a woman, I was defined relative to the male norm, and in this position I could not change the culture by embodying it (as I could do at Faculty level). This was my least favourite aspect of the job.

During my Deanship, I continued to do research and to publish. My fifth book, *Irish Children and Teenagers in a Changing World* was published during my Deanship, in addition to a number of chapters and articles in peer reviewed journals. I was able to continue to be research active because I insisted on having a research day. This was an opportunity provided for all academics in the Faculty and hence I felt no compunction in accessing it myself. This enhanced my credibility as Dean and helped to keep me in touch with one part of the reality of the daily life of an academic. With a (male?) sense of entitlement, I had negotiated this with the (then) President on my initial appointment. It had to be renegotiated with each
change in the senior management structure. I found the phrase ‘It is not possible’ extremely useful and this, plus consistent adherence to the practice, meant that it became an unremarkable taken-for-granted reality within the Faculty and the wider university. Having some work ‘of my own’ was also absolutely essential in keeping my energy levels high, and in enabling me to serve the Faculty with a full heart over a ten year period. This strategy becomes increasingly difficult at vice-presidential and presidential level (O’Connor and White, 2011).

In the later stages of my Deanship I began to think of ways in which I could use that position to raise awareness of gender in a wider context. Three of these came to fruition. Firstly I was invited, initially to be a member, and later to chair the International Panel for the Evaluation of Research applications for Linnaeus Funding in Sweden, with a particular focus on organisational processes and leadership. This enabled me to highlight gender as an issue for research applicants and for their Rectors/Vice Rectors in Swedish universities (since the latter’s presence is essential for applicants for these prestigious awards). Secondly, in an attempt to institutionalise and internationalise the university’s commitment to gender, in collaboration with internal and external colleagues, a successful application was made to the European Union for a Framework Seven, five year, cross- national project (involving Sweden, Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Ireland and Turkey) on Female Empowerment in Science in Academia (FESTA) which began in February 2012. Thirdly, it seemed useful to try and use the insights that I had gained as a practitioner in educational management in a research context. As part of the Women in Higher Education Management Network, I undertook a study of men and women in senior management in Irish Universities and this has generated a number of publications (including a chapter on Organisational Culture in Gender, Power and Management edited by Bagilhole and White, drawing together data on UK, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, Turkey, Portugal, Ireland and South Africa). My sixth book, Higher Education and the Gendered World of Senior Management (2013), and comparative papers with other members of the network, are also spin-offs from this project. I am now teaching again and still enjoy its immediacy and the satisfaction of finding ways to present ideas to students in a persuasive engaging way. I am greatly heartened to find that yet again, gender in the academy is becoming an issue at grassroots level in several of the universities, reflected in the launch of cross-institutional recommendations for action (Ni Laoire and O’Gráda, 2012); in the context of the re-emergence of more positive attitudes in the Higher Educational
Authority, at European and particularly at OECD (2012) level, where gender equality is unambiguously endorsed as a crucial element in stimulating economic growth.

**What I did not learn in College....**

When I graduated with a first class honours in Social Science at the age of 19 years, I was totally and naively convinced that knowledge not power was what was most important. I still wish it was so, but I know that it is not. Many women in higher education continue to see university bureaucratic structures in such rational depoliticised terms (a view challenged by for example, Ferguson, 1984 and Halford and Leonard, 2011). They assume that promotion comes from doing your own job well. They assume that the standards that define excellence and the ways of measuring it are not gendered. There is now extensive evidence that this is not true (Rees, 2011; Van Den Brink, 2011). They assume that their competence and achievements are noticed by those in power, and that it is both unnecessary and unfeminine to ‘advertise’ them. They do not notice that the areas in which they are disproportionately employed are not seen as strategically important, either within the university or by the (Irish) state. They assume that promotional and other opportunities are equally available in all parts of the university. They assume that students are key stakeholders and that meeting their educational and emotional needs is a crucial element in their role. All of these assumptions are problematic.

I saw ‘shafting’ at close quarters. I saw how women’s tendency not to consolidate their own power and develop a power base contrasted strongly with the actions of some of the men. As someone who was naïve but instinctively authoritative, I saw how a failure to mark out ‘turf’ could be taken as weakness and lead to the erosion of one’s position. Men quite simply stepped in and took over if there was the slightest suggestion of ambiguity. It was very difficult to reclaim that power. Starting from my time as Course director in Women’s Studies, I noticed many men’s reluctance to ‘go out to bat’ for a woman. Good men would approach privately and say they would not oppose me, but only the strongest and most exceptional would publicly support me. That reluctance was heightened in the senior management context, especially if the main power holder had not publicly declared support for your position. I found that, as Connell (2005) has suggested, the system is maintained by men’s desire to be men in a situation where being a man involves at the very least, a lack of open support for women, individually or collectively. Within male dominated hierarchical
organisational structures, it is difficult for women to access power positions for all sorts of reasons, not least of which is homosociability. Most of the men who have impacted positively on my career translated gender into a sectarian or class model and this process transformed their own attitudes and behaviour.

The university went through several periods of financial austerity during my ten years as Dean. Initially this arose from a dramatic decline in student numbers outside my own Faculty. Ireland’s financial difficulties have impacted on all universities, with core funding per student by the state over the period 2007-11, falling by 56 per cent (IUA, 2012). My experience, as Dean, was that if Faculty are given ownership of a problem they will find creative ways of dealing with difficulties. Despite the cut backs, their appetite for improving their courses, using new technology and taking on new initiatives never seemed to abate. This endless creativity, energy and flexibility was a source of gratitude and pride, emotions which are also not given the attention they deserve in reflections on women’s experiences in senior management positions.

As Dean, I kept a rough list of my tangible and intangible achievements, a very important exercise since the nature of management is such that the things that are successful are everyone’s, but the failures are your own. I learned that having power is very useful in getting change. It enables one to do things a lot more easily than when one lacks it. It helped me to shape the Faculty in many ways. The one that gave me most satisfaction was the change in the gender profile in the Faculty and the university. In the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, the proportion of women increased at all levels, with women constituting 50 per cent of those at (full) Professorial level when I completed my term as Dean. Women now make up 34 per cent of those in the Professoriate in the University of Limerick (HEA, 2012), the highest proportion in any university in Ireland. The extent of the change is indicated by the fact that it was zero before I was appointed, as the first woman at that level in 1997. This is considerably above both the Irish (18 per cent) and the EU average (20 per cent). Furthermore, the National University of Ireland Galway, with 12 per cent of women at this level, is less than 100 kilometres away, and broadly similar in size and profile. As a woman, a Professor, researcher and former Dean, I take a quiet pride in the contribution that I have made to this change in the University of Limerick (Fleming, 2012).
Although I was a very unlikely appointment as Dean, to my own surprise and that of others, I was effective at Faculty level. This was reflected in my re-appointment by three different presidents. I was surprised at how much I enjoyed the ten years as Dean and the opportunities they presented. I remained the impatient, blunt, warm feminist that I had been before, but somehow the framing of these qualities changed their value. Within the Faculty, some people of course, remained viciously resistant to even discussing gender related concerns, and the annual gender audit of external examiners was frequently a source of explicit irritation at Faculty management committee. But I was surprised to find that most people accept the priorities of those in power. At university level, I found the dynamics much more complex and difficult in the gendered and hierarchical culture in the most senior management group. There I was defined relative to the male norm. I began to appreciate that keeping one’s head down is a form of resistance (and a way of avoiding seeing oneself as a victim), although when I wrote about such strategies (O’Connor, 2001) I was dubious about the extent to which it could be seen as such. It was not however a strategy that attracted me.

Much has been written about the tension between gender roles and leadership roles (Eagly et al, 2003; Eagly, 2011). That tension does exist. However within the Faculty it was possible to redefine leadership roles to reduce that tension. I enjoyed re-defining the role of head of department as a nurturing role and ‘reframing’ gender. At Faculty level, I learned that power protects. I learned that men by and large respect power and so challenges to my power were much less frequent than when I had been course director in Women’s Studies. I learned that it is possible to be a ‘tempered radical’ (Meyerson and Scully, 2011/1995) committed to the objectives of male dominated academic structures and yet as a feminist, in an ambivalent position in such structures. Much has been made of the disadvantages of such a position, with its risks of isolation, and pressures as regards co-optation, but it is also a position of visibility and personal authenticity. I learned that doing a job previously done by men is much easier than doing one previously done by women. Formal structures reflect men’s willingness to continuously delegate, so as to have space to ‘do power’. Such positions also have resources to support the occupants of those formal positions in numerous ways. Thus whereas as course director in Women’s Studies I was often effectively on my own in the face of institutional opposition, as Dean I had five heads of department, two assistant Deans, a Faculty manager and a personal assistant. I learned that many women’s relationship with power is complex.
Many withdraw from the power holder, seeing the whole arena as unfamiliar, dangerous and problematic. Feminists instinctively tend to distrust those who have ‘gone over to the other side’. I learned that I found resistance by women much more unsettling than similar behaviour by men, since it undermined part of the purpose of my Deanship.

I had thought that a managerial position would be extremely fraught and awesomely responsible, but to my surprise, overwhelmingly this was not so. Even more surprisingly, at times there were opportunities for intellectual and organisational creativity and fun. I loved the feeling of a team working together for a common objective, in a context where we worked hard, but laughed a lot, at ourselves and at life. I wonder why these kinds of experiences are not more widely discussed, and whether this might influence women’s willingness to take on such positions. Ignoring these elements, and the extensive supports available to women in jobs previously held by men presents a very skewed picture, and in effect discourages women from considering them, which may indeed may be the purpose of the exercise.

I still have trouble accepting the reality of power in universities, not least because what attracted me to higher education was an aversion to line management and the ultimate abdication of responsibility that a slavish adherence to it implies. Managerialism, with the centralisation of power effectively in the President, and the multiplication of Vice Presidentsial posts filled by his/her appointees, stresses line management as well as reducing the possibility of a diversity of views. I do not think this is healthy in a university.

My parents are dead almost thirty years now. But I am beginning to think that my father rather than my mother was right in that oft rehearsed argument about which was most important: what you know or who you know. Ironically, given that much of my career has been as a feminist but ‘pseudo-male’ woman, in the sense that it has not been shaped by family responsibilities, I am more comfortable believing in the importance of knowledge rather than power, reflecting my mother’s rather than my father’s view of the world.

References


HEA (2012a) Data on gender profile of Faculty in universities and Institutes of Technology. Unpublished data from HEA


IUA (2012) Data sent as personal communication by L.O Sullivan, 12/10/ 2012 and 24/10/2012 Dublin: Irish University Alliance


OECD (2012c) Closing the Gender Gap: Act Now


