Gender equality and representation within and beyond the University of the Highlands and Islands

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Women's networks in further and higher education: key considerations for cultural change, digital engagement and responding to COVID-19

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Abstract

Women's networks in further and higher education offer spaces for women to come together to discuss the challenges and barriers for women working in education, to hear from inspirational women, take part in professional development and to lobby for change. Beginning with a review of key literature and research this chapter will explore the role of women's

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networks in further and higher education, including the potential of digitally mediated women's networks. The literature highlights the current inequality in further and higher education for promotion of women into leadership and senior roles and is drawn from a period of 20 years which reflects that issues relating to gender equality are still as relevant today as they were 20+ years ago. Furthermore, the chapter will explore the limitation of networks and development initiatives to have real impact when inequality is embedded within masculinist working cultures and structures. Finally, the chapter will highlight the implications and impact of COVID-19 on gender equality and potential for women's networks to provide peer support and a safe space at a time of isolation and challenge of home and work balance, with a focus on the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Women's Network, including what it has achieved, lessons learned and plans for the future.

Keywords: Women's Networks, COVID-19, gender equality, further and higher education, leadership

Gender imbalance in further and higher education: in leadership and senior roles

An [Advance HE Equality in Higher Education Statistical Report](#) published in 2019 reported that gender imbalance in promotion into professional roles begins early after graduation, with women holding 45.9% of academic roles and yet only 25.5% of professorial roles (statistics collected by gender 2017-18) which is an increase of just 5% from data collected in 2009/10 (Morley 2013: 121) and is despite women being over represented at undergraduate and graduate level (Savigny 2014: 796). Male-dominance is not unique to the UK higher education sector. Across the European Union 86% of higher education university heads are men, 76% of which are in professorial grades (O'Connor

2020: 207). The Advance HE report shows that employment contracts, part-time working and lack of gender balance on university boards creates barriers that women need to overcome to achieve progression and/or promotion in academia in the UK sector. Further barriers include significant cultural ones, such as the perception of the leadership role as being "demanding, aggressive and authoritarian" (Morley 2013: 123) and best suited to males. Additionally, the "male dominance of leadership can produce stability in relationships, networks and structures that reproduce professional hierarchies" (Morley 2013: 125) and position the woman as the 'other' (Savigny 2014: 798, Crabtree and Shiel 2018: 902). This masculinist working culture "understood to mean compliance to a regime of almost total and uninterrupted commitment to wages work" (Crabtree and Shiel 2018: 901) does little to encourage women who are more likely to be balancing work and caring commitments than their male colleagues, to remain and progress in academia.

When women do reach senior positions their experiences of leadership can still leave them feeling isolated and in the minority. Interviews with 18 senior women professionals from leading UK higher education institutions found that despite them having successfully reached leadership positions "their experiences of leadership could often be quite confronting and be characterized by men behaving in an aggressive, loud and domineering manner, particularly in meetings with other senior managers" (Burkinshaw and White 2017: 5/6). A lack of discussion around these issues leads to further compound the under-representation of women in senior and leadership roles in academia and sends a negative message to women earlier in their careers about their own prospects for success (Savigny 2014).

O'Connor (2020) explores organisational hierarchies through vertical and horizontal level lenses. The vertical level refers to senior positions dominated by

men, whereas the horizontal 'segregation' refers to areas of the organisation that are predominantly staffed by women. O'Connor points out that the different approaches to evaluating the vertical and horizontal levels, with the vertical areas of work being considered more skilled and strategically important, create a barrier for women to progress to senior roles (212). As O'Connor observes these cultural "practices value men and (to) facilitate their access to such positions and (to) undervalue women and inhibit their access' (O'Connor 2020:208).

In summarising key findings from research to date, it is clear to see that promotion practices favour men and cultural structures value areas and practices dominated by males which are considered as more strategically important, which in turn creates masculinist working cultures. Part time working, employment contracts and lack of female representation in senior positions, and not in the male dominated networks, create further barriers for

women progressing in further and higher education. The limited opportunities to talk about these barriers further compounds the problem.

Women's networks in further and higher education

A literature review carried out by Pini et al. on women-only spaces from studies dating between 1986-2001 found they could increase self-confidence, raise awareness of learning opportunities, and help women gain new skills and grow social networks. However the authors also argue that they shouldn't be seen as a single fix or approach for increasing women's representation in management positions (2004: 2) which instead require cultural and structural changes. Research carried out by Macoun and Miller into the experience of women participating in a feminist book group at an Australian Political Science department found that those who participated benefited from peer support, navigating the "often hostile space of the University"

and nurturing a community of belonging within the group (2014: 288).

Leathwood (2004) also explored the perceived benefits of women-only spaces. Citing the works of Marilyn Frye (through Tong 1992), Thompson (1997) and Hartsock (1998), Leathwood stressed their importance as a space away from men and male defined and dominated practices, and as safe spaces to grow and learn away from the participants' oppressors (2004: 449).

Online and online supported women's networks

With the advancement and access to technology, online women networks and movements have broadened the reach and visibility of gender equality in education beyond a single institution or group. Online spaces can encourage contributions and memberships from different, for example the femedtech collective (feminist education technology

@femedtech) welcomes "colleagues of all nationalities, races, ethnicities, sexualities and genders" (https://femedtech.net/about-femedtech/values/) to become involved, aware and join in the critical conversations beyond women-only spaces. Formed in in 2016, the femedtech collective offers an open digital network for people learning, practising and researching in educational technology, and aims to be "alive to the specific ways that technology and education are gendered, and to how injustices and inequalities play out in these spaces" (femedtech, n.d.).. The Women in Academia Support Network (@wiasnofficial) offers a digital space and hashtag for women academics from all stages of their careers, and is also open to all to follow and contribute.

These spaces are important to ensure that allies of change are recruited, that equalities are explored beyond specific group-only spaces, and that inequalities are exposed and challenged.

However, as Leathwood explores in her paper, women often have "a straightforward desire to meet in a space with other women and to be able to talk about issues, concerns, ideas, and experiences free from negative responses from men" and it is often the combination of integrationist and separatist strategies that promotes change and challenges practices (2004: 450).

Limitations to gender equality initiatives

Despite the aforementioned benefits of Women's Networks, it should be acknowledged that there are limitations in the extent to which women-only networks, professional development initiatives, sector awards and leadership programmes can support progression into leadership and management roles for women.

Leadership programmes can offer opportunities to develop leadership skills and qualities, but without

cultural changes can leave participants still feeling marginalised. For example, interviews with both academic and administrative women working in middle management positions or aspiring into those positions at a new Australian university found that a leadership programme left participants feeling disenfranchised or sidelined, with one interviewee stating that having had the time to think about the workings of the university had served to "convince me that I am a poor fit with this university" (Burkinshaw and White 2017: 9). These types of experiences further compound women's feelings of being 'othered' and disadvantaged.

Athena Swan is an initiative that awards a bronze, silver or gold award for commitment of HE institutions towards gender equality across all roles (previously focusing on STEM). However, Athena Swan, as O'Connor contends and argues, drawing evidence from the work of Amery et al (2019) and Graves, Rowell and Hunsicker (2019), has no

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leverage at very senior level to promote gender equality, hasn't changed the pay gap, and has not increased gender equality at a senior level nor changed organisational culture (2020: 219). Therefore, providing a useful space for discussion around gender equality does not necessarily translate to institutional change.

Although mentoring is an established professional development opportunity for supporting minority groups there are limitations to the extent that mentoring can influence career progression, and these limitations can be felt by women professionals who seek mentoring to support career progression opportunities within an institution. It is therefore critical that mentoring programmes should not be considered the 'fix' to the issue of gender inequality. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge the barriers to career progression which may influence the perceived benefits of the mentoring partnership

(Kent et al. 2013: 213, Tareef 2013: 703, Castanheira 2015: 338 and Morley 2013: 125).

However, despite the aforementioned limitations, professional development opportunities can offer some benefits to individuals.   For example, mentoring does offer less measurable but significantly important benefits for minority groups, including increased self-confidence, institutional awareness and networking, and it can be contended that these skills "should be inherently linked to career success" (Allen et al. 2004:128). Furthermore mentoring partnerships can provide both the mentees and mentors with "the opportunity to develop their own thinking in the presence of others who faced similar experiences" (Padgett 2004: 182). Interviews carried out with 30 women who took part in the women-only leadership programme Aurora found that participating in the programme increased their motivation to seek leadership opportunities, and develop the skills of

leadership and career management. Although lower than other perceived benefits of taking part in the programme 30% of those interviewed agreed that the impact of Aurora meant that 'I openly challenge the system and/or culture of my workplace' and 40% agreed that 'I find way of turning systems and/or culture of my workplace to my advantage' (Barnard et al. 2021). This shows the role of leadership programmes to highlight and challenge the cultures that are enablers to inequalities.

There is less literature available specially focusing on Women's Networks. This likely highlights Women's Networks as a 'nice to have' and where they are in place perhaps considered more informal networking spaces for likeminded people and often for women in senior positions. However, both the literature review by Pini et al. (2004) and the article by Leathwood (2004) acknowledge that since women-only networks and spaces have been around they have provoked debate, with some

feeling women-only spaces are separatist and exclusive, whilst others believe they are necessary to provide a protected space away from masculinist dominance and hierarchies. Women-only networks encourage discussions around challenges and barriers within the group which are impacted and disadvantaged by these barriers, so there will always be a limitation by which change can come from women-only networks, if that is indeed the purpose of the group. This highlights the need for such networks to find opportunities and pathways to lobby for change. Furthermore, there is some consideration around whether women are 'othering' themselves by creating spaces that exclude men and this highlights the need to position women's networks alongside groups and initiatives that are open to both men and women and do not position gender inequality as women's problem.

In summary, despite the underrepresentation of women in leadership and senior management

positions in education, the approach is often "an individualised response to problems that may require more collective or structural solutions" (Morley 2013: 125). This focus on 'fixing the women' further 'others' women and "focuses on why women do not measure up to HE leadership roles" (Burkinshaw and White 2017: 3). The aforementioned initiatives and networks do have benefits and together can make an individualised difference but unless cultural barriers are addressed they will produce limited impact in the way of actual change to inequality in further and higher education. Despite the aforementioned limitations these spaces, and the conversations within them, hold value and opportunities to raise awareness, champion cultural change and challenge indifference, recognising the latter in relation to what Bryson (1999) points out ergo: "men can benefit from the overtly oppressive or discriminatory practices of others; because their failure to oppose such practices can itself be seen as a form of connivance,

the distinction between male power and male persons is frequently difficult to sustain" (as cited by Leathwood 2004:455).

UHI Women's Network

The UHI Women's Network was formed in 2018 after the first university wide International Women's Day highlighted a women-only network would be of benefit to colleagues across the university partnership. Therefore, after the event an email was sent out to all participants and colleagues across the UHI academic partnership to see who would like to join the network, with over 40 positive responses then received.

In forming the network, the decision was made early on that it would be open to colleagues who identify as women across professional services, research, teaching, and leadership roles and at any stage of their career. The Women's Network provides a space for all women working at UHI recognising that

a space for only 'one' group within a group marginalised by gender would be counterproductive in not 'othering' women holding varied roles in education. Women's networks are often for senior women and given that the main barrier in universities is around promotion to senior positions it felt important to be inclusive and have a network with colleagues at any stage of their career, including senior women. It was hoped this would nurture fruitful discussions around barriers to career progression, as well as insights from women who had been successful in moving into senior and leadership roles within the university.

Alongside the women-only network there is also an online University of Highlands and Islands Women's Network hosted in Yammer. This is open to all, with male colleagues regularly contributing to the space to share articles, news articles, and professional development opportunities for women, and information of benefit or of interest to anyone

passionate about gender equality in education at UHI.

Utilising technology

As well as online and open spaces, technology has opened up the opportunity for participation in women's networks regardless of geographical location. Within UHI, due to the geographically distributed context, traditional approaches to engage staff in professional development and networking opportunities, which typically involve face-to-face facilitated sessions, are not possible to offer in an equitable or cost-effective way. The UHI Women's Network, is offered to women across the academic partnership with meetings attended in person and through synchronous technology pre-COVID and entirely synchronously post-COVID. Network members are able to join meetings through their own college or home and from a range of technology including laptops, tablets and phones. This requires more pre-meeting planning and facilitation than

perhaps a traditional network where meetings take place in person but does not disadvantage those who could not attend in person (pre-COVID). Furthermore, since COVID the need for spaces to mitigate against isolation and provide online locations to continue the discussion around gender equality has been crucially important, especially given the data emerging that highlights that women have been more disadvantaged by COVID than men. For example, the UHI International Women's Day 2021 event which was opened up to anyone working in education, and moving from an in-person to wholly online event opened up these important discussions beyond a single institution or group, and also saw the highest number of participants since the event was launched at the University in 2018.

Recognising the aforementioned limitations for initiatives to 'progress' women through the masculine hierarchies of further and higher education, it was important to stress that the network

is not intended to 'fix the women' who belong to the network but instead offer a safe space to discuss common challenges, hear from inspirational women, and to lobby for change through sector and national initiatives such as Athena Swan and International Women's Day itself. Moreover, in a distributed university it was hoped that the network would offer networking opportunities beyond the member's immediate Academic Partner college and subject or disciplinary context.

Aligning to university wide events and initiatives

The UHI Women's Network has also aligned and fed into wider initiatives and events. In Digital Education Week which took place in January 2019, Dr Louise Drumm, lecturer at Edinburgh Napier University, spoke to the network about her experiences as a professional woman working within the different fields of theatre and learning technology, exploring from her own perspective, challenges, barriers and

successes. The network has also fed into the Athena Swan application through a survey and focus group exploring experiences and perceptions of women working at UHI. Within UHI the Auroran alumni have become active and a vital voice in the spaces of the women's network and events like International Women's Day, facilitating meetings, presentations and workshops.

Benefits so far

Members of the Women's Network have highlighted that being part of a community, the process of networking, peer-peer learning, support and guidance as being of great value, as captured in the comments below.

> "The women's network brings together an inspiring community of colleagues from across the partnership. It's been a catalyst to discussion and learning. I took so much from the recent interactive session with Dr Irene Garcia on exploring the topic of imposter

syndrome that I've tried to embed in my day-to-day'."

"UHI women's network - a positive, empowering, supportive network of like-minded people. I always come away from the events, thinking I can make a difference. The group has helped me build my own network within UHI and to the welcoming nature of the network I would have no hesitation in contacting any of the members for support/advice and would welcome the same in return."

"The UHI women's network has brought me into contact with university colleagues I may not have met otherwise. It's been invaluable, enjoyable and uplifting to be part of the network".

Looking forward

As the Women's Network has developed and awareness of gender equality has risen in the university through initiatives such as the women-only leadership programme Aurora, International Women's Day, and Athena Swan, the need to move some of the discussion beyond the space of the

meetings has come more to the foreground. The focus going forward will be to find fora, groups and pathways to highlight the main messages of the network, without compromising the safe space that the network provides where members are free to talk openly and share experiences that they want to stay within the group. Furthermore, as the group gains further traction, a decision around whether there should be special interest groups could be explored. For example, in the early stages of the network a pilot feminist reading group was set up and this has recently been restarted again with the first reading group meeting, since being reconvened, being held in May 2021.

The impact of COVID-19 on women and the UHI Women's Network

COVID-19 has highlighted and exasperated gender inequalities for women, with a number of publications and reports emerging on the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality since the first

lockdown in March 2020. Women are more likely to have taken on increased caring and domestic responsibilities, with mothers spending on average 2 fewer hours of doing paid work and 2 hours more housework and childcare than fathers (Andrew et al. 2020: 3). This has particularly impacted on BAME women, with a study carried out by Fawcett Society, the Women's Budget Group, QMUL and LSE finding that 45.5% of BAME women said they were struggling to cope with all the different demands on their time, compared to 34.6% of white women and 29.6% of white men. Furthermore, women with children are one-and-a-half times more likely than fathers to lose their jobs or to have been furloughed in the first lockdown (Andrew et al. 2020: 3). Workers in the shut-down sectors are disproportionately female, young and low-paid. Those under the age of 25 twice as likely to work in a shut-down sector as those over 25 (Blundell et al. 2020: 298).

However, the report by Blundell et al. state that some benefits to COVID-19 on working approaches could be accelerating gender norms, such as remote working providing career opportunities for women with children, and the opportunity for fathers to spend more time during the lockdown with their children due to working from home which could potentially change the way that they work in the future (2020: 293).

Gender-based violence has increased since COVID-19. 'Counting Dead Women', a project that records the killing of women by men in the UK, reported that between 23 March and 12 April sixteen women were killed by men, in comparison of an average of five deaths at the same period over the last 10 years.

Given the impact of COVID-19 on women, it is unsurprising that the mental health of women has been affected. In their investigation into the mental health effects of the first two months of lockdown and

social distancing during the pandemic, Banks and Xu (2020) found that the mental health of UK women aged 16-24 was seriously impacted. As measured via the extensively used twelve-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), average scores amongst women in the aforementioned category rose by 2.5 points or 18.2% against a 'non-pandemic' projection for 2020, and the share reporting a severe problem doubled from 17.6% to 35.2% against the same projection.

The impact of COVID-19 on women in higher education

As well as existing barriers for women working in further and higher education highlighted in this chapter, challenges for women in early career positions can include balancing work and parenting commitments and often while being on part-time contracts. These existing challenges and barriers, with the addition of the increased impact of COVID-

19 on societal gender equalities, further jeopardise the progression of gender equality within and outwith education. A survey of 8,416 (51% of respondents were women) UK researchers by Vitae (2020) on the impact of COVID-19 on researchers indicated that early career researchers reported a decrease in working hours and reduction of 15 hours for research that cannot be done from home, and concern about being furloughed or not having contracts extended (37% women and 29% men) than other levels of researchers. In the same report, caring responsibilities disrupted both men and women's working hours with an almost equal percent of men and women having to cancel important meetings and conferences due to caring responsibilities. Almost equal numbers of men and women reported the number of hours spent on research had decreased due to caring responsibilities (42% women and 41% men). However an article published in The Guardian highlighted that women's publications dropped dramatically during COVID-19, whereas men's

publication rates increased (Thackery 2020). Yet despite this, 50% of those surveyed in the Vitae survey did report exploring new research directions during lockdown. When asked the question "What has been most challenging about sustaining your research since 23 March 2020, when 'lockdown' came into effect?" the second biggest challenge (the first being lack of access to onsite facilitates/spaces) from the Vitae survey was struggling with mental health.

Advance HE published a report in February 2021 which highlighted some benefits to the move to working from home with 6 out of 10 HE staff reporting remote working helped them complete administrative work and attend meetings (Aldercotte, Pugh, Codiroli Mcmaster and Kitsell 2021). More women than men said the move to remote working enabled them to attend meetings, conferences and career development opportunities. The report however does go on to say that women who did not

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have access to adequate space were the least likely to say that they had had the opportunity to engage in career development activities while working from home, meaning that not all women have experienced the same level of benefit.

COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated gender inequalities for women. Women's networks therefore offer the potential to support colleagues in a time of potential isolation and home/work challenges. Offering a space to talk about these challenges with colleagues facing similar difficulties can help alleviate the feelings of being alone, and can provide the opportunity to signpost colleagues to other groups/organisations internally and externally who can provide support.

The role of the UHI Women's Network during COVID-19

Due to COVID-19, the priority focus for the UHI Women's Network for the academic year 2020-21

has been on mental health and wellbeing, and the feelings of imposter syndrome. This started with an interactive session facilitated by UHI Aurora alumni, with discussions turning to mental health and the impact of COVID-19 on women working from home, balancing home and work life and negotiating space (that which we live and work within, and the blurring of the boundaries of both). Another meeting saw Dr Irene Garcia facilitating an imposter syndrome workshop which explored participants own feelings of imposter syndrome and their position within the university with some practical tips to confront and tackle these feelings. The final meeting of the year will focus further on the impacts of COVID-19 on women's mental health, exploring current reports on the impact on women during COVID-19 generally, before an interactive activity exploring the impact on individuals in the network. The network will then welcome the UHI Mental Health and Counselling Manager who will facilitate a discussion to explore what the university and external bodies and groups

can do to support colleagues in a time of isolation and challenge. Finally, break out spaces on the online platform will allow small groups to engage in informal networking over lunch. It is difficult at this stage to gauge the impact of the women's network in supporting colleagues through COVID-19 in particular, although offering a space with others sharing the same experiences has, it has hoped, lessened the feelings of being along and offered some small solutions to make an individual difference. Furthermore, COVID-19 has shone a light on existing inequalities with an increasing volume of research literature and reports being published in the last year which highlight existing inequalities and those which COVID-19 has exacerbated. This has encouraged wider discussions around gender equality within other spaces, shared with male colleagues, which encourages consideration and reflection around not only the impact of COVID-19 but the pre-existing and

post-COVID-19 inequalities that women face inside
and outwith education.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the need to challenge
the cultural barriers to gender equality in further and
higher education, namely in relation to barriers to
career progression into leadership and senior
management roles for women. Although networks,
initiatives, awards and professional development
opportunities have proven effective in offering
individual benefits they should not be presented as
a solution to fix the problem of gender inequality, and
to attempt to do so 'others' women and suggests that
women are the problem. However, these spaces do
provide a voice for women, an important space to
discuss challenges and barriers and an opportunity
to learn, network and champion change to
masculinist working cultures and structures.

Throughout COVID-19, the UHI Women's Network has also provided the space to discuss gender equality in light of the pandemic and to focus in on mental health while also providing the opportunity to network in a time of isolation. However, as the chapter highlights, it is important that discussions had within women-only spaces have pathways to highlight the messages coming from these spaces, to raise awareness and champion change from within the cultural hierarchies.

For those considering setting up a women's network then recommended due diligence should be around who the network is for, deciding the purpose for the network early on, and enlisting the support and leadership of individual/s who drive the agendas and topics for discussions, as well as setting up the meetings and inviting speakers. Women's networks can often be seen as a 'nice to have' rather than an established initiative that is supported by the institution, and the impacts can often be felt by

individuals in ways that are not always valued by the university and are not easily measurable. Therefore, if the network is to have an impact within an institution consideration of the ways in which the network can have an influence on recognised institutional and sectoral initiatives is important. For example, representation on internal equalities groups, in senior fora, and feeding into initiatives such as Athena Swan, highlighting the main themes of the network discussion, but without jeopardising the confidentially and safe space of the group. Finally, accepting that individuals will often have to prioritise workload and/or family commitments over attendance is important, so ensuring a large enough network that results in appropriate representation at every meeting should be considered.

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